

*Ora continues to grow in wisdom, but her brother and his friends make decisions that lead them, the Kateeleans, the Shanai, and the forest itself into perilous situations.*

## **DIRE CONSEQUENCES**

By Debbi Weitzell

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The background is a painting of a forest. In the foreground, a large, curved, translucent shape, possibly a piece of fabric or a veil, hangs down from the top, partially obscuring the trees. The trees are rendered in various shades of green and brown, with some showing signs of autumn. The overall style is somewhat impressionistic and atmospheric.

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## **Dire Consequences**

Book II in the Ora's Quest Series

Ora continues to learn and grow in wisdom. But her visit to Dynora entices her headstrong brother and his friends to make decisions that lead them into a situation far worse than they could have imagined. The people of Kateele plot their rescue, which sets in motion events that could alter the course of life for Kateeleans, the Shanai, and the forest itself.

## Chapter 1

“This will give you a place to sleep while we are gone,” Ora said, in a soft, purring-sort-of tone. She spoke as she worked to build a small shelter for her hamra. This creature of the forest, one whose species was usually terribly ferocious, had adopted her shortly after she had begun her journey three years before.

Forest people knew of hamras and feared them, with good reason. They stood only two feet tall, but they were heavy in body, and that weight was solid muscle. Its compactness gave the hamra a waddling walk when calm, but if it were aroused to anger or defense, it could outrun and take down animals of any size. Even the towering jarret with its blade-like teeth and large talons would not take on a hamra if it had the choice. Yet this one was different.

Taliz had once attacked Ora. It was a relatively minor attack—more a warning than intent to do real harm. He had been suffering from a serious wound and thought she was trying to hurt him more. She, ignorant of the danger she was in and listening only to instructions from the Inner Voice, convinced the animal that she could help him. Her efforts had indeed accelerated his healing from a nasty gash, and the hamra had then apparently decided that Ora would be his personal responsibility. He had rarely left her side in the three years since, and had become her treasured protector.

“These should complete it. Though I am sure he does not need our help to find shelter.” Paoul dropped an armful of long branches beside his wife.

“No, he does not,” Ora replied. “But if he accepts what we have built, perhaps it will be easier for us to find him when we return.”

“You have a point,” Paoul said. He bent to help his wife do the work. “We will weave these in across the top, and leave the leafier ones to act as covering.”

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“You see, Taliz?” Ora said, tipping her head to one side as she always did when she was soothing the hamra, “there is plenty to eat around you. All the morganberries and omvra roots you could want. You will be much happier here than in the village with all those strangers around you. They would be frightened, and I know how that bothers you. This is much better. You have shelter here. You can come and go as you please. We will visit you when we can, and after seven risings of the sun, we will come and take you with us back to Kateele.”

The hamra, who had been snuffling the ground around the area, looked up and made his happy chirping sound.

“We will be listening for any disturbance in your aura,” Paoul added. “If you need us, we will come at once.”

Ora smiled. “Of course, if Taliz is in danger, he will probably have taken care of it before we can get here.”

Paoul nodded. “Most likely. But I thought I should say something of comfort.”

Ora stood and kissed her husband gently on the cheek. “Always the healer, my love.” She picked up her pack and walking stick, then added, “Now we will see how good a liar you are.”

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In Dynora, learning took place in Alya’s cozy dwelling. The school-age wattlies and the older weonums sat on the floor each day to hear lessons on kindness, on farming, on the history of their village, and on other topics that would help them to become happy, productive eldras. The sessions were concise—not drawn out so long as to cause boredom—and often in the form of stories that usually held her audience’s rapt attention.

But something had changed in recent weeks. In all the years that Alya had been watching over the people of Dynora, she had not encountered this kind of behavior. Still, she was not surprised by it. This group was well into the second generation since she had come. Though they had been told how a plague had killed all the eldras in the village and Alya had raised the survivors, their parents, to these weonums it was just a legend; they had not

experienced the painful reality. Now they were wondering whether the tale was true, or if it had been concocted to invent reasons for the younger generation to practice humility, and to scare them away from the forest that surrounded their village. Alya had seen this before in other villages where she had served, and she knew the likely outcome. Therefore, this behavior disturbed her; but she did not feel the time was right to say anything to them just yet. Soon, however, she would have to begin a new kind of lesson.

