

Prologue

23 Eleint, the Year of Lightning Storms (1374 DR)

Aril could not contain a smile. Five good skipping rocks filled his pocket and a pouch of squirming bole slugs hung at his belt. And there was no better bait for catching greengill than bole slugs, especially *fat* bole slugs, like his. When the sun rose he and Mother would take the path to Still Lake. Aril would skip a few rocks then they would catch a few fish, always a welcome addition to the supper table. It would be the best Nameday ever. Aril only wished mother would have let Nem come along, too.

Mother walked beside him, slowly to accommodate Aril's awkward gait. As always, her right arm hovered near his back.

"I won't fall, Mother," he said. She was always afraid he would stumble or fall, but he never did. He was awkward on his clubfoot, but not clumsy

"Of course not, sweetdew."

Her arm dropped for three strides before re-taking its usual position.

A yawn snuck up on Aril. He had not been awake so long after moonrise in a long while.

"Sleepy?" Mother asked him.

Aril *was* sleepy but did not want to say so to Mother. He did not want her to think him a wee.

"No, Mother," he fibbed, and turned his head as another yawn tried to betray him.

"Well, you should tell your yawns that, then, or they'll soon have your mouth filled with mosquitoes. And I know how much you like that."

Aril winced, in part because Mother had caught him in the fib, and in part out of disgust. He knew exactly what a mouthful of insects tasted like. Once, on a dare from Nem, he had run through a cloud of gnats with his mouth open. He'd spent the next quarter hour gagging and spitting out gnat pieces. Nem had nearly split his sides laughing. Thinking back on it caused Aril to giggle. Mother smiled, too. Then a thought occurred to him.

"Hey! How did you even know about that?"

She looked down at him and winked. "Mother's know everything, Aril. How do you think I knew where to look for bole slugs in the middle of the night?"

Aril frowned, his mind racing. She could not know *everything*, could she? What if she knew about Matron Olem's pie? Or that time he and Nem had hidden in the peddler's wagon and rode halfway to Ashford?

He decided he should tell her the truth from then on, to be safe.

"Maybe I am a little sleepy," he acknowledged. "But only a little."

Mother smiled and tousled his hair. "There's a good boy. Maybe you can sleep late tomorrow, before we go to the lake."

"Do you mean it, Mother?"

The next day was the last of the tenday, and even though it was a day of rest in the village, Mother *never* let Aril sleep late. Usually, she took him to hear Hearthmistress Millam give a sermon about Yondalla. And the Hearthmistress said the same thing every time: the harvest would be better next year, the drought and wild weather could not last, the dragons had all gone back to sleep. Millam's voice always made Aril sleepy.

“It’s your Nameday,” Mother said. “So if you like, you can sleep in.”

He knew what she wanted him to say so he said it, though not with much enthusiasm. “No, Mother. We should go to temple and hear the Hearthmistress. We can go to the lake after that.”

Mother smiled and took his hand in hers. He did not resist. He still liked holding Mother’s hand when they walked. If his friends had seen it, they would have laughed and called him a wee. But his friends were not around. It was just him, mother, the Old Wood, and the night.

A full Selune floated in the sky but her light fought its way through the forest canopy only with difficulty. Aril was not afraid of the dark usually, but night in the tangled Old Wood was a little scary. He knew it was safe, though. Halflings had been hunting game and chopping timber in the Old Wood for generations.

“Look, Mother!”

He grabbed her cloak and pointed up through an opening in the trees. A shooting star chased a glowing path across the sky. He watched it until it faded to nothingness.

“Did you see it?”

“I saw it, Aril,” Mother said, and offered a brief prayer to Yondalla.

Aril still remembered the night the previous autumn when a whole rain of flaming stars had streaked from the dark sky. He’d heard from a peddler that many of them had destroyed villages or burned down forests or caused destructive waves or made the drought, but he doubted it. They had been too beautiful. He wished with all his heart that he could find a piece of one of the falling stars – he thought they were probably orange, or maybe red— and carry it around in his pocket with his skipping stones. But none of them had struck near his home. If one had, he and Nem could have found it and taken it out to look at it anytime they wanted. That would have been wonderful. And Jase would have been so jealous.

