

Book 1 of The Centre Vale Trilogy

*The Heart
of Tarkon*



S.C. Meakin

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by

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Chapter 1 : An Awakening

Emerging from the depths of Space, the Great Maker kept searching for a World devoid of life. A Planetary Being of immense size and power, the Maker is a creator of life, and its Keeper. Directing forces of the one Universal Spirit, its plans are far beyond mortal understanding. Initiating life on countless Worlds, but the next one was to be the most testing of all.

The red desolate Planet rotates dimly before it. Forging Mind with Matter, the Maker fires a white beam of power at the dusty surface. Another follows as rocks turn to lava, sending aftershocks rippling across the barren terrain. Five strikes of dynamic energy inflame the once deserted World.

Surrounding the glowing Sphere, the Great Maker embodies the hot fiery Planet within itself. Sowing the seeds of life, its Soul... infuses.

Snapping awake, daring to believe his call had finally been answered, Brandor leapt out of bed, images from the compelling dream still clear. Picturing the point of white light hovering before a throne, it was just what he had been hoping for. Lighting a lamp before scurrying over to his clothes, the same words kept repeating to ensure he did not forget. Estimating it to be a short-turn before sunrise, it did not matter, such was his delight that things could at last start moving.

Waiting many seasons for a sign from the *Sacred* - those *Greater Lives* that govern this World, he had started to wonder if anyone was listening. As a Dai-laman, he along with the remaining members of the Hisian-set had detected terrible corruptions in the *ethers* over recent seasons. One of numerous natural forces underpinning life here in The Freelands, grim manipulations by their ancient adversary now warranted action. Travelling extensively to muster a defence this past season, but not everyone had been persuaded. At least this new directive would enable him to try again.

Adjusting loose attire for comfort before pulling on his speckled light-grey overcoat, he made for the door and down the arcing stairs. Packing a few essentials for his long trip, he started to hum before muttering those essential words.

“A Point of Light... in the heart of a High-house Heir.”

As simple as that, all he had to do now was find the right one. The nearest High-house was Manson, but its Heir was far from worthy of such an honoured blessing. Deciding the most likely place was the House of Rovot, its eldest son Hasdam a shining example of how to live, if anyone deserved the attentions of the *Sacred* it was him.

Not bothering to leave a message for his colleagues, knowing they would not shift from their own work anyway, such unsupportive attitudes no longer bothered him. Viewing such an escapade as a waste of time, time that could be spent finding an answer to dispel the coming *shadow*, he sighed when climbing up onto Tunder, his sturdy two-legged Kyboe.

On his own again, when the tall doors of the Sleep opened, the old man sped out into the crisp red dawn. Riding hard between wild-bush and tree, he had not felt this hopeful for a long time.

Tossing and turning from another unsettled sleep, the dream mocked briefly before drifting away with its unnerving story. A repeat performance of the past three nights, they were now taking their toll on Hanor. One image in particular lingered like an ache. A field soaked in blood, but its meaning was lost within the obscure details. Dismissing it as an over-productive imagination, he had little choice if he intended to get back to sleep. Curling into a ball under the covers, he tried shutting out the light filtering through the wooden shutters.

“Hanor...! Are you up yet?” a sudden voice yelled from outside. Bane, his ever-present curly-haired friend had promised to call if the weather was good. ‘*Not now*’ Hanor thought, snuggling deeper into the warmth. “The girls are going to the lake,” Bane yelled, unsurprised that Hanor was yet to appear at his window. The early morning sun was already radiating its mid-morning glory. “Hanor...!” Bane snapped again, irrelevant that his friend was the son of a High-man. Frustrated as usual by Hanor’s lack of enthusiasm before half-turn of the day, it went against everything he believed in. Blessed with bags of zeal himself, his friend was going to miss out if he did not move.

“What is the matter with you?” Hanor called down, yawning. Clambering around, he searched for his elusive clothing discarded randomly the previous evening. “What am I doing up at such a ridiculous short-turn of the day,” he grumbled, putting on a dappled rustic top along with a neat pair of grey shorts. “Do not want to look too refined,” he mused, the prospect of seeing Lara, the girl from the Cropping Village of Sorle, instilling a sense of purpose.

His Father, High-man and ruler of Manson was tolerant of his pastimes, albeit only just. Obeying his Mother’s wishes, ensuring leniency by mixing well with the people of Manson and the surrounding areas, he knew his Father feared one day he might run off with a young maiden unsuitable for the House of Manson. Not that the idea was a bad one. After all, there were only three that had caught his eye since the last double moon. Wetting down his silky black hair, with a quick gurgle and rinse of mint-salt to guarantee the freshest of smiles, his lifelong friend barked again from below.

“Are you coming or not?”
“Yes... yes,” replied Hanor, pulling back the shutters.

Fully awake, the painful part now over, he climbed up onto the window ledge. Peering down between two small supporting pillars of stone at his disapproving friend, the teasing grin was rejected. Reaching round to seize the vine clawing its way up from the ground, he skittered down regular footholds and cracks. ‘*Like walking down stairs,*’ he thought, leaping the final part. Turning, his friend looked none too pleased.

“I will not bother in future,” Bane scorned.

Together they ran towards the main gates, a sharp retort behind fuelling their vigour for another turn of the day by the lake.

Hanor’s maid Glenda stood watching the two boys leave. Disappearing through the main gates and out into the city, she knew they would be laughing, finding it hysterical to disregard her. “No discipline in those boys,” she muttered, shaking her head. A future Ruler of Manson with no respect! With a huff, she returned to the kitchens, his room would be a mess too.

Passing the recently built training camp where men were being trained as fighters, ignoring such developments, the two young lads ran on, abandonment experienced only by the very young. Sweeping by homes, alehouses and the market place before reaching the outer wall of the city, guards now patrolled here too. Displaying a new sense of purpose, something was in the making but Hanor and Bane did not care. Knowing the guards at the outer gate, they passed unhindered. Turning left and heading straight for the lake, Nole, Hanor's younger brother was already there.

Following the worn track through the scrub, trees drooped low, an abundance of wildlife bustling around them. Uninterested, Hanor and Bane were too focused on their own appetites for fun to notice. Laughing and joking, pushing and shoving, each jostled for the upper hand. Undisciplined rivalry regularly filled each turn of the day with whatever challenges sprung to mind. Bursting through the undergrowth with a loud yelp, Freemans Lake stretched to the horizon.

"Nole!" Bane shouted, stripping off his top whilst running. Waving to the young man swimming further out, bold and determined, he leapt into the chilly waters.

Hanor, somewhat more reserved, searched around for any sign of the ladies. Modest, undressing before joining his playmates, the joyful banter was soon in full swing. Splashing and dunking without a care to the world, it was what they were good at.

Four girls soon arrived, idly talking about everything and everyone. Sitting on carefully arranged blankets, the boys continued frolicking in the water. Lapping up the sunshine, the warm season was well under way.

Three young men, all on the verge of adulthood, joined the girls. Sprinkling them, the invitation to swim in the lake was declined by the more mature members of the group.

"Stop it," said a stern Vivace, wiping her arms, annoyed. Enduring many turns of the seasons with these rascals, nothing was new to the girl from Manson.

"There is no life in you," Nole said, slumping in beside her. "You take life too seriously."

"A lady does not play childish games," she retorted, the other girls giggling.

"Too old for your shoes," Bane cut in, lounging across in front.

"And too young for yours!"

"A stab to my heart," Bane laughed, punching his chest with his fist.

"How... are you?" Hanor asked Lara to one side, ignoring his friend and brother. From the Cropping Village of Sorle, timid unlike her friends, he liked her a great deal.

Shy, she giggled with her friend.

"She cannot stop talking about you," said Morie, her close friend also from the Cropping Village.

Alluring when compared to the fast track girls Vivace and Sulie, who were both from Manson, Lara's dark, silky countenance with long flowing ebony hair was a rare picture for any roving young male. Hanor sometimes struggled to make interesting conversation, but a bond between them was a real possibility.

"Hanor has been a little dizzy lately as well," Bane teased. "Be careful of his father though..., I think he might be someone important at Manson."

All four girls knew exactly who Hanor's father was. Shooting his friend a disapproving glare, it was a tender subject. The eldest of two sons, his younger brother

Nole here was given a wider leash to come and go as he pleased, and being reminded of his own inheritance only fuelled frustrations at the supposed honour of his position. The point was enough to stall and embarrass Hanor.

Morning circled towards the after-turns, everyone devouring the picnic brought by the girls. Some fell asleep, whilst others just basked in the sunshine. Returning for a swim periodically to cool down, the scene was set for another trouble-free day.

Feeling a need to stretch his legs, Hanor hesitated, tempted to ask Lara to join him. Eyes closed, she did look wonderful. Was she really interested in him? Shackled by his parents, he doubted it.

Sighing, he put on his top and left the group. Ambling into the woods nearby, he enjoyed his own company when emotionally challenged. Frustrated, throwing a few sticks into the brush, desires for something more purposeful accompanied every step. Larking around had its moments, but boredom was looming, prompting him for something new. The fact he was Heir to The High-house of Manson was not the type of excitement he wanted either. Too suffocating, the idea of entertaining dignitaries from other parts of The Freelands was dire. Nevertheless, that was his destiny, certain it was the root behind much of his dissatisfaction of late. The nightmares he supposed were reflections of that. Sighing at the sense of lack, feelings of emptiness felt strong today.

Hoots and tweets bounced around him in a cryptic chorus, blending with the quiet rustling of trees. Hanor continued idling along, irritable. Gombols and Rassers scurried away from his intrusion, wide inquisitive eyes staring back from under a bush. Staying for as long as they dared before darting off, envy surged through him.

Freedom! The word aggravated him. "Are not these creatures more free than I?" he groaned aloud. Trees were good listeners when episodes of self-pity reared up. Throwing another stick into the scrub ahead, "It is not fair," he added, as if his liberties were at stake. Panged by an underlying jealousy for his brother and Bane, coming and going as they pleased, there were few expectations heaped on *their* shoulders. Being the firstborn was a burden he did not wish to have. His mother had permitted him and Nole to rove freely for this long, but now his father would soon demand obedience he was quite certain. Longing for a more traditional way of life, he adored his parents, but being strangled by his inheritance was too much.

Meandering moodily, the trees and brush parted. Climbing up onto a small hillock, the sight rewarded him with a splendid view across the lake. Able to hear the rest of them further along the shore, Bane was as loud as ever. Always dreaming or acting out some wild adventure, his best friend was forever active, and would jump at the chance to govern. Waving a hand here or beckoning there, he could envision order crumbling within a short time of him gaining that role. Yes, his friend would enjoy a life in power, having a drive he clearly lacked.

Picking up a stone, he cast it into the deep waters, trying to send his frustrations with it. Adding three more, he tossed one in the air. "I did not ask for this," he grumped. "Ask for what?"

Heart stopping at the unexpected voice invading his mood, the words came from behind. Spinning a little too quick, Hanor slipped and fell backwards, tumbling, finishing in a small heap at the base of the mound.

"Careful now," the voice said, amused.

Frantic, searching above and around the small cove in the trees, no one was there, Hanor's view restricted from the foot of the mound. Anxious, he started climbing. Startled when a faintly familiar face emerged over the rise, gulping, the young Heir wondered what the old man wanted.

Sitting resting against a tree, the sizeable fellow waited, a wry smile proving he had enjoyed the spectacle. Raising an eyebrow, "Are we happy now?" the man toyed. Exuding a confident but patient charm, he seemed in no hurry to move.

Rubbing himself down, Hanor had been so entrenched in his own ponderings that he had not seen or heard this newcomer arrive. Recognising the watchful figure from somewhere, but he was unable to place him. "You should not creep up on people like that," he braved, confident there was nothing to be wary of.

"I am not one to creep," he replied, surprised by the notion.

Short, pale wispy hair with streaks of thick silver made it difficult to guess the man's age. Weathered, etched wrinkles spanning from timeless eyes added to the problem. Mature, yet young at heart, the gleam in his gaze showed kindness, but Hanor still could not place him. "What do you want?"

"What... do I want?" the man looked hurt as if made unwelcome by a friend. "Do you not recognise me?"

Staying his ground, Hanor did not wish to offend, thoughts racing. Where had he seen him? Climbing the final part of the mound, buying some time, but nothing came. Shrugging, "I think I know you but... I am sorry."

Surprised by the admission, a tight smile spread across the man's lips. "That is fine," he said, rising as if unfazed by it.

Strong legs veiled beneath a light dusty grey ankle length over-gown suggested hidden strengths to the observant lad. The free-flowing garb, worn by people accustomed to working in hot conditions, concealed any other clues to his stature.

"I am not used to being forgotten or misplaced," the man added, breaking into a chuckle. "Not that I try to make a grand entrance wherever I go. I enjoy being humbled now and again, no harm done." The reassuring smile widened, he definitely meant it.

Hanor remained stone-faced, waiting to see what this was all about. Looking down from his vantage point, the curious figure was tall, an air of power underpinning his manner. '*Not one to take lightly,*' he thought, scrutinising him.

"My name is Brandor," the fellow decreed as though it should have some bearing on the situation. "And I... remember you very well."

Piercing but friendly hazel eyes pinned Hanor in a grip. Suspecting he was not here by chance, the name did not hit a note either. Deciding the man knew him from when he was young, the last thing he wanted was to hear stories about what he used to get up to as a minor.

Brandor started laughing, evolving into a hearty roar.

Contagious as laughter usually is, Hanor struggled to see the humour. "Why are you laughing?"

The misplaced laughter subsided, Hanor sensing the circumstances change.

"Hmm...!" contemplating which way to go, Brandor ran a hand through his thin short hair again, seeking inspiration. Making up his mind, "Sit...!"

"Pardon?"

“Sit down.”

The command was uncompromising. With no explanation given, Hanor felt strangely compelled to obey this mysterious man. Unused to orders, moving to sit on top of the mound, the ground was still soft and spongy after yester-turn’s rain.

“Close your eyes.”

Again it was an order. Respect lacking, especially to the son of a High-man, but there was no resistance.

“Good,” Brandor commended, kneeling behind him.

Catching his breath, Hanor had no idea what he was about to do, the scent of old books soon filling the air. Ancient beyond time, the Heir of Manson waited, apprehensive, disbelieving how quickly this was happening. Starting when a large hand rested on his head, cold, clasping fingers spanned his entire head like a cook testing the ripeness of a large fruit. Feeling numb and unable to move, what was he doing? Daring to look out across Freemans Lake, a quick retort from the newcomer forced them closed again. Sounds of the forest increased, his vulnerability trying to anchor itself on solid ground.

Long moments passed, but then the hand blanketing his head began to get hot. Like a stove warming to the fire, his head too increased in activity. Tempted to pull away, certain he was being tampered with, his body however would not respond to such weaknesses.

Before fears got the better of him, the heat in his head began easing. About to ask a flurry of questions, he stopped, a change in his heart stalling him. Unsure what it was, the sensation felt strange but not alarming. Placing a hand on his chest, he had never felt anything like it. Familiar rhythmic beats altered, pulsing smoothly as if witnessing the quietening of a storm. For this to be happening inside him was astonishing.

Absorbed by the occurrence, he did not register the hand leave his head. Subtle, the sensations were peaceful and absorbing, flushing away any doubts about the future or hang-ups from the past. Nothing seemed to really matter, as if the commotions of life were really part of some great game. Permitting the sensations to flow, he was convinced it had an agenda of its own. Every breath was consumed by the phenomena, not wanting it to end.

Unsure how long he sat there, only when a worried looking Nole appeared did Hanor realise he was still a part of this world. Unwilling to speak for a time, searching for the old man, but he had gone.

“I have been calling you for ages,” Nole said, cross at being ignored. “Why did you not answer?” When no reply came, he tried again. “Hanor! What are you doing sitting there?”

The trees seemed to lean closer, stretching their branches towards Hanor like hungry shadows seeking the light. A strange sense of union kept vibrating through him, the altered state of awareness permeating every part of his conscious mind. Unable to think rationally, he was in no rush to. Strong impressions that life was all interconnected moved him. Tempted to brush his brother aside so as not to disturb the experience, but the atmosphere started changing, normality returning. Subtle stirrings in his heart also eased but not completely. Tender feelings of peace still vibrated when peering around at

the trees and plants. Inhaling the freshness, finally focusing on his concerned brother, a glazed look could not hide his wonder.

Attempting to stand, but Hanor stopped, amazed that the soothing sensations in his chest were real. Like a lake without a ripple, a serene calm enfolded him. What was going on? The first real solid question he could make, but there was no answer. Holding his arm aloft, Nole's firm grip pulled him up.

"Are you all right?" Nole asked, disliking this.

"Er..., yes..., I... think so," he said, steadying himself. Still unable to comprehend any of it, Hanor searched again for Brandor who had disappeared.

"Are you not well?"

"I am... not quite sure," he said, blank eyes giving nothing away. "Where is...?"

"What are you looking for?" Nole probed, scanning the vicinity.

Shaking his head to dispel the problem, Hanor felt dazed.

"Do you feel ... sick?"

"Not... really," Hanor admitted, uncertain how he felt.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I am not sure... how I would begin."

"Come on," Nole said, reaching under his arm to reinforce his hold. "Let us find the others, you need to lie down. Perhaps you are coming down with something."

Hanor did not respond, too overawed by the whole event.

By the time they reached the rest of the group, Hanor was more himself. Revitalized after coming to terms with the encounter, he felt uplifted, the whole scenario strange. Brandor had vanished, saying nothing about what he had done. Presuming the old fellow had triggered the effect, intrigue roused Hanor. Subtle pulses were still there in his heart as a persuasive reminder, now awakened to something entirely new.

Firing questions at him, genuine concerns for his welfare from the others were touching, but a deep-seated feeling warned him to remain cautious. Deducing they were not yet ready for such information, questions of his own surfaced. Feeling intimate, yet sensing it was all part of something so much bigger than any of them, fending off his friends with mild possibilities, in truth, he did not really know what had happened.

Nole sat to one side, keeping his thoughts to himself. Disquieted, he had never seen his brother in that state before. As if intoxicated, Hanor's glazed expression was far from normal. Accepting his brother was hesitant as if avoiding the details, it would not do to press him here, deciding to tackle the issue later when they were on their own.

Laughing and joking when entering the main gates of Manson, saying a warm goodbye to Lara, Hanor was rewarded with a kiss on the cheek. Spurring him into a new round of vocals, his mood was high.

"You have come alive," Bane noted, tripping his friend from behind.

"Alive, alive..., yes indeed," Hanor sang jubilantly. "Truly alive."

Nole said nothing.

At the training camp, they stopped. Over a hundred men were standing in file, awaiting instructions in the late after-noon sun. Preparing as if for battle, the setting

fuelled the three boys' imaginations. Unconcerned as to the actual reasons why, they watched for a time before Bane picked up a stick and started sparring with an invisible adversary. Jabbing like a great swordsman, the unnoticed divot in the ground quickly dashed any hopes of achieving mastery this turn of the day.

"You cannot even beat yourself," Hanor laughed, teasing his best friend.

Nole could not help but snigger. Retaining a guarded vigilance on his older brother, who was without doubt not himself, something important had occurred earlier and he needed to find out what.

Lines of rigid-faced individuals stared in their direction. Some were not from Manson, brought in from the surrounding Cropping Villages of Sorle and Missel Hoe. Staring out from beneath hastily made helmets, brushed up and polished to look respectable, most were volunteers. A mixed bunch, many were accustomed to using cropping tools rather than the sword.

A barking order cracked the strained silence, the stout figure of Rainer appearing around the far end of the line. Shouting course words to instil purpose into the unprepared group.

The boys watched, untouched by the blistering whip-like tongue of Manson's second in command. Convinced wars happened in far off places, ignoring the urge to enquire further, the idea of Rainer on their tails was unthinkable.

"Do you want to join us?" Rainer growled, spinning on his heel, pointing at the three of them.

Shocked at the sudden attention, the others who had gathered to watch the spectacle stared at them disdainfully, knowing who they were and what they were like.

"Not us," Bane returned, backing off. "We are not fools."

"Your foolishness is a reflection of your immaturity," Rainer called after them, as they quickly fled up the main causeway.

Thankful that not everyone's attitude was the same, the last thing Rainer needed was for those rogues to plant doubts in these newcomers. Dissatisfied with the Heir of Manson and his brother, and their subsequent lack concerning the coming troubles, he had already said enough to their parents on the issue. As close as he was to Hanor and Nole's Father, Manon's leadership was only questionable when involving those two. An issue that still needed addressing, huffing, he turned back, determined to get this lot trained to a reasonable standard.

Passing through the large kitchens, Glenda sat in a corner reading a book, detached from the bustling cooks running about preparing the evening meal. Absorbed by her moment of escape, the three creeping figures opposite went unnoticed, pinching a pile of biscuits as they left. Pressure was on for the score of chefs and their scullions, guests were visiting from Ebanor of Hitori. All Hitorians on average stood a neck-stretching ten hand-spans tall, with ravenous appetites to match. The kitchens rarely got this busy.

Usually feigning illness or tiredness to escape such events, it was all too refined for Hanor's liking. Collared more often than his brother, his father was determined to enforce an element of respect for those from another land. "To mix with different cultures was good for him," he would say, unconvinced, underlying his own disdain at some of the characters he had to endure through duty. Aware that his father liked nothing better than

to sit on his bedroom balcony with a scented reed-bowl watching the sunset, it was a trait he had been born with too. Reassuring Hanor that his future would not be too grim, all pomp and ceremony, he laughed at the falseness, wanting none of it.

Feeling upbeat, nothing could faze him at this time. Still tingling from the subtle energies in his heart, observances of life seemed to heighten, viewing everything as they should be. He would find it very difficult to step into his father's role if these feelings were to remain.

Entering their Leisure Room, now tidy, the three young men slouched on feathered sofas like Trackers returning from an exhausting hunt. Devouring the biscuits without a care for the hand that made them, life was good.

"What shall we do now?" Bane asked, already dissatisfied at being indoors. Feeling a sudden bout of fatigue, Hanor yawned. "We should relax here."
"No stamina... that is your problem," Bane mocked, putting his feet up.
"Hmm..." Hanor murmured.

Resting his head, he stretched tight muscles in his legs, needing to recover from an excessive turn of leisure. Even though uplifting, the pleasant feelings from earlier had sapped his strength. Rubbing his temples, Hanor still did not know what the man Brandor had actually done. The sense of life was still there, but how could he begin to explain it? Now, with heavy eyelids, the after-effects had arrived. Searching for meanings now seemed futile, the fatigue demanding he recuperate.