Alya stopped teaching and listened to the weenum boys for a moment. They were in the back of the room, whispering and laughing among themselves. They were those who had reached that age at which they questioned everything and rebelled against whatever they could. Ora's brother Eb was among them.

"Perhaps we should end for the day," she said softly. "I will see you on the morrow."

The boys made a speedy exit, followed by the wattlies, anxious for the extra bit of play time. The weenum girls lingered briefly, talking to each other and to Alya. That is, until they heard the ruckus outside.

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In Dynora, where Ora had been raised, families worked together daily in the growing places, hoeing around their crops. The youngest of the wattlies played nearby, and occasionally their parents would tend them, offering juicy bits of fresh produce. Livestock grazed lazily in the meadow, and all seemed peaceful.

At first sight, the village seemed little changed from what Ora remembered. She saw the people she loved so dearly engaged in their idyllic life.

No one knew she was coming, so when she stepped out of the forest, hand-in-hand with her husband, the excitement of shrieking wattlies in the village square filled the little collection of cottages immediately.

"Ora! Ora is here! Come see!"

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All the eldras came from their work, Li and Tre at the forefront to greet their daughter. Tre cried freely. Ora did not need her connection to the Inner Voice to know what her mother was thinking, but she easily read the woman's thoughts. She was thinking how much more mature her daughter looked. Ora had left a weeonum and now returned a married woman.

She wore her hair differently. Two tiny braids woven toward the back from the long hair that began at her temples were caught together on the back of her head. They then flowed into the rest of her dark tresses, which were bound at the nape of her neck. Her clothes were different, too. She wore a tunic made of a very soft, tawny-colored, leathery-looking fabric that Tre had not seen before—nothing like the linen that the women of Dynora wove. Ora knew she would have to answer questions about that, and about the small bags of the same material that hung from her belt.

Tre hugged her daughter to herself. "Oh, my little one! How I have longed to see you!"

Li, in turn, also held his daughter in a long, tight embrace. He then turned to Paoul, eyeing his new son-in-law somewhat warily. Ora smiled as she watched what she had known would come: her father's first assessment of this man who had earned his daughter's heart.

She watched as Li looked him over. She followed his gaze as Li catalogued Paoul's curly brown hair, his solid build, the walking stick he carried, the maran across his shoulder and the little bags that hung from his belt. She noted that Paoul tried to look relaxed under the scrutiny.

"Father, Mother, this is my husband, Paoul," Ora said.

Li offered his hand, which Paoul shook heartily. "Yes," Li said. "Alya has told us about you." Li looked pleased at Paoul's strong grip. But the furrow of his brow said that the assessment was not complete.

Ora's sisters, Seta and Jil joined the group, giggling and dancing in circles with their elder sister.

What a handsome husband!" Jil whispered.



Eb was the last of the family to arrive. Apparently wanting to appear above such emotional displays, he strolled in with his friends and dropped a casual, “How *are* you, Ora?”

Ora ignored his attempt to stay aloof and ran to hug him and kiss him on the cheek. He blushed the same crimson color that he had when he was younger.

Ora searched the crowd with her eyes until they fell on Alya. As was her practice in such situations, Grandma Alya had let the others share the excitement while she stood back on the steps of her little home and watched. Ora locked eyes with her mentor and felt love flowing from her.

Ora sent a telepathic message to Alya: “We have much to discuss, Grandma.”

“Yes, I know,” Alya returned. “Both of you come later.”

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Ora and Paoul spent the evening with Ora’s family. Tre prepared all of Ora’s favorite foods for their meal, and Li talked with Paoul, passing pleasantries, but more trying to get to know something about this man who had married his firstborn.

“So where exactly is it that you live?” Li asked. “I have never been quite clear on that.”

“On the other side of the forest. The north end. Several days’ journey from here.”

“And what is the village called?”

“I am sure you have not heard of it.”

“While it is true I have never left Dynora, I would still like to know the name of the place where my daughter lives.”

“Ashkala,” Paoul said. “It is called Ashkala.”

“And is this Ashkala bigger than Dynora?”

“Not much. Maybe a little.”

“What do you do there?”

“I am a healer.”

“Ah, yes. Alya told us that. It is a good profession.”

“Thank you, sir. I do my best.”

