

***CHILD OF THE AIR***

# CHILD OF THE AIR



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*for Ruth and Shirley*

# **PART ONE**

# CHAPTER ONE



THE CHILDREN TOILED UP THE STEEP hillslope, hauling on the empty broom cart, impatient to get home. Their grandfather, leery of slick clay underfoot, trod more cautiously behind. The issalm—ice season—might well be over, but wet from the thaw still pooled in the doft, making a hazard for old and brittle bones.

Reaching their hut, Mylanfyndra stretched, looking up into clear sky a deeper blue today, with a good hour of gold left in it, just begging to be spent. “We can’t go in yet,” she declared. “It’s far too nice.”

“Oh, really?” Her brother jabbed the wet doft pointedly with his toe. “And just what would we do in this?”

"What we always do after the issalm," Mylanfyndra said, pointing up behind the hut. "Grandpa! Grandpa!" She ran to meet the broom-maker.

"Let's climb to the Grandpa Grove!"

"The Grandpa Grove?" Gven'bahr-brum peered up through the podliths, frowning. "Mylanfyndra, girl, it's too soon. The air still gets cold so fast, don't let this sunlight fool you."

"Please, Grandpa?"

"We'll go up in a day or two, when my old legs are back in stride. By then, the air will keep its warmth a little longer."

"We needn't stay," Mylanfyndra persisted. "Just go straight up and down again, promise!"

"I'll say!" Gven retorted. "All our brooms sold and folk clamoring for more now the open doft down there is drying out and filling their houses with dust! We'll be working past bedtime, even so, to keep up with demand."

"Hah!" Brevan snorted, putting in his half-grat's worth. They all knew how the hut was stacked with brooms, fruit of an issalm's laboring!

Gven sighed. "The day is fine, I must admit. Very well, we stay out one more hour—no longer! Go on, go ahead, I'll take my own good time. Careful!" he warned, as they rushed away behind the hut and up through the tangled podlithra. "Watch for barbs—and remember the stip is rising. Don't get any on your clothes!"

They climbed single file, Brevan leading—but not fast enough for Mylanfyndra. "Step lively, will you? We want some time for



a game," she complained, and promptly slipped. Not her fault entirely. A round, ungainly bird, head down in urgent quest for vinesuckers and 'lithworms had waddled out underfoot, and how to see, Mylanfyndra thought irritably, when the drab gray plumage merged so well into the doft? A firebird, wingless now, and a ghost of its plump self after an issalm's fasting! With a loud squawk, it scuttled off among the podliths as Mylanfyndra's feet slid under her. In her fall, she grabbed for a podlith limb, missed, and went down, the limb's barbed tip snagging her sleeve. "Ow!" She came up, hands and knees all clay.

Brevan looked back. "Are you all right?"

Mylanfyndra checked. Luckily, the barb had missed her skin, but her coat sleeve was torn, and worse, her skirt was smeared with sticky vine sap. In only hours, the stip would harden into stone, and her one good working dress would be ruined. "Just look at that!" she cried in vexation.

"Here:" Brevan pointed to a nearby puddle. "Wash it out, quick."

Crouching, Mylanfyndra swished the sticky patch around in the puddle, rinsing out the milky stip. After squeezing out the excess water, she moved on, wet skirt clinging. Now, despite her haste, she climbed more carefully up to their goal: a round, bald knoll crowned with a ring of hoary podliths, the oldest in the podlithra. Their living vine—leoia—long since gone, the hollow, upright stumps made splendid hiding places. It was for these aged ancestors that the children had named the place the

Grandpa Grove.

Mylanfyndra sighed with satisfaction as the jagged pillars came into view. “Kooos is gone, the issalm is over!” she cried, and felt secure.

“Maybe,” warned Brevan. “But with Kooos gone, can Anlahr be far behind?”

“The glair won’t be here for two whole seasons—the far side of the year,” Mylanfyndra retorted. “Why do you always have to take the fun out?”

Brevan could tell the year’s wheel as well as any; name its quarters with their double seasons as shown in tile on the Moot Hall entrance thuswise:

Nettled, Mylanfyndra turned from him to look for Gven. “Grandpa’s taking his time,” she murmured. She crossed to the biggest and most majestic podlith bole—a fragment standing taller than Gven himself. Reaching on tiptoe, Mylanfyndra peered into the caisson through a massive hole in the side. Not that there was much to see, save tangled root tubes at the base, and space under them where the doft had eroded. She stroked the bole’s rough outer surface, still damp from the thaw. Grandpa’s favorite podlith. Come warmer weather, he’d sit with his back against this bole, while she and Brevan played . Games! Mylanfyndra spun around. Time was wasting.

Brevan was stooping low, scanning the ground. “Let’s do Pick-a-Shoot first.”

“Oh, all right.” Frowning, Mylanfyndra joined the search through the tender new leoia shoots poking from the doft like

fingertips. Exposed to the air, each tip hardened within hours to form a callus. In a single day, the callus changed to a spiky barb; a tiny, conical hat, with needle point and razor rim. From a row of pores around the rim, the growing vine exuded soft, creamy stip, spiraling it into a tube. In no time, soft tube set into hard, stone casing; both prop and shield to the vine it enclosed. Every first thaw visit to the grove, the children each staked out a hopeful shoot and bet on whose would be the bigger by the end of the warming—eighty or so days hence.