Thinking of his friends, he decided to ask Mother just one more time if Nem could accompany them to the lake on the morrow. He held his tongue for the moment, thinking to wait for just the right moment.

They picked their way through the trees and brush in silence. Quiet shrouded the wood. Even the insects were sleeping. Aril could hear himself breathing. He and his mother moved so lightly through the undergrowth – quiet and light was the halfling way, his mother always said – that Aril could have sneaked up and touched the three brown hares he saw feeding on foliage near the base of a pine. Aril might not move quickly or gracefully on his clubfoot, but he moved quietly.

Fighting another yawn, he suddenly longed for his bed. He asked,

“How much farther to the village, Mother?”

“Not far, Aril. The edge of the forest is just ahead.”

Aril was glad of it. He decided the time was right to ask about Nem. He clasped Mother’s hand a bit more tightly and adopted his wee voice, the one that usually got him what he wanted.

“Mother?”

She looked down at him.

“May Nem—“

A sound from ahead of them carried through the trees and bit off the rest of his words. As one, he and Mother crouched in the undergrowth and froze. Aril was glad they had relied on only the moon for light.

“What was that?” Aril whispered.

It had sounded like a growl, but unlike any growl Aril had heard before. His heart beat faster than he liked. He reached into his pocket and clutched a skipping stone in his fist. Mother’s grip on his hand tightened and she shushed him.

The sound had come from the forest’s edge, from the direction of the village.

Mother stared ahead, head cocked, worry lines creasing her forehead. She caught Aril looking at her and forced an insincere smile.

Aril opened his mouth to speak but she shook her head and put a finger to her lips for silence. That made him still more nervous, but he held his tongue and nodded.

They stood as still as shrubs. Time passed slowly, but when the sound did not repeat, Mother’s grip on his hand loosened. She visibly relaxed. Aril took a sweaty hand from his skipping rock and let out a breath. He pulled Mother down by her cloak to his level, leaned in close, and whispered, “What made that sound, Mother?”

He imagined in his mind a passing bear, or maybe a wolf. Two months earlier a bear had killed Matron Ysele and her dog. Aril had not seen her body but he had heard enough from Nem that for a tenday he’d had to sleep in Mother’s bed with his feet touching hers. Sheriff Bol had said the bear was just hungry, the same as the villagers, and that he would not return.

“I don’t know, sweetdew,” Mother answered. “Let’s be still for a bit longer. To be sure it’s gone.”

Aril nodded.

An autumn wind rustled through the trees. Limbs rattled. Aril wished for the thousandth time that his father was still alive, that the red pox had never come to the village. Father would have come with them into the Old Wood; father would have protected them from any old bear.

He leaned against Mother. Her warmth and smell – like fresh bread – comforted him. She crouched and put her arms around him.

A limb cracked sharply somewhere in the woods behind them. Both gave a start and looked behind them. Aril’s heart started racing all over again. He saw nothing through the filtered moonlight but trees and undergrowth. Aril had heard that dwarves could see in the dark. He wished with all his might that halflings could.

Mother was breathing fast and Aril did not like it. He tried to swallow but his mouth was dry; he clutched a handful of Mother’s cloak and bit his lower lip.

Another limb cracked behind them, out in the dark.

Mother put her mouth to his ear. “Quiet. We must hide.”

He nodded.

He still saw nothing, but he knew that *something* was out there. Mother was afraid; he could tell. He started to shake and Mother hugged him tighter. He was breathing as fast as her.

“It will be all right,” Mother whispered to him, but he was not sure if she was really talking to him. She half-stood out of the undergrowth and looked around the forest for a better hiding place.