“How did you meet Ora?”

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“She had...injured her hand. I treated it for her.” Paoul reached for one of the bags on his belt. “I used this herb. It is called ‘vamir.’ It aids healing. Have you any in Dynora?”

Li shook his head, “Not that I have seen.”

“Perhaps you would like to keep some here.” He handed the bag to Li, who nodded.

“Vamir on my hand, and it was love at first sight,” Ora added, carrying a bowl of greens into the dining area. “Really, father, I do not think it fair of you to question Paoul so rigorously. It is not as if he is my first boyfriend, come calling.”

“Leave him alone, Li,” Tre agreed. “The time has come to eat now anyway.”

Over the meal, Ora’s sisters were animated, firing questions at her, back and forth between them in rapid succession.

“What was it like in the forest?”

“Very dark at first. I could hardly see my feet stepping in front of me. It was as scary as I always imagined it would be. But after a while, I think my eyes became used to the darkness. And after two days, I came to a place of light.”

“Two days in darkness! How dreadful!”

“And then what?”

“Well, I fell and hurt my hand.” (Ora purposely left out the part about being attacked by an injured hamra before the actual fall.)

“Fell? From what?”

“I had climbed a tree, thinking maybe I could see farther than just what was around me on the path. Then I lost my balance.”

“And that is when Paoul found you?”

“No. We met later. I found some priz leaves and washed my hand.”

“But priz is only for cuts,” her mother observed.

“Yes,” Ora replied. “There were some small cuts. I wanted to be sure they were not deep, and to clean them.” (She sensed her mother knew that was not the entire story.) “I used your ointment of Matah on them. They healed nicely.”

“And there was more to the injury?” Her mother pressed the point.

“I had broken a small bone in my finger. My last finger,” Ora said, flexing the digit. “But it is fine now, thanks to Paoul.”

“And Cleve,” Paoul added. “He helped you first with that.”

“Who is Cleve?” Li asked in a protective, fatherly tone.

“A very kind man from the village who happened by. He has a lovely wife and two wattlies,” Ora said, to calm her father’s fears. “I went with him to the village, and that is where I met Paoul. Cleve brought him to heal my hand.”

“What is this village like? What did you say it is called?”

Paoul and Ora shared a glance. “Ashkala,” Paoul said. “It is much like Dynora. We have some different herbs and plants, but the people are much the same.”

“Your clothing is not,” Jil said. “What is that cloth you wear?”

“This is an animal hide,” Ora said. It is very strong. We also have cloth we weave from plants, much as you do here.”

“Animal hide?” Seta asked. “I see nowhere that you have sewn pelts together.”

“Some animals are much larger than the rabbits you catch,” Paoul said.

“What animal has enough hide to make into all that clothing?” Seta took a corner of Ora’s tunic in her fingers and rubbed it. “And so soft!”

Ora smiled. “As Paoul said, there are different things in the forest.”

The questions continued throughout the meal. Having never ventured into the forest, all the members of Ora’s family were very curious about what it was like outside the protection of Dynora. Paoul and Ora did their best to supply what details they could without making it sound either too benign or too threatening.

Throughout the evening, Ora was aware that her mother was watching her closely, still noting all she could about the changes in her daughter.

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Ora’s family did not fully understand what it was to have a calling from the Inner Voice. Indeed, Ora herself was still learning

all that it encompassed. What her parents *did* know was that Alya had endorsed it.

Although the Inner Voice was mentioned from time to time in Dynora, Alya was the only one who knew much about it. The rest of the villagers looked upon it as something outside their ability to understand—a mystic presence that they could not access—and they therefore put their total trust in the grandmotherly Alya to lead and guide them.

Alya had nurtured them, taught them skills by which to earn their living, and trained them in the ways of kindness and fair play. There was nothing with which they could not trust Grandma Alya. So, as their children grew and matured, they repeated the teaching that they had received and continued to trust their loving matriarch. For that reason, when Alya had come to Li and Tre and told them that their oldest daughter had a very special quest ahead of her that would prepare her to serve the Inner Voice, they believed her. Knowing that Alya would not lead them astray gave them courage to consider letting their child leave the village, walking alone into the forbidden forest.