"I have a few questions," Nole said, moving to where his older brother lulled. Hanor did not respond.

"What happened today?" Nole pressed, but no reply came. "Hanor...!"

"I do not... know," Hanor groaned, finding it difficult to stay awake.

"You were looking for something shortly after I found you. What was it?" Again his brother was slow to reply.

"Hmm..., yes..., I do not... know," he muttered, not really listening to the question. Flagger, "I think... I need to... sleep."

"You looked bemused," Nole continued. Determined to get a response, he ignored Bane's comments to let him rest. "Hanor...!" he balked, poking him in the side, receiving just a grunt in return.

Watchful, Bane was confused by the questions. Accepting Hanor had been full of himself today, but nothing warranted this reaction. "What is it?"

"I do not know," Nole replied, probing the features of his brother, who was now asleep.

"Something happened to him today."

"What do you mean?"

"When I found him earlier, at first..., he looked right through me as though I was not there. He did come round, but would not explain himself."

"He *has* been unusually high," Bane acknowledged.

"I have been watching him, and something has changed."

"Hmm..., I cannot suggest anything, perhaps we should keep an eye on him."

Sighing, Nole stared down at his slumbering brother. He never liked mysteries.

Chapter 2: Intense Secrets

Pacing the Greeting Room, irritation was getting the better of Brandor. Talking with Manon, Hanor's father a short time ago, just mentioning Hanor's potential had sent the man into a spin. Stumbling over lame excuses as if avoiding a sensitive issue, he had insisted Lizan - his beloved, should be present and left. Undignified, the reaction was quite worrying, leaving Brandor to speculate why.

Peering out of one of numerous slender, arched windows, the door to their private chamber remained closed. Visiting Manson previously to rouse them against the growing evil in the north, viewing the results on his way here, but that issue was now secondary to this new development. Since receiving that insightful dream about a *Point of Light in the heart of a High-House Heir*, he had known instinctively its importance. Ignorance however, had cost him a great deal of time and trouble, and present frustrations were a reflection of that mistake. If he had not left Hanor until last, by-passing Manson in his original search, progress would have already been made.

Calming down, considering what he had experienced with the young man earlier, that was one scenario he had not foreseen. Triggering Hanor's awakening to the dormant powers locked inside him, it was as mystifying as it was exciting. Relieved, his arduous travels at last producing fruit, he still had no idea what it all meant.

Two ornate doors opened, a sombre looking Manon entering followed by a hesitant Lizan. United in both love and war, Brandor knew they were close. Any words exchanged outside were now hidden behind shielded expressions.

Walking to where he waited, Lizan managed a thin smile, agitation flickering across her pretty face like someone anticipating the worst possible news. "How... are you Brandor?" she asked, stopping a few paces short of the old man.

"I am well," he answered, desiring to push aside any formalities. Regal looking, the darkness of her hair enhanced the depth in her eyes.

"I hope Manon has reported about our hard work, assembling a force to combat the evil you spoke of?" she said, glancing at her beloved. Gripping the side of her dappled brown dress, the wide creamy band down the front looked off-colour, reflecting her mood.

Playing along with this delaying tactic, the Dai-laman was after their trust not obedience. What he was about to ask would be difficult for any parent. "I have seen the changes, a credit to you both."

"Thank you."

"But there is still much to do," Manon said, trying to inject an air of confidence into the room. Standing beside Lizan, he held her hand.

"Yes, activities in the Northern Realms are increasing as we speak," Brandor said, deciding they still needed to know what else was happening in The Freelands. "Whatever is being prepared..., we are sure to find out soon."

"Our numbers grow with each turn of the day," Lizan reported, focusing on other issues to avoid the hurt to come.

"They should number a few thousand," Manon added, wiping his brow. Sweeping back silvery black hair, sweat ran down his back, the matt green tunic not helping.

"Would you like to see what we have done?" Lizan posed, indicating the door.

A meek attempt to distract them from the sensitive subject of Hanor, the old man considered the benefits. Would he glean more if the atmosphere were calmer? *Perhaps not* he concluded. "Maybe later," he said, peering across at the patterned trinkets of gold on the sideboard by the jade wall. Tempted to ask for a drink, but when looking back at the two, they stood like doomed animals awaiting slaughter. Determined to protect their son until the end, it was a sorry sight.

"I saw Hanor today," he said, getting to the point. "We talked, he has a good heart."

"Yes... he does," Manon stuttered, the older man's direction not changing.

"A wonderful... loving one," Lizan said.

"There is more to him than you know," Brandor said, surprised when the statement did not perturb them. "There is great potential in him."

"There is potential in all of us," Lizan deflected.

Not wishing to draw this out longer than necessary, the Dai-laman knew they would not let Hanor go easily no matter how tender his reasons. "The potential in Hanor needs to be encouraged, and Manson does not have the right people to stimulate that potential." Crunching, the words stunned both as if finally confronted by the inevitable.

Surprised there was no immediate reply, Brandor continued. "He should be tutored by people who can help draw out those innate powers."

"People like you... you mean?" Manon's tone was defensive.

"That should not surprise you," the Dai-laman replied. "We face a great darkness, and the battle will not be won by weapons alone. People like Hanor are increasingly rare in the latter parts of this Age, so we must seize the opportunity whilst we can."

"What do you intend to do with him?" Manon demanded to know.

"Teach him about the *Mysteries* to begin with, if that is what he wishes."

"What if he does not want to?" Lizan asked, hoping her son might reject the idea.

"We all have the freedom to choose," Brandor returned, startled at the prospect of the boy actually saying no. After what happened earlier, the glazed expression on the boy's face suggested the affect had been profound enough to make a difference. "I will respect his decision."

"But... he is the Heir to the High-house of Manson," Manon said, suspecting it would be a one-way journey for their son. "He has duties and responsibilities."

"There will be no Manson if this evil is not repelled."

"You cannot expect us to let him go when he is needed here?"

"That is a choice for Hanor to make."

"He is too young to make such a decision," Manon said. "I will not let him go."

"He will not stay here if he does not wish to," the man of power boomed, fearing they might resort to extremities. Such an act would be despicable.

"You are not in a position to order us," the High-man fired, surprised to see his beloved High-lady step over to the ornate seating to sit down. Troubled by her lack of passion to keep Hanor, he stalled, questioning why she was staring out the window. Sensing the deep-seated sadness, he felt sickened to see her so distraught. "See...!" he said, turning back towards the older man. "Is this what you want? Can you not see how upset she is?" Feeling her pain as his own, every tear in the past had been shed over their sons, Hanor especially. Her grief he could not endure. "I am tempted to ask you to leave, Brandor."

“I will not leave until I have seen Hanor,” the Dai-laman said, desiring to speak to the boy before nightfall. Leaving him after that awakening earlier so he could digest the life-changing experience, with the after-turns fading, he could not afford to be delayed here. “Your lack of respect is shocking,” Manon shot, his words were blades.

“Manon...!” the plea was barely above a whimper.

“I am not sure if I can forgive you for this,” the High-man continued, too incensed to hear his lady’s call.

“Manon..., it is no good,” Lizan said, a little louder this time.

Turning away from the seething High-man to look at her, Brandor could tell there was a possible light emerging through the turmoil.

“What is it... my love?” Manon asked upon hearing her call, going to her. Bending to one knee, taking hold of her hand, “Why... are you not arguing our case?”

“It is... over.”

“What... do you mean?” Manon asked, touching her cheek tenderly.

Sighing as though the air might help relieve the hurt, a tear streaked down Lizan’s dampened cheek. “It is time... to let him... go,” she stammered, shocked that she could actually say those fateful words.

Convinced earlier that they could send Brandor on his way without Hanor, but the moment she had entered she had felt their defensive strategy crumble beneath his powerful gaze. For so long they had lived a lie and tried acting just like any other family. Denying the intensity of those early turns of the seasons as a mother, her behaviour towards Hanor had bordered on obsession. Nole had been born a full cycle of the seasons later, but the devotion to her firstborn had not been affected by his arrival. Not neglecting Nole, but her heart had remained centred on his older brother all the same. Carrying the guilt for nearly eighteen full seasons, she was tired from the burden and she knew it. A hint of freedom was at last beginning to seep in.

“It was so long ago,” she said, staring at the cold fireplace. “But I remember it so clearly.”

This was more than Brandor expected. To persuade them to let Hanor go was one thing, to discover they had a story of their own saddened him.

“You do not have to do this,” Manon urged, fearing she was about to reveal all.

“I had been so ill,” she continued, bypassing his natural concerns. Wrought by her turmoil, the memories returned as harshly as the day they happened. “For many turns of the day, carrying my little baby had filled me with the utmost dread.” Running her hands around her waist, the clarity of her thoughts echoed across time. “Suffering fevers and fits of delirium, I did not know who or where I was.” Turning, she faced Manon, her pain intense. “Oh my love, how I burned you, for I blamed you did I not?” Tears streamed from her sorry eyes.

“It is over now,” Manon said, sorrow rising. “That was a long time ago.”

“No my love,” she rejected. “For all of these seasons, the tears I have shed in the silence of night at what I put you through.” Manon started protesting but a caring finger to his lips stopped him. “We knew Hanor was different, but like fools, we tried to hide it. How many times have my tears flowed and stopped you from raising him honourably? Refusing to let both our boys grow up, many times I have humiliated you in front of

others just because I was feeble. Shrinking away from your duties as a father and ruler for my sake, I have failed them both.” Her tears increased to a downpour.

“No..., Lizan,” he said, pulling her to him. “It is I... who has failed you. I should have been stronger.”

“You do not see it,” she protested. “What preparations have I given him, for he knows nothing about survival? I have pressed you into letting him roam free, twisting what you knew to be right so that my petty longings as a mother could be satisfied.”

Manon did not answer. Deep down, he knew she was right.

Cuddling each other, reacting as though their world had fallen apart, Brandor stood to one side, uncomfortable. Without ever having a love of his own, his choice appeared well-founded by the display before him. Blessed with longevity, such encounters always carried too much emotional weight.

Unexpected, the two stood, imploring eyes asking for forgiveness at their failure. Excusing themselves, they made for an early exit, embarrassed by the intense disclosure. No apology was given to the respectful Dai-laman, just a nod of acceptance. Their grieving was as if their son was already lost. No details of Brandor’s plans for Hanor’s future were asked for. Imparting the boy into his care, he was now the boy’s guide, his teacher.

Despite this unsettling encounter, he still had to face Hanor on the issue. The young man would be confused by what he had experienced. “What does all this mean?” he muttered, making his way from the room. The original dream indicated what he was to look for, but now the boy had been found, what was expected of him apart from developing his knowledge of the *Hidden Mysteries*?

Chapter 3: New Opportunities

Staring out across the countryside, Hanor stood firm, the great storm increasing in size as it approached. Violent and terrible, tearing up the earth as it moved, below him the field groaned in pain. Lurching back and forth like the ocean, the wind kept howling its defiant cry. Around his feet, blood started seeping out of the ground, oozing like the rising of a flood. Unexpected, an earthquake shook the foundations of The Freelands. Heaving and buckling, to his horror, a huge cavern opened before him. Teetering on the brink, a great booming voice called out, "HELP ME!"

Sitting up, his vision consumed by the images, Hanor gasped for air. Fighting the hand when it rested on his shoulder, still half-asleep, but its reassuring strength eased him down like a father to a frightened son.

"Everything is fine," said a strange but familiar voice.

Opening his eyes, the dream dissipating with the arrival of the real world, two penetrating orbs peered down at Hanor, the kind smile restoring an element of control. Rubbing sleep-filled lids to wipe away the mist, the Heir of Manson sat up, a stiff neck reminding him of where he had originally fallen asleep.

"What... are *you* doing here?" he asked, a surge of questions rushing forward. "And where did you go?"

"I have been here for some time," Brandor said, sitting next to the startled young man. "How do you feel?"

"I... am not quite sure." Charged by the dream, its meaning remained elusive. "I would like a drink, if you will."

Brandor pinpointed a jug of water nearby. "Here," he said, handing him the glass, probing the boy's features for any resentment.

"Thank... you," Hanor said, scrutinising the older man. Permitting the cool liquid to settle him, he felt better and more himself. "Where... are the others?" Vague memories of their entry earlier climbed into a still fuzzy mind. His brother had prodded him with questions, but tiredness had closed him down.

"There was nobody here when I entered."

A small blanket lay on the floor, Hanor supposing he must have been asleep for some time. Dark outside explained the possible reason for their absence. "They have probably gone for something to eat," he said, rumblings in his stomach calling for its own measure. "I cannot blame them for that," Brandor smirked.

Recalling the wonderful events earlier, an echo of that otherworldly experience flushed through Hanor briefly, a gentle reminder of its genuineness. Lifting his woes as a result, incredulous to believe it possible, words could not explain it. To think this man had inflamed his whole being with such power was astonishing. Dwarfed by that realization, a sincere face opposite still advocated an approachability he liked.

Siding on caution, a dim smile revealing his fragility, the disturbing dream was put to one side. "What... did you do earlier?"

Relieved that rejection was not immediate, Brandor was determined to preserve this good start. "You certainly deserve an explanation," he said, rising and strolling over to one of numerous large arched windows.

Outside, the early stages of moonlight were already casting twilight shadows across tidy gardens. A subtle warning of their grim future, he could only hope this young man's potential might be something special. One moon was trying to break through thickening clouds above the outer garden wall of this High-house, the other one would follow the same route later that night.

Chuckling, ironic, Manson was the last place he had visited prior to having his original vision. Recalling them crossing at the foot of the main stairway, Hanor had just risen from his slumber, scoffing to himself at such idleness. Ignoring the lad, he had continued with what he thought were more important matters. Weird that their paths should cross again, life had a wonderful way of creating the most unforeseen circumstances. Even so, now that he was in the presence of the boy, a strange feeling did ease the apprehension. Detecting a deeper quality about him, an innocence generating respect, glancing back, two patient eyes waited for him to respond. Recalling how obedient he was at the lake, an openness to accept what was beyond him, perhaps he would be a good student after all.

"Yes," he said, thoughtful. "I can understand it was unusual for you."

"I... have no idea what happened."

"There is no need to be alarmed," Brandor assured him. "What you felt was the Powers of the *Sacred*."

"It was... amazing," Hanor said, wanting a repeat encounter.

"Yes..., it is," Brandor agreed, seeing this as a positive sign. "More than you know."

"So..., why did you do it?"

"Come here..., please," Brandor ordered, gazing out through swirling patterns of charcoal silver embedded in the windowpane. Leaning against the rusty coloured wall, simplicity mixing well with elegance, a regular theme of this uncomplicated High-house, he did enjoy visiting here.

Hanor did as asked.

"What do you see?" the Dai-Laman asked, indicating the shadowy gardens.

Confused, "What do you mean?" Daring a quick glance, Hanor could only see the odd silhouette of tree or bush. A few stone benches populated the darkness, but he presumed there was something specific.

"What do you see?" the mysterious figure repeated, unwilling to accept such a quick response.

Cupping hands to the side of his head, Hanor leant against the pane and peered out into the twilight. Searching through the dimness, lamps on the High-house walls were not yet lit, limiting his view. Half-expecting something dramatic to occur, a small light in front was his best guess. "There is a glimmer of light, is that what you mean?"

"Just a glimmer of light?"

Thinking it a game, "Yes..., " he said, shrugging as though not important.

"And... what about the light?"

"Er..., it is quite bright," he offered, rather poorly.

"Look again."

Agitated by this seemingly pointless exercise, when Hanor peered out again, it dawned as to what it actually was. "It is a reflection of moonlight."

"It is," Brandor acknowledged.

"But... what is so special about that?"

Expecting nothing less, but still appreciating this interaction, the Dai-laman had not taught anyone for a very long time. “Why are you able to see it as a reflection?” Hanor shrugged.

Brandor waited, again not accepting how quickly he was prepared to give in.

Not savouring the sense of inadequacy, memories of nights at the lake sprung to mind, reflections of the two moons on water. “Water,” Hanor tried, still unsure what the man was getting at. “There is a small water table out there.”

“Hmm,” Brandor was far from impressed. “Have you ever asked yourself what water actually is, and why it is able to reflect the light as it does?” Not waiting for the boy to respond, he continued to make his point. “Have you ever considered how and why the moons arc through the sky? Where does their light come from that are beacons for any traveller at night? Why are there two moons and not three... or one?”

The young lad did not move. Staring through the window at the questions he had never asked before, he felt uneducated. An element of shame heckled as life by the lake lost its sparkle. “I never thought about it,” he admitted, as if sacrilegious that he had not. Resting a hand on the boy’s shoulder, sensing the turmoil within, it was at least a start. “Do not worry about it now, for there are many things that you have taken for granted, not realising powers are at work just so you can run, play and have fun without a care in the world. It is nice to live a free life without concerns, but everything has its price.” Squeezing his shoulder, “You are at a cross-road Hanor, and important options lay before you.”

“What options?” His mood by the lake prior to Brandor’s first arrival proved there *was* a gap in his life. Filling that void with the attentions of certain females, but it would not be enough to dampen the disquiet inside he knew. With the arrival of this mysterious man, Hanor could see a door opening.

“Playing by the lake with your friends has its benefits,” Brandor started. “But you are missing out on what life is really about. There are mysteries that dazzle the senses, which cannot be experienced by a complacent mind.” Wary that Hanor could be overawed, life had been too comfortable for him. Confessions of his parents earlier did release the boy from some blame, but a significant shift in attitude was required if he was to reach new heights. “There are many people relying on me for help, and I too need help to achieve what has been set before me. I see great potential in you, but that is all it is at the moment, potential. It is a matter of whether you wish to explore that potential and join us.”

“Why would you want someone like me to join you?” Hanor asked, astonished. “I am hardly useful, and do not see the potential you speak of.”

“Do you not think there was a time when I was a young man like you, and that young man grew into adulthood just like you will? If I had not chosen at your age to follow a certain path, I would not be in a position to help others now, would I?”

“I suppose not,” Hanor admitted, toying with the idea of actually making a difference.

“So here we are, facing the same sort of choice I did all of those seasons ago,” Brandor stated, waiting for a reply.

Sobering, the future now looked quite daunting. Giving up his leisurely lifestyle was not a problem, but the suggestion of aiding others triggered doubts. “Who needs help?”

“Have you not asked yourself why your father is gathering numbers to fight?”

“I... I have been meaning to ask but...,” Hanor said, shame flushing through him again. Surprised at just how blinkered this boy was, the Dai-laman continued. “An *evil power* is rising in the north, and people are lying in its wake. If they do not receive support, they will not survive.”

Wars had happened throughout history, but it seemed strange to think it might happen now. “What *evil power*?”

“I will leave it for your father to explain, for my time is short,” Brandor said, thoughtful. “He is preparing for war using traditional means, but there are other ways that are more potent. Those paths are the routes by which I travel, and others like me. Thwart with perils, but they are trails that give hope, and is the way you will go if you are willing.”

Gulping at what he could volunteer of any worth, this was going too fast. Today by the lake had opened Hanor’s world to powers surpassing his wildest dreams, the charge of loving energy lifting him towards a new way of living, but to think he could do anything was hard to imagine. Even so, the idea of receiving further insights urged him to say yes. “It is like... you are offering me a new start,” he said, seeing it as forgiveness for his idleness. “I am still not sure what you expect of me, but I will learn if you are willing to teach me.”

Satisfied by his reply, “You underestimate yourself, and you have made me very happy.”

“But what of my father, and you have still not told me what happened earlier?”

Lowering his smile, “I have already spoken to your parents, and they have placed their trust in me. That need not concern you for now, I have ample to keep you occupied.”

“Where do we begin?” The idea of repeating what they had done earlier surged, so too the desire to wield powers like his new mentor. Presuming Brandor was a Master of the Arts like some of those mysterious people he had heard lived in the larger cities of The Freelands, his imagination exploded into life.

“We start with reality,” Brandor said, picking up on the boy’s fanciful ideas. “For this will not be an easy road. It is beneficial to start small, rather than trying to grasp everything. Your eyes tell me you are looking in the wrong direction.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wielding powers against our foe will come in its own time,” the Dai-laman explained, keeping him inquisitive yet sensible. “This may be exciting for an untrained mind..., but there are natural laws governing everything. There may come a time when such powers become a great burden.”

“That does make sense.”

“Let us sit before I continue, I am not as young as I used to be.”

Moving to the cushioned chairs opposite the unlit fireplace, Hanor tried to stay calm. Scenic tapestries ensured no precious words could escape as young expectations increased.

Brandor’s approach shifted. “Your parents have entrusted you to me,” he repeated, pausing on how they might be coping with it.

Sensing more to the statement, Hanor was astounded they had agreed to it.

“They have raised you the best they knew how,” the Dai-laman continued. “But we both know you are short of skills and experience. I detect honesty and integrity about you that I rarely see nowadays, and for me, that means more than the use of a weapon or ability to

absorb a great many facts. Such characteristics are invaluable in times of duress, and usually stand firm in situations that may threaten the individual or group.”

The young man sat straight, unused to praise.

“But that does not mean it is enough,” Brandor went on. “I mentioned about an *evil* preparing to invade The Freelands.”

Hanor listened, eager for more light to shine into his shallow life.

“I have been rallying support from all Nations to unite and meet this threat head-on. The people of Manson are part of that support.”

The hastily built training camp was a testament to that.

“What you experienced earlier were invisible *forces* that are an integral part of life. You encountered *The Forces of Light*, which leads all towards a dominating good. Against that, a dark resistant *power* is trying to hold back progress, generating pain and misery, destruction and death. These two *Forces* face each other at opposite ends of The Freelands. There is a great deal of history encompassing it all, a tale of which would take to the morning to tell. We can ill afford the time, so for another meeting perhaps.”

Hanor sat astounded, each explanation painting a scary albeit wider picture.

“You Hanor, are part of that confrontation, now that you have accepted my lead. You must grow up by discarding those childish attributes wrapped around your neck. No more abandonment of yester-turn, the work begins now. The future is unknown, but with the guidance of the *Sacred*, we shall prevail. I trust few, especially in these dark times, so we have to be certain we can rely on those we know. You already have my seal of approval, I trust you will use it wisely?”

“Er..., yes..., of course,” Hanor stuttered, fidgeting. Disbelieving he had been targeted for such an honoured inclusion, he was determined to do whatever was asked of him.

“Good.”

“So what happens now?”

“That is the kind of question I like to hear,” Brandor said. “For the time being, you must stay here and learn some survival skills. Mastering a Kyboe for one, how to cook, and using a sword.”