Aril wondered if maybe they should dash for the village? Or shout for help? Surely someone would hear them. Maybe even Sheriff Bol. “Momma...”

He had not called her ‘Momma’ since he was a wee, since Father had died.

“Momma, shouldn’t we—“

One of the village’s dogs barked. Another joined. Soon it sounded as if all the dogs in the village were barking.

Aril looked to his mother for reassurance but she was not looking at him. She was looking through the trees, toward the village.

A shout of alarm sounded – a man’s voice – then another, another. Before Aril could ask any questions, a woman’s scream tore through the night. Aril did not recognize any of the individual voices, but he knew they were his neighbors, his friends.

Growls answered the shouts, lots of growls. Worse than before. They sounded like Aril’s stomach after he ate too much rhubarb pie, but worse. A man’s voice shouted for arms and Aril thought it might have been Farmer Tyll. There was fear in the voice and the sound made Aril’s skin turn gooseflesh.

Mother squeezed him so hard that he could hardly breathe. Aril’s heart beat so fast it hurt his chest. His stomach fluttered.

“What’s happening, Momma?”

“We stay right here, Aril,” she whispered. “No matter what.”

The growls turned to roars and Mother paled. More shouts answered, the dogs barked themselves into a frenzy, doors slammed, wood cracked. Aril could not see it but he knew the village was in tumult.

“What is it, Momma? What is it?”

“I do not know, Aril. Cover your ears. Do not listen.”

But Aril could not help but listen as the shouts turned more and more to screams. He heard a dog yelp in pain and go silent. Another dog did the same. A man screamed, a woman. He thought he heard Sheriff Bol barking commands. And throughout it all was the roars, the terrible roars.

He buried his face in Mother’s cloak.

Mother picked him up, stood, and started back into the woods.

Fear seized Aril. He did not want to go back into the woods. “Where are we going?!” he said, too loud.

From the trees behind them came another growl, almost thoughtful. Saplings snapped, the sounds coming closer.

Mother froze in her steps. Aril felt a tremor run through her body.

Something was moving through the brush toward them, something big, snapping trees.

“No,” she said, so low that she probably had not intended Aril to hear. “Please, Yondalla, not my boy, not my son.”

Terror rooted in Aril’s chest. Whatever monsters were in the village, more of them were in the woods. He wrapped his legs around Momma’s waist and buried his face in her neck. Tears filled his eyes.

“What do we do, Momma?” he whispered through his tears. “I want Papa. Where’s Papa?”

The words made no sense but they came pouring out anyway.

“We must hide,” she said again, her voice a hiss. “Yes, we will hide.”

She whirled a circle and fixed her eyes on a stand of pine near the edge of the forest, but off to the side of the village. A dead log lay near it – a good hiding place for them.

Mother adjusted his weight in her arms and ran. She sometimes struggled to carry him but at that moment she bore him as easily as a babe.

The creature behind them in the woods growled. Mother stumbled, Aril squealed in terror, but her grip on him never faltered. She kept their feet, crashed through low hanging tree limbs and undergrowth, and fell to her knees under the pines, near the log.

They both turned to look behind them, breathing heavily. Aril saw nothing but trees and darkness. Perhaps the creature had not seen them?

Another crash sounded from the trees, so loud that Aril thought the creature must be not more than a stone's throw away. More roars from the village. Aril covered his ears and squealed.

Mother pried his hands away and put her mouth to his ear. She spoke in a whisper.

"I don't think it has seen us, Aril. Squeeze under the log and do not move. Like when you play hide and find with Nem."

Her voice calmed him and he nodded, though the screams from the village made him think of his friends. He was worried for Nem.

With Mother's help, he hurriedly squirmed under the log. It was a tight fit, but the irregular lay of the ground made it possible. The earth smelled loamy. Dried pine needles poked his exposed flesh and made him itchy. Mother pushed armfuls of leaves and branches over him and positioned herself behind him, like wooden spoons, sheltering him. He could feel her breathing in his ear, feel her body trembling. He could not imagine that she was well hidden.