No one from the village ever went into the forest more than a few yards, and then it was only eldras, and only very briefly to retrieve a stray animal or pick wild herbs near the bushes on the fringe of the deep darkness. It was serious business for the men and boys to spend a morning outside the village limits, hunting small game. The wattlies were warned to stay away from the thick wall of trees and never step into the shadows. The tradition of the village was that evil lurked there.

Now Ora had returned from the unknown that lay beyond the curtain of black and green. It was only natural that people, especially her family, would be curious about what she had encountered and how she had not only survived, but had come through the experience so well. In fact, she had found a husband and had built a life in the unknown regions. How was that possible?

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At last, the meal was over. Ora helped her mother clear the food and dishes while the others continued talking. While they were separated from the others, Tre stopped and looked deeply into her daughter's eyes.

"There is something different about you," she said.

"Well, yes, Mother. I am older."

"No, it is more than that. There is something behind your eyes. A deepness. A knowing."

Ora blushed. "Whatever do you mean? I am the same."

Tre shook her head, continuing to study Ora's face. "No. I have only seen that depth in one other place. In the eyes of Alya."

Ora turned away. "Well, she taught me. Perhaps that is why...."

"Yes. Perhaps."

Ora could tell her mother was not convinced that this was the entire answer. She realized that trying to keep the whole truth from her might be harder than she had thought. And yet she felt she must try. These simple people knew nothing of the dangers that lurked in the forest, nor how to deal with them. For their protection, and to allow them to continue to live so peacefully, she knew she must say nothing for now. This was, however, one of the things that she and Paoul needed to discuss with Alya as soon as possible.

They walked back into the gathering room, where the others still sat.

"All this excitement at the end of a busy day," Li mused. "I am truly tired. Perhaps we should all retire."

"Oh, no, father! Not yet!" Seta and Jil protested, almost in chorus.

"You may if you wish, my dear," said Tre, "but there is work yet to do. Ora, you and Paoul go on to Alya's. I am sure you want to see her. And since your sisters have so much energy, they will clean up."

The girls groaned, but followed their mother to begin washing dishes.

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When they were out of earshot of the family, Paoul let go a healthy sigh.

“That was rather difficult,” he said through his thoughts.

“I know,” Ora answered. “I do not like lying to them either, but that is how it must be for now.”

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Alya was waiting for them, sitting in her only chair. The cottage had not changed at all, so far as Ora could tell. Though it was a warm night, a small fire crackled on the smooth stone hearth. Still, the heat was not uncomfortable, and it was the only source of light in the room. Halo grass sculptures made by the children filled many nooks and crannies. Woven mats covered the floor. Other belongings made the room feel rich and cozy.

“Come in, my children, come in,” she welcomed them.

Ora and Paoul each, in turn, grasped the old woman’s hands, then sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her, as the young ones did for class. It was the first time for Paoul in this setting, but it was a cherished remembrance for Ora. She thought of the many hours she had sat learning at Alya’s feet before she had gone on her initial quest.

For the first few moments, they only smiled at one another, in a deep, loving way. Thoughts and feelings filled the air as the many close connections the three shared swam around the room, engulfing them all.

It was Alya who finally aligned her thoughts to begin a discussion. Her telepathy was clear. “I feel we should communicate with thoughts only, lest anyone should be listening.”

Ora and Paoul nodded, and their minds intoned, “Yes.”

“But before we get to the business at hand, tell me of your life together!”

Ora beamed. “Oh, Grandma, we are so happy! It hardly seems that it could have been nearly three years since we were joined.”

“Your joining was a momentous occasion.”

Paoul shook his head. “You, as well? The Council still keeps bringing it up.”

Alya's eyes opened wider than Ora had ever seen them open. "How can they not? That was a beginning! It opened our understanding of the Inner Voice to levels that we did not even know existed!"

Ora shook her head, too. She still had trouble accepting the idea that she was at the center of a revolution that to this day she did not fully comprehend. She still felt like a novice—a junior traveler in a life that involved the Inner Voice. Yet things kept happening to her that those who had been learning the ways of the Inner Voice for many years told her they had never experienced themselves, nor in some cases even heard of. Now, to hear Grandma Alya, her mentor, get so excited about the joining made Ora feel that perhaps it was not genuine—that someday reality would come crashing down around her and everyone would recognize that none of it was true.

