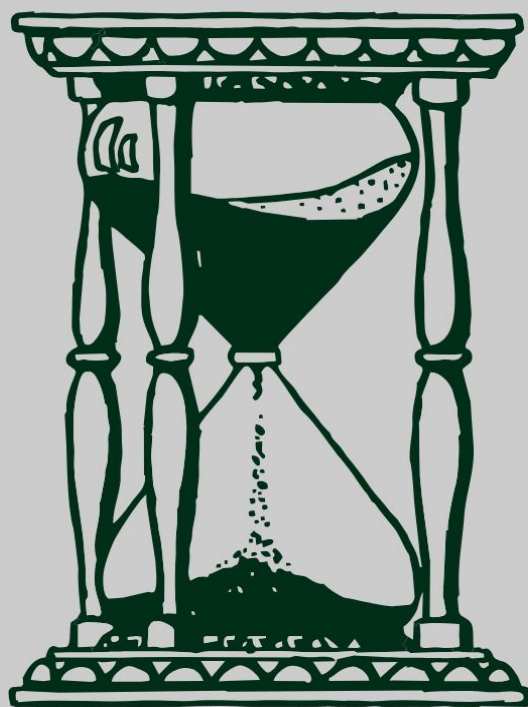




WORLDMENDER



ROBYNNE SAGE



Worldmender

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DEDICATION

To those who believed I could.

To those who did not.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thanks to my good friends S., L., and K. Without you, this book wouldn't be where it is now – in the hands of a reader.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE,
in case you're feeling extra frisky (but it's also alright
not to follow it, I'm not the pronunciation police):

<u>Spelling</u>	<u>IPA</u>	<u>Simplified</u>
Acura	akjʊɹə	AH-cure-ah
Amalia	ɑmɑːliɑ	a-MA-lya
Amavi	amavɪ	AH-mah-vi
Bentri	bentʁi	ben-TREE
Elvira	ɛlvɪɹɑ	el-VIR-ah
Fyara	fjɑɹɑ	FYA-rah
Hatxal	hætʃɑl	HAT-khal
Helmar	hɛlmə	HEL-mar
Lai	l'aɪ	LIE
Mi'e	mi'eɪ	ME-eh
Niralim	nɪɹɑlɪm	NEAR-ah-lim
Saarfel	s'ɑːfɛl	SAAR-fell
Syldir	sɪldɪə	sil-DEAR
Tauva	tɔːvɑ	TOH-vah
Thunric	θ'ʌnɹɪk	THUN-rick
Verd	vɜːd	VORD
Vilken	vɪlken	VIL-ken
Vran	vɹæn	VRAN

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*During the last few months of 1705,
the year of Meara in the first Postumbral Cycle,
the world of Niralim stood
at the brink of annihilation.*

Almost nobody noticed.

Prologue

An ancient forest lay naked on the hillside, as cold and bleak as the autumn sky aloft. No roads led through these woods; moss and brown leaves blanketed the ground, hiding stones and gnarled roots. Grass was scarce and where it managed to take hold, it had now withered with the nearing of winter.

The tree branches, like contorted arms and clawed hands, were reaching towards the full moon in a fruitless attempt to snatch it from above, wanting to smother its pale glow. The forest lay silent, nary a mouse moved.

A breeze picked up, then grew in intensity, swaying those twisted limbs – and with it, the sounds of pursuit came from afar.

A man in plain clothes reached the first trees. He was short of breath. His right sleeve was flapping in the wind, empty; his left arm was guarding his stomach, hand clutched at his side, stained with red. With eyes unfocused and legs unsteady, he threw himself into the underbrush.

The hounds hard on his heels halted at the edge of the wood, growling and barking. None dared to step past the threshold.

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There was no path to guide him. Without regard for obstacles or his own body's limit, he pushed forward, sifting sharp gasps for air through his bared teeth.

He lost his footing on the steep slope, and tumbled forward into the darkness below. He grunted as he hit a tree with his shoulder, but despite his pain, he scrambled to gather his bearings. As soon as he stood upright, a venom-filled order to the dogs came from the edge of the forest to chase him down. The pursuers were persistent, and he could not get far from them fast enough to save his skin.

Still, he kept on running. Thorns clawed at his clothes, and soon, he was tattered – but he went on, into the deep shadows cast by the moon, not looking back. He came across an animal trackway and turned to follow it, grabbing onto the moss-covered tree trunks as he teetered forth.

Behind, he heard voices, as his pursuers reached their dogs and urged them to find him. He turned to glance the way he came and whimpered as the flames of their torches flickered in and out of sight. The snarling came closer again.

His foot slipped on the muddy trail and he al-

most lost balance again.

Gritting his teeth, he turned to head downhill towards the heart of the forest.

It was no use; though the dogs were nervous in the shade of the trees, they still followed the orders they received, and they were closing in.

He stumbled onto a small clearing and buried his knees into the green softness below, letting go of his side. His clothes were soaked; through the slit in his vest, his life was slipping away, one scarlet droplet after another.

His vision swayed and he leaned forward, bleary-eyed. As he raised his bloodied hand to his face, trying to focus at it, all the noise faded into nothing, overpowered and drowned out by the pounding in his ears.

A cold sensation from below tore him from his stupor.

He looked down and inhaled sharply.

A layer of thick white vapour began to rise from the moss around him. He scrambled to get away, but the fog swiftly poured over him, through the clearing and under the trees.

“Wait!” he heard someone cry out.

His pursuers stood frozen for a few heartbeats as a cloud grew from the clearing, its shape revealed by moonlight. White tendrils slithered towards them across the forest floor.

“Run!” their leader screamed, but his men were already fleeing. Some dropped their torches in panic, and in haste they clambered back uphill, man and dog alike. The underbrush hindered their ascent with malice, wanting them to get caught in the horror rising from below. Where the cloud reached the dropped torches, it sizzled but doused them within moments, and continued up, turning the hunters into the hunted.

The man in the clearing attempted to stand up but failed; the sea of whiteness robbed him of sight, and the air, thick with vapour, was suffocating. He gasped for breath like a drowning cast-away but his vision began to turn dark, darker than the surrounding woods, and he felt his body leaning backwards with the certainty and weight of a falling tree.

The forest fell silent. His pursuers and their dogs vanished somewhere out of his weakening earshot, and he closed his eyes as he landed into

the mossy pillows below. It was a miserable life, one he did not want to have led – yet for it to end like this, he was filled with regret.

A pair of hands grabbed him and yanked him upright. His eyes snapped open, the sharp pain in his gut returning in that moment, and he blinked into the dark.

The fog rested in a thick layer on the forest floor; a figure in a silvery hooded cloak was kneeling in front of him, clutching his shoulders.

He hung his head and looked down; the hands holding him were ashen. No living Human hand was this gaunt, or this bright. The creature's skin was aglow with Théra's light, more so than their silver robe, more so than snow on a full moon night.

His dry lips parted and he attempted to speak but found no strength to. It was too late for him now; he'd lost too much blood.

Something cold covered his mouth, locking his head in place. "Fret not," a voice like the echo at the bottom of a tomb whispered, "this should take but a moment. You'll be well in no time. Allow me to repair this broken body of yours."

The creature procured a dark oblong item,

crushing it in their hand. A silvery liquid seeped between their fingers as they brought it to his lips and forced them open. A bitter, corrosive taste spread across his tongue like poison.

The pain he'd almost managed to block out increased tenfold.

Hundredfold.

He let out a helpless cry, muffled by a relentless set of fingers, as the agony devoured all of his senses and sent him past the threshold of oblivion.