

The Book

Prelude

Arvid - The Song Beneath the Meadow

It was dark. Arvid woke to a melody, faint, rhythmic, pulsing. A sharp breath. The very ground was alive with it. *No, it can't be.* Outside, the Meadow still slept. But the earth beneath his bed on the floor thrummed with an ancient sound. Wind slithered through the open window of his hut and tugged on his cover like a secret. Arvid shivered. He wasn't cold; something was wrong. He quietly rolled out of bed, rubbing the ache in his knee that had been pestering him for weeks. Getting older felt like a hide forgotten in the sun, cracking and thirsty. Arvid wasn't accustomed to it. Doing his best not to wake his wife beside him, he put on his morning robe and walked outside.

The grass consumed his uncovered feet and swayed in the wind like feathers in a storm. The wind pulsed in waves, ebbing and flowing. There was no storm tonight, but the wind had found its voice. Like the breath of a great beast sleeping beneath the stars. Arvid closed his eyes and swayed for a moment in the wind, letting it shape his very soul, knowing there would not be many more nights like that one. Not if what he thought was true. Opening his eyes, he looked up and locked eyes with the moons. Thalorim's twin moons glared down, as beautiful as they were powerful, fractured and freckled with what looked like great lakes butting against one another like armies locked in eternal battle.

His hut - called a dilla - was surrounded by several smaller ones where his family remained asleep. Small huts made of earth and long grass. They were quaint, charming even. They were all he had known for 20 years. Arvid knelt to the ground, feeling the long grass between his fingers. He pressed his fingers into the ground.

Arvid Pulled.

The dirt was drawn to his fingers like water in a funnel, a faint sound like the crackling of a fire leapt from the ground as dust released into the air. The loose dirt crept up his forearm in tendrils and the grass wrapped itself around his fingers like the legs of a centipede, both glowing faintly like the moon itself. The very Essence of the dirt was extracted and left lifeless, but that life wormed its way into Arvid's body. Immediately, he felt *alive*. This was the bliss of Pulling, but it would be wasted until given a purpose.

Arvid Pushed.

The world assaulted his senses. The warm, hearty smell of the grass pierced his nose, the Moon's light was a blazing fire, blinding even as he looked to the ground. The ache in his knee abated for just a split second, but there was a cost: life could not exist when its Essence was Pulled.

An object without its Essence was just matter. Raw matter. Dust. There's always a cost. He would mourn the shrivelled grass another day, *he needed to know*. He couldn't pull too much from the Meadow or the others might discover. Already a small patch of the grass around his fingers lay lifeless, its color given to dust as Arvid Pulled the Essence from it. Pulling amplified every miniscule vibration around him. He could feel the ants wriggling, the groundpins tunneling for food, worms, bugs, burrowing creatures. As soon as he Pushed, he heard the melodies. The song had returned.

The seal would soon break.

In the Grassy Meadows of Ayyr, life flowed with song, with stories, with light. But something stirred in the shadows, beneath the waters of the Serpent's Sea in the heart of the Myrkwod Forest—something ancient and unrelenting. And though the people of the Meadow sang and danced and rejoiced in their rest, they did not yet know: the Fog was waking.

Chapter 1

Arvid - The First Sun of Rest

Arvid woke again, this time the sun had peered over the mountains in the East, tangled with the yellow stalks of the green meadow, and washed through the window and into his small hut where he lay on a feather mattress on the floor. Nira breathed softly next to him, her warmth a familiar well. The spring sun began to warm the dilla as the cool breeze swept through, bringing with it the fresh smell of newly blossomed flowers in the fields outside. Arvid climbed out of bed, again wrapping himself in his morning robe. The wind carried laughter and shouts from the field. Rin and Sora must have challenged the sun early in the morning to see who would tire first. "Nira, I believe the boys woke before the sun again" He chuckled as he poured water from a clay jar near the wash basin into his leather canteen for the day. He wondered in that moment if Nira had heard him rise in the night. Part of him hoped it was a dream, but he knew better. *Does she know?*

Nira rolled over, "and if I was still sleeping?" she asked with a hint of a smile drawing one side of her mouth up. Arvid winked in response. *She doesn't know, good. That will give me sometime to think about how to bring it up.* He thought to himself as he poured a second cup for Nira.

"I had a feeling you were awake - look, here they come. I'll tell them you're still asleep." Her eyes widened and she quickly rolled over, facing away from the door. Arvid closed the water jar quickly to prepare for the storm about to blow into the room: his sons. Sora and Rin stampeded through the doorway bare chested and wild eyed into their parents' hut, skidding to a stop on the hardened dirt floor, their faces red and their breath heavy. Still too young for muscle, their frames were all bone and boundless energy. Sora's hair was like a young Plinka's, rough and thick, swirling

and swaying like the grass itself, dark like his father's. Though he could keep up with the wind, he was the gentler of the two. Arvid knew he inherited such a trait from his mother. Rin was a hand taller, and though he could keep up with the wind, he was the gentler of the two. *My sons, why must the song return now; you are not ready for the storm to come.* "Good morning, my children." He put a finger to his lips. "Your mother is still sleeping," he whispered.

"Father!" Sora began, "It's the first day of the Sun of Rest! We must gather our things and leave for the village center!" His eyes wide, his feet bouncing.

"Patience my son," Arvid gracefully added, knowing these words would get tangled in the boys' hair before they ever entered their ears. "Your mother is still sleeping and your elder brother is finishing his chores to care for the animals. You would not want to face the wrath of your mother if you were to wake her from her slumber. We will go when all is ready. Besides, aren't you missing some clothes?" These two reminded Arvid of himself when he was younger, though he supposed it to be a little different. Arvid remembered a time he would leave for months on adventures, waking before the sun, parting ways with it when it was too tired to continue. Arvid put a hand on each of the boy's shoulders. "Listen, Rin, Sora. Find your shirts, and ready the plinka - mind their horns. I will wake your mother, and we will leave shortly." Rin nodded excitedly, but Sora stayed.

The sun approached high-noon as Arvid and his tribe approached the Village Center. They traversed the tender slopes of the meadowland with ease and comfort. The Nilsen family had brought a few extra plinka they had befriended during the warm season. Plinkas were wonderful creatures—friendly and fierce the way a great sea can welcome you into her waves and swallow you whole. Young plinka were more fierce than their parents; it was a rare sight in the Meadow for a young plinka to befriend a member of the tribe. Of course, the Nilsen family walked with a beautiful young plinka whose fur was hearty and rough. As plinkas age, they grow more tender in fur and personality. Their hindleg thickens as their muscles become more defined. Their heart becomes more trusting as they find their place in the world. It seemed that as their power grew, so did their kindness, compassion, and care. Young plinkas also had a thick, calloused horn that came out from the bottom of their jaw which made them especially dangerous. As they aged, the horn slowly dulled and softened. The world of Thalorim had many wonderful creatures, large and small, and the Meadows were the perfect place for them to dwell and thrive.

Arvid glanced toward his son, who could hardly wait for the beginning of the festival. On the night of the first Sun of Rest, the Song Festival of Songs began. Songs from ancient days and new songs of ancient joys and sorrows were lifted to the great dome of lights. Arvid could see the pulse of excitement in Sora's step—whatever it was, it filled the boy like a current. There was always a song in Sora's heart, even if he had a hard time remembering all the words. Each hill the southern tribe conquered was another hill closer to the festival, and Sora had already counted a hundred hills. The small and mighty of the tribe shared stories while they walked together from the past and even invented new ones. Sora especially loved inventing new stories; the songs in his heart often rose and fell with the tides and the oceans in the worlds he crafted in his imagination.

Arvid noticed the boy drifting again. Sora often imagined the trail which led to the center of the village becoming a path cut through the rocks in the mountain. He would pretend he was suddenly balancing on the edge of the Cliffs of Burrn, overlooking the vast expanse of the rising stones in the Crag Mountains. He could almost feel the breeze in his hair as he leapt in his mind's eye from the birds to the snow-capped mountains to the dry desert land beyond. Though Sora had only heard about the mountains and the desert land, he had no problem inventing and changing the world around him to his desires. He often shared these dreams with Arvid, who wondered if some of his own adventures had somehow leapt into the heart of his son.

The village center peaked over the horizon of the grassy hills. Arvid slowed. They were close. The smell of libbers and tasty, sweet sugarglobs was carried on the breeze. The little tribe stopped at the top of the final hill to take in the wonder of the village which rested in a humble valley among the hills. The center of the village was one of the most beautiful sights Arvid had ever known. It was wide as a mountain and full of life. At its center was a great shelter of stone, large enough to hold everyone in the village during the rain. Coming out of the sides of the great stone shelter, the villagers wove awnings of green grass dyed with wonderful colors which sheltered different shops run by the village center. There were libber shops, sugarglob shops, gardening shops, book shops—anything and everything the heart could ever want.

Life to the fullest was found in the center of the village. The sounds of music radiated through the air and from the very ground itself. Song was the heartbeat of the Central Village and it rumbled like a deep thunder through the people of the Meadow. Though the village oozed with dillas and buildings, it was not enclosed by great walls or borders. Generations ago, the people of the Meadow were without shelter or protection from the elements, and the tribesmen of the Foothills took them in. They knew in their bones they were once foreigners in a distant land, and they even knew the very land on which they dwelt belonged to the God of the Sky. Each grassy hill

was a gift. Besides, there was no need to build stone walls when the land provided its own kind of security. Tributaries gathered from around the grassy hills into a great river that flowed from the mountains to the Myrkwood Forest. The water created a natural moat around the village center, providing a layer of protection from the dangers of the wilderness, and offered vibrant life to people and animals alike who were willing to share in its great, simple wealth.

Arvid's gaze followed Sora's to the brilliant colors of fabric which decorated dillas in the eastern district of the village. The central building stood like a wonder of stone come to life, shaped and frozen forever. If the central building was the foundation of the village, the tall tower in the northernmost point was its great beacon of hope. Even Arvid was still amazed they had built something nearly as tall as the mountains. Great stones from the foothills of the Crag Mountains in the west lined the base of the structure; some of them looked to be larger than a dilla. Stones stacked on top of one another in a circular pattern with dried mud and stones to keep the inside dry and warm even after the harvest. If someone were lost anywhere in the meadows to the east of the forest, they could find their way to the village center for shelter, food, and music to warm the soul.

Though called the Village Center, the edge of the Myrkwood Forest was nearly visible. The grass of the meadows grew thicker and gave way to brush and bramble to the east. The trees grew taller and more dense until the Forest. Since the day of Sealing, no one had entered the Forest. Anyone could walk right up to the edge and touch the vines and bark, but there were no paths through. No axe could clear a way, and no man was dull enough to try it.

The Grassy Meadows of Ayyr surrounded the Myrkwood Forests, and a great mountain range surrounded the Meadow like a great barrier. The mountains were so far away it was hard to tell where the mountains stopped and the sky began. Just past the edge of sight, it was easy to imagine looking back over the meadows from the mountain tops. No Meadow folk had been to the top of those mountains in generations. To the north and to the east, they were called the Crag Mountains. In the south and to the west, the Hort Mountains. Two villages inhabit these mountains and their foothills. In the east, there was an opening in the mountains which led to a desert; in some places this opening was a thousand feet wide, but mostly it was a winding valley only as wide as a small river. Every child raised in the Meadow was brought up to know the world around them. They had a deep respect for all they had been given, and Arvid made sure his children took it seriously. If Sora were to visit the mountains one day, he would need to know all he could.

The village center was a safe haven for sojourners weary in their travels. In those days, it wasn't often a traveler would wander through, though hospitality still ran deep in the blood of the meadow folk.