“I was expecting something more exciting,” Hanor admitted, frowning. Many attempts by his father to do the same had been rebuffed by excuses, his mother supporting them.

“I thought as much, but much suffering can be prevented by learning to be patient,” the Dai-laman decreed. “Your life may depend on it.”

That statement stopped Hanor’s active mind, a shiver running through him. Living a sheltered existence, the reoccurring dream returned, a timely reminder of what he was getting himself into. Could he really get involved?

In silence, the two sat for a while listening to the backdrop of noise filtering in from adjacent rooms. Other activities equally at threat as they bustled about, more attuned to the workings of this House than the worries of The Freelands. Like Hanor, many had risen that morning under a veil of ignorance. But as their future ruler pondered the implications of what he had accepted, things were about to change for everyone.

Brandor appeared to be resting, so Hanor copied him. Trying to return to that inner tranquillity he had experienced earlier, just switching his attention seemed to work. Concentrating on the rhythms of his heart, the beats quickened, a permanent peace rising that felt blissful.

“What is it you want me to do?” Hanor asked, daring to break the silence. Enjoying the peace, but flickering thoughts of what was ahead meant he could not sit still.

“You are a brave young man,” Brandor praised.

“I have had it easy for long enough, it is time for me to give something back.”

“Wise words,” the older man approved. “You have still made a courageous decision Hanor, one that many people may come to appreciate someday.”

Self-conscious, the Heir of Manson remained silent.

“Right, enough of the pleasantries,” the Dai-laman said, stretching his legs out in front. Weathered hide-boots indicated a seasoned traveller who had spent many turns on the road. “After your initial training, I will send someone to take you to Tarden - the main city of Tardania.

“Tarden of... Tardania?”

“Yes, a wonderful place, have you not heard of it?”

“The name is familiar, but...”

“Well, no need for specifics, for anything else will have little meaning to you. Do some research, I am sure your Reading Hall will have plenty to look at. As to your travelling companion, his name is Kifter - of Fion. He is quite capable of nourishing your newly found appetite for information. But a word of caution, as patient as he is, unruly young men would surely irritate him.”

“I will remember that,” Hanor said, barely believing this was taking place. Tarden in Tardania!

“Good,” Brandor said, rising. “Night has closed in, and there are some things I need to tend to. Stand up!”

Numb, Hanor did as asked.

Soaked in astonishment, the lad’s large brown eyes stared up at Brandor, taking a moment to appease any woes. “Questions will mix with fears, but the lesson for now is... patience. Control that imagination and you will grow ever wiser. Kifter will inform you of a great deal, but for now, I must leave. I intend to meet you at Tarden, so in the meantime, I will speak with your father about training. Do not shy away, and learn as much as you can. The protective embrace of your parents will not help when you are out on the road. I trust no one more than Kifter, who will look after you.”

Hanor nodded, bewildered by the pace of it. “I... I will do... my best.”

“Good,” Brandor said, lacking the time to nurture him through the shock. “Have an early night, no more half-day rises.”

Hanor looked away.

“You have started a new chapter, get rid of the old and learn. Cultivate a sense of purpose, and make a difference, Hanor!”

Forcing resolve to the surface, “Old habits die hard, but... I can manage it.”

“Is there anything else?” the Dai-laman asked. So much remained a mystery.

“I still do not understand what happened to me today.”

“Remember what I said, a little at a time. It is beyond your understanding to grasp, but answers will come when they are ready.”

Thoughts of Nole and Bane sprung to mind. “What about my brother and friends..., what shall I say? They will not like me venturing off without them.”

“This is to stay secret. You are moving into the big world Hanor, and walls have ears. Loose tongues can be just as dangerous. The fewer who know... the better. I believe in stealth, that is why I am entrusting you to Kifter for the time being. Are we in agreement?”

Gulping, “Yes,” Hanor answered, unsure how to deal with the issue.

“We will meet again soon. Get some rest, for an early start is essential.”

Before Hanor could add anything else, the mysterious figure turned on his heels and strode out of the small hall, leaving the young Heir’s thoughts racing. Just as the door was closing, it reopened. Hoping for more insights, it proved unwarranted when his brother and Bane entered. Sighing, their interrogation was the last thing he needed.

“Who was that?” Nole asked, concerned. Rushing to him, “Are you all right?”

“I am fine,” Hanor assured them, searching for a way out of this predicament. Hiding tensions from what he had just agreed was difficult.

“Who was *he* then?” Bane wanted to know, disliking the idea of things happening without their involvement.

Unused to concealing what he knew, Hanor struggled to find a legitimate reason. To lie meant jeopardizing their relationship, unable to remember the last time he had. “It is a friend of mine,” he tried.

“A friend!” Nole coughed the words out.

Avoiding eye contact, his ways were too easily read by those who knew him.

“Since when have you been friends with old men?” asked Bane, surprised.

“I am not as predictable as you believe.”

“So..., who was he and what did he want?” pressed Nole, still disturbed by the events earlier. “Well?”

“He is someone I met by... the lake.”

“By the lake, when?” Nole shot.

“Today.”

“Today...! You mean earlier..., just before I found you?”

“Er..., yes..., it was about that time.”

“Hanor!” Nole warned, catching hold of his older sibling’s arm as he turned away. “This is important. I have not stopped worrying about it. I need to know.”

Defences failing, conflicting emotions collided as Brandor’s heartfelt words about trust echoed. How could he discard those he loved and expect them to put up with any avoidance? They had been his whole life prior to this. Refusing to look at them, he felt burdened and tired. “Look,” he implored. “I am exhausted and cannot think straight. I need to rest. Maybe tomorrow I can answer your questions.” Facing Nole, he cut his brother short who was about to protest. “No, Nole, leave it. You have to trust me.” That last statement jabbed him, wondering how he could satisfy them without lying. To hide what he knew was awful. Heavy, sullen eyes indicated his need for sleep.

“I do not want to leave you like this,” Nole said, desires to know suspended. Hanor did not look well. “I will stay with you tonight, on the floor if I have to.”

Settling for anything just to grant some respite, a timely yawn reflected just how tired Hanor was. After the heady discussion with Brandor, mixed with the incredible experience earlier, he was thankful when Nole and Bane supported him and made for the door.

Heading south through the Cropping Village of Missel Hoe, shuttered windows and locked doors were the only bystanders to Brandor's passing. Riding through the night, the turn had been intense and time consuming but at least successful. Difficult to understand Hanor's unusual awakening earlier, just delighted by the boy's inclusion, he hoped others would come to a rapid maturity over the coming turns too. Tucking behind the muscular neck of Tunder, his faithful two-legged Kyboe, his next task was to find Kifter at Tilor.

Disappointed when passing two campsites on the brow of a hill, fortunately for them, he had not heard of *Nyshifters* striking this far south yet. Counting thirty full seasons since the fierce creatures had snatched four of his compatriots from the Sleep, the Sleep being the residing place of the Hisian-set to which he belonged, there were now only eight of them left. Old and tired, their group had never fully recovered from the attack. Trying to convince people afterwards of the *Nyshifters*' existence, but those who had ventured north to investigate had given no credence to their story. Some had gone missing, but few had cared enough to worry.

For most, that terrible experience passed into myth, forgotten whilst daily matters were met. Now though, doubts were returning to haunt them. Graven whisperings about shadows moving undercover of night had trickled fears into proud hearts. Few travelled to those rocky regions now. Some people were facing up to the reality of the growing evil, but not enough to make a difference.

Swift, a well-trodden road disappeared into the shadows in front, keen eyes searching for movement. Not many journeyed during these late short-turns of the evening. Preferring to travel at night, there was less chance of a delay by meandering travellers in no rush to move. Watchful of the strain this latest venture could have on him, '*going over*' was a real danger. Using his knowledge of the physical body to achieve what he did, it was the lack of sleep that usually destabilised the unwise.

Content that he was far enough from Missel Hoe, he reined Tunder in. Not through straps but a simple transference of thought, he had taught his Kyboe the basic mental language long ago. Highly intelligent for an animal, they had been together for many seasons. Conscious of each other's needs, he would not have achieved what he had without it.

Dismounting, leaving Tunder to graze nearby, the hollow under a large tree was adequate shelter from the unpredictable weather and any hungry eyes high above. Eating a couple of diva sticks to recharge before settling down for the night, achy joints were already stiffening.

Satisfied at finding Hanor, thoughts turned to his age-old enemy, the very reason behind this impending *evil*. "How mad have *you* become *Gorl-darl*?" he groaned. Tunder snorted in agreement. What delusion had caged his adversary, was it purely revenge? Regretting their failure to catch *him* when they had the chance long ago, he reflected briefly on the sorry details.

Thirteen hundred full seasons ago, the people of Mandurin had needed help, for *Gorl-darl's* domination of that city had brought it to its knees. Twelve men of power, who were later to be called the Hisian-set, had come to their rescue. Abusing *his* powers, *Gorl-darl's* work had been worse than anything witnessed before. Registering those vile

manipulations then just as he could now, *Gorl-darl's* callous influences had affected many.

Surrounding the huge building housing *him* and *his* subordinates, convinced *he* was trapped, but to their dismay *he* had escaped with a decoy. Following *his* trail, they had searched the northern mountains for many turns but without success. Cunning, *he* had somehow avoided them at every corner. Sharn's warning, "*We must find him or we will not hear the last of it,*" felt extra poignant today. Ironically, it had been Rinn and himself who had called off the pursuit, believing the atrocious weather would finish *Gorl-darl* off. How wrong they were. Bitterly paying the price hundreds of full-seasons later with the blood of four fellow members of the Hisian-set, it had been a shock as much as a horror. Now, the *darkness* had increased tenfold, and was still growing. A terrible price for their initial failure, huffing, Brandor rolled over and pulled the blanket up. He needed rest not frustration.

Fearful of the terror soon to come, the Great White Freelover snorted, searching the night sky above for its foe. Detecting the crude movements of *Nyshifters*, there was nowhere to hide out here on the grassy planes. Using its horn to disperse incoming energies from the Cosmos since the dawn of time, but such energising powers always enticed those of evil intent. With *dark forces* now active in The Freelands, this strike was inevitable.

Grunting again when five monsters emerged above, the *Nyshifters* were eager for carnage just as expected. Pounding the ground with thick trunk-like legs, the Freelover jabbed its horn back and forth, warning of the power it still possessed. What was once used to energise life now had to be used in death. With its mate far to the south, it would fight to the death.

Spreading huge wings to add size and menace, five ruthless Nyshifters descended, blackened shapes of evil moving undercover of night. Flexing gnarled claws for the slaughter, gaunt and wretched, callous eyes glinted in the moonlight. Here for the Freelover's prized Horn of Power, its blood would be theirs this turn of the day.

Chapter 4: Strong Hands

Two heavysset hands clasped Hanor tight in the dark. Strong and unforgiving, snatching him from slumber, it took a few desperate moments for him to realise what was happening. Struggling, the intruder's stale breath filled his lungs. Clamping over his mouth, the palm of a cold hand suppressed any resistance, horrified when carried out of his room. Faint stirrings of Nole asleep on the floor came to nothing, his brother oblivious to this invasion. Kicking out, but with a quick flip and readjustment, Hanor was rolled up like a rug, a forceful arm reaching round to fasten his legs. A chuckle emanating from his aggressor spoke volumes, like someone familiar playing a trick.

"Be silent my young apprentice," said a calm, hoarse voice in his ear.

Unable to answer, Hanor waited for another opportunity to break free, shocked when they turned left down the main stairwell. Eyes adjusting through the dimness, his mind raced when they reached the bottom. Making out familiar pictures and banners, they worked their way silently along the main corridor. The whole place was deathly quiet. How could someone enter undetected and just whisk him away like this? Struggling again, twisting and turning, the vice-grip tightened.

"You need not fear your eminence," his captor insisted, retaining a firm hold. "This has been long overdue."

The doors to outside were already open, suspicion now replacing fear, detecting this intruder knew him well. Out in the open, the cool whispering breeze heckled him, a laughing witness to this diabolical invasion. Trying to see his foe, an ear and part of a square jaw were just discernible in the half-light. Twisting and buckling again, but such meagre efforts were futile. Confident the Nightwatch would come to his aid, whoever it was would never get away with this.

Perched up on the wall, peering down unconcerned, a small group of guards waited, an audience to this illuminating spectacle. What was going on? Why were they not helping?

"Help me," he tried screaming, a pathetic muffle the only thing escaping through a temporary muzzle. Shocked, laughter was the only thing trickling down in greeting. What was happening?

The main gates to the High-house grounds were ajar too, open like beckoning hands to his doom. Shadowed faces on the wall were watching, mocking this predawn display. Passing through, the laughter behind increased to fits of hilarity, those of the High-guard evidently aware of something he was not.

"Have we guessed yet... as to what this is about?" the subtle voice said in his ear.

An accent known to the Cropping Villages of the south, traces of his words were recognisable but Hanor still could not place them. Numb, coated by apprehension, his mind was a blur to any calm logic. The cold, calculating hand continued smothering his mouth, unrelenting in its intentions. Whoever it was knew his cry would bring guards from other quarters to his rescue, or would they?

Passing down the main causeway, closed windows and doors on either side were as uninterested by his predicament as the sleeping inhabitants inside. Inns, storehouses and dwellings were disquieting in appearance, at peace from the bustling activities of the approaching dawn. The whole place was eerie. Not until they veered left and crossed the open ground towards the recently built training camp did it dawn on Hanor who this

intruder was. Those detached words fell into place, knowing who and why. Finally, he relaxed. In response, the hand was removed from his mouth.

“I suspect... you know what this is about at last,” said the raspy words of Rainer, Manson’s second in command.

From the relief, anger burst forth from the Heir of Manson. “What... what is going on? Why are you treating me this way? How dare you? Put me down...!” The hand clasped over his mouth again to shut out the protests.

“Are we finished yet?” Rainer said, unimpressed by the outburst.

With little choice but to stop his objections, Hanor was most thankful when the hand was removed. Setting him down on his feet, they stood outside a low stone building that ran away behind. Turning, facing his father’s aid and second hand, he knew this would not be taking place without permission. A wry smile greeted him with a curt nod, Hanor estimating it was still sometime before sunrise.

“I do not believe... this is happening,” he said, looking around for any spectators. Rainer did not say anything, staring at him as if to measure his worth. Not a man of many words, *‘but as dependable as iron’* Hanor’s father would often say, there was a glimmer in his eye that Hanor did not like.

“Could this not have waited until later... or at least allowed me to get dressed?” His nightclothes were far from adequate for the morning chill, shivers running through him.

Without a word, Rainer turned and reached for something behind. Before Hanor could utter a word, a large bucket of icy cold water poured over him like a biting knife slashing at every part of his body.

“What...!” he screamed, paralysed and outraged. “I do not... believe...,” he gasped, catching his breath. Soaked through, the numbness nullified all senses.

Glaring at the older, larger man standing in front, enticing him to lash out, to come out fighting with fists ablaze, the young heir could read it in his eyes. In that moment, Hanor knew his childish ways were about to be burnt out of him. No more pampering, no soft approach or mother for protection. Brandor’s advice echoed like a repetitive parent. *“Do not shy away, learn as much as you can, for your life may depend on it.”*

Temper subsiding, the anger drifted away with the approach of this newly acquired insight. Imagining what he must look like, a chuckle followed to his kidnapper’s obvious surprise, Rainer’s eyebrows lifting at this unexpected reaction. A tame smile turned to laughter, both appreciating the ridiculous setting.

Nuzzling him awake, the stale odour of Tunder's breath infiltrated the serenity of the Dai-laman’s sleep. Disgruntled at first, Brandor stopped upon recognizing his Kyboe’s concerns. Sitting up, he strained for any direct threats prowling in the half-light. With the sun still lingering below the horizon, the morning dew clung to his light blanket, the sodden atmosphere soaking up any sounds. Accepting Tunder’s senses were far superior to his own, something was on the move.

“Movement,” came the impression in his mind.

Still undercover of the low-lying branches, Brandor peered out. A fine layer of mist seemed determined to hold precedence over the lush wild-grass at his feet.

Long moments passed before sounds of a moving cart emerged through the quiet. A fully laden merchant’s wagon trundled along the way. Two heavyset kyboes were pulling it, plodding from side to side. Stocky, the bearded fellow sitting unperturbed at the reins

was whistling cheerfully, large bundles wrapped in skins bulging behind him. Intermittent bumps in the beaten track kept trying to unhinge him from his contentment, but his load held and he seemed unconcerned.

Packing away his mat, the Dai-laman stayed tuned to the approaching wagon. Returning from a successful trip to the southern regions, the man's mood showed it. "*Probably expecting to sell his wares at Manson,*" Brandor thought, but Tunder's apprehension did not shift.

Feeling a conviction warning him of something yet to be seen, it was unlike him to hesitate but the Dai-laman stayed his position. So early in the turn, the hunch forewarned of potential trouble. Undercover of the tree, and standing behind a few large bushes, the cart drew level to his position, stopping as it did. Certain he could not be seen, but the burly figure stood up and looked around, suspicious.

"I know someone is there," bellowed the stranger, confident he was right. "For nothing escapes the senses of Billor."

Brandor waited.

"Do you have something to hide?" came the knowing question, highlighting it was not his fears or an excitable mind playing tricks. Gawping in the Dai-laman's direction, a beckoning hand proved that he did know.

Trying to read the large man's features across the way, something kept gnawing at Brandor. Loud and well at ease, unmoved that danger of some degree could be preparing an ambush, Tunder's earlier suspicions now appeared well-founded. Suspecting the man was veiling something sinister, capabilities worthy of respect even, Brandor trusted his intuition and decided to step out into the open anyway. Tunder followed, eyeing up the two forbidding Kyboes.

"See," the man said, triumphant, indicating them with his arm. "Nothing is missed by Billor." Talking to his kyboes as if they could understand what he was saying, a snort and grunt signalled that the two burly animals could do just that.

Checking for dark motives, but if there were any, they stayed hidden behind the wide smile as Brandor approached. Daylight was increasing, permitting him to see the big fellow's eyes and any glimmer of treachery. Frequent chirps piped out from the local wildlife, a battle cry for the duel about to take place.

"It is always pleasing to meet new faces on one's travels," the large man greeted. "Even if they be shy at first."

Brandor moved nearer still. "One can never be too careful," he said, searching the fellow's deep-seated eyes. A full black beard camouflaged any twitches that were a common indicator of hidden agendas. Unable to shake loose the suspicion, the Dai-laman permitted the other to lead.

"There is nothing to fear if you keep your wits about you," Billor said out loud, in case there were any other ears listening. "Only the odd thief from time to time, but it breaks up the monotony."

Halting a few paces short, the man's mannerisms did nothing to imply mistrust, but the warning signals would not shift. Careful not to leave himself open to those scrutinising eyes, the Dai-laman went to pat one of the enormous kyboes. Retracting his hand when the animal emitted an ominous growl, two pairs of dark round eyes on chunky oblong heads stared at him. Their sharp claws were quite unlike most kyboes, who had

softer paw-like hands on the end of short, stubby arms. Charcoal skin looked equally disturbing. Now appreciating Tunder's unease, he could not risk lingering for long.

"They do not like to be fussed," their keeper said, proud. "I treat them fair and keep them lean, they know who is in charge. A little sensitive to strangers, that is all."

"I accept your word on the matter," the Dai-laman conceded, stepping back.

"My name is Billor as I have already declared, but who are you my friend?" he asked, doing his own inspecting.

"You can call me Bran," Brandor replied, surprised at his own response.

"Bran is a good name."

Not once since Brandor had stepped out from under the tree had this fellow taken his eyes from him, both parties appearing to recognise something in the other but unwilling to confront the issue unless forced.

"You have been busy," the Dai-laman said, pointing at the goods in the wagon.

"Yes..., I travel far, working hard for a small wage. Buying and selling, a little bit of everything for everyone." Glancing over at the travelling bags and rolled up mat on Tunder, "Your journey light?"

"I always do."

"You must live nearby then?"

"Quite close," he said. The Sleep was not too far, it just depended on your view.

"I have just come up from Tilor and Fion before that. One has to earn his wage there for sure," Billor said, laughing heartily at a particular event. "Yes, you cannot outwit a Fife."

"I know," Brandor said, Kifter being a classic example.

"I am off to Manson," the merchant continued. "Has there been much happening..., for I take it that is where you are from?"

"It is always a busy place at the end of each wet season," Brandor said, detecting a definite undercurrent.

"True enough, it is why I go there now."

For the first time, Billor looked away like a Fliryn called by its master. Closing his eyes, inhaling as if detecting something in the air, a laugh erupted upon opening them when realising Brandor was watching him.

"Where is it you travel to my friend?" the merchant asked, chancing an innocent line of enquiry might detract them from what had been witnessed.

Taken aback, Brandor was now convinced that this mysterious character was to be avoided at any cost, the illusion of sincerity painted on by the beaming smiles and fine talk. The man's motives were not where they should be. "I am heading south," he said, turning, getting ready to leave.

"South?"

'If he was an eye for the enemy, then he was not very good at it,' Brandor thought, climbing into his saddle.

"I see you are in a hurry to leave rather than speak idle words to a lonely traveller?"

"I apologise," Brandor said. "But I have to meet someone."

"Ah... I see," the big man said, eyebrows frowning, pinpointing a reason to continue their dialogue. "Do you have far to go?"

"Is anywhere ever near enough?"

Billor's laugh was weak. Whatever he recognised in Brandor, the opportunity to find out more was about to end.

"Until another time," the Dai-laman signalled before heading off.

Climbing down from the wagon to watch him go, Billor patted one of his kyboes. The beast snorted, agreeing with its Master's thoughts. "Yes, my little ones," he said, scratching his beard. "There is life in this land yet."

"I have been looking for Hanor everywhere," Nole cried in disbelief. "Do you not care?"

Turning towards her beloved son, Lizan managed to suppress her already charged emotions. "It is best for you to let him go," she said, holding back her pain, wiping a tear before he could see it.

"You said that earlier," Nole reminded her. "What do you mean by that?"

"I will explain everything in due time."

"You are talking in riddles," he protested. "Can you not talk to me as a man for once? I am not a boy anymore. We are talking about my brother..., your son. He has disappeared. You are not telling me what you know, what you are hiding."

Torn between Nole's pain and her fear of losing him as well, she knew he would not accept what had been agreed. What they had decided was for his sake as well as everyone's. Unthinkable for him to let Hanor travel into the unknown without him, she could not afford to tell him.

"Listen to me," she said, trying to instil conviction into her words. "You have to drop this." Reaching out, he pulled away like a lover betrayed. "Let it go." Sobs welled like earlier when he had first come bursting into her room, sick with worry. This was all too much. Wrenched inside, what else could she do but despair?