"Do not move, sweetdew," she whispered. "No matter what happens. No matter what. Nod if you understand."

He nodded and got a face full of pokey pine needles for his trouble.

"Momma loves you, Aril. More than anything. Papa did too."

Aril moved his head a tad to get a needle out of his ear and saw that a thin gap between the bottom of the log and the ground offered a window through which he could see part of the village commons. He pressed his cheek into the ground so he could see better...

...and wished immediately that he had not.

His field of vision was limited but he caught a glimpse of long-limbed lumbering creatures loping across the green, tearing at any halflings within reach. He saw flashes of claws, huge mouths full of teeth. He knew what they were, and the knowledge made him sick to his stomach.

Trolls. There were trolls in the village. And there were more trolls behind them in the woods, hunting him and Momma.

He knew what trolls did. He'd heard the stories. He knew they could smell as well as Farmer Tyll's hounds. He and Momma would be caught. He knew they would be caught.

And they would be eaten alive.

Tears flowed anew but he bore them in silence. He clenched his eyes shut and wished the horrible images away but the sounds coming from the village, the screams, the

roars, preyed on his imagination. He saw with his mind what he no longer saw with his eyes: trolls killing and eating, claws and fangs dripping with the blood of friends and neighbors. He imagined Momma screaming....

He heard a rush of motion behind them, the slow footfalls of something large prowling the undergrowth nearby. He heard heavy respiration. It was sniffing for them; a troll was sniffing for them.

He felt Mother tense.

Aril felt dizzy. His heart beat so hard and fast he thought it must jump out of his chest. His breath left him. He could not breathe! He could not breathe! Panicked, he squirmed and his body crushed one of the limbs Mother had used to cover him.

It cracked.

The troll near them went still.

Momma's hand squeezed him. Both of them held their breath.

More screams from the village, a long high pitched wail of pain.

Aril pressed his face into the dirt to muffle any more sounds but that only made it harder to breathe. He wished so hard for his Papa. He wished that he was one of the bole slugs so he could burrow into the ground under a tree where no troll could ever find him. He wished he could hide in the earth and never come out again. He promised Yondalla that if she made him and Momma a worm he would live in the ground and never bother anyone ever again.

His mother gave him another squeeze. He felt her tears smearing his ear. A limb broke right behind them. He heard sniffing, a rumbling, curious grunt.

The troll started tearing through the debris under the pines and he knew, with perfect clarity, that he would die.

"Stay here," Mother whispered, and jumped to her feet

The troll roared.

Aril immediately ignored what she had told him and squirmed out from under the log. He stood, raining dirt and leaves and twigs. He was already out and up before he thought about what he had done.

"Aril, no!" Mother said, and he heard despair in her voice.

A troll stood five paces from them. Though hunched, it still looked as tall as a tree. Warty green skin and a few patches of coarse black hair wrapped a frame that looked to Aril to be otherwise composed solely of muscle, claws, and teeth. It looked right at them and inhaled deeply, as if testing the air for their smell. It smiled a mouthful of fangs and a low rumble emerged from somewhere deep in its throat. Moonlight caught the drool dripping from its lips.

Aril wanted to scream but no sound would come from his mouth. It just hung open, waiting to be filled by mosquitoes. He was frozen.

The troll was looking *right at them*. Its eyes were as black as night.

Mother held out her arms to either side to shield Aril.

"Into the woods, Aril! Run! Run now!"

But Aril could not run. He could not move.

The troll cocked its head at Mother's audacity. It flexed its claws and took a step toward them.

"Now, Aril!" Mother ordered. She picked up a thin stick and brandished it at the troll. "Here, creature!"

Aril was tempted to run, but only for a moment.

He would not leave his Momma. Papa would not leave her and he was Papa's son. He grabbed a skipping stone from his pocket.

The troll growled, took another step toward Mother.