Paoul, on the other hand, was a little older than his wife and had grown up with the workings of the Inner Voice his entire life. He had chosen a life of discipleship to the Inner Voice above being with his family when his father had become a follower of the evil Sabató. He had integrated listening to the Inner Voice into planting cycles, hunting, accessing the essences of his patients, and everything else that mattered. He relied on it for his healing work, so it was central not only to his spiritual growth, but to most of his daily activities. His belief in its unerring guidance was all that had allowed him to accept that someone like Ora could really choose him as a companion. He had not thought of himself as worthy of her until the Inner Voice led them to their joining. Now, after living with her for so long, he was secure in their relationship and therefore more confident in himself.

They complimented one another's talents fully. They both supposed that this was the reason they were chosen for the miraculous joining—one of those things that had never been seen.

They had been alone, cut off from others during a battle. Paoul had been working to heal Ora's wounds. The seriousness of the situation caused them to talk of feelings they had suppressed before. Their bodies filled with the spirit of the Inner Voice, and

they were raised up off the ground. Their spirits intertwined, so that each knew every thought and feeling in the other's heart. When it was over, they were as connected as any two people can be while they remain in separate bodies.

Since they had been joined, they had both grown in their communication and understanding with the Inner Voice to heights unknown by previous generations. Together they were a living phenomenon among those acquainted with that force. To others they had to try to appear as inconspicuous as possible, so that their great power would not be revealed. Some might try to exploit them, and others would surely seek their destruction. Thus, they could not even tell Ora's family that they really lived in Kateele, the stronghold of the users of the Inner Voice.

"We are indeed blessed," Ora thought. "I only hope what we are learning will be of value to Kateele and to the other villages around the forest."

"I am sure it will be," Alya responded. "Your attunement with the Inner Voice offers us a hope of peace that was not possible before."

"If it could only be so," Paoul thought.

"What are the circumstances in Kateele?" the grand eldra asked.

"There is unrest," Paoul returned. "The Shanai are still as they were, and even more angry since we retrieved Tacria from them."

"And you have hidden it well?"

"Yes, Grandma," Ora replied. "No one knows where the sacred book is except the members of the Council. And...well, me. It is safeguarded by many illusions far beyond the mental capacity of the Shanai."

"And these have been tested?" Alya asked.

Ora nodded. "They have raided us four times since we retrieved it from them, and they seem to have no compass to guide them anywhere near its hiding place."

Alya smiled. "I am pleased. It is most important that Tacria be preserved. No one could ever achieve the Sacred Order without its teachings, and there are few copies."



Ora's eyes widened. "There are other copies?"

"Surely we would not have only one book when its contents are so precious and there are those who would defile it."

"Then why did we risk our lives to get it back?" Ora questioned. She tried to keep disdain from her thought, but it was difficult. "And why did Selin give her life to preserve it?"

Alya gazed deeply into the girl's eyes. The idea crossed Ora's mind that she might at this moment be seeing the kind of wisdom there that her mother seemed to suspect she herself had gained.

"Ora," the old woman began, somehow letting her thoughts come more softly, "Tacia is sacred. Even if there were a thousand copies, it would still be worthy of protection."

Ora blushed. "Of course. But to risk our lives...."

"And you have seen yourself the power that is associated with it. We do not want the evil ones like Sabató to have access to that."

Ora nodded. "He would not know how to use it. He has no depth of soul."

Alya shook her head. "He is clever. Never doubt that. And remember, he was once among the people of Kateele. He could find some evil way to use the record against us."

"Perhaps, then," Ora's brow furrowed as she thought, "the Council may be right. We have wondered if we should not send it back into your care."

"I am not sure that is wise," the matron replied. "So far Sabató and his warriors have not found it in Kateele. And here I have not the resources.... It is much better defended in Kateele."

"How *are* things here?" Ora asked. "I sense a difference."

Alya's face clouded. "Life seems to go on as usual, as you have seen. But there is an undercurrent, especially with the weenum boys."

"Have they been into the forest?" asked Paoul.

Alya nodded. "Not far in, but I have sensed them there. And I have seen them lurking dangerously near its borders many times. Even now, as you saw, some wattlies are playing nearer the edge of the trees, following the older boys' example."

"Have you seen any Shanai?" Paoul asked.

