



# Ora's Quest



**Debbi Weitzell**





*Ora is a young woman with a longing. She leaves the little village of Dynora under the watchful care of the mystic Alya to seek her calling in life. Though she feels she has prepared for the journey, she is surprised by many of the things she finds, including deadly struggles and people that she never dreamed existed.*

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# **ORA'S QUEST**

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## Chapter 1: The Call

The path into the forest managed somehow to look both warm and eerie. Ora stood in the sunlight, watching the shadows of the leaves play on the dirt road ahead, and marveling at how, when the leaves became too dense, the effects of the sun were shut out. Still, the blue darkness held a mystery that Ora could not deny; nor could she ignore it.

"Your answers lie within the forest," Alya had said. "Those who seek to know must enter therein."

The problem was, Ora did not really know what she was seeking; only that she had a burning desire to know...*something*.

Ora had grown up in the tiny village of Dynora. Dynora laid to the south of a vast forest and supported its people well, but the town was largely isolated. Ora knew there were other villages that surrounded the woodland, but seldom did a traveler venture far enough south to reach her village carrying tales of places beyond. Ora only knew of two outsiders who had come to them. One was the embodiment of benevolence; the other had brought catastrophe.

As the story was told, life in Dynora had gone on undisturbed for many generations. People grew up, married, had children and died, all in proper course. They raised their gardens and animals, and lived a very peaceful existence.

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Their occasional visitor was Alya, a grand eldra—that is to say, a mature woman of grandmotherly years—who would stop for a few days every year to renew acquaintances and meet the newest group of children. Everyone regarded her as a treasured family member and looked forward to her visits. They even built her a cottage in the village so that she could have all the comforts she wanted, for however long she wanted to stay, always hoping that they could coax her to stay a little longer.

Then, three years before Ora was born, a passing stranger came out of the forest, bringing with him a terrible plague. He died, and many of the Dynorans were ill within a few days. Though it was not time for Alya's usual visit, she nevertheless appeared and became the chief nurse for the villagers. It was surely a blessing that she came when she did, for they soon found that the adults (eldras) were much more sickened by the disease than the youth (weeonums) and children (wattlies) were. In fact, when the crisis was past, there was not a single villager over the age of 16 left alive—only Alya. For that reason, Alya decided to stay in the village and care for all the children.

Those children grew from wattlies to weeonums, fell in love, married, and the cycle of life resumed. By this turn of events, Alya literally became the mother or grandmother figure for the entire village of Dynora. This history was told yearly at the village festival, as the townspeople filled the garden dedicated to the memory of the dead; it was known by all the inhabitants of Dynora.

The village functioned as one big family in which Ora was a favored child. She never really understood why; perhaps because she was the oldest of her generation. After the plague had taken so many, Ora thought she must have seemed the symbol of hope for the future. Each child that followed her into existence in Dynora suggested to the eldras that life could regain its normalcy. Though each birth was a blessed event that underscored the natural rhythm of life, none was quite as exciting as Ora's had been, so she had often been told the tale.

Ora was fond of her family. Her father, Li, worked his parched land hard and had little time for other things; but when he could, he

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loved to play as much as did his three daughters and his son. Not once had any one of them beaten him in a race. Li was so very proud of his family—his beautiful wife and all of his smart offspring—and he'd tell anyone who would listen.

Mother, Tre, was quieter; gracious and loving. She always made home a place Ora wanted to be, and she was sure her siblings felt the same—even obnoxious little Eb, the most unruly boy in the village. Even though he considered his older sisters no fun to be around, Eb felt that Mother's cooking was well worth coming home from play.

The other girls in the family were Seta and Jil, both younger than Ora. They seemed a bit jealous of the privileges Ora was permitted, while Ora often felt that she should be allowed much more. (It was not that she was selfish by nature, but she had always been told she was special. Somehow she thought that "special" must include something beyond the ordinary things of life that everyone else had. She always felt that there was something missing.) However, her sisters were much too busy with their own lives and friends to give Ora's attitude much thought, except when they wanted something. Then they tried to convince her to use her status to get them whatever favors they could.

All in all, the family was happy. Each person knew his place in the order of things and what was expected of him or her to keep them all fed, clothed and comfortable. As any wattlies do, they would fuss and bicker, but harsh words were soon forgotten; and if the truth were put to the test, they were one another's biggest defenders.

Father and Mother loved their children dearly and taught them well the lessons that would carry them through life: hard work, time for pleasure, and dedication to helping others.

Most people would have been satisfied with such a life. Yet for Ora there was that missing piece. She often thought that if she could just put a name to it, she could at least start moving toward filling the void she felt. She longed to know what the world was like; if people in other places looked and acted the same as the villagers of Dynora did; if weeonums everywhere felt as she did, caught somewhere between wattlie and eldra.