"Do not do this to me," Nole pleaded. "You cannot expect me to allow this to filter away, as if he never existed." Kneeling in front of his devoted mother, her tears moved him, but they were not enough of a deterrent. Convinced this whole mess had something to do with that old man they had seen leaving the Leisure Room, Hanor's admission that he had met him by the lake was behind this. It all made sense, but facts were not forthcoming. Frustrated, his mother had answers but was not prepared to reveal them. "Has he gone somewhere..., is he in trouble? What could he have done to deserve all this secrecy? You are my own flesh and blood..., and still unable to trust my judgements." Taking hold of her hands, trying to reach beneath her tears, he wanted her to feel compassion for his suffering. "Please..., talk to me. Tell me what you know."

Sad and weary, her whole existence was now hanging in the balance. Touching his cheek, committed eyes stared back, longing for what she knew. How could she refuse him? Knowing it would destroy him to keep him here, imprisoned by her yearning to cling onto what was not hers. To love him was to give him that freedom to choose, had she not learnt from the past? More tears poured, there was nothing left to fight with. Verging on giving in, searching for the right words, Manon entered the room.

"Mother...!" Nole pressed, squeezing her hand, realising she was on the brink. His father's presence would scupper any chance. He too had refused to move, rebuffing him earlier with, "*Not now my son.*"

Apologetic eyes longed to give him what he wanted, but the opportunity had gone.

"Mother!" Nole added, but it was no good.

Retracting her hand, Lizan's sorry eyes relayed her compassion towards his needs. Shaking her head, she stood.

Manon's glare probed the High-lady's. Concurring that all was as it should be, this was much harder than they had envisioned.

Nole, still bent to the knee, tried to keep his temper. They were protecting him from something, a grim situation he would not be happy with. Now the two were together, they could lean on each other for support. Rising, frustrations surging, he faced his overprotective parents. Refusing to shed tears, it felt like confronting strangers.

"Openness is a treasure, and will grant you peace when shared wisely," he said, reminding them of advice given in the past. Angry at his folly at being duped into a lie, not waiting for a response, he brushed by them, his whole world collapsing around him.

Easing down on the mat, aches in his back and legs jabbed Hanor as if lying on a bed of nails. Never experiencing such pain, the occasional knock or bang in the past had advocated life was not all fun, but this went way beyond that. Every part of his being was protesting at what he was forcing it to do. Sighing when settling down, even the makeshift bed under the rather hastily erected canopy was a welcomed reprieve from his first turn at the hands of Rainer. Shown only once how to construct it, stretching between two trees and two pegs on the ground, he laid down without a care for its reliability.

The turn's events had passed brutally slow. A long period of ruthless training, he could scarcely remember his bitterly cold awakening at dawn that morning. Willing to accept the tender disciplines of other teachers compared to this animal, there was no counting how many bruises he now had. Agonising, the torment of learning to ride a Kyboe well had nearly killed him. Falling frequently, his guide had insisted he learn to fall correctly, promising it might save his neck. Arguing that at this rate he would not have a neck to save, but any complaints had fallen on deaf ears. Thinking he knew the basics, how wrong he had been. Pounding into the ground like a discarded bag, Rainer's yells soon had him on his feet and running again, trying to remount whilst in motion. Falling and tripping many times, his tongue had never been so sharp.

Unconcerned, Rainer had shown little sympathy. Lifting him up and pressing him on, such coldness proved the man was determined to make or break him. Short periods of rest offered had granted little solace to the tender burning muscles and aching limbs. Even when his head had throbbed, his recently appointed Trainer would just stare at him as if pathetic.

Commanded to rid Hanor of his innocence, Rainer had made sure he knew it too. A number of times Hanor had screamed at his tormentor, storming off, refusing to take any more. Each time wrestled back to heel, eventually a stubborn resolve kicked in. Rising to the challenge not to give in to this creature snapping at his heels, they had sparred like rivals, trying to render the other as inadequate. Why that notion had surfaced was now lost, paying a terrible price for a stubbornness not of Hanor's nature. Vague thoughts of Nole and Bane had drifted in, but another new trial had quashed any lasting affections.

A thumping heartbeat pulsing to its own hectic rhythm now blotted out any surrounding noise. What would his mother say? Oh father, what are you doing to me? What have I accepted? Brandor's grinning features filled his thoughts, barracking him for daring to step into the adult world. Without resistance, he finally fell asleep.

When dusk fell, so too the rain, Brandor continued riding into the night, enduring yet another turn on the road. When reaching the brow of a familiar hill, he halted, checking all was as it should be. Peering down through thick shadows, the welcoming sight of Tilor stretched out below. Set between two opposing hillsides, the valley crossed east to west, following the flow of the terrain. Rich in life and produce, sheltered from most of the harsh dry winds from the withering savannas of Fifania to the south, it was a haven for many, creatures and people alike. Draining in from the surrounding regions, water collected into various sizeable pools, and was used to irrigate the region. A green oasis in the midst of this barren terrain, a bustling hive of activity it was.

Faint aromas wafted from below, tantalising most travellers that shared such views. Lamps indicated the Alehouses and Inns were open, glinting like the reflection of a clear night sky upon a lake. Cramped rooftops lined the main road, fanning out behind into minor streets. Clumps of trees populating the entire valley looked picturesque even in the dark. Sporadic shouts and shrieks of laughter accompanied the light breeze.

“How long will this last,” he said, envisioning burning rooftops. Tunder snorted, aware of the dangers lurking ahead. Expecting more suspicious figures like Billor here, he would have to be careful.

Entering one of Kifter’s favourite ‘*activity houses*’ as the Fife called them, the regular smell of ale and burning reed-bowls filled the air. Sharp at first, Brandor’s senses had to adjust, the atmosphere hazy and irritable. Scanning numerous figures, the low hum of voices continued, most of the occupants hardly noticing him enter. Some turned, a few from different races. A Hite, a couple of Fifes, and even a grey faced Grovian fellow, which was most unusual. Lamps clinging to creamy, stained walls emitted just enough light through grubby glass to make a difference. To think he used to escape the serene life of The Sleep to come here was astonishing. Many times he had sat propped in one corner, addicted to the ale’s luring call. A sad period in his life, and one he wished to forget, the props had not changed only the people. Kifter was nowhere to be seen.

Leaving The Hollow Inn, he walked a few strides to the next Alehouse. His friend could be in one of many, promising a long night if he did not find him soon. No luck in that one either, Tunder strolled behind as he checked each building. Counting two score along the main road alone, it was the only form of entertainment the cropping folk liked. Working hard in the fields all day, then out at night whilst their families were in bed, it was a tradition dating back many generations. Only something shocking would break the habit, and that shock was waiting to strike.

On two occasions strangers tried striking up conversations, but he walked out, not leaving himself open to anymore undesired scrutiny. Encountering Billor had penetrated deeper than he would have liked.

Leaving The Double Edge Inn, the Fife’s last regular hunting place, a nagging fear was getting stronger. Kifter had to be here somewhere, his friend being too reliable to have forgotten. Tunder felt his concern. Estimating it to be past half-turn of the night, the second moon overhead was following its smaller brethren which had passed earlier. Seeking inspiration, just a quick dash of laughter behind and the stirrings of a brawl in the Alehouse across the street caught his ear. The last one on the main road, and small by comparison to the others, a grubby exterior with soiled windows was one he had not tried.

Unsure if he wanted to enter a place on the verge of trouble, but one thing he knew, his friend had a canny way of attracting conflict. With nothing to lose, he stepped through the low dilapidated doorway. Passing down a short corridor before entering a dingy squalid room, the disquiet had simmered. Pinpointing the source of the original noise, a ring of people surrounded a table at the end of the bar like spectators awaiting a performance. The ale keeper seemed none too bothered at the fracas, talking idly to a big Hitorian fellow without concern.

Disbelieving cries erupted, a round of curses exploding in disgust. A couple of men threw their tankards across the room, annoyed by what they had seen.

“I do not believe this,” one man said, turning towards the keeper. The stout man shrugged and continued where he was, others laughing at the commotion. Two men sitting near a window knew better. “They never learn,” one said. Brandor approached.

“I will... wager these... boots... that you cannot... do it again,” slurred a drunken onlooker at the rear of the crowd.

Barely standing, Brandor supposed the man would not be able to reach his boots let alone take them off. Gladdened, for this situation was what the Dai-laman had been searching for, if not tucked up with a companion then this was the sort of setting his friend thrived in.

When a hush fell across the group, another pundit making a bet, Brandor peered over those encircling the entertainer. Relieved to see Kifter’s familiar features, the Fife sat in the corner, focusing on one of his many tricks. Narrow eyes beneath that familiar high hairless head were scanning the many upturned tankards populating the round table. All shapes and sizes, at least thirty in number, it was one of Kifter’s most testing challenges.

Many times the Dai-laman had fallen foul to this spectacle, sometimes losing his temper in disbelief. Whole turns were spent trying to out do the Fife, to the point of not placing anything under one of the tankards. That of course was the trick. Mixing the tankards randomly, allowing the Fife a moment’s glance before covering his head, the small ball was then placed under one. Some people would take the utmost care not to make the slightest noise, himself included, but the Fife never failed to find the ball. His keen eye for detail surpassed most, a notable skill to earn a living.

The onlookers waited, fixated by the drama. Kifter’s sharp eyes searched the table for that vital clue, nodding, assessing each possibility. Customary when faced with a real test, the contender clearly knew what he was doing. An air of expectancy gripped the room. Even the ale keeper fell silent, the Fife taking longer than usual. Brandor just waited. Examining the tankards, going over each one, the motion of Kifter’s nodding hypnotised his observers.

Raising a hand, drawing the waiting eyes closer, it hovered seductively, thumb and forefinger dancing like two elevated performers. The whole group waited. Easing down with his thumb towards a worn wooden tankard, eyes opened wider, sharp intakes of breath hissing. Like a true performer, Kifter hesitated again, the tension increasing. Wiping his brow, it kept the witnesses guessing. Odd glances wondered if he might get it wrong this time and finally be defeated. The Fife made his move. A sudden twist of his wrist, he jabbed another tankard altogether with his finger.

“How does he do it?” a burly spectator called, followed by others, equally appalled by the result.

The pale faced man opposite Kifter looked bewildered. “You have done it again,” he said, reaching over and lifting the tankard indicated. Underneath was the small black ball Kifter used for this display. The Fife did not move for a moment as if relieved, sighing at how close it had been. Glancing up at Brandor, a calculated smile crossed his lips.

‘*A true crowd pleaser,*’ Brandor thought.

“Do you want... to wager... my... boots?” said the highly intoxicated fellow again, the Fife tucking away his reward.

“Not tonight,” Kifter said, patting the man on the back. Potential problems were always at his door. “Maybe tomorrow,” he said, rising.

Cursing under his breath, the man went to the bar to order another drink. Accepting the game was over, everyone returned to their tables or filed out the door.

“It has been a longer wait than I expected,” Kifter said, reaching out to his larger friend, embracing him .

“Too long,” Brandor admitted. “I have been busy.”

“You must remember to have some fun whilst you labour,” The Fife said, aware of the immense efforts the old man had made of late.

“Hmm..., there is not much time for that at the moment.”

“Come,” The Fife urged, motioning towards a table in the far corner. Signalling to the ale keeper for two tankards, he stopped when his friend objected.

“Make mine... water.”

“Sorry, old routines,” Kifter apologised, gesturing with his hand to change the order. Eager to share what he knew, “I have heard much whilst staying at Tilor,” The Fife said, sitting down. “And by the looks of it..., so have you. Is it that bad?”

“It could be worse,” Brandor said. “*Dark Forces* are on the increase, but... there is always hope, and new possibilities.”

“That still sounds grim.”

“Yes, the signs *are* ominous.”

Supping their drinks brought by the keeper, since the gaming had finished, there were now only a handful of people left in the room.

“What have you discovered?” Brandor got straight to the point.

Lowering his voice, if others found out he was talking about things given in good faith, trouble would follow Kifter. “I have heard of evil things,” he started, checking no one was paying them any special attention. “Some details are what you have told me in the past, but there is more. I spoke to a couple of Seekers who searched areas of The Great Barrier Mountains, and their tale is most grave. They saw creatures patrolling along the northern rim of the Ravaged Planes as if protecting something. Disfigured and of unspeakable size, they have appeared from nowhere.”

An edge crept into his voice. “Both Seekers reported seeing *Nyshifters* as well. *Nyshifters* Brandor! Just like you said.” Aware of the Dai-laman’s encounter with *them*, and his subsequent brush with death, the Fife’s declaration did not seem to surprise the older man. “Both were chased by two of the winged monsters, fortune playing its part in that flight. Stumbling over the edge of a ravine, they fell into some trees.” Nimble hands

wiped his brow. "I never doubted you Brandor, but if *Nyshifters* have returned... then there is good reason to be concerned."

"There is," Brandor agreed. Even though *Nyshifters* were bad enough, it was the trace of *Gorl-darl's* influence upon *them* that blotted his memory most.

"The creatures on patrol, what do you think *they* are guarding?" Kifter asked. "You said a Force was preparing to invade, surely this is the proof you need?"

Brandor considered his words. "It would seem *he* has been busy, for what you say were pockets of these foul things, their numbers have grown to hundreds, and will increase to thousands I am quite sure. *Gorl-darl* has been creating hybrids, but from what I do not know. For those of us sensitive enough, he is distorting the *Ethers* to do so."

"Tales, when told," Kifter said, his qualms evident. "Fascinate me, but this is different. To think these creatures are real disturbs me. I trust my own survival skills, but I do feel a grave unease for others..., for you especially Brandor. I do not understand what powers are at your disposal, but to think there is another with powers matching your own, one who is bent on evil and death..., can it get any worse?"

"Hmm...", Brandor murmured. For Kifter to be moved like this, how will those ignorant of this affair react when that *evil* arrives at their door? Images of the group camped on the hill returned. "I have never mentioned it before..., for pride's sake I suppose." A feeble chuckle filtered from the Dai-laman's lips. "*Gorl-darl's* powers dwarf mine beyond recognition."

Coming to terms with that last statement, Kifter chose not to get rattled, trusting a way could be found to head off disaster. "What do you plan to do next?"

"The future is getting hazier by the moment," Brandor said.

"Your responsibilities are heavy," Kifter said, concerned by the burdens his friend was shouldering. "What about other Members of The Hisian-Set..., should they not be doing something?"

"They are dealing with it in their own way. They seek answers of the supernatural kind that may produce fruit if we are lucky. Likewise, the many Masters living right across The Freelands are too. They are all striving to find the right way forward."

"It seems unreasonable that you alone are trying to muster a defence."

"Someone has to do it," Brandor said, as if it was not an issue.

Unconvinced, Kifter let it be. "What else has been happening?"

Briefly explaining his dream and subsequent travels across The Freelands to find the right heir, Brandor's mood heightened at the idea of Hanor's potential.

"*A Point of Light in the heart of a High-House Heir?*" Kifter repeated when Brandor finished. "What does that mean?"

"I do not know, but... I do know the lad has been awakened to *The Sacred*."

"You have lost me," The Fife said, unashamed. "Awakened...?"

Explaining some of the mysteries of life to Kifter in the past, but this was something entirely new. "An Awakening is when your perception alters and you start to think and feel different. Sometimes it happens subtly, other times it can be quite profound. Hanor experienced the latter."

"And from this Awakening... springs forth the potential which you see in him?"

"There is potential in all of us..., but yes, if he is willing."

“Will he grow to be like you?”

“Perish the thought, I would not wish that on anyone,” Brandor joked. “But yes..., there is that possibility. He has already felt the inner peace of *The Sacred*.”

“You have spoken about that peace before, and as wonderful as it sounds... it is difficult to imagine.”

“I know, hence why it is called an *Awakening*. Only when the veil starts to lift between this world and the next do you become conscious of *it*.”

“Sounds nice, but it does not seem to do much against evil when it appears.”

“Perhaps the Awakening of Hanor is the beginning of that invisible help,” Brandor said, keeping his hopes tight.

“What are you expecting of him?”

“He is a person with weaknesses, fears and doubts just like me and you, however, the potential in him is very strong, and it is my task to ensure that potential matures.”

“Is this where I fit into your plans?” the Fife asked, thinking ahead.

“Sharp as always, Kifter. Yes..., there is something I need you to do.”

Chapter 5: Letting Go

A loud clatter woke Hanor with a start. Not wishing to stir from his slumber, he feigned sleep, the sounds of Rainer approaching drawing him to his senses. Groaning, the audible coughing of that now familiar alarm deflated his will to carry on. The fifth morning since that fateful experience with Brandor by the lake, those memories were now a bleary mist through the shadows of fatigue. Yester-turn's morning swim followed by a long trek with a log strapped to his back had nearly killed him. Every part of his being was lamenting for freedom from this tyranny. There was nothing left to give.

"Are you eager for another turn of the day's work?" asked the unrelenting figure, whipping the thin blanket away from Hanor.

Not responding, wanting to cry and return home from this madness, Hanor dared to open his eyes. The beaming grin staring down was that of a starved animal savouring its final meal. Surprised that the sun was up, the three previous mornings had been a struggle in the dark, the polite cough announcing the beginning of a new turn. Certain it had been Rainer's way of teasing him, he now waited for the barrage of verbal abuse that was sure to come.

"Your meal is ready," was all that Rainer said.

Turning, he walked back to the small fire burning on the other side of the clearing, leaving Hanor to stare after him.

Suspicious, sensing something strange in the air, what was he up to? Leaning on his elbows, Hanor checked the vicinity. Two ropes had failed in the night, leaving the canopy flapping to his side. Chirping sounds of the forest sang, reminding him that life continued whether he got up or not. Trees encircled behind and to his left, with Freemans Lake spanning out like a mirror of calm to his right. It all seemed too peaceful for his liking.

Sitting up, grimacing, something was going on. His charge brought across a bowl of steaming broth, a lump of dried datter milk and a slice of quaner for him to eat, the smile given added further uncertainty. The trickster returned to the fire, surprises a part of his nature. Rarely had Hanor been given a chance to relax. Determined to prepare him for life in the real world, the notion had sometimes filled him with respect for the man. It did nothing to help when in the grips of an arm-lock or leapt on from behind, but there was still enough to appreciate what he was trying to do.

A hard path to follow, Rainer had absorbed his frustrations without protest. Working him through like a master craftsman, many tantrums had he thrown. Calling upon his position as Heir of Manson, but a snide grin was all Rainer had needed to silence him. With his parents' approval to do this, left Hanor helpless. Not pushing him beyond his measure, but Rainer had certainly taken him to his limits.

Aching to the bone, wondering what this turn of the day might bring, he looked again at his compatriot. Thick heavy-set arms controlling agile, skilful hands dished his own meal up like any deft cook at home in a Cook-house. A square solid complexion, with wiry mottled hair covering deep eyes, his guide and teacher was capable of hiding every emotion. Hanor did not realise he was staring when Rainer looked back.

"Do you have something to ask?"

Startled, not once had Rainer tried to strike up conversation. Lacking in energy, Hanor had not pressed for it much, blaming him for his sufferings rather than the seasons of idle

abandonment he himself was guilty of. Stammering, his boyish manner returning, “Er... no..., yes... er..., I am not sure.”

“You are quite a young man,” Rainer chuckled, revealing traces of respect himself.

Unsure of his meaning, Hanor waited for more but nothing was added, leaving him guessing.

For a while, the two just sat eating the full flavoured broth, a worthy reward for their gruelling efforts.

Finishing his meal, Rainer turned to him with that knowing expression Hanor had come to know and fear. “When your father first said of the task concerning you,” the robust figure began. “I scoffed at his request. Not disrespectfully of course, but... disbelief.” Smirking as if agreeing with those first doubts, “You have been an interesting challenge, testing my methods and convictions.” The quiet husky voice was personal in what he was offering.

Hanor did not move, this was completely unexpected.

“I have pushed you hard, some might say *too* hard,” Rainer said, coughing as if the difficult words were tickling his throat.

Hanor wondered if his father’s closest aide was working towards an apology for his brutal techniques. So unlike him, he could not help but look for the mischief.

“Come,” Rainer said, motioning for Hanor to join him.

Shocked at the invite, Hanor hesitated, still scarred by the many tricks this man had pulled.

“It is not everyday that I talk..., so please, come and sit.”

Rubbing dry eyes, as if his body was purposely placing obstacles to stop him going, Hanor checked for Rainer’s motives, surprised at his sincerity. Rising, he stretched, a painful reminder of what he had endured at the hands of this man. Cautious, he strolled over and sat opposite, undecided where this might lead. Requiring strength just to stay put, he waited, ignoring his own suffering.

“You have proven to be a worthy student,” Rainer began, thoughtful. “Up until now, you were someone for whom work and life had limited value and purpose. Even so, you have met my trials with courage and passion. Raising my tempo to increase your skills, you have survived the hardest of what I could demand from you. Your bite, thankfully, is not as vicious as it sounds, and there is fire in you that I like. I was expecting you to sulk more than you did; a credit to you Hanor. It appears you are made of tough iron rather than fragmented wood, something your father will be proud of.” Growing fond of the lad, but pain had a terrible way of scarring people. Waiting for a possible outburst, at least the boy now had a fighting chance.

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, half-expecting Rainer to jump up mocking him for falling for this trickery, words failed Hanor. Anticipating further challenges, he was so used to the constant hammering at his will that nothing would surprise him more. Hope floated close, swaying like treasure set in a trap. Exhausted, he was unable to respond. Body tender, he was mentally worn out. What could he say? This man was doing the will of his father, how could he be blamed?

Glancing down at the hilted swords beside Rainer, he recalled the many short-turns spent training at ridiculous times of the day. Thrashing them around as if his life depended on it, conceding one day it just might, on the second night of his training, this

creature had attacked in the dark, sword in hand, testing him on what he had learnt. Convinced the other was trying to kill him, only Brandor's encouragement to learn as much as he could had reminded him of the real reason behind it. Those potent words had saved him many times whilst in the throws of misery, and only now could he appreciate the benefits.

One question now sprung to mind. For his own sanity, to make sure he was not misinterpreting this situation, he stared hard at Rainer, daring him to say otherwise. "Are we done with this training?"

Furious at his parents for still not sharing details about Hanor's whereabouts, Nole rubbed his throbbing temples, sitting moodily on the small hillock where he had found his bewildered brother five turns of the day ago. A vague hope of finding a clue, he had searched the area every day since. Bane had been helpful, eager to find out too, but had been no less successful.