Mylanfyndra pounced. "This one! I pick this one!" she cried, pointing down, just as the broom-maker climbed into view, looking quite puffed.

"Agh, you choose too quickly, Myl," Brevan jeered. "That's why you never win!"

"Now, you two." Gven leaned against the nearest bole. "Hurry, get your visit over. It's turning chill already, didn't I say it would?"

Seemed quite hot to Mylanfyndra. "A minute, Grandpa," she wheedled.

"Just one, *please?*"

"Until I get back my wind."

Mylanfyndra turned on Brevan. "What game can we play, in no time?"

"Koos and Anlahr?"

Her favorite. They knew it so well, they could rattle it off. "I'll take Anlahr—and I'll go first, as usual."

Brevan grinned. "You don't say. All right, I'll be Koos, and go

second—as usual.”

They mounted the knoll, then turned to face each other.

Mylanfyndra struck a pose, feet apart, arms raised. “I, Anlahr, winged fire-spirit, do scorch the mesa and set the very air alight with the flames of my breath. I, who ring the glair upon the people am the greatest of all spirits!”

Brevan folded his arms. “Not so, O Anlahr! I, Kocs, sharp-heeled ice-giant, do chill your fiery breath and freeze your embers. With issalm do I quell your glair!” He turned away, and started down, but Mylanfyndra caught his sleeve.

“We can’t run the podlith ring until we vow to chase each other at opposite ends of the year. It won’t make sense.”

“I thought we had to rush.” Brevan pulled free. “Come on, you’re wasting time.”

“You’re the one who’s wasting time,” she cried. “Arguing again, as—”

The sound of coughing startled them. The broom-maker, still standing where they’d left him, all bent over.

“Grandpa!” The children ran to him. Gven’s face was dark red, the veins on his forehead bulged with the strain of his spasm. Presently, he straightened, wiping his eyes. “I’m fine,” he said. “I just need to wet my whistle. Come on,” he went on, taking them by the hand, and Mylanfyndra felt his shiver. “We have much work to do tonight.”

After supper, Mylanfyndra mended her coat sleeve, while Brevan sorted broomstraw, the fine droppings of dead vine ends, into brush-sized bales. Gven, his long legs stretched to the

fire, set to for a while knotting fresh vine into fancy broom handles for the richer houses. But despite Gven's threats of working past bedtime, they actually retired early.

Mylanfyndra peered through the dying firelight at the huddled shape in the opposite corner. Gven seemed very tired tonight. She stretched gingerly, wriggling her toes down into the cold sheets. Come to think, so was she, after all the fresh air and climbing. And Brevan, no less, in his neighboring cot along the wall. Asleep already, by the sound of it. She turned about to face him, eyeing the shape of his back. What a fine day it had been. All their brooms sold out! Those townsfolk in their houses, where would they be without Gven to help keep their houses clean! So proud, she'd felt, at the welcome the broom-maker had received. It had been good to visit the town again—and just as good to leave it!

Those town children, thought Mylanfyndra, her eyes closing, in their grand houses with huge larders, and closets full of clothes, and roofs higher than Gven on tiptoe—she wouldn't want to live down there for all the half-grats on the mesa!

Embers shifted in the hearth, flame flared for an instant, throwing strong shadows onto the layered walls: walls built of long, thin 'lith shards stacked horizontally. Then it subsided, spent, and all was still and quiet.

"Myl! Myl—wake up!"

Mylanfyndra opened her eyes. For a moment, she stared unfocused at bare hut wall. Then she became aware that Brevan's cot was empty, the covers thrown back. She turned to face the

room. "Brevan?" In his nightshirt, holding up a lantern.

"Get up." He looked frightened.

She scrambled off the cot, her blanket falling away. The warmth from the fire was long since gone; the chill air reeked of ashes. Mylanfyndra shuddered as the cold struck through. "What is it, what's wrong?"

Before Brevan could answer, an eerie sound started from the opposite corner of the hut. Low, and quiet, and faintly rasping, it swelled to a groan, as if someone squeezed a ghastly bellows. Mylanfyndra peered wide-eyed toward the far wall. "Grandpa?"

Brevan nodded, following her gaze.

Mylanfyndra sped barefoot across the cold clay tile. Gven's eyes were shut, and his face looked drained. "Grandpa?" She touched his shoulder lightly. "Grandpa!" A spasm seized Gven's chest. Mylanfyndra snatched back her hand, remembering his earlier one up on the knoll. The gray flesh suffused with blood, the veins on his forehead stood out as his body jerked with the force of his coughing. "I think he's really sick," she said uneasily.

"Sick?" Brevan looked at her in disbelief.

Gven'bahr-brum was never sick. Not in the issalm, when folk took to bed in droves with ice-fever; not during the glair, when they dropped in the Warren's tunnel shelters like zyt-flies from the deadly heat and humidity. "Grandpa's the fittest person on all the mesa," Brevan said loudly.

Mylanfyndra stood firm. "Maybe," she said, "but he doesn't sound that way right now."