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The girl felt no small amount of guilt because she was not truly happy, and yet the fact remained. She felt there must be more for her somewhere. What it was and where it was she did not know. The passion had been born in her bosom seemingly of itself, without input or information from anyone else. It gained root in her soul and grew inside her each day, until she could no more deny its insistence. She had to give it voice, to give it thought, and yet she knew not how. Thus came the day that she had found herself on the steps of Alya's cottage.

Alya was by now a very old woman. Everyone loved her, of course; she had much influence on the lives of everyone in Dynora. She had taught them to love and support one another through any variable of life. The bent, grey woman, whose long hair was twisted into a bun at the nape of her neck, exuded a reverence for all beings. She treated everyone equally with love and respect.

Many times she had told the young ones about the days of the plague, which had ravaged the town and taken all the eldras. The children knew it was not just a fable. They knew of the village records that showed the many who had died, all in the same year. Whether it was at the village festival or in Grandma Alya's cottage—focused on Alya's clear green eyes—they always sat with rapt attention, hearing the stories of their own beginnings.

Alya, then, was the person to whom Ora turned for advice in her plight. Ora had loved Alya from childhood and trusted her, knowing that her wisdom was great and that she could be trusted to counsel a person for good. So the girl had made her way to Alya's cottage that day.

The cottage had been as always: cleanly swept and neat, but every shelf and cranny was so full of little pieces of Alya's life that it appeared nothing else could be added. Still, when a child crafted some inexplicable something from twigs and the halo grass that grew around the pond, Alya would find a spot in which to enshrine it, to honor that child's giving.



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Ora entered at Alya's bidding and sat on the hearth. She watched while Alya arranged her buxom frame in the room's only chair, smoothing her rough-woven skirt and apron neatly upon her lap. This done, Alya listened intently to the outpourings of the child's heart.

"It is a hunger, Grandma Alya. Like a piece of me is missing, and I cannot rest until it is found. I do not nurture this discontent, I promise you. I know it would be painful for my parents to hear me say these things. But I had to talk to someone. I have to understand what these things are!"

As Ora attempted to explain the tumult of feelings she had been trying to sort out, Alya's countenance changed. Ora felt that the old woman could see beyond her youthful face—beyond the animation in Ora's dark eyes—to the eagerness in her soul. All the while Ora explained herself, she was drawn to notice a light in the matriarch's eyes that she, in her childhood, had never seen before—a glow that bespoke youth and yearning and adventure. The image was so strong that even through her own anguish, Ora could not help but see the transformation.

At last the weonum had poured out the deepest dregs of her searching and pain.

"I know not what to do," Ora sobbed. "I only know I must do something." Then she knelt at Alya's feet and cried for a long time with her head buried in the woman's lap.

Alya stroked the girl's dark, wavy hair, giving her time to release her anguish.

"All is well, child," she said at last. "You are neither wrong nor bad for feeling this way. In fact, I rejoice that you have found the stirring within that I myself once felt."

Ora looked up, incredulous.

"You find that hard to believe, do you?" the old woman smiled. "Ah, yes. I know what you are feeling. I myself passed that portal many years ago, though I was not as young as you are."

"Oh, Grandma Alya! Do you mean it?"

"You are a rare one indeed, Ora, to have become attuned so young."

"Attuned? Attuned to what?"

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"To the Inner Voice that leads. Few are they who hear its call, and fewer still who heed it. For one such as you to hear it so loudly and so well is a grand occurrence."

Ora had felt that her seventeen years were a weight about her neck when she had entered the room. She was neither old enough to be taken seriously by the eldras (though they were only a few years older than she), nor young enough to play with the carefree abandon of the wattlies. The life of a weonum was often a frustrating mix of childlike experience and adult expectation, complicated by the search to find one's place in the community. Even one so favored as Ora had to deal with the struggle of growing up. Now, as Alya expressed marvel at her youthful receptivity to the Inner Voice, Ora for the first time in a long time felt pride in her age.

"What is it calling to me?" Ora wanted to know. "How do I answer its call?"

"Your answers lie within the forest," Alya said. "Those who seek to know must enter therein."

Ora felt terror ripple across her scalp and down her back. At last she responded in a hoarse whisper, "The forest! Grandma Alya, you have always told us that the forest is a dangerous and evil place!"

"And so it is for wattlies, who enter it in innocence. Indeed, it is even dangerous for those who are aware of its secrets. And yet, if you would find peace, you must search out your answers in the forest."

Ora could not find words to respond. Entering the forest had never had place in her thoughts as she had striven to quench this emptiness. The forest: full of wild beasts and eerie sounds. The place so dark one could not see three steps beyond the first trees. The wattlies had made up many frightening stories about what laid beyond its borders. Ora remembered clearly the nightmares those stories had spawned.