The tribe descended the final hill into the village center, and the plinka with them began to stir with excitement. Arvid glanced at their tall ears and wondered what they could hear that he could not. Near the tall tower, he followed Sora's gaze and spotted what had caught the boy's attention. Creatures from the North. His children had always heard tales of the animals tamed and loved by the northern folks of the village, but even Arvid had never seen this many at once. It looked like a mural come to life—beautiful animals grazing and playing in the hills just on the other side of the channel. There were liras resting on the shoulders of children and other animals. Tophies as long as three galaphins, with hundreds of little legs and four great big eyes on the sides of their heads. Glingers wrestled in the grass like dogs, large and fierce as lions though harmless.

Sora and Rin broke away from the rest of the tribe and raced into the heart of all the activities. Vendors' voices sang songs of sugary sweets and savory goodies. Performers filled the air with ancient songs. Children were safe to run around. Everyone was family here.

The boys found a vendor with the biggest nose they could spot. Normally the treats would cost a copper piece, but on the First Sun of Rest, they were free for all. The boys looked longingly at the sweet and savory goodness in front of them, and as if they could hear the boys' grumbling bellies, the sugarglob vendor handed over the two largest sugarglobs either had ever seen. They lasted a matter of seconds. Rin let out a belch, and the two boys set their eyes on the next target: mischief.

Anytime Sora and Rin left their little tribe, they caused trouble. Not the boring, pain-in-the-neck kind. The adventurous, imaginative, leave-you-smiling kind. The Trink family was known for their tall tales of bravery and courage—and the youngest Trinks did their best to prove to the world those were no tall tales.

"Maybe we can catch a galaphin!" Sora shouted to Rin under the cover of music and activities around them.

"We tried that last year. It didn't work out..."

"We could try to throw sugarberries into the instruments!" Sora half-whispered, half-giggled.

Rin smiled, and the two boys ran off into the crowd.

Chapter 2

Arvid - Old Ways New Warnings

As the two boys planned their sweetness inspired mischief, Arvid headed for the village tavern, a homey place run by a widow who had wandered into the village decades before. He snaked his way through the crowds, weaving between families and animals towards a building of stone with a tall roof constructed with mud and long grass spread between the same branches the outer tribes used for their dillas. The buildings in the village center were typically made with stone - a contrast to the more transient dillas in the surrounding villages.

He walked a path surrounded by huts and booths stationed by smiling faces and open arms. He glanced east toward the forest edge and suddenly felt as if it had been watching him all these years. Gangling branches and threatening briars stood in eerie silence as the streets of the Western Village thrummed with excitement and song.

Arvid ran his fingers along the rough inlays of hardened mud between rocks. Rough-cut stone and saw-hewn boards formed the tavern's bones. White stone and dark mud mingled like the full moons in a dark sky. On a normal day, Arvid would have enjoyed himself, giving in to the melodies ancient and young, laughing and sharing with friends. He was no stranger to a tavern for a drink and a meal. Not that day. *Of all days for this song to appear.* His frustration crept through his eyebrows and into the people he passed who gave him a wide berth. *By the twin moons, this is supposed to be a day without worries.* Arriving at the tavern, he paused at a solid wood door whose grain reminded Arvid of the grass in his home. In the Village Center, most of the grass was isolated in soft patches behind homes or in the hearthfield in the southern end of the city. There were a few such expanses of beautiful grass throughout the village, where children played and families rested. In each, there were several stone fireplaces where people would gather. The rest of the city was dirt from the foot traffic of the townsfolk or animals. He placed a hand on the door, feeling the weight

of it. It may as well weigh as much as a galaphin. Arvin reluctantly opened the wooden door and stepped inside to a tapestry of sound.

The room vibrated with warmth, laughter, and joy. Cups clinking, voices murmuring, chairs scraping. The room was filled from front to back with a few vacant chairs peppered throughout. Misshapen circular tables filled the center of the room while rectangular ones were pressed against the outside walls. In the back of the cathedral room was a long bar that ran nearly the width of the tavern. To the left of the bar was a heavy set, wooden door of dark, knotted wood, reused boards from some other project in town. It stood crooked on its frame, and even in the crowded room, Arvid could hear its creak. Braces made from solid wood ran diagonally across from the middle of the door running up and down. Soft light thrummed from behind through the cracks in the old wood, guiding tired patrons to uncomfortable beds. They were mostly occupied by deliverers who spent days moving supplies to and from the Village Center at a time. The Center would often send supplies to the outlying tribes - things they can't grow on their own: preserved meats, processed grains and barley, herbs and medicines. The tribes were mostly self-sufficient, but the hearty people of the Meadow were not too prideful to lean on one another. It was in their nature.

The room was full of faces. Arvid recognized a few of them including some from his own tribe. Men and women glanced his way as he entered. He met their eyes gladly. Oblivious eyes in a sea of happy faces, clueless to the coming storm. He hurt for them at that moment, and suddenly he felt like a stranger. They didn't know. They couldn't. *How could they?* After all, Arvid was one of six from the Old Ways. The Monta and Nilsen families noticed Arvid enter, smiled and waved, and returned to their conversation. He was glad he didn't get pulled into a conversation. The mask he wore was wearing thin.

Arvid surveyed the room, looking for the familiar face of his old mentor. *There you are.* At the bar he saw a man with broad shoulders, a tattered brown tunic and a scar on the back of his neck. Arvid would recognize that scar anywhere. He gave it to the man, after all. He made his way back to the bar doing his best to nod and smile at people as he walked by. It wouldn't be a strange thing for Arvid to sit next to the man, and no one in this room should know of their past, but Arvid felt better about not announcing their conversation by walking straight towards him. He sat on an empty stool next to the man, ordered an oaken ale, and without looking directly at him, Arvid took in the sight of his old mentor. *Moons you've aged, Dellam.* The man didn't so much as glance Arvin's way. "I figured you'd be looking for me," the man said.

"And I figured I would find you here."

“I’m not always drinking, you know. I have a job. And today felt like the right time to drink a few.” Arvid couldn’t quite read the man’s demeanor. He planned to ask if he had heard the song too earlier in the morning. The stories of the song weren’t very common, but they were known enough that if rumor spread, it may cause a panic. Men and women laughed and shared stories around tables, oblivious to the world around them. Clueless that the world was beginning to sing again.

“So you heard it too? I was hoping I imagined it. This isn’t good, Ar.” The man looked at Arvid with heavy eyes. Wrinkles nested on the man’s face, some from laughter and some from tears.

“It woke me in the night. I thought I was dreaming. I Pulled from the earth to be sure.” The man’s eyes widened at the word, their voices barely audible. “Thalorim is singing again,” Arvid’s words were hesitant to join the conversation, and the weight of those words hung between the two men.

“I didn’t know you were keeping the old ways alive.” The man’s voice was deep, gravelly, and Arvid had to lean closer to make out his words.

“Dellam, I didn’t - I mean, I wasn’t trying to. I had to be sure, and the only way to be sure was to serve the old ways.” Arvid shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Dellam leaned in closer to Arvid, his eyes fierce. Anger? No, something else. Fierce with remembering. His jaw was set, and his demeanor changed. Arvid immediately felt like a child about to be scolded by his father. Arvid’s body tensed, he didn’t realize he was squeezing his mug so tightly. He trusted Dellam, but he hadn’t discussed the old ways in years. Only a few times since they had settled in the Meadow.

“I will never forget the old ways, old friend. You should not either. This ancient song requires of us to take back the old ways, to prepare for what is to come. Restore what was lost. When the seal breaks, everything will change.” As the conversation unfolded, Dellam’s voice shifted slightly. An old cadence emerged. Dellam’s body relaxed and he put a strong hand on Arvid’s shoulder. It was the strong hand of a warrior welcoming a brother before a battle. His eyes softened, and Arvid was relieved.

“Dell, I’m worried. I have little ones now. My own family.”

“And that’s *exactly* why we must prepare ourselves. Look me in the eyes and tell me Nira will not give you her blessing. If she knows the song is here, then she knows the importance of this task. Arvid, if the seal gives and we haven’t taken back the old ways, I fear we shall all be lost. Without the seal, the fog will move with purpose again. We mustn’t let that happen.” The words hung in the air like the fog itself, seeping slowly into Arvid’s ears; he knew what must be done,

even if he didn't want to accept it. *Why me? Why now?* Dellam must have sensed his thoughts, as the hand on his shoulder softened. "I am sorry it must be you, old friend, and I must ask of you no small favor. Retrieve the stones, and meet me at the Great Tower in 2 days' time."

"I have no choice then." Arvid's eyes remained locked onto Dellam's. Hoping to find some other way. But Dellam's eyes were a reflection of his own: worry.

"We all must choose how to proceed, but now all of our choices will carry great weight, and our shoulders the burden of guardianship once again. I will gather the others. Tell your family what you must, but for now we must deal in whispers and secrecy." Dellam's voice was stern, knowing that Arvid would push back against this advice.

"I will not lie to my family." Arvid risked more than a whisper. His heart was racing and the dark shirt he was wearing suddenly felt suffocating. "We have never left the Meadow and have travelled no farther than the Village Center. And I have never been away from my family more than a few days to gather food, and that was during a hard year. We have had a bountiful harvest this year. What am I to tell my boys?" Dellam sighed deeply. He pulled his hand from Arvid's shoulder and lifted the ale to his lips, as if trying to keep the words from escaping. Arvid's knee throbbed.

"Perhaps it's time they learned of the old ways." With that, Dellam stood up, and patted Arvid on the shoulder. For a moment it seemed he might say something, but sighed and walked away.

Arvid sat. Stunned. He stared blankly into his nearly empty cup of ale. What had just happened? Years of promised secrecy, decades of building a new life in the Meadow. Was he really to restore the old way of things? Was he really to become a Veythar again?

Chapter 3

Dellam - A Friend in the Crowd

Dellam left Arvid to wrestle this new task. The path would be hard, but sometimes the greatest cost is asked of the greatest souls, and Arvid was the best man Dell had ever known. Arvid had saved his more than a few times. Arvid would agree. He could be stubborn, yes, but he also knew what it meant to be a Veythar. To carry the burden of a protector. The oath of a Veythar couldn't be broken so easily.

Dellam didn't bother with smiles as he passed through the tavern. The regular patrons who knew Dellam knew him to be a little rough around the edges. He preferred it that way. Oddly their laughter was of no comfort to him that night. He knew soon enough their laughter would turn to tears. Let them enjoy the laughter of oblivion, maybe the memory of it will offer respite when their world begins to end.

After twists and turns and bumps from the tapestry of people between him and the door, he finally reached the exit. He pressed his hand firmly on the surface and closed his eyes, cherishing the rich grain of the deeply knotted wood. The door had history. As soon as his hand grazed the wood, he could see glimpses of a forest. Not the Myrkwood forest proper, of course, but a forest. A city of life once untouched by the destructive hands of careless humans. It wasn't made of skinny, crooked planks from some random young tree in the woods. No. Though humans were careless, Dellam knew many who cherished the world as he did. This door was harvested with great care from a tree that had given many generations shade, wood, seeds, leaves, and many other little wonders. Dellam relished the thought. After a moment, something bumped into Dellam; instinctively, his body tensed, and he pulled his hand from the door, turning to face whoever had found him. He hardened his fists, readying himself for a blow. But he found himself face to face with a smiling stranger. "Hello friend, my apologies for bumping into you. You've been standing there for a few minutes, may I pass?"

Doing his best to soften his expression, he stepped aside, nodded an apology, and let the man pass without saying a word. Dellam looked at the door with wonder and confusion, then looked to his hand. Life had been so uneventful for Dellam for a generation, he found himself a little homesick. He patted the door as if saying goodbye to an old friend, and walked through it and into the night.