Aril hurled the stone and hit the troll squarely in the chest. It sounded like it had hit a log and the huge creature barely flinched. Its eyes fixed on Aril and it said something in a foul language and licked its lips.

Mother exclaimed, "No! Here, beast!" She waved her makeshift club and tried to charge but slipped and fell on her stomach.

Aril did not think. He did what Papa would have done. He jumped in front of his prone mother, planted his clubfoot on the earth, and prepared to stand his ground. He took another stone from his pocket and prepared to throw.

"Leave us alone or I'll hit you again!" he shouted.

The troll bounded forward with terrifying speed and Aril knew he had made a mistake. His arm went limp; his legs weakened; the stone fell out of his fist and he screamed in terror.

Mother pulled him to the ground and threw herself over him.

"I love you, Aril!"

Aril hit the ground on his back and could not help but stare, eyes agog, as the troll loomed over them. Claws, teeth, and wall of green flesh filled his vision. The night grew darker. The troll smelled like rancid meat. Sound faded. Aril's vision blurred. The darkness swirled. He was spinning, spinning.

The troll opened its mouth.

The night clotted into a black deeper than pine pitch.

The troll reached down for them, its claws as long as Aril's fingers.

Shadows haloed the troll like black fire.

The troll's mouth was so wide Aril thought it would swallow him whole. He saw its black tongue, its sharp teeth. He could not close his eyes. He wanted to but he could not.

A man appeared beside the troll, a dark man with a dark sword.

Aril knew the man had come to carry him away into death. He realized that all of the Hearthmistress's sermons had been a lie. Yondalla had not come for him. There were no Green Fields. There was just a dark man with a dark sword.

The troll took hold of Mother's arm and she screamed. The sword flashed and the troll lurched, released mother. Aril screamed as the massive body of the creature fell to the ground.

Fell to the ground.

Fell to the ground.

He blinked, confused. He stared wide eyed at the body of the troll. Things did not make sense. Wasn't he dead?

Still lying atop him, Mother was crying, wracking sobs that shook her whole body.

Black blood pumped from the stump of the troll's neck. Aril watched it soak the forest floor. The headless body continued to scabble at the ground near them, as though trying to reach them, or to dig its own grave.

Next to the body the dark sword pierced the troll's severed head, pinning it to the forest floor. Pennons of shadow twirled around the blade. The jaws of the head gnashed futilely in an effort to get at the steel.

Aril still did not understand. He blinked rapidly, unsure that he was seeing something real. He closed his eyes, held them shut, opened them.

Everything remained as it was – mother continued to cry; the troll continued to bleed.

His eyes moved from the troll's head, up the blade of the sword, to the hilt, to the dusky, shadow enshrouded hand that held it, to the face of the tall, dark-haired human man. Aril met his eyes and they flared yellow.

Aril realized what had happened.

The shadowman had saved them.

“Back away,” the shadowman said in the halfling tongue, and nodded at the still moving body of the troll. His voice was deep, scary.

Aril had never before met one of the big folk who spoke the language of halflings. But the shadowman did.

Mother, still shaking and crying, bleeding from where the troll had grabbed her arm, scooted backward and pulled Aril with her, away from the body of the troll.

Blood soaked Aril's trousers. The troll's blood. Or maybe Momma's. It was warm and sticky. He had not noticed it at first.

“Thank, Yondalla,” Mother said through her tears, the words barely recognizable. “Whoever you are, thank you. Thank you.”

“He's the shadowman,” Aril tried to say, but the words did not come out.

The shadowman did not answer Mother, did not even look at her. He removed a small flask from his cloak and soaked the troll's body with the contents.

Lamp oil. Aril could tell from the smell.

The shadowman took a tindertwig – like the kind peddlers sold in the village – from a belt pouch, struck it on one of his boots, and tossed it on the troll. Flames engulfed the body, which thrashed in agony. The pinned head gnashed frenetically as the body burned. The shadowman held an open palm over the blaze. Darkness wrapped the fire and masked its light. At first Aril did not understand why he did it. Then he remembered the other trolls. The shadowman did not want them to see the flames.