After a few minutes, Alya tipped Ora's chin up toward her own face. "The next dilemma, my dear," she said, "is...how badly do you want to know?"

Ora bowed her head and was silent for a long time. She sat staring at the floor, contemplating what dangers could lie ahead if she were to

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pursue this...whatever it was. Finally, she straightened her shoulders and sat tall. She looked directly into Alya's eyes.

"I cannot imagine a life without knowing. Now that the questions exist within me, I must find the truth at risk of all else."

Alya cupped the girl's face in her lined and withered hands. "You are truly chosen, child. May all blessings be upon you."

That evening, Alya sat with Ora as she explained her feelings to her family.

"We have known you were restless, Ora," her father said, "as all youth are; but to learn you are drawn by the Inner Voice.... I can scarcely believe it. You are just a weeonum!"

"It is truly a blessing," Alya pronounced. "Ora honors us all."

Ora noticed tears in her mother's eyes.

"Please do not cry, Mother. I do not mean to hurt you!"

"The only sadness in my tears," her mother managed, "is in knowing that you must leave us to search out your destiny."

"Not forever, Mother!" Ora replied. "I will return!"

"She will be back," Eb chimed in.

Tre took a deep breath. "Time will tell," she said. "But please know, child, that I am humbled to be the mother of one so favored."

"Oh, Ora!" Seta and Jil sobbed, and embraced their sister, as if for the last time.

A stillness ensued, as each person was surrounded by the silence of his thoughts.

"However," Tre said, "the danger of the forest..."

"I want to teach her in my home," Alya said. "To prepare her for what lies ahead. I will not send one of mine away unprepared."

Li and Tre nodded and held each other's hands, their concern clearly showing.

Alya went on, "Send her each day when her work is done to study with me."

"Our trust is in you, Alya," Father said.

"You will come, child?"

"Of course, Grandma Alya. I will come."

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"It will take time."

"I will not tire."

For weeks thereafter Ora rushed through her household chores with a speed her family could scarcely believe, and hurried to Alya's cottage for daily instruction. The textbooks were Alya's own volumes of notes—things she had written as she journeyed through the forest on her own quest. Maps of pathways, animal dens, glades and rivers leapt upon each other, rolling like playful cubs through the recesses of Ora's mind. Alya's impressions and experiences pieced them together into usable information, to be seriously studied and surely learned.

Yet Alya repeatedly explained to the girl that this was just the basic part of her learning—an example to be followed. Ora was to use Alya's journals to understand the information that was in them, but more to learn for herself how to journal her own experiences. The student practiced every day, writing her thoughts and feelings so that when she entered the forest, she would know how to make solid notes about the things she encountered, how they were different from what Alya had seen, and how they affected her.

Months passed. Ora spent her eighteenth birthday memorizing drawings and descriptions, wondering all the while how these seemingly perfect references could possibly have seen any change. She placed herself in the forest and walked through this glade and down that path time and again, trying to see it as Alya had seen it. She wondered how much the passage of time would have altered things, and tried to imagine what might greet her now. Ora was constantly amazed, not only at the wealth of information Alya had recorded, but at her own jumble of fear and excitement.

At last, Alya closed the final worn and yellowed notebook.

"There is no more," she stated simply.

"Test me again, Grandma Alya," Ora begged.

Alya did not look up as she bound the old, broken volumes with a cord. "It would serve no purpose, child. What is engraved upon your

mind is there. Unless it is deep within your heart, it is not with you. These will aid you no more. The only way to learn more of these things is by experience."

"Am I not to have your records with me, then?"

"No, my child. The forest will be much changed, as I have told you. It is different for each who passes through."

"Then what...?"

"No," Alya continued, "these things are for your comfort that you may feel you have some sense of things around you. They will also help you note the differences you see. Can you not understand? You cannot walk by maps and charts on this journey. This is not simply a trek through unknown land. You must go deeper into yourself than this."

Ora was still trying to form her next question when Alya raised her hand into the air.

"There is something far greater that you must study now." The matriarch stood and walked slowly across the room. "You will not go alone. You shall have two companions."

Alya went to a heavy chest near the dining table. As long as she could remember, Ora had marveled at its intricate carvings. Animals known and unknown played, fought, and rested in scenes around the entire box and its lid. The tapestry of pictures was woven together with vines and flowers, trees and rivers. Alya had never answered questions about the chest, except to say it was exceptional. To Ora's knowledge, no one had ever seen her open it.

Ora's heart pounded as she watched Alya slowly, reverently, raise the lid. She could never have imagined what would be brought forth. Her eyes opened wide as she saw Alya lift out what appeared to be a book. The covers were of heavy leather, tooled as beautifully as (and with images similar to those on) the box which had housed it. The volume was slightly more than the thickness of Alya's hands as she held them flat against its sides.