The first day of the Festival of Rest was winding down and the day's merchants and vendors had packed their carts and booths and covered them with blankets to dissuade wandering hands from wandering too far. The folks in the meadow were kind, but not unwise. Dellam looked to the

now darkened skies. A few whispering clouds had drifted in from the desert in the west where a great salt lake caused warm, wet air to rise before cascading through the mountains. The moons were high that night, a lighthouse in an otherwise infallible darkness.

Lanterns across the city blessed the festival with a warm light. The orange glow made it feel like dinner was coming out of the hotstone and was ready to be served. And that's exactly what was happening. People everywhere had found what purchase they could on patches of grass, benches, firepits, or porches to eat together, sitting haphazardly and in tight quarters. People who had never met would share meals and stories. Like the people in the tavern, Dellam wondered if this night would help the people of the village persevere in the hard times to come. There were stringed instruments and instruments played with breath. Men and women sang of legends and myths accompanied by swirling melodies enthralling ears, young and old. Rhythmic drums gave life to the night. Some musicians acted as entertainers, while others offered soothing melodies for people to enjoy while they ate. Dellam always appreciated the traditions of the Meadow. They were good people, if a little uninformed. The people who weren't eating were gathered around performers of various kinds. Jugglers and singers, dancers and jesters. There was one performer Dellam needed to find.

He knelt to the ground and scooped a hand full of dirt, rubbing it on his swollen fingers, palms and arms, imagining all of the people who had walked on this dirt before. He thought of the stories this dirt might have heard. Stories of love or great loss. Stories of victory and pain. Even though the dirt wasn't technically alive, it worked when he honored its past. Luckily most people were too wrapped up in their activities, they wouldn't pay any attention to Dellam.

Dellam Pulled.

A puff of dust jumped from his hands and arms where he had just rubbed the dirt creating an almost perfect outline of his arms and fingers. A euphoric warmth seeped through his skin where the dirt was, mingling with the blood in his veins. He could stay like this for a few seconds and enjoy the sensation, but Pulling tended to push one towards action.

Dellam Pushed.

For a few seconds, Dellam's senses were amplified. At once, he could hear the clinking of cups from the tavern and the hooves of animals on the next street over. He could feel in the soles of his feet, even through his worn shoes, the vibrations of music coming from beneath the Great Tower a ten minute walk away. His clothes felt uncomfortable suffocating, the subtle breeze a great gale. He heard the sound of a berry landing in the bell a breath instrument, cutting its music short as two young boys giggled and ran away. This much Essence would only fuel his abilities for a few seconds, but that's all he would need to find the voice of his dear friend. A smile forced its way from

Dellam's eyes to his lips, his first genuine smile in quite some time. *Brin, you fantastic fool, don't share too many of our secrets, they'll start to believe you.*

Dellam wiped his hands, and touched the first two fingers of his left hand to his forehead, saying a silent prayer in honor of the dirt that would never hear another story. He sighed briefly, then he took his first steps towards the voice of an old friend, thinking of the new stories the path might hear that night.

As he walked he peered east towards the forest, convinced that at any moment something might be watching from the darkness within. Though the moons were bright that night, and though the canopy of the forest edge this far away from the Myrkwood was patchy, light barely reached the ground - as if the light itself was afraid to approach. *Is the seal really going to give? He thought Why now? What has changed?* Dellam's mind was twisted with questions he could not know the answers to yet. Was something or someone acting against the Veythars? Has the song returned because of the breaking of the seal, or has the seal weakened because of the presence of the song? *Who is able to sing the ancient song? I thought its memory was lost to the ages?*

Focus Dellam.

He pulled his eyes from the forest, trusting for the moment that the seal was still in effect, and set himself to the task ahead. A cacophony of sounds and aromas swirled around him from winding melodies to delicious meats and breads. Even without the boost from Pushing, his senses felt overwhelmed. Slowly, but with purpose, he walked. He stayed in the middle of the path, though he made sure to draw no attention from others. Walking the edges almost ensured being pulled into a conversation or a group of families eating together. Performers were notorious for calling passersby to join in the fun, and the Festival of Rest made it taboo *not* to join. Dellam put his callused hands into tattered pockets, trying to appear disinterested and tired as he walked.

He passed small stone buildings with canvas awnings. Everything in the village was made with the colors of Thalorim. Stone and mud gave structure, furs and hides were used for outdoor rugs and gathering spaces, Beige canvases were dyed with yellow flowers and green grass from the fields to create intricate patterns to resemble vines growing on the canvas itself. Some of the buildings were two stories, but most of them were only one. They didn't trust the air as much as they trusted the ground. A few carriages pulled by plinka through the streets delivering festival attendees to their homes or simply to another part of the celebration. Everything was free during the Festival of Rest. These three days would run the village dry if not for the tradition of sending "good will gifts" in the following weeks. It was quite the system, but it only worked because of the kind nature of the Meadow Folk. The imminence of danger was beginning to dry up Dellam's spirit.

Finally, the voice of his old friend whittled its way into Dellam's ears. He knew Brin would be performing tonight. While Dellam had isolated himself among the people, Brin had taken another approach.

Brin was a lanky man. As lanky as a man can be while only standing five feet tall. His hair was jet black with a few streaks of grey throughout. His tunic was made of simple canvas, brown, with the sleeves cut off and a hood that was reminiscent of the Old Ways. Beneath the robed tunic was a white canvas wrap with a belt worn above his waste. Winding tendril tattoos swirled up his right arm from his fingers up to his elbow. His left arm was of course bare. Dellam had covered the tattoos on his right arm. They were a symbol of a Veythar given to members upon ordination. Dellam shook his head - *always hiding in plain sight. I suppose it has worked all the same.*

An enthralled group of men, women, and children sat around Brin as he wove a tale of two adventurous souls braving the lands beyond the desert battling great evil to bring peace to distant peoples. In his story, the two men had tattoos just like his, only Thalarim had blessed the two men with great abilities to use her resources to do good. The two men leapt a hundred feet in the air and could crumble mountains with their hands. Their voices were as loud as a tornado or as soft as a blade of grass swaying in the breeze. Wounds would instantly heal, and they could even slow time itself! Brin met Dell's eyes. Even without words, Dellam sensed that Brin heard the ancient melody too. Brin winked, giving all of his attention to the hungry crowd around him. Dellam couldn't help but smile, deepening the wrinkles on his face. When Brin mentioned that the two heroes had descended into deep, *underground* caves, the crowd gasped and children looked to their parents for comfort. The people of the Meadow would never dare to dig into the ground for anything except growing food or honoring their dead. The ground was hallowed, full of mystery as it should be. They nearly feared the deep underground as much as the heart of the Myrkwod forest.

Dellam found a stone pillar nearby and listened to the rest of Brin's tale. As he spoke, his entire body moved with the story. When the heroes scored a blow, he was standing on the tips of his toes, arms flailing as if falling from a plinka. The rhythm of the story began to rise, a tapestry of prose, higher and higher until the pinnacle of the story.

"The two heroes dove deeper into the earth, seeking the truth of the heart of evil until they were deep in the belly of the world. A cavern as great as the Meadow itself and as tall as the Myrkwod Forest. The beast in front of them, shrouded in darkness, waited for the two heroes to make their move, unwilling to fight on their terms.. Of the two, Teribim was older and wiser, careful in his movements; Terifel was rash but stronger by far. Terifel rolled to the right and threw himself through the air and into the darkness, eager to win the day. He vanished. Teribim had an ominous feeling that they were being toyed with. He followed on foot, ready to react to any

movement. The sound of clashing swords filled the room as if there were suddenly a great battle covered by the darkness. A winding fog began to snake its way from the battle and curled around Teribim's feet. "Terifel!" He shouted. He ran after his brother, but not without fear. In the darkness, his senses were dulled; he couldn't see, he couldn't hear anything besides the sound of clashing metal. He tried to tap the world for its blessing to boost his senses as he had done a thousand times, but when he tried, Thalorim was not there for him.

Suddenly he felt very small. A silly boy chasing the wind. *How could we have been so stupid*, the wise hero thought. "I will not lose my brother this day!" He shouted in defiance. Suddenly the cavern was silent. The fog began to withdraw as well as the darkness. In front of Teribim was only one figure, still shadowed by the darkness of the cave. Teribim recognized the shadowed figure: tall, strong, as wide as a tree. It was his brother standing there in the middle of the belly of the world where Teribim had thought he would come to understand the heart of evil.

'It's me, brother' Terifel spoke softly, nearly a whisper. The shadow on the man lifted and Teribim could see he was crying, just a shadow of a man.

'Explain yourself, Terifel. What have you become??' Teribim spoke in confusion. Though he was beginning to understand.

'I've led us to folly, brother. You have always protected me, defending me and my honor from the enemies we faced. How many lives would have been spared if my arrogance hadn't led us into battle? How many landscapes were left in ruin for my pride? How many lives now face categorical destruction because I saw a reason to fight when there could have been another way? It's me brother. I have become the very thing I swore to protect the world from.'

Terifel fell to the ground and wept, and Teribim pitied his brother, for he saw the truth in his brother's words. 'You did not do so with intention, brother. And even still, I will not leave your side' Teribim meant what he said, but it pained him to say it. He approached his brother, the husk of a man he once revered with great honor, and even then saw even greater honor in the fallen man. For to admit one's folly is the sign of a great man.'

Brin looked to Dellam, an old friend, with mournful eyes. Dellam wiped a tear from his eyes; the crowd that had gathered sat in silence, revering Brin for the gift he had given them.

Chapter 4

The Fog

A single whisper. A pinprick of light. *This will be enough, for now.*

Chapter 5

Dellam - The Hearthfield

Brin walked towards Dellam through the crowds as they slowly gathered their things, ready to retire for the night. The first night of the Festival of Rest came to an end; the people of the Meadow had rejoiced together, shared meals and stories, and for this small group in front of Dellam, they have shared in a truth they could not understand. Candles set on stone pillars and buildings slowly began to flicker, burning the last bit of life they had to give. Dellam wondered if they had enjoyed the tale as he had.

A few folks stopped Brin to thank him for his story. Dellam noticed tears in the eyes of listeners as they meandered from the street to wherever they were staying for the evening. Some would walk back to their own Dillas, many would stay in the Village Center with friends or family or at the various Inns and taverns in town. The Meadow's Folk were hospitable on a normal day, but hospitality was a second language during the Festival of Rest.

As Brin approached, Dellam spread his arms and pulled him into a firm embrace. "Old friend," he said, resting his hands on Brin's shoulders, "I can't begin to tell you the joy it brings me

to see you again.” Brin’s eyes barely reached Dellam’s shoulders, but the warmth between them leveled any difference.

“And I, you, Dell! It has been decades! Centuries!” Brin spoke with his body as if he were telling another story. Though Brin was short, he always carried a grand presence wherever he went.

“Oh don’t be dramatic!” Dellam chuckled. “It hasn’t been *that* long.” The two men began walking aimlessly down the street. “And you better watch yourself, Brin. If you keep telling these stories, someone is going to start believing you, and then what?” Dell smiled.

“Oh not to worry, Dell” Brin jabbed Dell in the hip. “Plenty of people believe the tales I tell.” He said with a grin. “But I find with enough conviction and a sprinkle of performance, our secrets stay hidden in plain sight.” The two walked through the Village Center, leaving the quieting sounds of soft music and chatter behind them. The crowds had thinned and the laughter and music were mere echoes as the night deepened. They came to a hearthfield - a wide expanse of soft grass laced with small fire pits, their stone rings glowing softly in the moonlight. Most of these pits still had glowing embers from the night’s celebration, but just a few of them were host to late souls enjoying the light of the Twin Moons, sharing their favorite stories or just enjoying the dancing flames. The Moons’ light beckoned many to stay late.

