

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

SHADOWBRED
THE TWILIGHT WAR
PAUL J. ZEMPEL BOOK I



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 greengills than bole slugs, especially fat bole slugs like the ones he'd just caught.

When the sun rose, he and Mother would take the path to Still Lake. Aril would skip some rocks, and 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 drifting back to 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 a good long time gagging and spitting out gnat fragments. 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 know about that?”

She looked down at him and winked. “Mothers 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 ridden 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 drowsy.

"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 without 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 Selûne floated in the sky, but her light fought its way through the forest canopy with difficulty. Aril was not usually afraid of the dark, but night in the tangled Old Wood was a little scary. He knew it was safe, though. Halfings 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 a pale scar, then vanished.

"Did you see it?"

"I saw it, Aril," Mother said, and she offered a brief prayer to Yondalla.

Aril remembered the previous autumn, the night that a whole rain of flaming stars had streaked from the dark sky. He'd heard from a peddler that the falling fire had destroyed villages and burned down forests and caused destructive waves and 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 those falling stars—he imagined 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, Aril decided to ask Mother just one more time if Nem could accompany them to the lake on the morrow. He held his tongue for a time, 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 lightly through the undergrowth—quiet and light was the halfling way, his mother always said. Aril could have sneaked up and touched the three brown hares he saw nibbling on foliage near the base of a pine. He was hardly quick or graceful on his clubfoot, but he was quiet.

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 his 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 rushed through the trees and bit off the rest of his words. As one, he and his 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 sounded like a growl, but unlike any growl Aril had heard before. His heart beat fast. 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 into the trees, her 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 more nervous, but he held his tongue and nodded.

They stood as still as the 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 about. Aril's heart raced anew. 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, in the dark.

Mother put her mouth to Aril's ear. "Quiet. We must hide."

He nodded.

He still saw nothing, but he knew something was out there. Mother was afraid—he could feel it. He started to shake and Mother hugged him tighter. He was breathing as fast as she.

“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 it. Soon it sounded as if every dog in the village was 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, and another. Before Aril could ask any questions, a woman’s scream tore through the night. Aril did not recognize any of the 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, only worse. A man’s voice shouted for arms and Aril thought it might have been Farmer Tyll. There was fear in his 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. Don’t 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. A second dog did the same. A man screamed, then a woman. He thought he heard Sheriff Bol barking commands. And throughout all of it came 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, and the sounds came 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 thought Aril would 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 his mother'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 poured 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 pines near the edge of the forest, off to the side of the village. A dead log lay near it—a good hiding place for them.

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

The creature behind them in the woods growled. Mother stumbled and Aril squealed in terror, but her grip on him never faltered. She kept her 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 hills and hollows of the ground gave him space. The earth filled his nostrils with their loamy scent. Dry pine needles poked his flesh and made him itchy. Mother laid herself behind him, like a pair of wooden spoons, sheltering him. She pulled armfuls of leaves and branches over them both. He could feel her breathing in his ear, feel her body trembling. He worried that she was not 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 tilted his head to get a needle out of his ear and saw that a thin gap between 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 view was limited but he caught a glimpse of long-limbed, lumbering creatures loping across the green, tearing at any halflings within reach. In the village torchlight, 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 Aril 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 might jump out of his chest. His breath left him. He could not breathe. He could not breathe! Panicked, he squirmed and his body pressed against one of the branches 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, and 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 into worms he would live in the ground and never bother anyone ever again.

His mother gave him another squeeze. He felt her tears warming his ear. A limb broke right behind them. He heard sniffing, then 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 her words and squirmed out from under the log. He stood, raining dirt and leaves and twigs. He was already on his feet 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 hunchbacked, it still looked as tall as a tree. Warty green skin with patches of coarse black hair wrapped a frame that looked to Aril to be composed solely of muscle, claws, and teeth. It looked at them and inhaled deeply, as if testing the air for their scent. It smiled a mouthful of fangs, and a low rumble emerged from somewhere deep in its throat. Moonlight gleamed on 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 stared right at them. Its eyes were as black as the night.

Mother held out her arms 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 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 and 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 in 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 and the stone fell from his fist. 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 a wall of green flesh filled his vision. The night grew darker. The troll stank like rancid meat. Sounds faded. Aril’s vision blurred and the darkness swirled. He was spinning, spinning.

The troll opened its mouth.

The night clotted into a blackness 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 to 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 and released Mother. Aril screamed as the massive body of the creature fell to the ground.

Fell to the ground.

Fell to the ground.

Aril blinked, confused. He stared wide-eyed at the body of the troll. This 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 still scabbled at the ground near them, as though trying to reach them—or 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 troll's jaws gnashed futilely in an effort to reach the steel.

Aril still did not understand. He blinked rapidly, unconvinced 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.

Aril forced his stare away from the troll's head. His gaze wandered up the blade of the sword to its hilt, then to the dusky, shadow-enshrouded hand that held it, and finally rested on the face of a 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 he nodded at the twitching body of the troll. His voice was deep, and it scared Aril.

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

Mother, still shaking and crying, was beginning to bleed from where the troll had grabbed her arm. She scooted backward and pulled Aril with her, away from the body of the troll.

Blood soaked Aril's trousers, but it was 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 knew the smell.

The shadowman took a tindertwig—like the ones peddlers sold in the village—from a belt pouch, ignited it on one of his boots, and tossed it on the troll. As flames engulfed the body, it thrashed in agony. The skewered head twitched and gnashed frenetically as the body burned. The shadowman held an open palm over the blaze. Darkness shrouded 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 pulled his sword free 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 at Aril and Mother. Shadows wrapped him. Aril could not quite tell where the man ended and the night began.

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

He looked past them to Oakthorne, where 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 croaking 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?—reaching to touch Aril's head, maybe to tousle his hair, but he stopped 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."

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 and 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 toward 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 do not 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 the next day. 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 is 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 like it.”

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. Trust me, and 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. Roars of pain came one moment from Aril's left, then from his right, one moment nearby, the next farther away. He imagined the shadowman stepping out of the shadows, killing, and disappearing, only to materialize across the village and slay again. By sixty, Aril stopped counting. The surviving trolls were trying to flee. He could tell by the way their terror-filled shrieks grew more and more distant.

Mother held him throughout, rocking him, humming a lullaby. He thought perhaps she was more frightened than he was.

"It's 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 over the woods. Then Aril heard a *whooshing* sound. The smell of smoke and burning flesh grew 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 fire pit between the forest's edge and the village. Aril and his mother walked cautiously to the forest's edge. A pile of a dozen or more troll bodies, all of them dismembered and squirming, lay within the flames. Thick, stinking black smoke spiraled up from the corpses. The smell was foul and sickening.

The shadowman was gone.

The survivors from the village wandered slowly, dazed, confused. A few tended the wounded or knelt over fallen friends. 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 carried 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 mushroomed 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 woods toward the fire. Mother took Aril’s hand firmly in her grasp.

“It was the shadowman,” Aril called, and all 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 in the village beyond, standing near his father, who held a woodsman’s axe resting on one shoulder. Aril waved, relieved to see his friend. Nem returned the gesture and both forced smiles. The numbness left Aril 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 glanced around through his tears and could only shrug.

“Back into the shadows,” Mother said.

Aril gazed into the woods, into the dark.

“Come into the light,” he whispered to Erevis Cale.