The shadowman used his sword to toss the troll's head into the fire. It gnashed as it burned. Then its eyes popped.

The man – he was so tall! – looked over at Aril and Mother. Shadows wrapped him. Aril could not quite tell where the man ended and the night began.

“You are safe, now. I will do what I can for the village.”

He looked past them to Oakthorne, where the screams, roars, and shouts of combat and slaughter continued. The shadows around his body alternately coiled and flared.

“You are the shadowman,” Aril said, finally managing to get the words out.

The man regarded Aril with narrow eyes. The wind stirred his long hair.

Mother drew Aril close. “Thank you for saving us, goodsir. Please, help our folk.”

The shadowman ignored her. He had eyes only for Aril.

“What did you call me?”

His sword was as long as Aril was tall. Darkness poured from it like steam off the lake on winter mornings.

“He meant no offense,” Mother said.

Aril said, “The shadowman. You don’t like that name? That’s what Nem said the peddler called you. Hunters have seen you, too. In the forest. Some said they spoke to you but I thought it was all a tale. Nem said he heard you rode here on a shooting star. He said you came here to protect us because....”

Aril trailed off, suddenly nervous about continuing. He did not like the frown on the shadowman’s face. The dark eyes – they weren’t yellow anymore – bored into him.

“Because?” the shadowman prompted.

“He meant no offense, goodsir,” Mother said, her voice quavering.

“Please....leave us alone, now.”

Aril summoned his courage and said, “Nem said he heard you protect us because you had a friend who was a halfling and you...could not protect him.”

The shadowman’s face was frozen. Aril could not tell if he was angry or sad.

The shadowman appeared next to him – had he moved toward him? – to touch Aril’s head, maybe to tousle his hair, but stopped just short. He studied Aril’s face and said, “Your friend has the right of it. My name is Erevis. Erevis Cale.” He paused, then said, “But I like ‘shadowman,’ too.”

He did tousle Aril’s hair, then.

Mother audibly exhaled.

The roars and shouts from the village drew the man’s attention back to the slaughter. Without another word he was gone.

Aril twisted in his mother’s grasp, looked about. He did not want to be left alone in the forest.

He spotted the shadowman not far from them, crouching in the undergrowth, looking out at the village, and said the first thing that came to his mind.

“Tomorrow is my Nameday.”

“Let the man go,” Mother said to Aril, in the tone she usually reserved for telling him to do chores. “He’s going to help the others.”

The shadowman turned so that Aril saw his face in profile. Darkness gathered around him.

“I don’t want him to go,” Aril blurted. “I’m afraid.”

Aril did not see the shadowman move. The man looked back on Aril, the darkness blurred, and he was suddenly kneeling at Aril’s side. Mother and Aril gasped.

“Everyone is afraid,” the shadowman said, his tone soft. Ribbons of shadow leaped from his flesh and touched Aril with cold fingers. “Even me. There’s no shame in it. Do you really want me to stay here while the trolls attack your village?”

Aril understood the question. It was the same as when Mother had offered to let him sleep in tomorrow. He was supposed to say ‘no.’ He struggled to find words.

“I was just.... I was praying for Papa to come and you came. I thought....” He trailed off. He did not know what he had thought.

The shadowman stared at him for a moment. Finally, he asked,

“What number Nameday is it? Eighth?”

Aril felt indignant that the shadowman had taken him for a wee. “My tenth,” he corrected, and his tone made the shadowman smile.

“You are small for your age,” the shadowman said. “But only in your body, not in your heart. What’s your name?”

“His name is Aril,” Mother answered. Aril frowned that she had stepped on his answer.

The shadowman nodded. “Aril is a good name. My friend’s name was Jak. And he was a halfling like you. Not from this village, but from another not too far away.”