Dellam motioned towards a nearby pit where the embers still glowed. They sat, Brin cross-legged with the ease of someone half his age, Dellam lowered himself to the grass with a quiet grunt on the opposite side of the stone ring. Brin placed a new log on the fire until the flames warmed the two old friends. The warm, crackling fire eased their tension, and the sound seemed to carry over the forest edge a hundred yards from where they sat.

The occasional owl and cricket sang with the fire that night, creating a symphony of sounds full of delight. The song in that moment was a gentle respite, for they both knew of the chaos to come and the conversation to be had. Eventually, Brin leaned back and set his eyes on the Moons, the firelight danced on the man’s face, revealing a small set of scars just under his left eye. “It feels as though we’ve been running from this song for too long, Dell. I know we have only now caught wind of it, but that’s already a sign we’ve waited too long.” His eyes were deep in thought, looking at the stars beyond the moons.

“Yes.” Dell’s voice barely a whisper. “And I am afraid we can run no longer. I spoke with Arvid before coming to see you, he was awakened in the night. He heard the melody as well. Brin, a thousand years of silence, why now?” He rubbed his forearm where his tattoos were hidden.

“I am not sure, Dell. I travelled here from the Southern Village.” Brin looked around to be sure others were not close enough to hear. “The song has been there for seven days. Some of the villagers, Dell, they’ve heard whispers from the Forest. I fear we have less time than we thought.”

“I have not heard any whispers, though I did not think to listen for them. Have there been any reports of songs coming from the Myrkwood? Just whispers?” Dellam looked to the forest edge. It was an odd thing to be so close to such peril yet in the company of a thousand joyful souls. It was clear to see why the villagers had settled here all those years ago. The land near the forest is more fertile than the land which gives way to the foothills, and having a source of wood for construction was an added bonus. “And do you believe these rumors to be true??” Dellam looked squarely at Brin.

“I do. I spoke with one of the men who claimed to hear them. His eyes were changed, his family said it was so.” Brin continued looking at the stars.

“Brin, what are you withholding?” The silence was beginning to speak. Dellam trusted Brin with his life, and he was sure whatever he was holding back was not malevolence, but a hesitance for a truth to be uttered. Once a truth has been revealed, it cannot be covered again without great cost.

“I heard the whispers myself, brother. The Fog is returning. If it’s able to whisper, then part of its consciousness has already returned.” Brin looked at Dellam and suddenly seemed to have aged, wrinkles accompanied his sharp, dark eyes where there used to be none, and his eyes for the first time in Dellam’s memory held something new: worry. Brin was scared. Dellam felt a pit in his stomach at the thought. Brin had always been a solid rock amidst the storms. He had weathered countless storms, yet his eyes had always bolstered a confidence that spurred others on. *What did you hear in the whispers, old friend?* Dellam wondered to himself. Though as old as the Seal itself, Dellam suddenly felt inadequate for the test ahead.

“We’re not ready.” Dellam sighed deeply, now staring intently into the fire. “If the seal is breaking, we need to get the conduit stones. Once the Veythars were many - we were able to withstand the Fog and seal it in the Forest along with...” His voice trailed off and he looked to the ground. The Veythars had lost many in the battle leading up to the Sealing. They were strong, but in the end, many of them turned on each other like everyone else.

Something caught Dellam’s attention. Something faint, a single note plucked out of the forest. Riding beneath melody were hushed voices, a secret in the wind. Dellam locked eyes with Brin who must have heard it too as he was already crouched with his hand pressed firmly to the ground, ready to Pull. Dellam looked around to see if any others in the hearthfield had heard the sound, but to his relief, he and Brin were the only two remaining this late in the night.

Chapter 6

Brin - The Thing That Shouldn't Be

Brin looked to Dallum, there he saw the steady, reassuring presence the man had always had. Brin, in all his confidence, felt out of place so close to the Fog's whisper; this wasn't supposed to be happening. They had given almost everything to make sure the Fog would never return. But the melody was there as sure as the forest itself, and the whispers so clear meant something was coming. The Fog had given a command. Brin pressed his hand to the ground, ready to Pull as soon as the moment was right. Without a conduit stone, Thalorim would be less willing to grant her resources to the Veythars, and Brin would risk hurting himself if he Pulled or Pushed too much too quickly; he would need to be careful, not ideal when danger was fast approaching.

Where are you? Brin's eyes darted from the tree tops to the forest edge floor, dread filled his thoughts, and he knew he could not trust his own senses this close to the forest. He took a deep breath. *Focus, Brin, it will do you no good to let worry lead you into this fight.* He stilled himself and found a single point to focus his gaze, letting his peripheral vision scan the forest edge. A branch cracked to the right, Brin's eyes followed. He scanned the trees, but he saw nothing. "Left!" shouted Dellam. "Remember, the Forest can play with your senses, never rely on only one." Dellam had taken a defensive stance. Brin knew that he would stay back and offer support rather than rush into the fight. Dellam was a firm foundation, a boulder in a steady stream.

"I know, I know!" Brin smiled, "you haven't lost your edge, Dell." The tattoos on Dellam's arms began to glow gently through the covering he had put in place. It looked like his very blood was flowing with this faint glow. The ground beneath Dell's feet began to shift, the grass melting into gray becoming the same monochrome husk Brin had seen a thousand times before. Brin hadn't seen Dell practice the old ways in decades, and though there wasn't time to truly appreciate Dell's mastery, he made a mental note to bring it up later. Brin hesitantly began to Pull. *Come on, friend, help us once again.* He looked left, and through the edge of the forest, bounding towards them, was a wolf larger than any Brin had seen in his life-time. Dark fur. Black eyes. Teeth. The creature barreled from the forest with malice - Brin didn't need to think too hard to imagine the command the Fog had whispered: kill.

Dirt began to slither up Brin's arms. Pulling for a battle was different from Pulling for a party trick. Brin needed *substance*, he needed enough to strengthen his muscles, harden his bones,

hone his senses, but pull too much and his muscles could atrophy. Painfully. The trees at the forest edge were as wide as a man's shoulders. They were sparse and mere playthings compared to the trees near the center. The wolf leapt, placing all four paws on the side of one of the last trees and pushed off, giving itself a boost through the air; the tree shook, and the creature was closing in.

Come on, come on! His muscles screamed in protest at the growing power. When Brin was sure he could take no more, he gave one final Pull, leaving the grass and dirt beneath him gray and lifeless. His skin crackled and the pain in his muscles urged him to action. He could not hold this much Potential for long. Fifty feet. Now that the wolf had breached the hearthfield, the moons illuminated its form. What Brin thought was matted fur was actually patches of tree bark growing into its flesh, its eyes pitch black leaked an oozing dark sap, similar to the black foam bubbling from his jowls, and its teeth and claws looked from here to be metallic. "This is different," Brin said through clenched teeth.

"Yes it is," said Dellam quietly. "But still we will stand to protect." Brin struggled to catch Dellam's tone - *are you worried?* He wondered; he looked at Dell and back to the creature. He could feel its malice like the heat from a raging fire, and he could contain the Potential no more. He directed the Potential first to his legs.

Brin Pushed.

With a sound like lightning, Brin erupted into motion, pulling a dagger from under his robe, he darted first to the right. The Wolf's sinister eyes were set on Dellam. *Hold fast, Dell. I've got you.* Brin glanced back toward Dellam as he pushed away from the fire. Earth hand snaked up his arms, his tattoos were pulsing with light and his eyes were set on the wolf. *I wouldn't want to be you right now, creature. If you survive me, you'll be met with a quick end by that man.*

A growl as deep as the forest itself loosed itself from the belly of the wolf. Brin had closed the distance, skidding to a stop ten feet on the wolf's left side. The wolf was closing in on Dellam, who stood poised, ready. Brin drew Potential into his legs and Pushed again, this time with more strength creating small craters in the field. The wolf must have sensed the power differences between the two of them, as it never took its eyes off of Dellam. Brin collided with the wolf, drawing his Potential into his shoulders and arms, steeling himself for the blow. The dagger struck one of the patches of tree bark, a sound like sword on stone erupted from the collision, the wolf was thrown off its course and slammed into the ground on its side. Sliding a dozen feet, the wolf hit a patch of dirt, its bark carving into the ground as it rolled over, legs skillfully finding purchase in the soil and righted itself, leaping in the blink of an eye for Dellam. Dell dropped low, the wolf's claws raking the air where his head had just been.. The claw grazed his shoulder as he rolled to the side. Dell planted his feet and slammed both hands into the creature's side, using a significant amount of

his Potential. Brin could feel the vibration in the ground as Dell Pushed into the creature and sent it rolling through the fire, a plume of debris, embers, and ash littered the grass. The wolf righted itself again, its anger radiating. The smell of burnt flesh and fur assaulted Brin's senses, and he noticed a fractured rib pierced the creature's flesh where Dell had struck, but it didn't seem to notice. Red blood dripped from its fur and pooled on the dirt below.

The fire illuminated the creature even more fully, and Brin pitied the beast. This creature once dwelt in the woods, nestled in the trees, spent its days hunting for food or drinking from streams. It had been changed; it had become something new entirely. Holes speckled its ears, and its lips had begun to rot away, revealing bleeding gums and jagged teeth that looked like they had been forged out of metal from the earth. Its breath was ragged, but it didn't appear to be winded by the two blows. Its eyes did not reflect the firelight; they were pits. It looked back and forth between the two, as if considering who was the greater threat. Brin wondered about the intelligence of such a disfigured and corrupted creature. Seeing the dagger still in Brin's hands, the wolf made its decision; Brin was a threat, but he was less risky than Dell. *This thing is smarter than it looks. It's thinking*, Brin thought, worried.

It exploded towards Brin, its claws leaving great streaks and cracks in the ground. He readied himself again. He still held Potential, and directed it into his arms and legs. Brin glanced for a second at Dellam, whose crackling Potential danced up his arm like a fire. Brin could *feel* Dell's Potential. *How can you Pull so much without a stone? The earth always asks for a price, why does it seem you pay none?* He wondered. "I've got this, Dell!" He feigned confidence. The beast lunged, this time for his shoulder, but he ducked below, his senses and speed sharpened by the Potential he held. Brin would not make the same mistake twice. The wolf's heat curled around Brin, black foam dripping from its mouth. With a quick look, he noticed several patches of flesh on the creature's belly. A patchwork of corruption. He plunged his dagger into the fur closest to where he assumed the creature's heart was. The dagger bit into the flesh and sank to its hilt. Brin Pushed what was left of his Potential into his legs and shoved the beast backwards over its hind legs, slamming into the ground with a sickening thud; Brin collapsed, the muscles in his left leg snapped from the final Push. The wolf was still.

Brin lay on the ground, pain eating away at his leg. He had pushed it too far, a mistake Dell would have never made. Through the pain, Brin could feel something else. He could still feel the black ooze that had dripped on him during the collision. It didn't feel wet, it felt... *Wrong* somehow. Like some part of the Fog's essence lived within the fluid - Brin could feel it being drawn towards himself. Ignoring the searing fire in his leg, he frantically pulled his robe off and threw it into the fire where it began to sizzle and bubble. Silence settled over the hearthfield.

Dell walked quietly to Brin, deep in thought. He bent over and placed a hand on Brin's leg. "You okay?" He didn't need to point out Brin's mistake; it was painfully obvious.

"Yeah I think so," he lied. "Moons this hurts. I haven't practiced the old ways in decades, Dell. And to that extent in centuries." He could see the deformed muscle beneath his pant leg, which was covered in mud and ash.