Gazing out across the lake, it was a glorious turn of the day, and one usually spent swimming under the sun's energising rays. But not since Hanor's disappearance had any of them had the heart to swim or play. As if an invisible cloud had descended over their world, the fact of not knowing seemed harder than what the actual details might be. Alienating himself from his parents, frustrations had hit out at his friends too. No one was eager to tolerate his company, and he was in no frame of mind to talk pleasantries. Just wanting to know what was going on, why would they not trust him?

Casting a stick into the lake, he stood and then made his way back. Trapped, he did not want to be alone, yet could not bear being around anyone. Seeking out Bane, the faint hope of his friend finding something spurred him to put one foot in front of the other.

Lizan stroked her beloved son's head tenderly as he lay asleep. Travel-stained and weary, Hanor was oblivious to the love pouring over him by his dedicated mother. Teardrops cascaded, knowing she was about to lose him.

Enduring Rainer's harsh training, it both alarmed and appeased her. To think he had suffered panged her as if failing him, falling short of what a protective parent should do. But deep down, she knew better. Respecting it was for his own good, Rainer had said how well he had done. Now, all she had to do was let go, to grant the freedom all children deserved. But try as she might, that strange experience when giving birth kept repeating itself, forcing her to hold on.

Notified by the guards of his return just after dusk, they had all been eager to see him, Nole especially. But upon reaching his room, he was already asleep, Manon wisely motioning them back. Nole of course had stormed off, still in the dark about what was going on. A lingering problem, she had considered whether to send him as well for support, but her heart would not take it.

Rising, she left the room. Kifter, the Fife, the one Brandor promised would come, had arrived the previous evening. Checking his strengths and character, to her relief, he had proven to have a deep understanding of life and The Freelands. Despite that, the notion of just one person escorting their son to Tarden was worrying. Others were joining them later, but it was a grave risk. Sighing, she went back to bed to get what sleep she could.

Attempting to rise, Hanor's stiff neck jolted him, resting his head back on the tiled floor to ease the pain. Presuming he must have fallen out of bed, just lying there felt good. Cool and safe, absorbing the moment of refuge when realising where he was, familiar noises drifted up from elsewhere in the High-house, adding a sense of security. Soothing sensations in his heart calmed him further. Tempted to stay put, but family ties urged him to get up. Vacating his room, he made for the kitchens, hunger calling.

Entering the Cook-house, with its dusty beams of sunlight angling through the windows, the half-day mealtime had passed, now empty and ready for Hanor's pleasure. Needing to eat before addressing his family, he went to one of the huge store-larders, the aroma of freshly baked *quaner* fuelling his appetite. Grabbing one, some fruit and a lump of spicy datter-milk, he turned back towards one of the large black stone tables to sit down, but stopped. He was not alone.

Sitting across the Kitchen, keen narrow eyes were staring at him from beneath a hood of the deepest blue. Not hearing the newcomer enter, recognising him to be a Fifanian from the south, he felt unsettled, unknowing what to do. Gaining strength at being in his own home, he sat down, placing the food on the table.

"I... have not seen you... around here before," he managed, politely. The Fife did not move or acknowledge his greeting. "Are you a guest?" Hanor added, biting into the *quaner* and waiting for a response. The sly looking figure still did not respond. Awkward, hoping a kitchen hand would enter, Hanor continued eating. Presuming good manners would persuade the newcomer to speak, but he could only wait for so long.

Halfway through his food, he stopped eating. Suspicious of the outlandish figure, who rudely kept staring, Hanor thought about leaving, but to eat somewhere else would be like running, and it seemed inappropriate to do that. Out in the wild, things would be different, but here was unacceptable.

"Do you want to say something?" he asked, apprehensive. The Fife remained motionless. "Not a polite way to greet somebody; I thought Fifanians were friendly."

The Fife's sudden, unprovoked response staggered the young lad. Leaping from his stool onto the table with the deftness of a Seeker, it shocked the unsuspecting heir, the nimble figure landing on the table directly in front of him.

Lurching backwards, powerless to retain his balance, Hanor fell from his stool. Expecting to be jumped on from behind, hoping Rainer's training would kick in, aches were forgotten when struggling to get up on the cleansed tiled floor. Slipping, when his feet did grip, the bout of laughter from behind was most unexpected. Unsure if it was the mocking of a friend or foe, Hanor clambered to his feet and faced the challenger.

Dry, humorous eyes and an outstretched hand stressed there were no ill feelings as far as the Fifanian was concerned.

Snapped from his lethargy, body pulsing with adrenalin, Hanor held his ground, unsure what might follow. Angry that he could not eat in peace, was this his future, his doom? Pleased at his initial reaction, confident he could put up a fight, it did not occur to him to call for aid, Rainer's training giving him the self-belief to confront his aggressor.

Sincere eyes soon sought forgiveness, the Fife springing from the table as quickly as he had climbed it. Hand still outstretched, Hanor was still coming to terms with this intrusion to do anything. To move that quick, only *The Sacred* knew what this newcomer

was capable of. What could he do against such speed anyway? Not ready to commit, he declined the handshake, bending to pick up the fallen stool.

“I apologise for my methods and rudeness,” the Fifanian tried. Detecting a degree of mirth, Hanor sensed the stranger still enjoyed the encounter. “My name is Kifter,” the slender figure greeted. Frowning, Hanor still felt rattled. “Is this the way you greet people?” he asked. The peace in his heart had gone. “Is it not reasonable to enquire after the person one will be travelling with?” The Fife offered, to justify his actions. Hanor stopped, recalling Brandor mentioning that someone would come for him. “What did you say your name was?” “Kifter.”

Half a head shorter, it seemed preposterous that this small Fife was a worthy guide and protectorate. Deciding this fellow was not having it all his own way, “No..., I have decided to go with someone else.” Unprepared for that response, “Oh...,” he said, scanning for the deception. “Rainer..., Manson’s second in command is taking me,” Hanor said. Still irritated, a battle of wills with Rainer had clearly developed a sharpness he never had before. “Rainer...! I think not,” Kifter said, uncertain of the exact details the boy had agreed with Brandor. “He is responsible, and more than capable of the task. I do not need a fool to take me.” Maintaining an even gaze, Hanor felt the narrow eyes scan him again.

After a brief pause, “I detect a trickster before me,” Kifter said. Tight lips pursing, he started chuckling. “You nearly convinced me there.” A glint in his eyes had given the boy away. “Clever. Brandor said he was surprised by you. You have a quick wit, which means I had better watch my tail.” Shaken by the incident, Hanor was still far from impressed.

Lying on his bed, Hanor felt exhausted. Why had his life become so complex? On leaving the Kitchens earlier, he had found his parents waiting in their Leisure Room waiting for him. Surprised by the subdued atmosphere, they had kept their distance like formal visitors from another region. When explaining that he had grown into a young man they could be proud of, their detachment had been as shocking as it was confusing. The fact he was getting involved in The Freelands’ plight had not moved them at all. Brandor must have told them about the incident by the lake, so why had they not reacted to it? Tolerating the strained atmosphere for as long as he could, when leaving, his mother’s sad gaze had shown that they did care, but were too upset to show it.

Needing to clear his thoughts, he had strayed into the gardens awaiting his brother’s turn. ‘*Could he really go without Nole and Bane?*’ was the question that kept repeating itself. Hypocritical, there was no way he would let Nole go on his own.

When his younger brother did arrive, two concerned eyes had demanded justification for the secrecy. Spluttering his way through frail answers, he had let slip that he was to go on an errand for Brandor. The lack of details had not been good enough for his brother, who demanded more. Avoiding where he had to go by talking about his training in preparation for the trip, they had tossed back and forth before tiredness had got the better

of him. Promising to talk tomorrow, he had left his brother in the garden, guilt weighing him down. Meaning what he said, Kifter's sudden appearance on returning to his room was what troubled him now. Filling him with dread and a sense of betrayal if he were to carry it out, the Fife's piercing tone meant the easy life was over. "*I will call you before sun-up, be ready for an early start,*" he had said, unconcerned by the emotional baggage Hanor had to deal with.

Tears rolling, the child in him returning, what was he getting into?

Chapter 6: Unusual Guide

Hanor stood watchful, the great storm in the distance approaching, so terrible with its destruction. Tearing up the earth as it came, below, the field moaned as if alive. Convulsing, blood seeped higher out of the ground covering his feet. The earthquake, far stronger now, rattled him as the huge cavern opened again. Teetering, the great booming voice juddered the hillside. "HELP ME NOW!"

Sitting up, Hanor gasped for air, the darkness about him intensifying the dream. So life-like, shame caressed him for daring to wake from the nightmare. Tainted by guilt, demanding he should do more, time pressed him, urging action.

Confused, had he not committed himself enough already? Getting a glimpse of just how serious this was, there was no room for the complacent boy of yester-turn. Annoyed at the subtle impressions urging him to move, clambering out of bed, were *The Sacred* unimpressed by his efforts? Frowning at using that term, it came too easily for his liking.

Putting on his over-gown in the early morning chill, uncertain what stage of the night it was, he went downstairs for something to eat. Tempted to wake Nole to unburden himself before his travels, he decided against it, knowing his younger brother would shackle him until he got answers. Hampered by his dreams, his waking life was no different. He was about to break his brother's heart.

Entering the Kitchen, a lamp was aglow on one of the large polished stone tables. Movement from within one of the huge larders stalled Hanor. If it was Nole, what would he say? Gulping, his brother surely deserved more from him?

Thumping pressures increased, trying to catch any familiar sounds to whom it might be. It could be his mother. If there was ever a time he needed her, it was now, her strength reassuring during periods of crisis. That was another reason why he felt as he did. To see her in such a vulnerable state alarmed him to what he was actually about to do. She knew more than he, was that why she was so afraid? Were there dangers that even Brandor was not prepared to reveal?

Another clink from behind the large wooden door alerted him back to the present. Thoughts of sneaking out teased him. Determined to stand his ground, if it was a member of his family, then a final good-bye outweighed any potential complications.

A dropped pan made him jump. Cursing, a hiss echoed around the large Kitchen. Whoever it was, they were doing their utmost to stay quiet. Before he could react, the person came out.

"I presumed it was you," the mysterious figure of Kifter said, unperturbed by Hanor's presence. Loaded with food and supplies, he shrugged as if the clatter had nothing to do with him. "I did not touch it of course, someone must have stacked it wrong. My failure was not catching it." Placing the supplies on the table, his movements were nimble and quiet.

"Do you always blame other people?" Hanor said, forcing a degree of mirth to fend off anxieties. Relieved yet saddened that it was not his brother, he was now approaching the point of no return.

The Fife grinned, thin curving lips cutting into his cheeks. "Not the best way to convince you of my abilities. I promise you..., things will get better." Turning, he tripped over the doorstep. Feigning disgust, Kifter winked, meaning it as a joke.

"Do you require a *quiet* hand?" Hanor teased. With no emotional turmoil to deal with, good humour was what he needed.

"This is the last of it," the Fife said, glancing towards the exit. "It is good that you are up, your Kyboe is waiting outside."

"My... kyboe?"

"Unless you wish to walk to Tarden?"

"Er... no, of course not. I did not know I had one."

"The honourable Rainer has set it aside for you."

"Rainer...?" Thoughts of his father's second in command had escaped him since returning to Manson.

"Yes..., a solid fellow, and likable. The Kyboe he chose is a good one."

"When do we leave?" Hanor asked, the jitters getting the better of him.

"I thought you might insist on kisses and farewells from your nearest before we leave. Not that I am insensitive, but it can be most awkward."

"I would have wanted to in the past, but this secrecy takes some getting used to."

"The family life has its demands," acknowledged the Fife. "A free spirit is hard to tie down once it has been granted room to fly. Those left behind are the ones who suffer. To be free is to be alive."

"I just want to get started. If I think about what I am doing, it may stop me."

"Doubts can be destructive," Kifter said, checking over the supplies before picking them up. again "Shall we see what the morning has in store for us?"

Hesitating, a rush of fear grabbed Hanor. Was he really doing this? Refusing to think about Nole and Bane, "I need my clothes," he said. He had not even freshened up.

"Your mother has already taken care of it. Here!" He pointed towards a low bench loaded with various articles of clothing. "I have spared you embarrassment by removing the bed clothes." Smirking, he exited the Kitchen. "Other necessities have already been packed." The door closed behind him, a last line of defence from the ominous world outside.

Haunting, an eerie silence closed in on Hanor, an invisible barrier to his future. Checking the neatly folded clothing, a new dusty orange hide-skin overcoat was the most notable item. New boots made from the toughest of skins waited for that final step of no return. He was going to miss them.

When ready, Hanor walked outside. Halting, Kifter was talking to someone. To his relief, Rainer's voice hummed through the half-light.

"Well Hanor, it is good to see you ready like I taught you," Rainer said, half-hidden features grinning.

"As ready as I can be," he said, falling in beside Kifter who was still packing.

The Fife's Kyboe was crouching, unconcerned with its master's activities. "Rainer has mentioned about your commendable efforts," Kifter said, fastening the final strap before checking the other bags. "A credit to you."

"I feel better for it," Hanor said, wishing Rainer could come with them. "I have not even thanked you."

“The reward is mine,” Rainer said. “I hope it will serve you well. Your mother has still not forgiven me, but I am sure she will come round.”

They laughed.

“I wish we could have got to know each other better,” Hanor said, an idea forming. “On my return..., perhaps you can teach me more. Not quite as severe though.”

“It is the harsh lessons from which we learn most,” Rainer said. “I accept your request nonetheless.”

Stretching, Hanor felt a shade of apprehension bite him. This was happening so fast. Mixed loyalties groaned as thoughts about his family tried to undo him one last time. Determined to do this, the experience by the lake with Brandor returned, the power and sense of life captivating. How could he not want more?

Muffled snorts from the two awaiting Kyboes jetted into the predawn, heralding their readiness. The Fife mounted effortlessly, Hanor’s confidence about the traveller from the south increasing. The incident in the Kitchen yester-turn supported the fact that he was in capable hands.

Tender aches did not deter Hanor, climbing onto his own Kyboe. Musty, animal sweat suggested his mount felt the anticipation too. Snorting, the Kyboe stood and stretched its two powerful legs. Rotating its huge block of a head, it looked up at the stars above to iron out stiff joints.

“A bit like how I feel,” Hanor said, taking hold of the reins.

Saying farewell, Kifter and Hanor started out towards the main gates. Querying why the guards were absent, Hanor halted, glancing behind one last time. Tinged with sadness, arched windows seemed sorrowful at the departure of one of Manson’s sons. Peering up at his room, his heart fluttered, certain two figures had stepped back. Hoping his parents would accept the decision he had made, what did they know that he did not?

Waving to let them know he had seen them, he turned and continued out of the gate.

Working their way down the causeway, a few trade shops were preparing for a new turn of the day. Baking aromas drifted out to the two early riders, Hanor realising he had not eaten. Sporadic bangs and a loud cheery voice invaded the silence, cutting through the predawn setting.

Kifter was not in a talkative mood and neither was he. Watchful, ‘*His work begins now,*’ Hanor supposed, remembering why the Fife was here in the first place. An escort to Tarden, his escort, self-importance reared its ugly head, but he discarded such notions. Not enjoying his birthright, the Fife did not strike him as one who bowed to positions of privilege anyway, just how he wanted it.

Reaching the central Market, empty stalls added to the eerie atmosphere. Passing a closed stand, two charcoal kyboes snorted at their intrusion. Standing between a wagon and the stall, fierce eyes warned them to stay back.

Detouring away, Kifter signalled for Hanor to do the same, not taking any risks. “Strange,” he whispered. “I did not detect them.”

Unsure how to react to the admittance, Hanor let the Fife ride protectively on the inside. Disliking such surprises, the tent behind them showed no signs of life. The two

dark kyboes scrutinised their passing, an edge to Kifter creeping in. Heading down the main road without further cause for alarm, they left the unsavoury creatures behind.

Pulling back the flap of his tent just when the two figures disappeared behind a building, ‘*A Fife and a young man!*’ Billor wondered, his two faithful servants alerting him to their arrival. Stepping out onto the road, never forgetting a face, the boy was local, but not the Fife.

When the two passed from view, Billor returned to his tent, patting the two bulky animals chewing on grass. “I know,” he said. “Suspicion is our work my lovelies. Yes..., it was a little unusual..., let us keep our eyes open today.” With dawn approaching, it was time to set up the stall.

Halting to appreciate the view, Kifter and Hanor took a moment from their ride, the breeze temperate and refreshing at this time of the morning. Another opportunity for the young Heir to consider what he was actually doing, the sun seemed just as hesitant on the horizon. Casting long sinewy shadows across the undulating terrain in front, down and across to their right chimneys billowed trails of smoke across the low valley. Huddled between grand trees and the surrounding hillside, the Cropping Village of Sorle was half-hidden under the early morning mist, preparing for another turn of day in the fields. Lara lived somewhere close. Never visiting her home, Hanor promised to change that on his return.

Continuing along the beaten track, the Croppers were not up; unsurprising considering their late night activities. Renowned for their work and play philosophy, it permitted the two riders a welcomed solace. Riding between ploughed fields, different crops imbued rich colours and contrast; browns and greens mingling with faded reds and yellows. Large berry bushes lining each side of the road were home to an abundance of wildlife, creatures like Fliryngs and Gombols, Rassers and Finks. Bane, Nole and Hanor had been this way several times camping. One of many jaunts as adolescents, a favourite pastime was to disrupt the Croppers. Falling foul to their wrath, only to move on and lark about elsewhere, they had been good times. Nevertheless, Hanor was glad to have outgrown it, at last emerging into the real world.

Scattered clouds roving above seemed a long way from any future troubles. Brandor’s warnings about Dark Forces brought Hanor’s haunting dreams to mind, and so too the doubts about his actions. Not needing it right now, he focussed instead on his experience by the lake when Brandor had lit up his whole world. Just by redirecting his attention, the rhythms of his heart changed, a lasting peace rising. Not as dramatic as his original awakening, it was still enough to appreciate.

Stopping for an early meal, hunger demanding attention, Kifter and Hanor sat under a low-lying biddel tree to rest. The cropping fields were long gone, replaced by oceans of wild-grass, flowers, and islands of bush and tree. The sun was up, beaming its wonder.

Behaving as if he had not eaten for a few turns, Kifter gave Hanor a stark warning. “When venturing into the unknown, be wise in word and deed. Eating... is a deed. To continue as you are, we will run out of food within a few turns. Take your time, and be patient. Your hunger does not need as much food as it pretends. Give it a while, and your appetite will cease. What you have already eaten should last you until tonight.”

Taken aback, Hanor stopped eating. “Berries, quaner and datter milk... are not what I would call a meal.”

“You will have to do it the hard way then,” Kifter said. “Believe me, you will have to learn to control your appetite. It is lying when it demands more. Be patient and watch.”

“Watch what?”

“Your appetite. Just think about other things and the hunger will subside.”

“Are you serious?”

“Pack away the rest, the salt-liner will keep it well.”

Hanor hesitated.

“Do you want to learn or not?” Kifter frowned. An arduous journey this could be. “Put them away.”

Hanor’s under-breath moan was quickly retorted by his elder.

“Do you wish to do this on your own?”

“No..., it just seems peculiar. To quench a hunger... you feed it. To not feed it will leave you hungry.”

“That is the difference between you and me,” Kifter said. “You come to a conclusion before you have even tried it. To be wise is to be open to all possibilities.”

Brandor had asked for his trust, did not Kifter deserve the same? “All right..., I will try it,” Hanor said, competitiveness rising just as it had when put to the test by Rainer.

“Good,” Kifter said, rising. “Let us be on our way.”

Grumbling, “I am still a tired, I did not sleep well last night. Can we not rest a while longer?”

“I think not.” The Fife was unmoved, packing away his things. Remounting, without waiting, Kifter kicked off back towards the mud road.

Disgruntled at his new guide, after surviving Rainer, the idea of bowing to another of a similar kind was grim.

Motionless, Nole sat and waited. Concealed within one of numerous cupboards lining his parents’ bedroom wall, they had forced him into this. If only they had told him what was going on, he might have accepted what had been decided. Not wanting him to find Hanor, what choice did he have but resort to spying? Beside himself with worry, they were both to blame.

Entering Hanor’s room earlier bent on getting answers, to see him gone had been the final strain. Incensed, searching everywhere prior to charging into his parents’ room, both had been sitting on the balcony, dressed as if they had been up all night. Tear-lined expressions had not hidden their upset. Holding back, his pleas had once again hit that wall of avoidance. “He has gone away for a while,” was all they would say. Why were they treating him like a boy?

Throughout the morning, he had asked many if they knew of Hanor’s whereabouts. Disbelieving his brother could act like this, up until now they had been so close. Something was up, for Hanor would not do this to him. How serious was it?

Voices drawing near captured Nole’s attention. Daring to believe this might work, his father and mother entered the bedroom discussing Hanor. Past half-turn of the day, the atmosphere was tight. Returning to their room to change into formal attire before entertaining guests who were arriving later, Nole waited out of sight as the two people he loved started changing, unaware of his presence.

“I still want to send some of our finest men after them to make sure their passage is secure,” Manon said, restless.

“That is not what Brandor wanted,” Lizan replied, the calmer of the two.

Nole did not need to look, the exchange filtering into his hiding place.

“It is a long journey,” Manon said.

“Kifter is more than qualified for the task.”

“I do not doubt his abilities, it is the dangers out there that concern me.”

“My love,” Lizan said, sensitive to his concerns. “If we do not let go, this will consume us. He is out of our hands, how many times have we discussed this?”

“I wish I had your strength.”

“His journey is on a different path now.”

Sounds of them sitting on the bed reached Nole, his pulse racing. Imploring them to say those vital words about Hanor’s whereabouts, the waiting was unbearable.

“We have to consider Nole,” Lizan continued. “He needs us now more than ever. This is tearing him apart. We have a bridge to build if he is ever going to trust us again.”

“When should we tell him?”

“A few turns yet,” his mother said. “We dare not reveal where he has gone. You know how close they were, to lose one son is hard, but to lose two!”

“Why do you say lose, you have not said that before?”

“Oh my dearest love, you still do not get it do you?”

“This goes back to his birth does it not?” Manon wavered.

The question was unanswered, Nole knew they were cuddling each other.

“We have done our part,” she said, soothing his woes.

“Why Tarden though...? Why does he need to go there?”

Rebounding around the room before returning to a shocked Nole, he could hardly believe his cheeky plan had worked. Tarden, a place far away to the west was the home of the Tardanian People. A fascination with old maps when he was young, that interest now rewarded him with a welcomed insight. Overwhelming, the relief consuming him drew tears, the burden finally lifting from his worn shoulders.