The screams from the village continued.

“Can you count, Aril?” the shadowman asked.

Aril nodded.

“To one hundred?”

Aril nodded again.

The shadowman stood and looked down on them. “When you reach one hundred this will all be over. Those trolls will never bother you or your village again.”

Aril nodded, wide-eyed.

The shadowman looked at Mother. “This is nothing you’ll want to see. Same for the boy. I will see to that. Just stay where you are. I’ll save who I can.”

Mother just stared.

The darkness around them began to deepen. Before it was too dark to see, Aril took a skipping stone from his pocket and tossed it to the shadowman.

“You might need it,” he said.

The shadowman caught it, smiled, and slipped it in a pocket.

“I might at that. Your Papa would be proud of you, Aril.”

The shadowman vanished as the darkness grew impenetrable. Aril held his hand before his face and saw nothing. His mother’s arms were around him though, so he felt safe enough. The shadowman’s voice cut through the darkness:

“Start counting, Aril. Aloud.”

Aril did. “One, two, three, four....”

By ten he heard roars of surprise from the trolls. By fifteen he heard the first of them die. Others followed quickly, at twenty, twenty three, thirty one. The roars of pain came one moment from Aril’s left, then from his right, one moment from nearby, one moment from farther away. He imagined the shadowman appearing from the shadows, killing, and disappearing, only to reappear across the village and repeat the process. By sixty he had stopped counting and the surviving trolls were trying to flee. He could tell because their terror-filled shrieks grew distant.

Mother held him throughout, rocking him, humming a lullaby. He thought she might have been more frightened than him.

“It is all right, Mother,” he said, and patted her hand. “He is here to save us.”

He felt his mother shake her head. “No, sweetdew. Not us. He’s here to save himself.”

After a time, quiet settled on the woods. Then Aril heard a whooshing sound. The smell of smoke and burning flesh grew more powerful.

He and mother remained still, as the shadowman had told them. He heard no trolls, no combat, merely the moans of wounded villagers, the soft crying of mourners, the barking of a few dogs.

“Shadowman?” Aril called.

The darkness lifted. He blinked in the flickering orange light of a great bonfire that burned in the communal firepit between the forest's edge and the village. A pile of troll bodies, all of them dismembered and squirming, lay within the flames. There must have been a dozen or more. Thick, stinking black smoke spiraled up from the corpses. The smell was awful.

The shadowman was gone.

The survivors from the village stood around, dazed, confused. A few tended the wounded or knelt over a fallen body. Aril avoided looking too long at the dead. He would have cried but he felt too numb to do anything more than stare.

Some of the survivors walked cautiously toward the fire. Many held weapons, mostly pitchforks but a few swords; others leaned on their fellows, whether from wounds or fatigue Aril could not tell. They murmured amongst themselves as they neared the pyre. Aril could see them pointing, explaining, trying to make sense of what had happened. Some prodded the burning troll corpses with their weapons. Sparks flew into the air.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. A storm was threatening. Aril doubted it would rain, though. It rarely did.

"None escaped," Aril heard someone say.

"Did you see him?" said another. "Who was it? *What* was it?"

Aril and his mother limped out of the tree line toward the fire. Mother took Aril's hand firmly in her grasp.

"It was the shadowman," Aril called, and eyes turned to him. "The shadowman saved us, all of us. His name is Erevis Cale. We saw him. He talked to me."

Aril spotted Nem back in the village, standing near his father, who held a woodaxe in his hands. Aril waved, relieved to see his friend. Nem returned the gesture and both forced smiles. The numbness left him abruptly and he began to cry. So did Nem.

"The shadowman is a hero," said another, and everyone nodded.

"Where did he go, Aril?" asked Matron Steet.

Aril looked around through his tears and could only shrug.

"Back into the shadows," Mother said.

Aril looked back into the woods, into the dark.

"Come into the light," he whispered to Erevis Cale.

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