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Alya shook her head. “No, but I have known of their nearness, and it makes me uneasy. If they raided Dynora we would have little defense against their massive warriors. But more: I fear their spirit of rebellion is infusing the boys.”

“But how could the Shanai have such an influence on people of the village if they have not entered it?” Ora wondered.

The old woman’s eyes were sad. “Dark things make themselves known.”

Ora tried to dismiss the unrest she felt. “Well,” she reasoned, “their language is corrupted enough that the boys could probably not even understand them.”

“Evil is a force not to be underestimated,” Alya replied, “and it needs no language. She sighed, then smiled as her thoughts turned to a more hopeful point of view. “But now, because of what you have experienced, we have greater confidence that we can combat it. Come. I want to know how the Kateeleans fare with learning the new protection. The dome, as you call it. It will be vital to us all. Are the members of the Council making progress?”

“I fear it has not gone as well as we had hoped,” Ora thought. “The four of us—Cleve and Ferron, Paoul and I—have not been able to teach the others how to duplicate it.”

“As nearly as we can tell,” Paoul continued, “the fact that the four of us were able to harness the energy around us the first time had a lot to do with our specific auras. We have been trying to teach others, but it is hard to teach what one does not fully understand. Whether we can match up other groups that have the same dynamics has not yet been seen.”

“You are wise to work with the Council first. Progressive as they are, most of the Kateeleans are not as advanced in use of the Inner Voice as the members of the Council are,” Alya mused.

Ora and Paoul nodded.

“Grandma,” Ora asked, “can you tell us anything of Selin?”

Alya smiled, and her eyes danced. “Oh! She is doing so well! She is happier than she ever was in mortality.”

Ora sighed with relief. “I have never seen anyone transformed after death as she was. I did not know what would become of her.”

“Where does she serve?” Paoul asked.

“For the most part, in Ashkala.”

The young couple looked at each other in surprise, then began to laugh aloud. “That is where we told my parents we have been living!” Ora thought.

Alya smiled, then more seriously thought, “It is well you told your family that you were living somewhere other than where you are. People here should not hear any more of Kateele. At least not now.”

“More? But they have never known of Kateele,” Ora said.

“Ah, but they did!” the aged one replied. “Before the plague. That is why they accepted the stranger into their midst—the stranger who brought the disease. Members of the Grand Council would sometimes send people to see if all was well in the village. When the stranger came, they believed he was from Kateele.”

“Did they know you were of the Grand Council?”

“The eldras did. But when all of them died, the Council thought it best to keep the very young of Dynora as separated from the people of the forest as possible.”

Paoul nodded. “That was wise. Even then Sabató was turning the Shanai toward evil.”

“Yes,” Alya said, “the innocence of the young ones here, with only one to watch over them, made them prime prey for Sabató’s indoctrination. We were sure that was Sabató’s plan. We had to protect them with all the power we could muster. It seemed best that they not know about other villages at all. At least for a time. Seeing all the eldras die and knowing that the source of their disease came from the forest was enough to make them want to stay within the safety of Dynora.”

“Each event of my life makes me realize how blessed I have been to have you, Grandma,” Ora thought. She rose to her knees and hugged the old woman as she sat in her chair.

The trio talked—mostly telepathically—well into the night. Afterward, the couple snuck out into the forest to check on Taliz.

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While Ora spent time stroking Taliz and talking softly to him, Paoul searched the area around the hamra's shelter.

"There is disorder in the soil," he told his wife telepathically.

"Perhaps from animals," she responded.

"Perhaps. Yet I think these are older markings. If something so large as the disorder suggests had been here, Taliz would have had himself an unpleasant encounter."

Ora rubbed the hamra's long, dark brown fur against the grain, looking for signs of injury to his skin. "I see no wounds."

"And I see no blood, here nor there. Perhaps these were those who desired not to be his prey."

Ora knew what he meant.

Silently they resolved that each evening of the week that they were in Dynora, they would be sure come back to Taliz's temporary home to see if he had battled a jarret...or a Shanai warrior.

## Chapter 2

As she watched the people around her, Ora began to notice the changes Alya had talked about. The eldras seemed the same, but there was something going on with the weonums—mainly the boys, but among the girls, too. There was an unrest; a feeling that they were being denied something and they did not like it. She could understand that to a degree. She had been about their age when she began to feel unrest. But this was something different.