“You have to let go, my love,” his Mother continued.

“It is hard,” Manon said rising, going to the wardrobe adjacent to Nole’s hiding place.

Heart stopping, if they were to discover him, what could he say? Pulling some clothing from the adjacent cupboard, his father returned to the bed to change, adding nothing more before they left the room.

The hidden figure did not move. If caught here they would bind him to Manson. They were right of course, how could he stay when his brother was out there on his own? Someone called Kifter was accompanying him, but by their own words, dangers were very real. What dangers did not matter, he would go after them anyway. Understanding his parents’ caution, it did not justify their lack of respect.

A quiver of excitement touched him. Deciding a plan was needed, every moment was precious, separated by the long step of a Kyboe. He had to be quick. Checking all was safe before exiting the room, he had to tell Bane. Making a pact to get to the bottom of this, it was only right his friend should know, he would want to come too.

“I will go to the old Book-hall and find a map,” Nole said, finding Bane soon after leaving his parents’ bedroom. Sitting in their Leisure Room, it was the only safe place to share the discovery. Bane’s glee echoed his own when laying out the plan.

“And I will make ready two Kyboes,” Bane said, his excitement evident. Always ready for adventure, this one surpassed all others. “We will need supplies and spare clothing. How far did you say Tarben was?”

“Tarden,” Nole corrected him, laughing for the first time in what seemed like an age. “It is many turns, so make sure you prepare. No cakes, just dried, long-lasting food.”

“You forget..., I am the traveller here. I taught you..., remember?”

“This is not a game, we have to get it right.”

“Too true,” Bane said, calming down. “Leave it to me.”

“I will meet you at the enclosure. Hide the supplies outside the city walls by the hanging tree. Knowing my parents, guards will be looking for anything suspicious.”

“The enclosure it is then.”

Leaving the Book-hall, dust irritated Nole’s nose. Taking the map from the hall’s collection was not stealing, he just needed to borrow it indefinitely. Discarding the excuse as irrelevant, more important matters were at hand, his brother’s safety for one. Ignoring the doubts warning him of his actions, his parents would be horrified, but it was their fault for treating him as a child.

Exiting the High-house grounds, Nole wanted to say goodbye to his parents, even if only subtly. But on seeing him, they might insist on justifying their actions of late, delaying his departure. No, there was no time and it was too risky.

Guards on the wall watched Nole as he ambled by, pretending nothing was wrong. With the map tucked away in his pocket, he could ill afford to falter. Daring not to utter a word, for a quivering tongue would betray him, he passed unhindered, filing down through the City.

It was now three parts into the turn with the sun already heading towards its setting. Intending to ride a considerable distance from Manson before nightfall, there was a possibility of continuing into the night to recoup lost ground if need be. His parents would send a search party once they discovered he had left, but that was a minor issue.

Shivers ran through Nole. Nervous that he and Bane were untrained, Hanor had at least received some expert guidance by Rainer. Misgivings surged at what he could do if his brother did get into trouble. Concluding it was to be there for him, a shoulder to lean on, it would have to do. Love was a powerful tool. If this Kifter was to abandon him, at least he would not.

“Have you remembered everything?” Nole asked Bane, his friend leaning against the large open door of the enclosure.

“Of course,” he said, twirling a blade of grass in his mouth. “Two Kyboes await us inside.”

“Has anyone asked questions?”

“Rainer walked by but just grimaced. Others glanced across, but said nothing.”

“Good,” Nole said, entering the building.

“What took you so long?”

“There are many books in the hall, I could not just ask for a map to Tarden... could I?”

“I suppose not.”

Checking their mounts, they led them down to the city gates. People continued bustling about, oblivious to their passing. Strange faces, unnoticed before, appeared disquieting. Glimpsing potential hazards at every corner, were they really capable of going through with it?

Avoiding two unsavoury Kyboes with fierce eyes, the two boys hurried along, not noticing the bearded fellow had finished serving a customer and was watching them go.

Arriving at the hanging tree outside the city walls, out of view of travellers and the recently commissioned patrols, they packed their Kyboes. Bags of mostly food and water were soon ready.

“A little berry intoxicant for good luck,” Bane said. Taking a swig from a small hip flask, he offered it across to his friend.

“Not now,” Nole declined, a gurgling stomach reacting to their hushed activities. “I just want to get going.”

“Me too,” Bane said, climbing onto his Kyboe. “It has been a while since I rode one of these.” Getting comfortable, legs angled down and out in front, he turned to Nole who looked anxious. “You are holding the reins too tight.”

Finding it difficult to relax, Nole took a moment to calm both himself and his Kyboe.

Gazing out across the bumping terrain, the two young men paused just long enough to be sure this was the right course of action.

“Shall we go?” Nole said, satisfied all was well. “We have to go west.”

“Which way is that?” Bane teased.

Clipping his heels, Nole pushed out from between the protective trees and bush of their hiding place. Out of range of Manson, only the patrols could stop them now.

“Are you sure you know which way to go?” Bane called from behind. Tarden was many turns ride, and the odds of getting lost were likely.

Shrugging, Nole just carried on. Using the sun as his guide, its final passage was lying south of the target. No idea how far ahead his brother was, he did not care. Just finding him was all that mattered.

Chapter 7: Handling the Doubts

Opting to leave the main roadway that veered south, Kifter chose a more direct route west along an ancient path now overgrown. Crossing wild grazing lands, the Fife and his young charge soaked up the blooms of colour, crossing hills and gullies awash with Fliryms and buzzes. This was a haven from the bustling life of a city. Wary eyes investigated the unusual rumblings of their passing. Scurrying off into well-concealed dens pending a return to normality, such intrusions were short-lived as the two riders pressed on. A bright sun arced like an enormous timepiece towards the latter parts of the turn, the ride going well. Slowing to a walk, drawing their labour to an end, it was an opportunity to get to know each other.

“Will you tell me about Brandor?” Hanor invited, refraining from prying into the Fife’s own story.

“Brandor!” the slender fellow jolted, as if pulled back from a daydream. “I have known him for a very long time,” he said, ensuring nothing untoward was on the move. Passing through thick patches of bumpy wild-grass and weed, they were on their own. “And I will share with you how we first met, if you are willing?” The telling of tales was his favourite pastime.

“Please do.”

“As a young cheeky Fife,” Kifter started, savouring the warm setting of this late short-turn in the day. “I was always on the lookout for adventure. Getting into mischief with my elders, I regularly outwitted those around me. My father was often away working for The High-house of Fion, so I had to keep myself busy. Then, one bright turn of day, the wise old figure of Brandor entered my life.”

A Fliryms with reddish fur and a light grey underbelly flew off just in front, flapping from amongst the long wild-grass up into a nearby tree.

“Bored as I often used to be,” Kifter continued, the small creature sitting on its hind legs and grooming its tight fur. “The Cook-house roof was a great place for action. Adjoined to the rear of The High-house, I had just discovered a nest of rotten eggs and was mulling over what to do with them. Searching for a target, who should walk along but our good friend Brandor. I had seen him before, but did not know anything about him. Self-assured as I was, not sensing a threatening manner to his person, I let him have an egg.”

“Have an egg?”

“Well..., I... threw it at him.”

Laughing, “Did it hit him?”

“Another of my favourite activities was to throw stones at very small targets. As we both know..., he is not the smallest of objects.”

“Where did you get him?”

“Only here.” Pointing at his smooth high forehead, he shrugged. “I was very young you might understand.”

“What did he do?”

Kifter sighed. “I am not sure you want to hear.”

“Was he furious?”

“Not exactly. I thought he was just an old man, but how wrong I was. Before I had left the roof, he appeared to cut off my escape.”

“What happened?”

“He threw me over the side of the building.”

“No...! Were you all right?” Hanor could not believe Brandor would do such a thing.

“My whole short life flashed before me,” Kifter said. An instinctive ability to tell tantalising stories drew his young charge closer. “Even in mid-air I could not believe it. Discarded like rubbish... I was convinced it was the end.”

“Well...?” Hanor urged, the Fife’s pause leaving him dangling.

“Yes, like a piece of rubbish,” Kifter repeated. “So it was only fitting that I should land in a pile of kitchen waste.”

“Really...?”

“Of the very worst kind.”

“Were you hurt?”

“No, just foul to be near. When he came down, Brandor was not impressed.”

“I can picture it.”

“Presuming my torment was to continue, but to my fortune, he just laughed.”

Ushering the two new companions towards a new level of friendship, the light tale cleared the air. Disappearing behind the undulating hillside, the sun’s departure alerted them to the encroaching night.

“You can set up camp,” Kifter said, pulling in beneath a tree.

“Me!” Hanor was astonished. “I am not very good at it.”

“I will decide that for myself.”

“Are we troubled?” Kifter asked from across the fire. Commending Hanor earlier for his first attempt at cooking, the boy had done well considering he was not a master cook like himself.

“It is nothing,” Hanor said, suppressing what he felt. Missing Nole and Bane, the sense of betrayal was strong. Emerging whilst they had eaten, he could not shift the emptiness.

“A problem shared helps.”

Exhausted, and not really in the mood to open up, the Fife was still right. “It is my family. I am confused.”

“Loved ones should be considered in all that you do.”

The troubled youth frowned. “I have come on this journey at the request of Brandor, a person who I do not really know, and have caused a great deal of upset at home. He asked me to trust him, saying I would find out more when I was ready, but I have turned my life upside down on very little.” The encounter by the lake could hardly be called little, but his current mood would not let go. “I need convincing as to whether I am doing the right thing. He talked about threats to The Freelands, but what can I do anyway?”

Flames crackling, Kifter scratched his long chin, considering what should be said. “Most people would find it difficult to leave their friends and family like you have. It would be unwise for me to burden you with what lays ahead of us now. We have plenty of time to share details over the coming turns. What you are doing is honourable, and that is something to be proud of.”

Staring into the fire, Hanor was uncertain if the Fife’s words helped or hindered. He did feel as though he was doing the right thing, but the guilt of leaving Nole and Bane remained. Settling down under his blanket, he felt drained.

Gloomy, the deluge did not cease in strength the following turn, blurring the horizon. The greyness tried dampening Hanor's spirits, but he held his nerve when riding into the after-turns. Levelling out, the terrain stretched far into the distance. Soft underfoot, the Kyboes bounded on as if free at last. Long ago, these planes had been their natural habitat, until adopted as bearers. Instinctive to life outside, even though content to serve their masters, their timid, adaptable natures had contributed enormously to life here in The Freelands.

By early evening, the downpour eased, diminishing to a saturating drizzle. Hanor treated the rain with the same dogged resolve he had Rainer. Digging in, stubbornness had its benefits. A small wood ahead welcomed them like a large ship amongst smaller, more exposed vessels. Protection from the damp was essential.

"I will spoil you now," Kifter said, pulling in amongst the trees. Leaping down, he found a sheltered part and began clearing away the foliage. "Set the fire just there using twigs that are small and dry. Look under logs and bushes, damp wood will smoke."

Proceeding as ordered, Hanor rummaged around the small clearing, ignoring the rapid snapping of branches behind. When complete, he was most surprised when the fire ignited. Turning, waiting for the praises of his elder, he stopped, astounded. The Fife had somehow conjured up a makeshift bed. Branches, vines and leaves spanning between two trees appeared lavish compared to the hard ground of last night.

"I do not believe you have made that."

"I am not sure where you are going to sleep tonight," Kifter teased.

Laughing, the grimness of the turn's ride dissipating, "You have made that... for me?"

"At your service," the lean figure replied, bowing. "Let us not get overexcited. A bed is a bed..., whether on the floor or in a grand room at the inn. You have a short rest, the rain has stopped so I will put up the canopy tonight and prepare the meal."

"I...", Hanor started protesting, but Kifter was not having it.

Indicating the makeshift bed, "Be wise in both word and deed," he said, signalling for him to move. "I see someone who battled hard to keep going today. You need to rest."

Enough to seal the argument, Hanor was tired. Not fully recovered from Rainer's training yet, he laid his mat on top. Taking his time to settle into its clutches, the creaking motions of the cradle held his weight, closing in about him. Comforting, only now could he appreciate just how worn out he was. The relief was blissful

Kifter's fixing of the canopy above went unnoticed, as too did the Fife's hunting skills, catching a Rasser for their meal. Sleep claimed Hanor.

Rising, Nole's eagerness to get going triggered further groans from Bane. Packing away their makeshift camp, thrown together in the dark last night like a couple of children playing tents with some bed sheets, the resultant damp blankets would have to be dried later.

Overcast, it set the mood for a gruelling turn in the saddle. Eating a cold meal before starting out, the two young men stayed focused on their appointed purpose. Without the sun for guidance, it would be difficult to stay true to their bearings. Estimating where the line taken yester-turn was, Nole picked out a tree on the horizon and aimed for it. What else could they do? Since leaving the main roadway late yester-turn, following this shorter route indicated by the old map, they could only hope Hanor had done the same.

“If we are to catch them..., we have to go faster,” Nole shouted to Bane when sweeping down another low-lying hill.

“We have to be careful not to overdo it,” Bane warned, digging in when the terrain began climbing again.

Nole did not answer, desires to find his brother too strong to let sense prevail.

Travelling on through the turn, it started raining, but it was not enough to quench Nole’s drive.

“Shall we stop?” Bane called, guessing the response.

Nole rejected the idea. “No!”

Still grumbling from having to eat his half-day meal whilst riding, Bane’s protests had been dismissed with, “No time.” Understanding his friend’s urgencies, but if not careful, there was a risk of running themselves ragged at this rate.

Daring to wonder how far in front Hanor was, Nole kept searching for movement ahead, hoping to see a tiny figure in the distance. When the rain got heavier, damp started soaking through their coats. Ignoring the inconvenience, Nole’s concerns were of a different sort. If they misjudged their direction, even by the slightest of margins, they might miss them.

Pulling up, darkness a wink away, they stopped for the night under a large tree surrounded by a wall of bush. Disgruntled, Bane was only prepared to tolerate Nole’s obsessive drive for so long. Stiff from the turn’s gruelling ride, when diving into his supply bag for something to eat, he made no apologies when sharing his feelings.

“I thought we agreed not to overdo it?” he complained, mouth half-full with quaner and dried berries.

“I am sorry,” Nole said, their purpose dominating his own aches. “It is strange,” he said, needing to explain himself. “I have thought of nothing else but reaching Hanor. Even my parents have not crossed my mind.”

“You should slow down,” Bane said, rummaging around for more to eat. “We cannot keep this pace up even if we wanted to.”

“I know,” Nole conceded. “But if we do not catch them soon, I fear we may miss them.”

“I accept that,” Bane agreed, empathising. “But this is new to us. No good having little strength left if dangers crop up.”

“It will be hard but I will try. Come on, let us set camp before nightfall. Last night’s efforts were deplorable. I know it was my fault for not stopping until after sundown, but I did not want to stop in case we were followed.”

“I am determined to get a fire going tonight,” Bane said, searching about for dry wood. “I was freezing last night.”

“Perhaps we should have brought Sulie to keep you warm,” Nole said, managing a taste of humour.

“Just mentioning her name has warmed me. Maybe this journey will prove to her that we have matured at last.”

“Perhaps,” Nole said, unconvinced.

Lying down, appetites satisfied, the two young men stared into the flames, thoughtful. Plumes of smoke exhaled into the darkness, the heat fending off the cold and drying out their soaked overcoats. Odd creaks and shuffles of movement behind did

nothing to ignite their fears, too tired to worry about it. The fire was hypnotising, drawing them into its orangey glow. Bane's berry concoction helped relax them into a silent numbness, both pondering what they were doing and why. Last night had been too hectic to think straight, and only now could the shock creep in.

"What if we do not find them?" Bane asked, troubled by the notion.

A thought mirrored by his friend, it was a tough question. "We will continue on to Tarden," Nole said. Intending to catch up with his brother, he had not considered going the whole way without him.

"How many turns will it take to get there?"

"Ten..., maybe fifteen turns."

"How... many?"

"I never said it would be an easy trip." Nole was rattled. "If you are not up to it, just go."

"I want to find Hanor just like you do," Bane defended, his friend's snappiness due to tiredness. "But... fifteen turns?"

"At today's pace..., we could half that number."

"And half our number too," Bane scoffed at the potential danger.

"Now *you* are the one exaggerating."

"Maybe," Bane said, leaning on his elbow. Eyes sparkled in the amber light. "But this has happened so quickly."

"I know," Nole said. Refusing to allow doubts to bite all day, it was why he had not wanted to stop.

"What do you suppose he is doing now?" Bane asked, flicking woodchips into the fire.

"I do not want to think about it," Nole said, unsettled at how he would respond when they did catch up.

Anger bubbled beneath the surface, still upset at his brother's lack of concern for him and Bane. What could he really say? To miss him on the way would be a tragedy, but if found, how would he confront him? Sighing, the love for his brother he knew was all that mattered. "Go to sleep," he said, closing his eyes, trying to shut out the issue. They needed an early start.

Chapter 8: The Great White Freeloaver

A full-bodied aroma saluted Hanor on waking, it was still dark, the fire spitting with life. He had no idea how long he had been asleep. No dreams hounded him, his tender joints an instant reminder of where he was. Rested, he looked across at Kifter who sat staring into the small fire.

"I am sorry, I must have fallen asleep," he apologised, not yet ready to leave the luxury of his precious bed.

Kifter's glowing countenance smirked. "You obviously needed it."

"Is there anything I can do?" Hanor offered, unconvinced he was actually prepared to move from his roost. "I am sure I could manage something from here," he said, stretching an arm out half-heartedly.

"No, you rest a while longer..., we will be moving out shortly."

"Moving out!"

"Yes, my friend. You have been asleep from the moment you laid your head down until now. It is just before sun-up."

Falling back into his makeshift bed, Hanor groaned. Refreshed as he was, it felt like they had only stopped a short time ago. Desiring the tranquillity of slumber, where the energy for another turn's ride was to come from he did not know. Not an early person, he was unlikely to become one in the foreseeable future.

Responding to his woes, the Fife tried easing the strife. "We will eat first... of course."

Leaving the woods, the fresh morning was clear and cloudless. The only evidence of yester-turn's downpour was the softness of the terrain. Long periods of running and the occasional walks kept the pace steady, the morning trouble free. Restless about Nole and Bane, Hanor tried enjoying the sunshine to stay upbeat, its warm rays medicinal.

Slowing for a quick break at half-turn of the day, Hanor felt at ease with his travelling friend. "*Yes, friend,*" he thought. Making that bed last night deserved respect.

Ambling along, the surrounding wild-grass now shorter, the respite gave Hanor the chance to find out more about his travelling companion. "What is Fion like?"

"Fion...?" Kifter said, twitching his narrow, elongated ears. "Fion is very different from other places in The Freelands," he began, reminiscing. "Seasons are dominated by hot, dusty dry spells, which are frequent due to the lack of rain. Supported by the Cropping Village of Sif situated to the north, Fion would not survive without its resources."

"Why do your people stay there then?"

Winking, a question asked countless times, "We Fifanians are shrewd," he said, tapping his head. "This is our true crop."

"That I can agree with."

"Fion is not the most elegant of places, but we cope with what we have. Millseed is our main crop, for few others can survive the conditions. We do not envy northern cities, we just see them as places of opportunity. Your people do not know how lucky you are. You have so much, and yet, how many of you appreciate it?"

Hanor did not comment, his overindulgent upbringing appearing distasteful.

"I am not being critical, but until you experience difficult situations, it is hard to see it as it really is." Kifter unexpectedly stopped. "Wait," he ordered, searching ahead.

Following his gaze, Hanor could not see anything. “What is it?”

Motioning for quiet, the cagey Fife turned his head, listening. A slight breeze was the only evidence of motion.

Hanor waited. The two kyboes went quiet as if suspecting something too.

“Follow me,” Kifter urged, cautious. “Do not talk unless you see anything.”

The Fife urged his mount on, checking the surrounding terrain. Falling in behind, a concerned Hanor stayed alert. For long moments, nothing changed, the slow pace adding to the suspense. Trusting his companion knew what he was doing, Hanor gasped when spotting a small shape on the horizon. “Kifter!”

“I know,” he said, concentrating on the object.

Tricky to place a size or distance, it did not seem to be moving. Kifter took his time, not in a hurry for surprises. Vigilant, Hanor felt for his short blade, noting his own keen response. What was it? The riders decided to investigate.

Two lines of huge dirty white curves arced over from out of the ground towards each other like massive fingers of bone. Other fragments lay scattered nearby, with one enormous section isolated further out. Dawning on Hanor what it was, the skeleton of a large creature, its flesh had been stripped to the bone.

Halting when near, the Fife searched for clues to shed light on the mystery. Sniffing the breeze, a low murmur admitted Kifter’s distaste. Sleek eyes continued searching, the signs not good.

Hanor waited, this cautious fellow from the south proving why he was here. Not wishing to distract his guide, he tried working out what creature it was. Its ribcage, which had alerted them to its location, thronged, the breeze swirling through it like an invisible musician playing a sorry tune. Eerie, an empty atmosphere permeated the region. Untroubled when animals were killed at home prior to cooking, but this felt like a tragedy, a sacrifice to the unholy.

“I do not like this,” Kifter grimaced, staying seated on his Kyboe.

“What was it?”

“This is a sign of things to come. Do you see those marks?” the Fife said, pointing at grooves scoring different sections of bone. Marks resembling the sweepings of a claw were fiendish. This creature’s death must have been horrific.

“What could have done this?”

“I said it was best that you did not know everything right away,” Kifter explained, now forced into something he wished to avoid. “This is the work of... *Nyshifters*.”

“*Ny... shifters...?*”

Talking like someone mourning the death of a friend, the Fife glanced skywards. “*They* are vicious monsters that haunt the night sky. I will explain more later, but for now, we should leave this place of death. There has been great suffering here.”

“There has,” Hanor agreed, sensing its pain. “What was it?”

“This was an animal not commonly known. A mysterious creature of immense power, it was one of a pair. Some say they are creatures born of the ground by the forces governing this world. Rarely are they seen. People consider themselves blessed if they do. This Hanor... was a Great White Freeloaver. These remains have been here for some time.”

Halting again when reaching the massive skull out on its own, a huge hole at the front of its head generated more unease.

“The *Nyshifters* have taken its precious horn,” the Fife said. More claw marks suggested the horn had not been easy to free.