"It seems we may no longer be calling the Old Ways the Old Ways," Dell said, trying to lighten the mood while he pushed some of his Potential into Brin's damaged leg. The muscles spasmed and jumped, making his leg tremble, but after a minute or so, the searing pain dissolved into a dull throb. Dell released the rest of his Potential, but it did not return to the ground. Once something had given its essence, it could never be returned. Dell's tattoos wisped away like ash in the wind until his skin returned to normal. Dell put two fingers from his left hand to his forehead, a silent gesture of honor for the cost of this magic. Brin, suddenly feeling like a child forgetting to say his morning prayers, did the same.

With the pain fading and the danger passed, Dell sat beside Brin. Together, they stared at the beast that now lay motionless on the ground ten feet away. "Dell we've never seen anything like this, even when we still had everyone with us and we were trying to find a way to capture and seal the Fog, it *never* created something like that... thing."

"Yeah. I've had nightmares about something like this for centuries now." Dell continued staring at the wolf while he spoke. "When we sealed the Fog, there was something about the forest that didn't sit right with me. So I did some digging. I searched the old mountains and found some old drawings that spoke of a presence in the Forest. I worry the presence has mingled with the Fog to make something... worse".

"Worse?" Brin rubbed his aching leg. "I didn't think things could get much worse. Dell, that thing is no simple creature. The bark, the sap... It wasn't just changed, it was grown into something else."

"Like I said. Worse." Dellam faced Brin, his face grim. "We must pray that Arvid is successful in his task to retrieve the conduit stones." Memories of the old days with the Veythars flooded Brin's mind. "We were lucky tonight. It appears the Moons are smiling on us this night, Brin."

"Lucky?!" Brin sat up. "Are you kidding, Dell? This was just one creature, and the Fog still has almost none of its consciousness, and we barely survived." Brin looked down at his leg. "Well, I barely survived. How did you do that?"

"Do what?" Dell asked genuinely.

“You Pulled perfectly without a conduit stone. Your control was amazing. You didn’t end up like this” he gestured to his leg. “When I said you hadn’t lost your edge, I was just trying to lighten the mood, but man you really haven’t lost your edge. So how did you do it?”

“Brin, for a thousand years, you and Arvid have integrated yourselves into cultures. You’ve both had families and homes. I’ve kept the Old Ways.” Dell’s eyes dropped, and Brin understood the weight of what he had said.

“Has it been so long?” Brin looked at his old friend with new eyes. When the Veythars sealed the fog a thousand years before, they parted ways with an oath to keep the Old Ways secret to ward off power hungry travellers.

“Yes, my old friend. And there has been a great cost to achieve what I have. I would not wish it on my greatest enemy. I’m tired, Brin.” Dell did not meet Brin’s eyes, and the words fell to the dirt. Brin left them there. As they fell, an unseen wind swayed the tops of the trees. The floor of the forest edge began to shift and a cold air swept from its darkness. The light of the moons dimmed for a moment and a swift gust of wind swept over the hearthfield. A single whisper escaped from the forest. *Run.*

In a fury of motion, the silent beast took a ragged, gasping breath and jumped to its feet, blood still dripping from its wet fur, a few pieces of tree bark fell to the ground. The large creature bounded towards the trees in a blur as the two men planted their hands into the dirt once again. Suddenly it was gone, and the wind was silent again.

Chapter 7

Young Dellam - The Cost of Magic

Dellam sat beside a river facing his mother. Her long, black hair peppered with streaks of gray, soft wrinkles beside her eyes from smiling. A simple melody coursed through the water, following its gentle currents as a few fish swam upriver to lay eggs; spring had arrived, Dellam’s favorite time of year to find all kinds of animals in the wild. He had spent most of his childhood

playing in the foothills of the mountains. The foothills were home to trees, critters, caves, and other wonders to explore, and Dellam loved them all.

“Look here, Dellam.” Ylsa’s voice was as soft as a breeze, yet as steady as the trees. Dellam admired that about her—how she could be both. “This magic does not come freely. There is always a cost” she said as she placed her hand on the wide trunk of a great elm tree beside them. Her arms were thin, but Dellam knew they held great strength.

Ylsa pulled.

The bark of the tree began to vibrate softly at first, then peeled upwards in tiny threads, first crawling up her fingers, forming tendrils of dust and slivers of bark up her arm, swirling like the river. She touched her other hand to a small stone on her chest and closed her eyes. The skin beneath the swirling tendrils of dust began to glow on her arm, and her eyes seemed to faintly grow too.

“Mother, look!” Dellam’s eyes widened as he followed the trunk up to its branches. The buds near the top were starting to wilt. The bark beneath her hand, once rich and brown, was now brittle—gray streaks running through it like veins of ash. His mother’s hair, now black as ink, shimmered in the sunlight, her skin smooth as river stone.

“Mother it’s amazing! Is this the stone?” Dellam couldn’t quite understand it. He hadn’t been able to Pull, even though he was already ten. *Too young*, his mother always said. But he knew other children who could Pull—and they weren’t ten.

Ylsa smiled gently. “**No, my son. The stone only helps. It keeps the magic from taking too much. This”—she raised her glowing arm—“this is the power of Thalorim. A gift.” The dull stone at her chest now shone like moonlight on water, flooding the clearing with violet light, sharp and pulsing.

“Do you want to see what this gift can really do?” she asked.

Dellam’s eyes flicked from her hand to the tree. His awe wavered. A branch cracked. The bark curled and split like old paper. He’d never seen her Pull this much before.

“Is it safe?” he asked, the words barely escaping his mouth.

Ylsa didn’t hesitate. “No, son, it isn’t. And it should never be used without good reason.” She stood up, eyes glowing. “Now, would you like to see what a Veythar can do?” Dellam nodded, his heart swelled with emotion he couldn’t name. Proud? Scared?

Ylsa Pulled.

The top branches of the great tree plummeted to the ground, Dell cowered in fear, covering his head with his arms. By the time they hit, they were but dust. The trunk of the tree around her hand exploded into splinters and coalesced in flowing tendrils around her body. She closed her eyes as purple veins sprouted from their corners. A hush fell over the forest, and the only sound was the falling of ash and destruction, a song he would remember forever. Tears fell from Dell's cheeks onto his trembling hands. "Mother, please stop." He cried. If this was the power of a Veythar, he didn't want it. He only wanted to go home. This wasn't a gift. She didn't stop.

"Dellam," How could her voice still be so calm? Still so gentle while she held so much destruction. "I need you to see that cost. If it is your path to follow the footsteps of a Veythar, you need to see. Look, child." She held a hand towards the river, his eyes followed. Suddenly the water stopped, and with it the melody of the forest that served as the undercurrent for all the life there. Dell didn't understand what he was seeing; the whole river stopped and began building beside them as if the very tree itself fell into the river, stopping its flow.. The water level behind the magical dam began to rise until it crested the river bank, splashing over the two of them. The riverbed quickly dried up down river, and Ylsa opened her eyes. Like the tendrils of dust and debris on her arms and around her body, the veins seemed to swirl around her eyes. Dell screamed.

"Mother, your eyes! Please, stop! This isn't right!" Dell looked away. In an instant, he felt the air change. His mother breathed deeply, and he heard a great crash of water. When he opened his eyes, the river was turbulent but flowing. The ground around Dellam Ylsa was covered in dust and ashes. Dell dared to look at his mother. He gasped, nearly falling backwards. A moment ago she looked younger than he had ever remembered, but she had aged ten years. Her hair was no longer streaked with gray, it was a nest of colorless bristle. Her skin rough like the bark of a tree. "Mother, what happened?" He rushed to her and squeezed, feeling even younger than his age.

"This is the cost of the Old Magic. It is a gift, but not to be squandered or wasted." She ran her rough hands through Dell's black hair, pulling it from in front of his eyes. She kissed his forehead. "My sweet child, you have always loved the wonders of the world. Your mind as sweet as a father cherishing his first born. I am sorry to show you this truth today, but you've wanted to reach the Old Magic for so long, I needed you to know the cost before you lost yourself in its pursuit." Dell said nothing, but he understood.

"This tree," she gestured at the blacked stump where the great elm once stood. "Will never again provide shelter for the animals in this forest. It will never again give food to the hungry, or warmth to a traveller. Its roots will no longer drink from this river, and its branches will never again give nutrients to the soil." She knelt beside Dellam and picked up a handful of ash. "We have a greater calling than most in this world. To use her gifts to help those who cannot help themselves."

She took the ash and made two horizontal lines on Dell's forehead. Then she pressed the same two fingers to her own forehead and bowed her head. "We must always give thanks for what has been given. For the stories this tree will never again hear and for the songs it will never sing."

"Is the power always this... bad? You seemed different when you used it." Dell still looked at his mother. Her skin and hair were slowly returning familiar speckled gray and kind wrinkles.

"There is always a cost. It's not always this violent, but the cost is always real" His mother had finally returned to normal.

"Mother, does everyone in our family use the magic?" Dellam said quietly, looking down to his feet. "Maybe the reason I haven't been able to use it is because it didn't pick me." The thought saddened Dellam, but at the same time left him feeling hopeful that he wouldn't have to destroy anything. He loved nature, and it seemed like this magic destroyed it. The cost felt too high, and he felt like his mother was hiding something. Something bigger. Something *wrong*.

"Not everyone in our family has chosen by Thalarim, but not everyone in the family is the son of two Veythars. Son, Veythars have been gifted an amazing ability, chosen to shape the fates of many. You are right to think reverently of the Old Magic. Your father. He would be proud" They began walking slowly upstream. Dell had vague memories of his father. He was too young to remember much when he died.

"You've never told me what happened to Father. Was it the magic?" Dell knew he wouldn't get an answer. Ylsa did not talk much of her late husband.

"No, Dellam." She stopped walking and looked at her son. "Your father was many things, and the magic has taken many, but your father was not one of them. He gave his life to protect something important to him." She smiled, but Dell had the haunting suspicion there was more to the story. He smiled back.

"You've said that before, but you've never told me what was so important to him as to give his own life." Dell felt a pang in his chest. Wasn't he important enough for his father to stay? Ylsa's eyes softened, and her posture shifted. She felt the weight of a ten year old boy yearning to know his father, and it pained her.

"What you need to know is that your father loved you very much. And if there was a way he could have been here to see you grow, he would have chosen that path." Dell smiled, but he knew there was more. There was always more. "Now let's go back to our home and make some lunch, I am starving!"

"Mother, can I stay a little longer? I need to... think about all of this." He needed to be alone. To clear his thoughts and read between the lines. He wanted to go back to the tree that just

exploded. Most ten year old boys would be amazed by an exploding tree, but Dellam wanted to study. To learn its secrets. To feel its life essence. And to see if he could figure out what his mother was hiding.

“Of course, Dell. Please hurry home when your stomach begins to rumble.” She kissed him on his forehead, which still had two small, horizontal lines right in its center, and she walked towards their home in the foothills. Once she was out of sight, Dellam turned around and walked back towards the Elm tree.

He sat down in a field of ash next to the tree his mother had destroyed, surrounded by the *cost of magic*, as his mother had put it. There was a small stump where the tree once stood, and he placed his hand on it. The jagged bark scraped his fingertips and tickled his palm. He could feel each groove on his skin. It felt right. He had climbed that tree before, like most of the trees in the woods around their home. He thought best when he had conquered the boughs above him. The song in the wind was different from up there, light, gentle crescendos and swells hovering between the leaves.

In that moment, with his hand on what was left of the great elm, he felt something. His heart began to quicken, a faint melody hummed inside of him and he felt a connection to the tree he hadn't felt before. *Mother did not take all of you*, he thought to the tree.