She saw it first in Eb. She hoped that it was just because he was at that awkward stage. He was now 15 years old, caught between wattle and weonum; but she soon realized that he had developed a streak of rebellion far beyond angst. He would speak sharply to their mother, and more than once Li had to reprimand him and ask him to apologize, which he did grudgingly.

Though he tried to be nonchalant around the others, Ora could sense that Eb was anxious to talk to her alone. He followed her outside on the fourth day of their stay.

“What is it like in the forest, Ora?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Tell me! You have been there. You have been gone all this time. I want to know what you saw.”

“It is not for you, Eb.”

“Why not? I can manage it! You did!”

“No, I think not. I went through months of training with Alya before I left, and I still was not prepared for most of what I saw.”

“Like what?”

“There are...animals. Plants that can kill you if you do not know them. And there are...evil people.”

The boy stood tall and jutted out his chin. “I am not afraid of any of that.”

*Dire Consequences*

Ora took her brother by the shoulders. “You should be, Eb. I want you to promise me that you will not go into the forest unless Grandma Alya prepares you.”

“But she refuses. She will not teach any of us about the forest.”

“Then she has very good reasons. You need to listen to her.”

“Why would she train you and not me and my friends?”

Ora knew the answer, but she also knew he would not like hearing it. “It is not your time. You are very young.”

“I am not! I am almost 16!”

“It is not just your age. It is how you think.”

“What is wrong with how I think?”

“Eb...you...you just do not think ahead yet. You do not consider what might happen if you did this or that.”

“What difference does that make? I do something. It works or it does not. So I move on.”

“That is what I mean. In the forest, thinking like that can cost you your life.”

“Oh, stop being mysterious. You cannot scare me.”

“You are the one who wanted to know what I had been through, and this is it. If you do not know what you are about out there, you will never survive.”

Eb had no answer for her. He kicked the dirt and walked away. Ora watched him join his friends. She recognized them: Lodi, Kal and Trace—all looking older, but still the boys she remembered. Eb seemed to be telling them what she had said, and each took a turn looking her way. She felt the disturbance in them. They were toying with things far beyond their ability to accomplish, and she, too, was concerned for them.

Paoul joined his wife. “What was that about?”

“There *is* trouble here, Paoul. Eb and his friends are considering entering the forest.”

“They are exactly the kind of recruits the Shanai would welcome.”

Ora nodded. “I tried to dissuade him, but I do not think he heard.”

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“Yes,” Alya confirmed later that evening in their voiceless discussion. “I knew that we could not maintain our idyllic life here forever. Your parents’ generation, Ora, was a new beginning. Now, as their children come of age, they know not the ravages of fear and pain. They want adventure.”

“But so did I,” Ora said.

Alya smiled. “You were different. Did you not sense that all your life?”

“I just thought people treated me well because I was the oldest child—the first of the new hope. That is what Mother told me.”

“That was only part of it. And for these villagers who do not understand the Inner Voice as we do, that was enough. I knew you were chosen.”

Paoul also smiled. “But even you did not know what she would accomplish, did you?”

Alya nodded. “It is true. How can one know things that have never been?”

Ora frowned and redirected the conversation. “What can we do about them, Grandma?”

The old woman hesitated. “It is a hard thing,” she said in her mind. “They have freedom to choose, and yet they do not understand the consequence of their choosing.”

“What if you *did* teach them?” asked Paoul. “Then they would comprehend the danger.”

“I have considered this. And yet, to give them more knowledge than they are ready to receive is also a dangerous thing. That was the way with Sabató. He learned, then spent his time thinking of ways to misuse his knowledge.” She sighed. “He was once so promising. To see him now, wild as any beast, it would be hard to believe that.”

Paoul nodded. “He is hardly human.”

“How did he gain followers in the beginning?” Ora asked. “It seems to me no one would choose that life.”

“In the early days, he charmed others to follow him. He promised peace and wealth and independence. But that was not what he gave them. He led them far from those things so slowly

that they did not realize what was happening. Over time, his people became so corrupted that they had no trace of the Inner Voice to guide them.”

“That is why their language is barely understandable to us,” Paoul said. “They have blocked all connection with us by rejecting the Inner Voice.”