Leaving the macabre scene, the two continued on their way. Difficult to justify such slaughter, it was Hanor’s first real taste of what evil could achieve. ‘A *Nyshifter*!’ Without knowing what *they* looked like, a shudder ran through him. Capable of killing such a huge beast, what hope did he have? Sighing, he was just glad Nole was not here.

Thankful for the early morning freshness, Nole and Bane welcomed the reprieve from the drabness of yester-turn. Drinking a hot broth, hopes were high.

“We might catch them today,” Bane said, encouraged.

“We might,” was all Nole would say.

Heading out, burning limbs made the going tough from the outset. In the past, such pains would have paralysed them enough to stay in bed, but their goal was a luring motivator. Undulating hills levelled out, the horizon stretching into the distance. Passing a small wood over to their left, multicoloured trees and bushes clothed the landscape.

Taking a short breather for something to eat, they continued into the after-turns, convinced success was only a matter of time. A shape out to their left broke the monotony of their ride.

“What is that?” Bane pointed.

Peering across, a fearful hope rising, Nole pulled up. Kyboes panting, the two stared across at the mysterious object. Some way off, it was difficult to see what it was.

“Shall we take a look?” Bane asked, unusually cautious.

“I think... we have no choice,” Nole said, inspecting the area.

Approaching the remains, its peculiar shape and size beckoning them nearer, huge curved bones revealed the animal was once a formidable creature. Both boys stepped down, transfixed by its size.

“What do you think it was?” Nole asked, reaching out. Touching one of its ribs, both hands could not encircle it.

“I have never seen anything like it,” Bane said, kicking at the huge bones scattered on the floor. “Look at these score marks,” he said, running three fingers along one deep groove. “What could have done this?”

Glancing over, Nole shrugged, concerns for his brother re-igniting. “Whatever it is, it cannot be helped now. We are wasting time,” he said, returning to his mount. “Let us get going.” Climbing up, he was in no mood to dither.

With a final kick of a rib, Bane joined him. “Very strange,” he said, turning to his friend when in his seat.

Just about to leave, a sudden groaning howl shook them.

“What... was that?” Nole said, alarmed.

The noise, like a creature in the throws of death, wailed again. Staring at the skeleton, fearing its spirit had returned to haunt them, but the cry seemed to be everywhere.

A sharp movement behind panicked the two boys. Catching sight of a beast charging their way, its enormous white body shimmering in the after-turn sun, muscles strained with every bounding stride. A great hulk of a frame three times the size of a Kyboe, it

stampeded towards their exposed position as if they were the ones who had slaughtered its mate. Wailing again, shaking its mighty head from side to side, the prominent horn perched on top swayed back and forth, an unmatched weapon of power and destruction.

Covering half the distance before Nole and Bane snapped into action, they turned and fled. Coming up from the south-east, the task of finding Hanor was now lost to terror.

Glancing over their shoulder, two giant orbs, black and unblinking, glared back. Toughened, pale skin reflected in the sunlight as four mighty legs pounded the ground. Once a resplendent creature of power and beauty, but such characteristics were now lost to grief.

“What... is it?” Bane screamed, horror scrawled across his face.

“Just go,” Nole fired back.

Looking again, fearing the worst, if it was gaining they had no chance. A stone’s throw behind, the monster twitched its long, wide snout before wailing again. A deep resounding groan, its white horn, larger than a man’s forearm, continued to thrust at the air. Covering the terrain rapidly, heavy snorts reached tender young ears, timely reminders of their unforgivable naiveté. To venture into the wild, they should expect to get hurt. A tantalising pursuit, when was it to end? Tears started flowing, the two struggling lads realising their demise was a possibility.

“No... no... no,” Bane cried. Gritty and determined, “I am sorry,” he screamed, as if the beast might understand.

Nole too started yelling. Dread pulsing, their cries echoed into the emptiness. Blurring their vision to anything apart from themselves and the pursuing beast, parched throats hampered their calls. Sometimes it drew close, but on other occasions they were convinced it was giving up the chase. Tormented, who could stop this monster?

“Help!”

Nole’s heart missed a beat when checking behind, convinced it was starting to flag. The gap was growing, more so than at any other time. Bane too looked, the relief obvious. Unwilling to slow at this point, it was too good to believe. As if tuning into their momentary respite, to their horror, it wailed and renewed its charge.

“No... no...!” Tears poured again, desperation surging. Exhausted, their Kyboes started floundering from the strain. What powers drove this mad beast? Starting to close again, lapping up the soil as though it had just started, what could they do?

A grim notion emerged through the shadows of fear. Tapping into the same dreadful idea, peering across at each other, there was no other choice. To head in different directions meant one sacrificing for the other. The horrific thought shook both, tired hearts aching at what they had to do.

Snapped from their distress, a sudden movement to their left startled them. Turning in their seat, they watched confounded when Hanor rode right by them, charging at the beast. Unfolding so quickly they could not believe their eyes, was it an illusion, a trick of despairing minds?

Pulling up at this act of madness, they turned, astounded by Hanor’s behaviour. Expecting the creature to run him down, it faltered, coming to an abrupt halt. Hanor stopped too, halfway between them and the beast. Starting back, Nole and Bane paused, fear striking their nerve. Not even acknowledging they were there, Hanor appeared transfixed by the mystical animal.

Trying to catch his attention, Nole gulped, what was Hanor doing? Surprised that the creature seemed to be scrutinising his brother, easing off as if comforted, how could this be? Torn away from desperation, they stared on, the beast panting from its explosive jaunt. Hanor needed to move back, but nothing escaped through Nole's quivering lips. His brother and the beast seemed entranced by each other. Pulling up nearby, Hanor's travelling companion seemed equally aghast.

Ready to pounce if it moved, Kifter rotated the sharp hunting blade at his side, deciding the beast's eye would be their only chance. Keenest of throwers, he could not afford to miss. Still dazed by the swiftness of the unfolding drama, duty tempting him to put himself between Hanor and the animal, but wisdom suggested the creature would attack if he did. Checking the other two lads, their bewilderment reflected his own. Trance-like, Hanor still did not move.

Rolling its enormous dusty white head, the creature snorted again, displeased at this outcome. Thrusting its enormous horn skywards, another call followed. Unforgettable, that sound penetrated proud hearts. Howling once more, the cry seemed less threatening this time. Further grunts proved its displeasure but nothing more. Half-turning, the Freeloaver stared at Nole and Bane as if angry at being stripped of justice. Looking at Hanor for a final time, connecting on a deeper level, to the group's bewilderment, it turned full circle before setting off the way it had come. Not once looking behind, it headed back towards the open grave of its loved one.

Watching the beast disappear over the rise, they waited for Hanor to turn and explain himself. What had happened here?

"Hanor!" Kifter called, finally breaking the deadlock. The young man still did not move. "Hanor!" he repeated, urging his kyboe forward. Approaching, the two lads broke from their trance, edging along with him. Acting as though they were not even there, Hanor's wide eyes stared straight through them.

"Hanor..., are you all right?" Nole asked, worried. Suspicious of the stranger's presence, he let it lie for now. Dazed by the miraculous incident, he had not expected to find his brother in such an explosive way. "Hanor...!" he said, pulling up beside him. Conveying that void of emptiness first witnessed by the lake, his brother could or would not acknowledge his presence. "Give him a moment," Nole said to the troubled Fifanian seated opposite.

"Why is he not responding?" Bane asked from behind, moving around to the front. His friend appeared distant, as if no anxieties could seep into his inner world. If the creature were to return, Bane doubted his friend would care. "What is the matter with him?"

"I have seen this before," Nole said, staying calm. "By the lake."

"By... the lake?"

"I did not like it then either," he said, analysing Hanor's detached features. Patting his brother's arm, Hanor's grip on the reins was tight, knuckles turned white. He still did not respond. "Hanor!" Nole tried again, gripping his arm. He was not blinking either. So absorbed by the experience, when he finally did it startled Nole. The first sign of life, just thankful at being here for him, it was all he needed to justify his decision to come. Hanor's travelling companion looked hesitant with no idea how to respond. "Hanor!"

Nole tried again. “Hanor..., can you hear me?” Shaking his arm, his brother blinked wide as if coming out of a stupor.

Not liking this at all, especially the two newcomers, Kifter could not think straight. Recalling the bizarre details, upon hearing the cries for help; both boys riding adjacent to their position but further north, what triggered Hanor to react as he did left him guessing. Unable to keep up, where Hanor’s kyboe got the speed he had no idea either. Following like a second rate fool, he thought his young charge had lost all sense, and was riding to his doom. Nevertheless, witnessing the Great White Freeoaver pull up was astonishing, disbelieving his young charge was still alive.

Observing the two boys, this was the last thing he expected. Picking out a few characteristics resembling Hanor, deducing the slim one to be his brother and the other, with dark curly hair, perhaps a friend, this was not good.

“Who are you?” Not seeking a confrontation just yet, their concerns were clearly for Hanor’s well-being. Accepting there was no threat, an underlying feeling warned him of future complications. What were two young men doing this far from home? He knew the answer but did not want to face it.

Both boys stared back, suspicious.

“And who might you be?” Bane countered, judging he was the reason behind why Hanor had left in the first place.

“My name is unimportant,” Kifter said, picking up on the tone.

“Then neither is mine,” Bane scoffed, fatigue catching up on him. Not accepting this person was somebody Hanor actually chose to accompany, it was an immature response.

“Bane!” Nole warned. “Show some respect.”

Huffing, the edge to his voice remained. “There you are..., you now know my name, what is yours?”

“Who are you and how do you know this young man?” Kifter got straight to the point. Indicating Hanor, the lad was coming to his senses.

“He is his brother,” Bane said, as if it warranted admission to be here.

Calculating it already, this was going where Kifter feared. “Why are you here?”

“We have come to support Hanor,” Bane said, proud of his loyalty. “Why else? Just two of you travelling on your own, we knew sooner or later you would need assistance.”

“It is you who needed the help,” Kifter said, irritation evolving to annoyance. “I suspect you do not understand the reasons behind Hanor’s decision to come.”

Hanor peered around, the bickering ending. Three caring expressions gaped back, impatient for answers. What had just happened? Whispering questions merged, blurring his thoughts. Body tingling from the experience, sensitive pulses in his heart felt surreal.

Details of the beast returned, so too the plight to save his brother and friend. Looking to where it went, “It has gone back to its mate,” he said, unperturbed by how he knew. Soothing, the throb of his heart refused to ignite any fears. Energised, he felt renewed.

“Are you... all right though?” Nole asked, anxious, letting go of his arm. Reservations about just how close he and Bane had come to death escaped him, focusing on his brother instead.

“Er... yes, I... am,” Hanor stammered, still somewhat detached from it all. What was happening to him?

“How are you feeling?” Kifter asked, putting to one side any qualms.

“Peculiar,” Hanor replied. “But... good.”

“What happened to you?”

“I do not... know,” Hanor said, unable to describe it.

Vulnerable yet unruffled, Nole felt uncomfortable talking in the company of strangers.

“We need to set up camp,” Bane said, taking control. Ignoring the Fife’s scrutiny, “There must be some shelter nearby,” he said, scanning the vicinity for a sizeable tree.

“You appear to know what you are doing,” Kifter said, deciding to play along with the situation. A rational mind was essential if he was to sort this mess out.

Finding a suitable spot to make camp, a recovered Hanor was still mystified as to where the original desires to charge had come from. Detecting the same dynamic energies in the Freeloaver that were flowing from his heart, it was why it had not attacked he was certain. The encounter by the lake had a similar effect. Lifting him to new heights, he wanted to lose himself to those same feelings but was hesitant. Without understanding what was going on, he could not chance it.

Hard to think straight, conscious of a potent sense of life, the sensations seemed to want someone to declare that existence had a higher purpose. Doubts bit at his heels, demanding he suppress what he was experiencing. Humming to himself, he started unpacking.

“Are you going to tell us what you are up to?” Bane challenged, deciding to break the awkward mood. Sitting on his mat across from the still standing Hanor, he waited.

Nole acknowledged his friend’s directness.

Glancing at Kifter, Hanor was uncertain how to respond, a dose of reality kicking in.

“It is no good looking at him,” Bane pressed. “I have asked *you* the question Hanor..., and we want to know.” Confident Hanor was back to health, “Well...?”

Presuming his friend was talking about him leaving them behind, and not the incredible episode earlier with the Freeloaver, guilt surged. What could he say? Nole sat staring into the fire, now lit and tended by a disgruntled looking Kifter. A glazed expression showed his brother’s disbelief at what he had done. Even so, smooth sensations in his heart continued beating, reminding him that dynamic forces were now involved in his life and could not be ignored. Sitting down, stiff joints aching, this pressure was the last thing he needed. An early evening chill crept in.

“I... do not know... what to say,” he said, wanting to reveal what he did know.

“You can start by telling us what you are doing travelling across The Freelands without telling us why?” Bane was unsympathetic to his friend’s difficulties.

“I... I,” Hanor stuttered. “It is... hard. I know... I should have perhaps told you.”

“Perhaps...?”

“Well no, I should have, but I did not know what to say. Just like now... I suppose.”

“Did you not think we would be alarmed? Could you not trust us of all people?”

“It is not as simple as that.”

“Why not?”

Hesitating, Hanor was tempted to just blurt everything out. “I... I was...”

“He is on an important errand,” Kifter interjected, to Hanor’s relief, the Fife breaking his own frustrated silence. Still coming to terms with the Freeloaver issue, the fact he had

failed his young charge on the first time of asking was also plaguing him. Not one to get things wrong, he could not forgive himself. The prickly issue of these two additions meant things could not get any worse. "Rather than opting for a life of leisure, he is undertaking this task to help defend this land against our enemies."

Surprised at the declaration, the two were staggered. Hanor just shrugged, allowing Kifter to continue.

"You two have followed us without considering your actions. This is not an adventure, lives are at risk. You should both turn back tomorrow and go home."

"Turn back!" Bane sneered, bowled over by his audacity. "One thing you can be sure of is... we are not turning back."

"You said lives are at risk," Nole interrupted before the matter got out of hand. "What do you mean?" Not wishing to look at his brother, the sense of betrayal was still strong.

"Do you know that a perilous evil is about to invade The Freelands?" Candid, he had to be, the idea of taking these two was deplorable.

Both boys felt discomfited by their lack of knowledge.

"No...? Just as I presumed," Kifter sniffed. "There are horrors that are not for the fainthearted. You will fall foul to such monstrosities as you nearly did earlier. Do you want a premature end to your seasons?"

Shocked, Bane noticed Hanor seemed just as startled by the statement as they were. Ensuring Nole was in agreement, the point was still not enough of a deterrent. Nothing was going to separate them again. United by an oath taken over five seasons ago, Hanor was a part of them, and it was their duty to stick by him at all costs.

"You cannot expect us to leave him to face these dangers alone?"

"He is hardly alone," Kifter said. With the fire established, the Fife turned to face them. "You do not realise the severity of the threat before us. Declaring brave words here is fine, but those dangers are beyond your ability to cope."

What he was saying was true. Without Hanor's intervention, at least one of them would not be here. It was still not enough.

"This...", Nole said, thumping his chest. "Demonstrates why we are here. Yes..., we are not ideal escorts, but one thing we have that you do not is... love."

An admirable response, it was Kifter's turn to find a suitable answer. "Love is good, but love will not protect you from some of the fierce creatures out here."

"It saved them earlier," Hanor said, his words shooting through their camp.

Surprised at the comment, Kifter especially was taken aback. For Hanor, Nole stirred something in him by using that one word, love. Not occurring to him before, but the one thing Hanor's intense experiences of late had written on his heart was the importance of it. Pulsing, unconditional love was there and an integral part of those subtle sensations. His brother and Bane had come searching for him out of that love, could he really reject them? Brandor had said about secrecy, but he had also said about trust. Burdens of betrayal for his friend and brother had taken a heavy toll, and only their love could relieve it. Apologising to the Fife, it was how he felt.

"Brandor has entrusted you to me," Kifter said, his composure wavering. "It is not my place to look after all three of you." Rising, hands on hips, it was a last stand.

"Do you expect me to let them go back and risk that creature again?" Hanor said, appealing to the Fife's sensitivities.

"That is not my concern."

“Well, it is very much mine,” he opposed. “These two were my whole life before I came on this journey. I could not carry on and just forget about them.”

It was a good point, and only made matters worse. If in their position, Kifter would do the same. Frustrated, he was about to lose this argument.

Disliking the idea of his brother in harms way, another option flickered in for Hanor. “We could take them back to Manson?”

Bane spluttered. “What..., and have your father lock us up?”

Not responding, Hanor waited for his guide to react. It seemed reasonable.

“They could head north and detour around the Freeloaver?”

“How would I know if they got home? How could I concentrate on what lies ahead without that assurance?”

Growling, Kifter’s displeasure amplified. Time was short, it would mean a delay of five or six turns of the day if they did turn back, and that was if they did not come across the Freeloaver again. Brandor had said time was of the essence, the Fife deducing five turns would be too long for the Dai-laman to wait at Tarden. Trusting the two would try their utmost to come after them again anyway, it was an unsavoury option. Whatever Brandor had planned for Hanor, there was clearly something in him to be encouraged. This was not in the planning, what would Brandor say?

“And what if I just say no?” he said, a final attempt to salvage the situation.

Wishing it would not come to this, but loyalties were not to be discarded out here. Treading that sorry route already, “I cannot leave them.”

Believing Hanor was not pretending, Kifter had run out of ideas. Needing to sleep on it, the Fife turned to prepare his and Hanor’s meal.

The outcome was not something to celebrate, Hanor casting the two rogues a disapproving glare. Putting a finger to his lips, indicating no more questions, their arrival was the last thing he needed. Adding to his worries, how would his parents be coping?

Not viewing the decision as a victory, Nole and Bane were going whether it was approved of or not. Respecting his brother’s warning, Nole decided not to press for the time being. Signalling for Bane to simmer down, to be tolerated for now was a fair start. They were not after a conflict. After all, his brother *had* chosen to travel with Kifter. In the dark as to what Hanor’s intentions were and what was happening to him, they would not find out by provocation. Needing to be patient, answers would come.

Chapter 9: Frosty Reception

Rising the following morning, the atmosphere was tight. Usually with sleep, burdens became easier, but Kifter's troubles remained. '*Another two infants!*' he thought, packing away. Shutting out their random pouches of laughter, idle chatter swung as if to tease him. Chiding himself for allowing the turmoil in the first place, there seemed to be no way around this. Quicker in wit and slight of hand than the best of them, but here, he felt inadequate for not controlling what was his territory. So unlike him, the previous turn's miraculous episode was clearly affecting him. Determined to find a solution, he was not putting up with it.

Setting out, the early morning chill fired them into action. A blustery wind from the north was a sharp reminder of what terrible forces were soon to follow. Kifter's ominous words echoed of another time and place, Bane dismissing them as oversensitive. The Freeloaver had not been evil, just angry. "It probably would not have actually killed us," he had said, rejecting how close they had come to death.

Not sharing the same views, Hanor spent most of the morning trying to unravel the previous turn's episode. Hard to pinpoint when that potent energy had ignited, recalling odd snippets but nothing more, why was it so hazy? Consumed by those remarkable powers, but confronting the Freeloaver without a care, rocked him. Registering those same powers in the creature, what had Brandor done to him?

"We will rest a while," Kifter said, half-turn of the day arriving.

Pulling in beside a huge shrub with blooming lila flowers of pinks, yellows and reds, they added colour to the sour mood hanging over the group. Perfumed, the fragrance left a fierce headache if inhaled, choosing this site to ensure no irritating light-flies would bother them. Intermittent trees and more lila shrubs were scattered in every direction, this region a blessing to anyone on the move. If the sun were shining, a timeless world it would be.

Rolling shoulders and rubbing taut necks, the morning's ride had been strenuous.

"Tarden... is how far?" Bane asked, massaging his lower back.

"Stop complaining," Nole hissed. One wrong word could inflame the embittered Fife.

"Who is complaining?" Bane shrugged.

Frustrated, Kifter sighed. They knew where he and Hanor were going, how much more did they know?

Stepping away from the others, Hanor needed time to reflect, guilt marking his conscience. Nole and Bane's presence was not helping, the latter especially. His parents would be distraught at Nole's disappearance, and the sense of betrayal his brother still felt had to be dealt with. Projecting ahead to when reaching Tarden, the idea of facing Brandor with them in tow was unnerving. Convinced Kifter would be thinking the same, the Dai-laman would not tolerate stubborn boys who had no real desire to help in future troubles. Nole's loyalties were understandable, but he doubted it would be enough.

Sitting down, needing a moment to collect himself, it was not long before he heard someone draw near. Guessing who, he was right when peering up.

"Can I sit down," Nole asked, hesitant.

Motioning for his brother to do so, a long silence ensued as the two, who were once close, searched for a way to start. Staring across the scenic view, a couple of Fliryns swooped nearby before drawing close to where they sat. Hovering, they were the only creatures able to drink from the venomous lila flower. Suspecting they were invading the Fliryns' territory, the two flew off to an adjacent bush to feed.

"I am so angry at you," Nole broke the silence. Rich brown eyes expressed his pain. "I know," Hanor said, hurting for him. Sometimes, feelings spoke louder than a barrage of rage. Taking it for granted, he had abused their trust. Discarding it for this new challenge, the problem now was how to heal it.

Unsuspecting, Bane came around the bush but stopped on seeing the two. Sensibly stepping back, not wanting to interfere, he left them to begin the rebuilding process.

"Why?" asked Nole after a pause.

"I know I have let you down," Hanor said, wanting to say more. Brandor, the lake, his training, the Freeloaver, he wanted to tell him everything, but something held him back. To do so would mean returning to the past, doing it out of loyalty rather than what was for the best. Brandor had not revealed all because he was not ready to handle it. He now felt the same with Nole. The unusual experiences he was having were beyond his brother's ability to perceive.

"You have changed Hanor, you are no longer the brother I knew. All of this secrecy, these activities that do not make sense." Turning, Nole looked straight at him. "Do I not mean anything to you anymore?"

"I am truly sorry."

"Are you really, Hanor? If you were, you would not have done it this way."

"It has all happened so quickly."

"What has? Tell me. If you do not say..., how can I help?"

"It is not that simple."

"Why not? What is so important that our relationship is discarded without a care?"

"It has not been discarded."

"It looks that way."

Sighing, Nole deserved an answer, a definitive response to wash away the anguish. But what could he say?

"Is it because of what happened by the lake?"

Forgetting it was his brother who had discovered him after the original encounter with Brandor, Hanor was saddened at the distress he must have suffered since.

"That look when I found you," Nole pressed when no answer came. "That same glazed expression was there after confronting that creature. Later, I heard you humming. With everything that has happened, you were humming! It was the same at Manson, dancing and singing. This is the second time it has happened Hanor, do you deny that?"