Like a river slowly rubbing off the moss on a river rock, he pulled some of the life essence from the tree in his mind's eye. *Gentle like a stream, Dell*. He focused on the sensation of pulling. His fingers began to tingle, his body felt lighter, more responsive. He closed his eyes and imagined climbing the tree as he had before. He imagined each branch on his way to the top, the small creatures that roamed its branches, the leaves that fall each year. He felt its life swirling inside of him, and the remaining bark close to the ground began to swirl up his fingers, dancing light a fire. A small slithering tendril of skin began to faintly glow on his arm up to his elbow. *I'm doing it, this is it!*

Dellam Pulled for the first time.

Something pulled back.

Chapter 8

Arvid - A Stranger in the Wind

Arvid sat at a small rectangular table against the wall in his dilla, one leg of the stool slightly shorter than the others causing a slight wobble, the sounds of the morning wind and children playing whistled through the open window. He organized essentials for his journey into the mountains, water leathers, a small pot for boiling water and cooking. A journey into the Old Ways and away from his family. Nira sat across from him, her long hair draped restfully over her one shoulder, her hand resting on a coil of rope running her fingers along its ridges, a question bubbling at the surface. “Why *you*? Why *now*?” Frustration simmered under each word, but not fully given to anger. “Dellam knows where the stones are just as well as you, and he has less to lose. Could you talk to him again?”

“I did speak with Dellam at the festival; we both heard the same thing, Nira. The song has returned, the seal is weakening. If we don’t do something soon - or now - we may be too late, and I can’t risk losing you or the boys. I can’t. The stones are the only way” Arvid absentmindedly stuffed his pack.

“Dell disappeared for how many years and he expects you to go on a whim?” She was squeezing the rope. “It’s not fair, Arvid. It’s not right. If someone must go, why shouldn’t it be him?”

“You’re right. It’s not fair. But I know he wouldn’t have asked if it didn’t need to be me. I don’t know what he’ll be doing, but I am certain he will be doing whatever necessary. If the seal is weakening, there will be a lot of work to be done.” Dell stopped looking over his things and looked at Nira, her brown eyes seemed almost black in the dimness of the dilla. The window behind her silhouetted her frame, but Arvid could see just enough of her face to see the deep worry there. She wasn’t just worried about Arvid being involved in the matter, she understood the situation was much larger than either one of them.

He took her small hands in his. They were calloused like his from working the fields. She would spend each day in the sun if not for the needs of others. Though she was born in the mountains, the meadow had become her home, the sinking reality of the Fog’s return was settling into Arvid’s stomach. He knew what she was going to ask, and he couldn’t allow it.

“I should go with you, Arvid.” Her eyes were certain, her chin was set, she looked at him with the confidence of the mountains themselves.

“Nira, we need someone to stay here with the kids, to finish the harvest and tend the animals. Tally could do it, he’s old enough, but not with Rin and Sora. I don’t think any of them

would survive.” He smiled, thinking levity might lighten the mood, but it only darkened Nira’s expression.

“Arvid, I’m serious. They could stay with one of the other families in the tribe. It’s why, after a thousand years, we decided to bring them into this world *as a tribe*.” She squeezed his hands, there was a hint of pleading in her voice.

“What would we tell the kids? What would we tell the others? They have no idea who we were before we came here, Nira. They know nothing of the Fog or the Veythars.” His voice was low, a whisper. “Moons, Nira, they don’t even know who we are! If we both leave, and our children stay, there will be more questions than if it’s just me.” Sora ran by the window, giggling, and a memory flashed in Arvid’s mind - running through the foothills in his youth. In all their years, the children have only known the Meadow. If it’s just me, we can come up with an excuse. If we both go, we may have to consider telling them the truth. Nira, we can’t.” Nira sighed deeply, now turned sideways and looking out the front door to the fields.

“By the Meadow you’re right, Arvid.” Her shoulders slumped slightly as if she felt defeat. Arvid, surprised at this, put a hand on her arm. “The only reason we settled down and had a family is because we were sure the Fog couldn’t return. A thousand years... Why now?” Her eyes seemed in that moment to reflect the moon. Sorrow? Frustration? No. Arvid knew the depth of those eyes. They had seen a thousand years of joys. A thousand years of good days and bad. A thousand years of burden, love, and sacrifice. He saw his children in the depth of those eyes.

“I will retrieve the stones alone. When I return we will speak with Tally, Rin, and Sora. Maybe it is time they learn of the Old Ways.” Arvid looked at his hands in his wife’s.

He could hardly believe he was saying it. Those who walked the Old Ways could live for centuries. But to bring forth life was to give theirs away. Once a Veythar bore a child, they began the end of their days, aging as others would. Most Veythars settled after a few centuries, choosing to pass their name along, the legacy of a living legend. The Fog changed things, and the last generation of Veythars was nearly wiped from the great song of Thalorim. Those who survived chose to act as watchmen for the ancient evil, living in the shadows, sworn to guard against the return of what they had once sealed.

“I don’t know, Arvid. Do you think they’re ready?” Arvid suddenly had a memory of bringing Tally into the world.

“Do you remember how small Tally was when we brought him into the world?” Arvid pointed to the corner of the room where their bed lay on the floor. “Right here.” He smiled deeply. “Even though we’d lived for centuries and given more of ourselves than anyone we’ve ever met, we still felt unprepared for the birth of our first son.”

“He was so small. But he was stubborn,” Nira replied.

“Like his mother.” Arvid’s smile crept into a grin, and he put a hand on her face. I’m not sure of anything right now, Nira. Each new son we bore we felt even more unprepared, but still we made it, and we did a storming good job.” The sound of Sora and Rin wrestling punctuated their conversation, adding to the rhythm of it. Arvid suddenly found himself crying. Not tears of grief or anger or sadness. Tears of joy. That life could be so hard and still so right at the same time. Something resolved within him at that moment, as if the ground had been prepared for a new seed, and it was beginning to blossom.

“I will take Sora with me into the mountains to retrieve the stone. He is the youngest, and it would make sense to tell others that Rin and Tally stayed behind to care for you. I’ll...” He paused; he hadn’t thought about the words he would need when he tells them. “I’ll talk to him. I’ll begin to show him the Old Ways.” He nodded as if that carved the plans into stone. He sensed the similar resolution in Nira, and he was grateful for it.

Nira opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it again, and instead she leaned out of her chair and fell into Arvid’s arms. “This wasn’t supposed to happen, Arvid.” Squeezing his wife tightly, words could not escape his mouth. But the warmth between them would be enough. In silence, Arvid continued readying his pack.

As if on cue, Rin stumbled through the door, eyes wide and wet, tears streaming down his cheeks. “Father, Mother, come quick. It’s Sora!” Dropping his pack on the floor and knocking over his chair, Arvid followed Rin out of the house and into the fields of grass. As they were running, Rin tried to explain what was happening between breaths.

“We were playing tag, and he was in front of me, and before we knew it, he fell. I don’t know what could have caused a hole like it. I - I - Didn’t mean for him to get hurt, I’m sorry, Father. I know we’re not meant to be so far from home” Tears continued to steam down his face as they ran. After 10 minutes of running, they crested a stretching hill in the Meadow - Arvid saw the hole almost immediately, and he recognized the markings of a Veythar. He first noticed the dormant grass at the fringes of the hole, sleeping and spent, an Icarus too close to the user’s power.

Around the hole was a layer of ash and dust. *Thalorim, this looks like someone has pulled from the grass here. Why? Who?* Stopping a few feet before the rim, Arvid put his hand in front of Rin. “Don’t get too close, in case more of the ground caves in.” *This is the wrong time for Sora to get hurt*, Arvid thought. “Sora, are you okay?” He called down, trying to make his voice as comforting as possible. The hole looked to be about 6 feet wide, but this far away from the rim, he couldn’t see the bottom. He couldn’t see Sora. Panic set in.

“Yes.” Sora called back, relief flowing through his body. Arvid could hear he was crying, but at least he was breathing and awake. “No... I don’t know. I think my leg is broken, I can’t stand down here.”

“Why is the grass dead around the hole, Father?” Rin always asked the right questions.

“I’m not sure, Rin. But I don’t want anyone else to fall in. Go and tell your mother what happened; tell her that Sora is okay.” As Rin ran back to the house, Arvid walked closer to the edge placing a hand on the dead grass. *Another hand has drawn from the soil.* This isn’t Dellam or Brin, neither would be so careless. So there’s another? Apart from Nira, none of the Veythar survived the sealing. *So who?*

Shaking the thoughts from the front of his mind, he leaned over the edge. Sitting at the bottom in a pile of dust and ash, Sora held his leg up to his chest looking up. Without a second thought, Arvid began to climb down, Pulling ever so slightly before the descent to sharpen his senses as he slid his legs over the edge and lowered himself enough to drop. The ground was mostly dead, but it was enough.

He reached Sora and began checking him over. “Where does it hurt, Sora?” He asked, checking various places on Sora’s body. He was all skin and bone, like Arvid was when he was younger. Nira is the only one in the village to have known Arvid when he was young, and she swears by the Moons it’s like looking at a young Arvid. Dark hair fell across his eyes, and his tunic - loose and ashy green - was typical of Meadow children.

“On my leg here,” he said, pointing to his shin. With his senses amplified, he felt a small fracture in one of the bones. It was small, but it could become a problem. He quickly checked the rest of Sora’s body, touching his hips, ribs, and arms.

“Nothing else?” He said, though he already knew the answer. With such little potential, Sora wouldn’t notice anything strange.

“No, nothing else. What is this hole doing here, Father?” Of course he wouldn’t know, but Arvid knew this power was in his son’s blood - one day Sora would be capable of such destruction. With a hole this deep, a magic user could do a lot, not often does a hole this large appear. Unable to discern to much from a hole like this, Arvid knew the user didn’t have a conduit stone. Without a conduit stone, the Old Magic was unpredictable. Pulling could deaden a 15ft circle of grass or shoot a line straight into the dirt. Or it could find old bones somewhere near by. Without something to direct the flow, it had a mind of its own. If the user was trying to be discrete and had stone, they wouldn’t have left evidence like this. *A hole this big? This was Potential Pulled for a battle.*

“Son, close your eyes. You have a small break and I think I can help.” Knowing he was going to reveal the Old Ways to Sora soon, he wasn’t too worried about hiding his abilities. He needed to fix the break so they could climb out. Arvid plunged his hand into the dirt at the side of the hole, shimmed between cold clay and stone.

Arvid Pulled.

He was worried he might cause a partial collapse, so he only drew what he needed to help Sora. Dirt climbed up towards his shoulder, curling around his forearm in a familiar spiral. It felt

good to Pull again. It felt like... home. "You'll feel a bit of a change, Sora." He didn't know how else to explain it. "It might hurt at first, but it should feel better when it's done."

"Okay." A tremble in his voice. He was scared, but he shouldered the fear to do what was needed; he clenched his teeth. He pressed his hands onto Sora's leg, doing his best to mask the magic, and he let some of his Potential seep into it. He didn't notice Sora's eyes were open and full of fear.

Immediately the bone shifted into place, and Sora's body jerked at the sensation. Sora went silent. "Does that feel better?" Arvid said, dirt and dust falling from his right arm. He looked at his Son, whose eyes were as wide as the sky above. *I guess we're starting this conversation now.* Arvid thought. *Not good.* Whoever had made this hole might be nearby.

"Sora," He wasn't sure what to say. Of all the battles he had won, of all the times he had thrown himself into danger, this felt like stumbling into the Forest itself. "We need to talk... Maybe we can climb out of here first?" Sora's stare felt like daggers - like he had just learned a terrible lie his father had been feeding him. Arvid's heart ached; that's exactly what it was, those eyes were young, but they were wise.