"Oh! Grandma!" she sighed. That was all that would come.

Alya spoke ceremoniously. "This...is Tacria."

"Tacria?" Ora repeated, sensing the reverence that was expected, as she rose to look at it more closely. "But what is it?"

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"Tacia is the sacred record. No one has ever seen it, except those who are called by the Inner Voice. My records will help you find your way in the forest. Tacia is the key to finding the object of your quest."

"Then I should study it next," the girl concluded, and reached for the volume.

"Yes, my child, but not here. The lessons of Tacia can only be learned in the doing. Tacia will go with you. You will study it as part of your quest."

Ora's jaw dropped in amazement. "You are entrusting me with the sacred record? But I cannot! What if something should happen to it?"

"Trust, Ora. Trust in yourself."

Ora searched Alya's face, then lowered her own as if in shame. "I do not know if I can do that."

The Learned One fixed her gaze on the girl. The intensity of her own emotion drew attention from her student that could not be torn away. She spoke purposefully.

"What brought you here, child?"

Ora furrowed her brow. "I do not understand."

"What brought you to my door, to these months of study? What force compels you on, to this dangerous journey?"

Still magnetized by Alya's stare, Ora's mind raced over everything that had happened in the weeks before, searching for the answer that must lie within her, but which eluded her tongue. She thought of her years of anguished longing. All the work and study of the past months rushed past her mind's eye. Her family's astonishment at her calling, her feelings.... At once Ora knew the answer. A wave of calm washed over her.

"The Inner Voice brought me here," she replied. "The Inner Voice that leads."

"And that is your other companion. Lead it will, if you listen and follow. Your success from here forward depends upon your heeding the Inner Voice above all else. Above reason, above logic, above fear, above yourself. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

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"The Inner Voice will speak peace to your mind. Then you may trust: in the Inner Voice, and in yourself. I give you Tacria because I trust."

"But how do I know when I am hearing the Inner Voice?"

"Ah!" and there was that light of youth and adventure in the old woman's eyes. "This is the most important lesson of all!" She came close, almost nose to nose with Ora. "The sound of the Inner Voice is usually no sound at all."

The girl was perplexed. "But how can I hear a silent voice?"

"There will be times when the Voice will come to your ears," she explained, "but as I said, more often, it speaks to your mind, and to your heart."

"And how do I hear it in my mind and heart, where I have no ears?"

"Close your eyes," Alya said, and did so herself, at the same time extending her arms downward, at a slight angle from her body, her palms facing forward.

Ora mimicked her stance, sensing that this was vastly important.

"Now hear yourself breathe. Concentrate on the rhythms of your own body. Feel the blood pulse through your temples, through your neck, through your chest, into your arms. Do you feel it, child?"

Ora did not answer. The sensation of this new exercise completely enfolded her. While she did listen carefully to Alya's instructions, she had no wish to disturb the glorious peace that now washed over her.

"That warmth, that peace you feel is the Inner Voice. It is a sure and comforting companion. This is the Stance of Enlightenment." Ora nodded, and she could somehow sense that Alya knew she had responded. "Now, think about when you might leave on your quest. Remain peaceful, and let the influence of the Inner Voice guide your thoughts."

Ora did as she was told, letting possibilities pass through her mind. One season, or even a year? At least that long to practice and memorize. No? One month? Ten days?

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Suddenly the answer came, only not the answer Ora had expected. She opened her eyes with a start. Alya obviously sensed it, and opened her eyes, too.

"When do you go, Ora?"

The girl's heart raced. She could not answer.

Alya's voice was calm. "Trust the peace of the Inner Voice, child. Close your eyes and hear."

Ora repeated the posture and technique as before.

Again her answer came; but this time she was prepared and accepted it. Warmth washed over her body. She felt light, happy, and calm. She breathed deeply and evenly, letting her entire body feel the tingling that seemed almost to lift her from the ground.

Again Alya asked, "When do you go, Ora?"

With firm resolve, Ora answered, "I go at first light."

So it was that Ora had come to stand at the gaping mouth of the forest. The excitement, the honor, the terror of recent months circled through her mind in one continuous loop, her passion to know beckoning to her from the darkness of the path; her respect for the dangers of the forest holding her feet fast.

She was alone. On Alya's advice, she had said her farewells at home. In truth, no one else dared to come even as close to the forest path as she had already ventured. She patted the pack on her back in several places, as if some of her provisions might somehow have escaped. All was right.

At last she spoke, with no other purpose than to convince herself. "I will know the truth, at any cost. Above reason, above logic, above fear, above myself." With that she stepped into the darkness.





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