Alya continued. “As they could no longer entice recruits with false promises of a peaceful life in the forest, Sabató and his warriors turned to raiding villages and stealing the children, so that they could force them to stay and become like themselves. They had no regard for family nor property nor anything of a spiritual nature; they took what they wanted and destroyed what they did not.”

“And the plague that killed all the eldras in the generation of my grandparents was purposely introduced by Sabató’s people,” Ora said.

Alya nodded, closing her eyes tight against the memory. “They hoped to kill as many as they could, then take the spoils of the village and any wattleies who were left.”

“The power that the Inner Voice displayed through the Grand Council at that time and Alya’s stewardship here were all that kept the warriors away,” Paoul said.

“But now?” Ora asked. “Now that they are pressing upon the village?”

“They are certainly more aggressive than they were in those early times,” Alya said.

“Not very organized,” Paoul added. “But there are more of them, and they are definitely more destructive.”

Ora and Paoul had had to deal with the Shanai when they raided Kateele. The first time Ora had met them, they had killed several people, then stolen Tacria, which had been in Ora’s possession. When the Kateeleans went to recapture it, one of their party, Selin, had been tortured and killed, and Alya had had to step in, calling upon the high powers of the Inner Voice to restore damage done to the book. These three people now nestled in the little cottage had been witnesses to the horrors wrought by the



Shanai. For them to think of the simple, happy people of Dynora being faced with such evil was sobering indeed.

“I hope Eb will heed my warning,” Ora said.

## **About the Author**

Debbi Weitzell has been writing most of her life, in one form or another. A long, convoluted path through the corridors of higher education culminated with a degree in communication studies, but her love of writing started when she was barely a teenager.

Working freelance for many years, she gained experience with a variety of occupations and industries. Among other things, this allowed her to develop the perspective of someone on the outside looking in. That viewpoint has served her well in both commercial and creative projects.

Weitzell has written many plays, and several of those have been performed to acclaim. She also wrote a movie short produced by James Dalrymple.

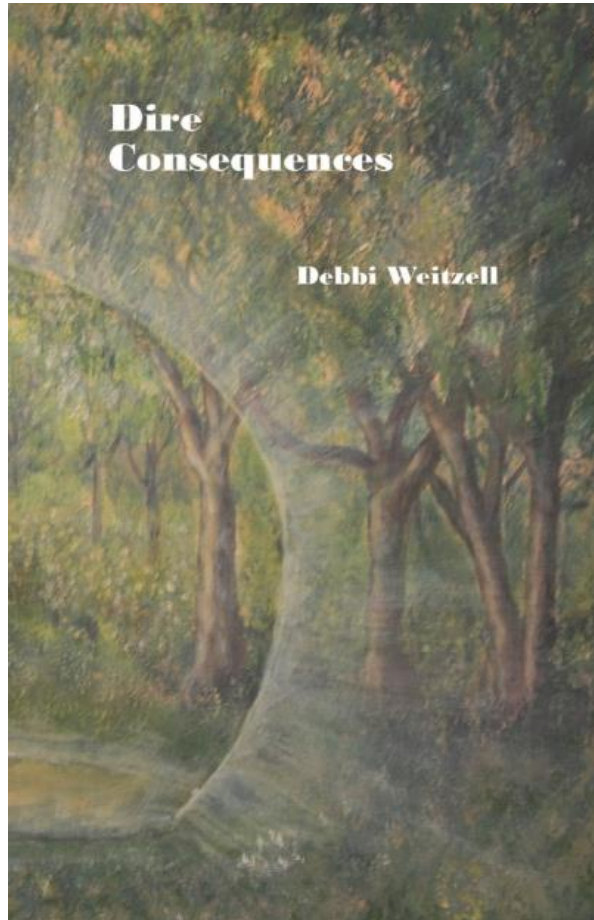
Fiction allows the deepest expression her values, which are based in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Weitzell also paints, has a job she loves, and enjoys family history work. She is a mother and grandmother, and lives with her husband in Arizona.

## **Other Books by Debbi Weitzell**

Dan Powell: The Making of an American Cowboy  
(Historical Fiction)

Ora's Quest  
(Fantasy Adventure. The first book in this series.)



*Ora continues to grow in wisdom, but her brother and his friends make decisions that lead them, the Kateeleans, the Shanai, and the forest itself into perilous situations.*

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