"Let's get out of here and we'll talk, Sora. There are some things I need to tell you." He wasn't sure how much to reveal or how quickly, but he knew the time for secrecy had just ran out. "Here, climb on my shoulders and grab the edge. You should be able to pull yourself out." Sora did as he was asked, pulling on the dead grass around the opening of the hole. Arvid worried the grass would simply rip out of the ground - roots turned to ash - was enough to get him up and out. Having a little Potential left, Arvid drew it into his legs and jumped, grabbing the rim and pulling himself out.

"Sora, I..." Bewilderment filled Sora's eyes, but a hint of excitement crept at the edges. Arvid did his best to hold his son's gaze.

"Father," Sora had heard the tales of the storyteller in the village center, "the stories - they're real?" This boy had just witnessed his father performing magic - what child doesn't imagine the old stories to be true? However most children don't imagine their father hiding another life from their son.

"Yes... Let us go home. We can talk along the way." As they slowly walked towards their dilla in silence, Arvid stopped and knelt to the ground, Sora beside him. "Sora, I am sorry for keeping the truth from you, but please trust that I only did so for your safety." He pressed his fingers in the ground. "Your mother and I, we are not who others believe us to be." Sora's eyes looked worried at that. "Not to worry, you are truly our son." A bit of relief slipped through. "Sora you have our blood in your veins, and though we have not discussed it, that truth is more important than you know. The people in the stories you've heard, the legends, they're mostly made up... But what they could do. That is real."

“What do you mean?” He didn’t understand. Of course he didn’t, how could he? Fairy tales were fun stories to help children grow to be heroes in their own rights. Sora sat next to his father. *Moons* Arvid remembered sitting with his own Father a thousand years before. Is this how his father felt?

“We are leaving today, you and I. To go into the mountains. There will be much to learn for both of us, but for now, it’s time for you to see who your father is.”

Arvid pulled.

For the first time in his ten years, Sora’s eyes beheld the power of the Veythar. For the first time in a thousand years, the power of the Veythar, the magic of old, was given to a new generation.

As Sora and Arvid walked back to their home, the wind whistles through the great grass, brushing past a figure standing in the distance towards the mountains just visible over one of the rolling hills. Watching. Arvid and Sora did not look back.

Chapter 9

The Fog

Another word. *It’s becoming easier. So close. A little more.* Tendrils seep through the bramble, closer to the edge, closer to freedom. *To the truth.*

Chapter 10

Arvid - The Twisted Thing

As much as Arvid wanted to get things off his chest, he didn't want to overload the boy. Sora was young, wise, but young, and the secrets of the Veythar were old. Scary even. And Sora had regained his boyish energy and excitement even as they walked from the hole. "Father," he said eagerly, "have you always been able to do.. Whatever that was?" It felt right to be able to talk about this with his son. This is what the Veythar originally practiced, passing in their legacy to the new generation, giving up strength and time to lift others up and make room for others to grow.

"Well," Arvid chuckled "since I was about your age, Sora." They crested a hill and paused on the top, wind rustling grass and hair. Sora's a mop in a storm. Kneeling down on one knee, Arvid looked at Sora in the eyes and put his hands on his shoulders. "My father taught me; it was a tradition when I was younger."

"How come I've never met Grandpapa? Did he die?" Children did not care for tact.

Smiling, Arvid replied, "Yes, long before you were born"

A sound on the wind.

"Get down, Sora, flat on your stomach." Arvid Pulled from the ground, creating a small spiderweb of ash shooting straight down. He drew it to his senses. Paws. Large. Fast. Something snarling was closing in, but the wind made it difficult to tell which direction it was coming from. He closed his eyes. With his senses amplified and his eyes closed, Arvid's hearing exploded. Sora's breath beneath him came in quick, shallow bursts - fear - the wind sang between blades of grass. West. Arvid opened his eyes and looked to the west, a heaping form crowned a ridge 50 yards away. Matted brown fur, black eyes, a twisted thing barrelled towards Arvid and Sora.

Instinct kicking in, Arvid knew he needed to face this thing away from Sora. "Sora, stay here and do not follow me. If you think it safe, run home as fast as you can." And with that, Arvid lunged towards the beast and plunged both hands into the dirt, drawing memories of running through the hills with his family playing tackle and tag, rolling through the grass. The greater and more meaningful the memory of a living thing, the stronger its available Potential, its essence.

Arvid Pulled. Hard.

A fire lit in his veins searing with pain, his heart beat spun wildly out of control, and the ground began to buckle beneath his feet, turning to dust. A guttural scream exploded from his

lungs as Potential filled his body. His arms a flame with purple light erupting from his arms beneath the dirt that had snaked up towards his shoulders. The beast advanced. He trained his eyes it, seeing it more clearly with so much Potential. *This is a creature of the foothills, but why is it coming from the direction of the forest?* Something was wrong with it. It's fur was spotted, with large sections missing and what looked like stone peaking through in patches. It's eyes... They were pits of anger. Pure anger. Arvid couldn't wait any longer, he needed to fight it as far away from Sora as possible. He sprang towards the twisted beast.

He closed the distance in the blink of an eye, face to face with it now - black teeth, oozing with black sludge - it reared back onto its legs. It stood as tall two men. *Its teeth!* They looked like they were made from stones in the earth. Heart racing, he jumped to the left as two paws the size of his torso crashed into the ground right where he had been. The bear's breaths were snarling and wet, each one felt like a struggle for the creature, and smelled like a rotted carcass. Panic rose in his chest - he brought no weapons with him, he would need to fight strategically, keeping the bear away from Sora but also inflicting large enough wounds to kill it.

Drawing Potential to his right arm, and knowing fullwell that one wrong step could mean the end - he jabbed his hand into one of the furry patches on its belly. His hand sank in, but not before another paw swiped his feet out from under him. He landed on his back with a thud. He rolled again as claws scraped the ground beside him. Its claws were similar to its teeth. Jagged, dark, like they were forged from metal to cause pain and infection. They oozed with a vial fluid. Arvid noticed where the fluid hit the grass, the blades began to wilt.

Arvid climbed to his feet, but stayed low to the ground, limbs swinging wildly as the bear tried to get a lock on him. He moved quickly with Potential, but wanted to preserve it. Pulling too much at once could break something, but Pulling over and over again caused fatigue. He couldn't afford that.

The beast reared on its legs again, loosing a roar that split the mountains. *This poor creature must be in a great deal of pain.* But he couldn't dwell on that. In the corner of his eye, he saw Sora stand to run. *Good boy,* he thought, eager to give his full focus to the beast, but as soon as Sora fled, the Beast's gaze shifted - its black eyes widened and its face contorted frantically.

In one great leap, it bounded over Arvid and sped towards Sora. *No!* A guttural scream exploded from Arvid's lungs, and without thinking, Arvid began wildly Pulling from all directions. Many warriors had perished this way, disregarding the limits of the Old Magic, but Arvid didn't care, he would not give into those limits until his son was safe. Small veins spider webbed from the corners of his eyes, his very bones ached and groaned as his body filled with unbridled Potential, even the air was sapped of its life. He felt the call of power, how easy it would be to give in to it.

He drew as much Potential to his legs as he could, bent his knees and launched himself towards the bear. It was fast and closing on Sora, but Arvid was rapidly gaining on it. Each step

strained his legs, he could feel his muscles at their limits, his bones threatening to break. But that didn't matter, Arvid would protect his son. In this moment it was the only important thing. More important than the fog, more important than the stones. Not just because Sora would carry the legacy of the Veythar, but because his life was worth protecting whether or not he could use magic or not. After a thousand years, Arvid could have grown selfish, growing only to care for himself. A thousand years is a long time to foster a habit like that. But the power of the Veythar was best displayed in their willingness to let it go for the sake of others.

Closing in, he was only a few yards away from the thing now and a few yards away from the end of this encounter. They were both dangerously close to Sora, whose terror propelled him faster than he'd ever run before. One misstep, one swipe, one leap, and the thing would be on Sora.

Three steps. First step, Arvid launched himself beside the beast, its patchwork fur a blur beside him. Second step, Arvid threw himself in front of the beast. Third, Arvid planted his feet, drawing Potential into his muscles and bones, praying to the Moons they would not give.

With his senses and speed amplified, he aimed his hands towards soft patches of fur on the animal's chest as it collided with him, hoping to do more internal damage than external. His legs fought with the ground, and his hands pierced the creature's chest. Hot blood oozed over his tired arms. Without a conduit stone, controlling Potential precisely was difficult, but his need to save his son was nearly overwhelming.

He felt his bones give just a little, splintering under the pressure shooting pain up into his arm, the muscles and tendons in his arms tearing from their holds. The Potential quickly shielded him from his own pain; he'd heal it after the fight. For a second, he thought about Pulling the life from the beast. It would be the quickest and surest way to guarantee it would not stand again - but that was forbidden, and for good reason. Arvid had lost companions to the lust for that amount of power and control. Instead, he drew Potential and pushed into the thing's body, stopping its heart. Stopping abruptly, its bones loosed a sickening crack into the air. His hands pierced its lungs, and it collapsed on top of Arvid, a gurgling sound escaping from its open mouth as its blood spilled onto the ground; the grass began to wither around it.

The beast was done, a twisted thing. Arvid fell unconscious. Sora screamed.

Chapter 11

Sora - The Stranger

Panic raced through Sora's body, his legs moving as fast as they could over the bumpy terrain away from the bear chasing him. It wasn't quite a bear, it looked different. It felt different. Sora's world was changing; what once was a playground for him and his brother had become a bloodbath. When his father yelled for him to get down, he dropped to the ground but kept his eyes up to see what had his father so scared. He'd never seen that look before. He wasn't just scared, he was walking into near certain death knowingly. Even though Sora had just learned he was being lied to his whole life, trust in his father was renewed in that moment seeing the love of a father manifest so viscerally. He watched his father press his hands into the ground and saw the ground *die* because of it. He also his father's arms glowing and the dirt that spiraled up to his shoulders. He didn't understand it, but in a way he couldn't explain, it felt right. It felt natural as if it had always been in plain sight.

His father screamed as he ran, and he knew the thing was close. The beast snarled and growled, deep and ragged, and each leap the bear took the ground trembled. As he ran, something else tugged at his senses. He felt not just the vibrations of the bear's footsteps, but something deeper. Like the sound of a nearby river rapid thrumming underground.

His foot hit a stone in the ground, and he flew through the air as the sound of his father colliding with the bear reached his ears. He twisted as he fell, looking back to see his father's hands pierce the bear's chest. The sickening sound of breaking flesh and bone sunk into Sora's young heart.

He saw his father's hands inside of the beast when a wave rippled through its fur and through the grass like when you throw a stone in a pond. He was afraid, like someone who might be looking at a dangerous creature from afar, in awe of its danger, but unable to look away. Was that really my father? He thought. But of course it was, without an iota of hesitation he plunged himself into harm's way for his son.

Sora watched him fall, the weight of the beast pinning him down - eyes closed - as he himself hit the ground. A strange sensation filled his head and his vision blurred as blood streaked his vision, the blue sky suddenly red. His body felt heavy, too heavy to lift his arms or legs. He tried, but everything was moving so slowly around him, even the sounds of the birds were distorted somehow and he couldn't convince his body to move. He should be hitting the ground soon, but he still felt like he was falling. *What was that creature? It looked like a bear, but it was bigger. It was misshapen and had black stuff on its claws and fur.* He tried to blink the red away, but his eyelids

were too heavy to lift. Before he lost consciousness, someone stood above him, a rotten toothed grin smeared across its face, the skin on its arms glowing faintly. *Weird*, he thought, *such dark eyes*. Then he fell asleep.

Chapter 12

Arvid - Gone

Pain scorched Arvid's body, his skin steamed slightly and his bones lamented. More than that, the piercing noise emanating from his chest is what pulled him into consciousness. When he opened his eyes, all was dark. How long had he been out? Was it night already? No, it wasn't dark, something was blocking his vision. He couldn't feel the beast still on top of him - the pain consumed his senses, but the pressure was immense. From the beast he could hear no heartbeat nor any breath in its lungs. He tried to wiggle his body, starting with his feet and hands. He could sense some movement, but they were confined to a few centimeters.

The fight began to come back to him, the strange, twisted bear barrelling through the meadow towards them. Where had it come from? The foothills were a half a day's journey. And why did it seem so intent on attacking? The look of the beast lingered in his mind, details unveiled themselves and he remembered the patched fur and misshapen body. Between the of fur nestled what looked like black stone, but Arvid felt none of that on him now. The weight of the bear pressed him into the ground, and as his sense of feeling returned, he felt only thick fur, sopping wet with thick fluid.

In an instant he remembered he had been with Sora, and as he was turning to face the creature he had noticed Sora falling. "Sora!" he tried to yell, but his face was covered- suffocating. The sounds that left his mouth were muffled cries and grunts. All at once he felt horribly claustrophobic, panicked. How long had he been out? He tried to tilt his head to look for any light - a pinprick of hope, but he couldn't move, between the weight of the bear and his exhausted body from moving too much Potential, he had nothing to give. He felt his skin steaming where Potential had snaked up his arms. In this weakened state, it was dangerous to Pull again until he had time to rest. His heart raced. He was stuck.

He needed to clear his mind so he tried to take a breath, but the weight was so great he could only squeeze a little into his lungs at a time. *Moons, where is Dell when I need him? It couldn't*

have been too long, Nira would have come with Rin to find me, so maybe Sora is home now. But if Sora saw me kill the beast, he would be here to help me out. Focus Arvid!

He closed his eyes. This was not the time to panic. Sora was gone and whoever sent the beast could be close by. So Arvid listened. He tuned his ears to the land, drawing his mind away from the lifeless husk on top of him. Thalorim had seen him through many hardships, and had always given what he needed, he would trust in the dirt, for Arvid's years were not even as long as a single speck of dirt. It would guide him to Sora.

Beneath the grass was life. A myriad of building blocks that gave nutrients to every creature and plant to grow and graze in the land. He let the sound and memory of the world calm his heart, still his soul. With a conduit stone, Pulling was without thought, as if the world *Pushed* it into him. Without, he felt like a beggar with an empty cup. He thanked the dirt, and gently Pulled. Reluctantly, his body allowed the essence of the to enter. Normally, the sensation was warm and euphoric, but as the small bit of Potential flowed through his body, it felt like a knife forged from ice. He had over extended himself, and instead of cultivating the world into goodness, he forced it to do his bidding, and he was paying the cost.

Blissfully and thankfully it worked. He felt Potential begin to swirl through him, just a little. With that Potential he carefully drew it to his arms and legs, feeling bones begin to mend. He wiggled his hands enough to place his palms on the wet fur of the bear, and he pushed. Light poured in around him, and he saw his entire body was impressed into the dirt. As quickly, but carefully because he didn't want to immediately over do it, as he could, he pushed the bear to the side enough to squeeze out from under its stomach and between its legs. The bear lay on its side, its head cocked at an odd angle.

Arvid crawled out and away from the pile of fur, and took it in for the first time its menacing size. From nose to tail, it had to be 13 feet long. The black stone patches were gone, and in their place was an oozing black liquid. As the black stone melted, muscle and sinew peaked through, and though the beast was certainly dead, the muscles convulsed and twitched.

He sat on the grass, breathing heavy, feeling as though he had aged a decade in the few short minutes of fighting; such is the cost of using without a conduit stone. More than ever, he realized the importance of retrieving the stones, which was where he was supposed to be going anyway. He was worried about Sora, but now that he could see and breathe clearly, he realized Sora was likely home getting Nira, so he took the time to examine the thing.

It was larger than any creature Arvid had ever seen, even leading up to the time of sealing, nothing like this had walked the land. It was a bear, or it had been once. It looked like someone had found a hole in the thing, and pumped it full of weight. Its skin stretched and bulging, threatening to rip at the seams. It looked like that's exactly what happened between patches of fur. He stood and walked towards its head. Its ears had deteriorated, or rotted, off. Streaks of black colored the

skin and fur emanating away from the rotten spots. The same was happening at its nose. Its teeth were black, but they weren't rotten. They had an almost metallic glint to them - more jagged than a bear's like they had been regrown.

Most surprising, and terrifying, was its paws. Each paw was as big as his own torso, and its claws retracted back into its paws. The paw itself was peppered with cuts and gashes, each exposing the same twitching muscle and black oozing fluid. Hesitantly, Arvid put his hands on its head, he reached out but found no sign of a life essence remaining. *This poor creature*, he thought to himself.

He surveyed the area, looking for any signs of another person or creature but found none. The wind through the grass would hide any footprints anyway - he couldn't even see Sora's heading towards their home. Without much else he could do, Arvid decided to leave the thing and head for home. He was far enough away that no one from the village would find it for the day - most of the families had already headed into the village center for the 2nd day of rest. What was more important was making sure Sora was okay, and getting to the conduit stones quickly. There wasn't a question whether this was related to the Fog - a thousand years of isolation has made it more powerful, more... brutal.

He would need to rest longer before fully healing himself with Potential, so he did not rush home; Nira would be able to restore his strength anyway, so he wouldn't push things now. Gratefully, the journey passed uneventfully. After 30 minutes of walking, he topped the final mound before the small valley leading to his family's huts. He saw movement in his and his wife's dilla, and felt some relief. If Sora told her about the beast, he was glad she had stayed with the boys. He didn't know how much of the beast Sora had seen, but it was likely enough to terrify him.

He walked into the room, his things had been packed from the table and into a travel bag. Rin was sitting at a chair, red eyed and worried, Nira was at the wash basin, cleaning one of their water jugs. As he walked in, Nira looked up and immediately her eyes scanned around him.

"Where is Sora? Is he okay?" Concern donned her gaze.

Panic. "I told him to run ahead to you, is he not here? Maybe he's in his hut. We.. encountered something. We need to talk" But she did not wait for him to continue.

"Arvid, Sora isn't here, I was just in his hut fixing his bed. Where is he? Rin told me he fell into a hole!" Concern turned to worry. "Arvid, where is he?"

Arvid's lips quivered, he opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Breath fled his lungs.

With a hand covering her mouth, words squeezed out of Nira's lips, "Arvid, where is our son?"

Chapter 13

Arvid - Careful

“Rin, your mother and I need to talk. Stay here.” Arvid said, hoping his son wouldn’t find himself curious. Grabbing his pack and Nira’s arm, they walked outside and a few paces away from the dilla.

“Nira, I need you to heal me.” Arvid leaned in as he spoke knowing that Rin would find out sooner or later, he didn’t want to complicate the situation more than it already was.

“Arvid, what’s going on?” Her voice trembled, afraid of the answer she knew was coming.

“I think someone took Sora. We were attacked by a creature. It was a bear, but... different. Changed somehow, bigger, and... twisted. I think it has something to do with the Seal and the Fog.” It felt strange to be talking when their son was missing, but she needed to know what he was heading into, and if he rushed without Nira’s healing touch, he wouldn’t have the strength needed to bring him back,

“What do you mean?” He found it hard to recall details while Sora could be in danger.

I think *someone* is using besides the Veythar. Someone Pulled from the hills - enough to make a hole 10 feet deep. And I think the creature was made with some kind of Life Essence magic. It was twice the size of a bear from the foothills. Its blood was black.”

“But I thought that was supposed to be impossible? Doesn’t it kill the user?”

“Impossible no. But unsustainable. You don’t live long if the magic you use to hurt others also kills you. But I don’t know what else it could have been.”

Nira’s mouth opened but once again she could not find the words to share.

“It doesn’t matter right now,” Arvid continued. “Right now I need my strength, and I need to go after Sora. I used too much Potential out there just to take the thing down and my body is going to give.” He wasn’t stretching the truth. Even standing in front of Nira felt impossible to maintain. He could feel his legs shaking and his stomach twisting like he might throw up. “Nira, when Sora started running, the bear *chose him* instead of me when I was right in front of it. This wasn’t just some wild beast. Whoever sent it must know he’s our son. Please, I don’t know if he was taken, but if he was, I need to find the trail before the wind takes it.”

“Okay” Nira replied, though terrified, her trust in Arvid steeled her nerves. She had always trusted Arvid, and he had yet to let her down. Nodding, she closed her eyes, finding her resolve in the storm, a moment of clarity and stillness; she took a breath and opened her eyes again. They had a faint glow, as if reflecting the moons themselves. Looking back at their home where her second son lay safe, she put her hand to the earth.

Nira Pulled.

As if filled with static electricity, her hair began to rise ever so slightly. Though Arvid was more accustomed to battle, Nira was more skilled with the gifts of Thalorim. Even without a stone, the dirt did not snake up her arm like it did for Arvid - only Potential. The joy and memories of the land beneath her focused her Pull until a spiral of glowing energy caressed her skin. Arvid felt the presence of its energy deep in his body, like a song resurfacing after years of hearing it.

He knelt beside her on one knee, and readied his body for her healing touch - She placed a hand on his hand and another on his chest. For a moment his heart stilled and his mind quieted. She released her Potential into his body, and his fatigue began to melt. He wasn't exactly sure how it worked, but when using Potential to heal someone, the user had to change it somehow before using it, and the act of giving Potential from your own body to another was vastly more powerful than trying to heal yourself. Otherwise he would have just drawn from Thalorim and been on his way.

She had always been so talented with Potential, delicate and precise, in some ways even more so than Dellam. Like a painter carefully placing each stroke of the brush, Nira drew her potential to the damaged parts of Arvid's body. Muscles relaxed, tension faded, warmth soothed his aches.

She breathed the last of her Potential into Arvid. Moons he felt alive. Nira looked older, the subtle wrinkles around her eyes more pronounced. “Please,” she started, “get our son back, and be careful.”

A quiet voice drifted nervously from the hut. “Mother?... Father?” Rin stood, a mess of hair lapping his ears, the wind dancing with his loose clothes, wearing concern on his face. Arvid thought he looked like his mother in that moment. “Is Sora okay?”

When Arvid and Nira didn't respond right away, Rin sensed something was wrong, and tears came to his eyes. He ran to his parents. “I'm sorry. I know we're not supposed to go so far from home. We just got carried away.” Nira hugged her son, tears wetting her own cheeks.

“This is not your fault, Rin. Sora will be okay. Your father will be back quickly” A cautious glance to her husband, he nodded. “Son, there is much to talk about. Come with me.” She started towards her room.

“Wait,” Arvid called, and he held out his arms, embracing his son. “I love you, Rin. Wind be with you.” He looked his son in the eyes. More than ever, Rin resembled his mother. His skin was fair and his eyes dark, a few stray freckles nestled below his eyes. He was 12 years old, and at that

age, Arvid had already become a Veythar - able to receive and use the gifts of Thalorim. Soon, Rin would join the tradition and call upon the earth. Arvid kissed his son on the forehead, and watched as they walked into the hut. The wind followed them in. He said a silent prayer that their conversation would go as well as it had with Sora - without the wild beast. He was grateful for the moment that Tally had been occupied in his room. They would have that conversation later.

His strength restored, and an old pack on his back, Dellam left his family and headed for the mountains.

Chapter 14

Arvid - Into the Mountains

After walking from his village for an hour, Arvid stopped. He wanted to put distance between himself and his home - up until this point, his use of magic had been an emergency, and he did not intend to do so in ways that could be so easily discovered by others. He placed his things on the grass, and sat down with his legs crossed. With a conduit stone he could have done so almost immediately, but without one he needed to sit and meditate, focusing on the memory of the land in order to fill his body properly.