Inner pressures prompted him to disclose as little as possible. Why was that necessary? This was his brother, someone he loved and trusted with his life, why?

"What has been happening to you?" Nole urged.

The plea stabbed his heart. "I do not understand what is going on."

A flicker of alarm flashed in Hanor's eyes. "Are you frightened to say?"

“It is not fear but... the unknown,” Hanor said. “Things have been happening Nole, weird things too peculiar to describe.”

“What... things?”

“Strange feelings, in here,” he said, placing a hand on his chest, careful in case those powers ignited into life again. “Indescribable energies are flowing right through me.”

“What do you mean... feelings and energies?”

“Sshh...,” Hanor hissed, wary that Kifter might hear. “They are difficult to describe, I cannot even explain it to myself.”

“Are they hot feelings... or cold? Do they hurt? How do they make you feel?”

“There is an overwhelming feeling of... life.”

“Life?”

“Yes, life. I cannot explain it any other way. The energies seem pure, natural, as if nothing can corrupt them.”

“So where do these feelings come from?”

“I am not sure.”

“Hanor!”

“I mean it. They seem to come and go. I do not know what triggers them. There is a peace that feels weird but very comforting.”

“So..., what has this old man by the lake got to do with it?”

Hesitating, considering if it would be betraying Brandor if he said anything, surely he could trust Nole? If he told him not to tell anyone, even Bane, he would do as asked. This was too much.

“The truth Hanor,” Nole warned.

Wanting to repurchase his brother’s trust, he had to give more, something final, for the time being anyhow. “Brandor was the one who first stimulated the change.”

“What do you mean... stimulated?”

“He placed a hand on my head, and it got hot. Then my heart changed and started beating smoothly, hence the feelings of peace.”

“Are we ready to move out?” Kifter called from the far side of the bush.

“Please,” Hanor beseeched his brother. “I do not know why, but you must not tell anyone about this. Bane would want to find out more, and I cannot give more. His tongue is too loose to keep secrets. If Kifter finds out, who knows what he might do. I am not sure how much he knows, but Brandor said it was to be kept secret. The enemy could be anywhere, including Manson. I did not deceive you Nole..., but circumstances moved so swiftly I barely had time to think. I am going to Tarden because Brandor said it is where I should go if I am to learn and be of any help. I thought I was the last person to be of any use, but he asked, so I am doing it. The more I understand, you will be the first to know.”

“We do not have an endless supply of time,” barked Kifter.

“Coming,” Hanor shouted, taking hold of Nole’s hand. “I am glad you are here but... this is not a game, Nole. Rainer’s training showed me how serious it was, and I would die if I were to lose you.”

Gripping his hand, still not excusing him for what he had done, but a great weight shifted from Nole. Being together was what mattered. “You are not going anywhere without me. I still have questions, but for now, I trust you. As mad as this is, we are joined as one.”

Both stood and hugged, the bond already healing.

The relief of both young men was apparent to both Kifter and Bane when they returned from behind the enormous bush. Re-igniting their trust, throughout the rest of the turn, Bane kept urging for details, Nole telling him to be patient. Kifter too pulled in beside Hanor, needing to know what was shared. Still concerned about what took place with the Freeloaver, dissatisfied that Hanor had not disclosed any specifics, he reminded Hanor that this was not a trip of fun. Deciding to leave it until a more suitable time, the Fife could only but wait.

An uneventful ride was enough to settle moods. Lila plants no longer guided their path with colour and beauty, passing their haven well before nightfall. Riding into dusk, the group of four camped within a clump of trees, the turn exhausting for all.

Insisting Hanor build the fire and prepare the meal, stamping his authority on the situation, Kifter did not want anyone to get comfortable.

‘*Like a punishment,*’ Hanor thought, refusing to get rattled. Nole offered to help, but a firm ‘no’ from the Fife stressed his discontent. Setting the fire inside a ring of large stones left by previous travellers, an aroma of stew soon wafted high. Careful not to upset their guide, Nole and Bane dared to lay their mat beneath Kifter’s canopy. Refusing to get perturbed, the Fife said nothing.

Pieces of quaner soaked in stew to add substance satisfied appetites and helped moderate the atmosphere. Hesitant glances flickered like the fire, wary of what to say.

Sitting on a travel bag, Kifter stared into the fiery embers. Intrigued by what Hanor might have told Nole earlier, he enjoyed mysteries, but this was different. Something happened to Hanor, and he needed to know what.

“Do you know of any good tales?” Nole said, feeling brave. Peering across at the Fife, deciding friendship had to develop if this journey was to work, he waited, hoping the slim figure would accept his invitation.

Glaring across at the boy, probing his intentions, Kifter cursed. Was he to remain bitter for the rest of their short journey? Already electing to pay someone at the Cropping Village of Candal to take them back to Manson, there was no point in staying sullen. His enormous Hitorian friend, Hallen could always persuade them to leave if that failed. Expecting to meet him at Ag’s Ole, he had a canny way of encouraging people to do the right thing. The outlook did look promising.

A thin smile spread across his bronzed features. “Tales?” he said, succumbing to the temptation. “Now you know the way to my heart, for the one thing a Fife does well... is share the tales of his travels.”

Relieved, the three boys welcomed the Fife’s change of attitude.

“Let me think now,” Kifter said, mindful of getting too acquainted. “Yes, I know one you should like,” he said, voice lowering and eyes narrowing to increase the drama. “A few seasons ago, I was invited to Baltiar. My skills as a tracker had been requested by the Sages at Altor, who are devout, their ways attuned to *The Sacred*. So I knew my services would be highly rewarded. Explaining what they wanted, I left and rode to the legendary Roldamor Mountains. A place infamous for its dust storms, my target was to be found at the southern tip, an intolerable region even for the hardest of travellers. On arriving, I searched but could not find what I was looking for. Tracks... yes, but nothing else.”

“What *were* you looking for?” Bane asked, the Fife pausing to draw them in. “I will come to that shortly,” Kifter said, pressing on. “When first given the challenge, I suspected they had not told me everything, which proved to be true. A small animal, they said, was to be caught. Very rare and precious, “*No harm was to come to it.*” I was told the creature had four short interweaving horns, a long snout and was no higher than my knees. Oh yes..., it had no claws or huge teeth, and was not considered dangerous, just temperamental.

Finding the tracks was the easy part. What riled me was fresh tracks kept appearing around my camp at night. Quite worrying you might understand. I tried staying awake all night, but the same thing happened. Fresh tracks, and without a sound made, they always ended up at the base of a nearby rock face.

I got annoyed. Tracks do not vanish into solid rock!” Absorbed by his tale, the three boys were hooked. “No matter how much I checked the immediate area, I could not find it. I was convinced the creature was following me, playing a game. I screamed at the rocks...more than once, challenging it to come out, but it never did.

Verging on giving up, but not really, for my reputation would not handle it, I decided to approach it differently. A bizarre notion, but I had nothing to lose.” Pausing again, anticipation rising in his audience, he continued. “As night closed in, I lit ten small fires in a huge circle, with a larger one at the centre, and set about preparing my meal. Adding extra spices and herbs, the aroma was very appetising. I left it simmering, the light breeze wafting everywhere. I dished half up and left the rest in the pot. It was odd, the notion of being watched felt unnatural. When finished, I lay down in the centre and feigned sleep, leaving the half-full pot to one side just in view. I was tired but determined to catch my prey. Time drifted, and the outside ring of fires eventually burned to smouldering ash, leaving only the larger central one alight. Lulling, it was hard to keep awake. Thinking my plan had failed, I was close to giving up. But then, peering through the cracks of my eyes, I could not believe it; the pot was twitching!”

Lowering his voice further, the three listeners leaned forward, captivated. “Alerting me to action, convinced the object of my hunt was right before me, even though invisible, I had to make a move before I missed my chance. I am quick, but to catch something I could not see from a lying down position was a challenge even for me. Accepting I had no choice but to go for it, a stroke of luck befell me. An unexpected noise snapped outside the camp. Trusting the sound had distracted it, I seized the moment. Leaping up and out with my arms ready to grasp anything, it was hardly efficiency at its best, but it did work. My hand struck the bony part of its lower leg. Gripping with all my strength, the high-pitched squeal did not deter me. Too fired up to worry, I grappled with the invisible creature. Dust was kicked into my face, needing two hands to hold on. Scrambling to avoid the fire, my muscles burned as the creature put up a brave fight.

Anyone passing would have laughed at me rolling around in the dirt. But then, quite unexpected, it transformed and became visible, flesh that I could see, or long golden-brown fur as was the case. Interwoven horns meant I had my catch. But would it settle, no. Determined to get away, our tussle was about to include a new factor.

Foolish, I thought I had the advantage, weight and strength the most obvious. But I was soon to discover it too had a surprise.” The memory tickled him even now. “I thought it was tiring, its stubby tail twitching. Before I knew what was happening, it

squirted the foulest spray ever. Urghh!” He feigned sickness. “It was worse than rotten meat.” The three lads thought it hilarious. “But that was not the end of it, it squirted another three.” Fears and doubts washed away by the medicine of laughter, the Fife having to admit it was good to see.

“What happened next?” Nole asked, calming down.

“Well, it must have taken pity on me. Realising I was determined to endure the worst of what it could fire at me, what hope did it really have?”

“So what did it do?” pressed Bane, reservations about their guide easing.

“It lay down as if dead.”

“Dead!” all three exclaimed.

“As good as. It was not of course. Fortunately for me..., it just meant no more struggles.”

“Then what?” Hanor asked this time.

“I bagged it. Tying its paws without disturbance, it just lay there panting. Its large dark eyes kept watching me; very strange.”

“No more sprays then?”

“No.”

“How sad,” Hanor said.

“It stayed like that all the way back to Altor. Strapped in a bag to the side of my kyboe, head showing, it permitted me to do whatever I wanted.”

“So what did you do with it?” asked Nole.

“I handed it over.”

“What did they do with it?”

“Ahh..., to the Baltian people, it is a sacred animal. They have the utmost reverence for it, and still do. They sent me because the previous one had crossed over.”

“Crossed over?”

“To you and me... died. But to them, burnt on an alter in holy reverence and prayer. You see, the Baltian people believe these creatures live in a place between our world and the next, hence its invisibility. They believe it to be a link to the sacred *Realm of the Soul*, which is where we are supposed to go when we die, if you accept those beliefs that is. Balts have great difficulty catching one of these creatures. It can be quite traumatic for it and the hunter. Limiting what they told me meant I could only catch it if it was willed by *The Sacred*. To hunt with my eyes alone, I was told later, I would have failed. Remember the ring of fires, I had no idea why, I just did it. According to them, I was given a revelation to catch it. It seems a little hard to swallow, but they were in no doubt. There is only ever one alive, given by the holy for the holy. The fact I had my hands all over it in the dirt did not seem to bother them. It had to go through a cleansing ritual anyway.”

“What is it doing now?” Hanor asked.

“The Rymar, as it is called, is still at Altor.”

“What does it do?”

“It does not do anything. It is just a connection to *The Sacred*, a symbol of acceptance from *The Greater Lives* that reside over this planet. In catching it, unbeknown to me, I was training it to accept life in this world.”

“Sounds weird,” said Nole.

“Fascinating,” Hanor added.

“I thought you might like the tale,” Kifter said, his nagging doubts gone. Closer to his usual self, tale telling was a way to relax.

“Do you have any more to tell?” Nole invited.

“Not tonight,” Kifter said, thoughts returning to what was said between Hanor and his brother earlier. “Is there anything *you* would like to share?” he asked both boys.

Missing the Fife’s point, Nole described a trip they went on when Hanor got lost and fell into a bog. Hanor however, did not miss Kifter’s meaning.

“Anything else?” Kifter inquired of Hanor when his brother had finished.

Yawning, it was timely but genuine. “Not now,” he said, lying down. Experiencing more than enough emotional stress of late, Hanor still had to come to terms with the Freeloaver encounter himself. Groaning inwardly, as one door of grief closes, another opens.

“I suggest we all get some sleep,” the Fife said, displeased.

Weather mild and enthusiasms high, doubts about the future were lost to the freedoms of riding the following morning. Little changed, the serene landscape sweeping away to the misty horizon. Few travellers ventured this way. The main Cropping Villages were either to the north, south or like Candal, ahead. So too the main highways, leaving them free from prying eyes. Only when crossing another carcass did concerns return.

“What is it?” Bane asked, covering his nose from the stench. Nearly twice the size of a Kyboe, tiny buzzies flitted about the remains.

“A Mallen,” Kifter said, horrified at what this meant. Flesh still lined the bones, many of which were protruding at obscure angles. Ribcage torn open, there was only one creature that had the power to do this. “A *Nyshifter* killed it,” he said, this journey getting worse by the moment.

Three boys gulped. To think a monster was here recently shook them, searching the sky for any signs of it returning.

“I suggest we get moving,” Kifter said. “We do not want to get caught here if the *Nyshifter* decides to finish off the scraps.”

He did not linger, and neither did the boys, tingles of dread tempting them to go home.

Pulling up beneath a huge tree at dusk, with its vibrant reds and golds, the boys had never seen one so grand. Hoping the branches bowing under their own weight would grant cover from any lurking monsters in the region, the atmosphere heightened, wary of what might strike this night.

“We will cook,” Nole offered, Kifter’s distracted gaze suggesting he had more important issues to think about, their safety for one. Ordering Bane to fetch what he needed, Nole set about the task.

Kifter did not react, so Hanor let his brother get on with it. Relieved that he was trying to fit in, taking responsibility at a difficult time, he could not help but worry about them being here. Sensitive to Kifter’s concerns, Nole and Bane’s presence added pressures he had not asked for. His own fault for refusing to go on without them, how many other beasts were there?

Nole’s attempts at a meal were admirable. The meaty broth warmed bones but could not dispel the chill of concern hanging over them. Packing away, he braved a sensitive question to Kifter. “Can you tell us about the *evil forces* that are intending to strike?”

Searching the skies, eyes and ears attuned to any noise or hint of movement, the Fife only relaxed when confident nothing was on the prowl. Allowing the fire to simmer, red ash embers their only source of light, flames were a luxury now that terror was close.

“It is fitting that you ask, especially after today’s discovery,” the Fife said, not in the mood for this but seeing it as essential now that they were here. “A long time ago, a young person named *Gorl-darl* rose from the shadows to dominate the City of Mandurin. Ruling with an iron hand, the people became desperate, calling for someone to free their chains of bondage. Powers were more active then than they are today, and some people were able to influence such forces. Twelve men had spent a lifetime studying them, and decided to help the stricken city. Together, they deposed *Gorl-darl*, but he escaped. Believing he headed north across The Ravaged Plains and into the mountains, they searched but could not find him. Conditions were bleak, so they gave him up for dead. Treated as heroes, the people of Mandurin built a great hall for them, a hall that still stands today. It is called The Sleep. Have you heard of it?”

“I only know of one kind of sleep,” Bane said, fighting off a yawn.

Hanor shrugged.

“It is where the Hisian-set reside on the northern side of Freemans Lake,” Nole said, coming to their rescue.

Embarrassed at not knowing this place, Hanor and Bane had lost count how many times they had swam in the lake.

“It was built so that the peoples of The Freelands could have a place to study and learn about the Mysteries of Life. After the shock of *Gorl-darl*, many did, quite unlike today of course. The tale was once widely known, but such knowledge has since drifted, known only to a few who care.”

“What happened to *Gorl-darl*?” Nole asked, intrigued.

“Alas, *Gorl-darl* did not perish, but recovered. Spending an age planning *his* return, *he* is behind the present *Evil*, and has forced us to call upon those twelve men again.”

“How is that possible if they lived so long ago?” Bane asked, the idea astonishing.

“The wielding of power permits some to live extended lives.”

“Sounds amazing.”

“And that includes *Gorl-darl*?” Nole said.

“It does.”

“And Brandor too?” Hanor supposed.

Glaring at him as though he had let something slip, the others picked up on it.

“You mean the old man we saw leaving the Leisure Room?” Nole intercepted. “The one by the lake?”

“I do not think we need to pry into that,” Kifter said, loose tongues potentially upsetting Brandor’s plans. Directing the topic back to the present *Darkness*, he continued. “About thirty full seasons ago, the Sleep was attacked by *Nyshifters*. Tragically, four members of the Hisian-set were snatched, never to be seen again.”

“*Nyshifters!*”

“You have already seen what *they* can do.”

“*They* killed that Freeloaver too,” Hanor said, recalling the grim details.

“We saw that!” Bane exclaimed. “Just before that *thing* charged at us.”

“Yes..., *they* killed It, and would kill us if *they* were to find us here. *They* are *Gorl-darl*’s pets.” Risking further problems, potentially solidifying Nole and Bane’s commitment to

Hanor, Kifter had little choice. Hanor was the one he was after, hoping he might sway enough to send them back. “*They* are capable of striking anywhere.”

Embers crackled as three young men darted doubtful glances at each other, fearful of *Nyshifters* crashing through the treetops to get them. Huge skeletal remains and a carcass confirmed that the monsters were not to be crossed. Praying *they* would not want to harm three scrawny boys anyway, none of them believed it.

Chapter 10: Candal

Soaked through, by early evening of the next turn, the Cropping Village of Candal emerged through the greyness. Spirits rose at the thought of a real bed, hot food and strong lubricant to take away the chill. Joining other travellers on the main causeway meandering up from the south, the small group stayed tight, watchful of any spies. Billowing smoke puffing out of weathered stone chimneys encouraged them on, promising baking stoves were burning below. Even Kifter could not fend off hunger.

Veering off to the right, the Fife made for an Inn out on its own. The rest of the Cropping Village ran down into a shallow valley ahead. Nestled between two great trees, the large building was old and distorted from the roots crawling beneath its patchy walls. Appealing through the damp, an Out-house at the rear linked the Inn to an Enclosure for their Kyboes. Thick plumes of smoke wafted high, evidence of a hearty fire inside. Faint peachy lights glowed, the windows on the ground floor like beacons for anyone outside. The upper rooms were lifeless, hiding any activity within their shadows. The smell of cooked meat drew them in. Faded, ornate words stretched across the front entrance: *Ags Ole*.

Following the Fifanian's lead, they went around the back. Debagging their mounts, the disgruntled looking lad inside the Enclosure ministered to their Kyboes. Carrying their baggage into the adjacent Out-house, a short plump woman dressed in a faded green overdress greeted them, entering through a back door of the Inn.

"It is about time you showed up again," she said to Kifter, stepping out from behind the counter. "Wet outside is it?" she ribbed, approaching.

Kifter's wet overcoat was not enough to dissuade her from giving him a hug. Rosy cheeked with fair shoulder length hair, she was the same height as the Fife. The boys nudged each other, thinking they were a perfect match.

Forgetting recent strains, Kifter laughed. "See how irresistible I can be?" he joked, dropping his bags to return the gesture. "It has been a while, Beenie." Brushing herself down from the saturated embrace, "Just what I needed. You have not changed."

"And you too," he said, looking her up and down.

"Cheeky." She poked his side before returning to the counter. "So, what can we do for our Kifter?" she asked, inspecting his three young companions. "And these young men?"

"We are seeking the finest of rooms and delicious food," the Fife said. "Do you know anywhere nearby?"

"I get this every time," she laughed to the others.

"You pain me," Kifter said, feigning hurt. "Am I not original?"

"Oh..., you are original, that is certain," she laughed again. "Just make sure you do not go upsetting our customers, do you hear?"

"Me...? I am shocked."

Surprised at the light banter, the three boys welcomed the change, the Fife showing another side to his character.

"What shall it be then?" Beenie asked, getting down to business.

"What have you got?"

Twitching her swollen nose, "I have rooms for two, three or five..., nothing else."

Assuming Hanor would not want to be separated from the other two, the Fife bit his tongue. "We had better take the five," he said, trusting there was enough room for his enormous Hitorian friend too. "Are there any Hites here?"

"Not that I know of."

Intending to use Hallen to influence the boys, he only hoped the big fellow would not be too long. "As I am a cherished customer..., will the room be for the price of four?" he said, fluttering his eyes.

"I am an honest, hardworking woman, you Fifes are all the same. But on this occasion," she said, winking at the boys. "Four it will be. But do not tell anyone, my other would have me strung."

"You are a treasure."

"Will you want those storing for nothing as well?" she said, indicating their bags.

"We are very hungry, and thirsty."

"You had better be. Forty pieces of bright," she said, holding out a chubby hand.

"Make sure they are generous helpings."

"You are talking to the right person," she giggled, patting her rounded tummy. "Room nine, you will find it at the end of the landing," she said, handing him the keys.

A gruff voice hollered from inside the Inn.

"My dearest is calling me. Put those in there," she said, signalling a large empty cubicle against the far wall for their bags. There were only two compartments left.

"Busy tonight I see," Kifter noted. Most of the other doors were locked.

"It is the end of season fair for the weavers. They do not need an excuse to celebrate."

"Hmm..." Kifter murmured, suspicious of what unpleasant characters might be here.

"Unlike you to react to potential customers like that."

Loading their bags and locking the cubicle, Kifter turned. "Room nine was it?"

"I will catch up with you later then," Beenie promised, stepping towards the back door, another shout from inside harkening her.

"Of course."

'Full of surprises,' Beenie thought, leaving the Out-house.

At the end of a short corridor rose some knotted stairs, trodden and tarnished by the passing of time. The sharp odour of reed-bowls was strong, odd calls echoing from behind the closed door that led into the main Leisure Room. Coughs accompanying them, Nole looked at his brother, doubtful.

"You did want a bed," Hanor whispered, following the Fife up the creaking stairs.

Gloomy, ale-stained walls added to the dim atmosphere, relying on one window above and behind to shed light into the dingy stairwell. Shadows from the enormous trees outside arrested the remnants of day, contributing to its direness. Their room was similar to the stairs; five beds lining one wall with two small cupboards opposite. One dirt-stained window at the end gave a poor view outside, branches and leaves scratching at the pane. Protests were unfitting considering Kifter had paid for it. Nole had a bag of brights, but refused to sleep anywhere except with Hanor. Dropping their bags, the longer they lingered, the worse they felt.

"To your liking?" Kifter asked, detecting their discomfort.

"Er..., yes, fine..., thank you," Hanor said, trying to stay upbeat. "Better than outside."

"Not your usual standards?" the Fife posed, a hint of sarcasm evident.

“It will do,” Nole said.

“Good..., shall we eat?” Kifter motioned towards the door. “At least we do not have to worry about *Nyshifters* tonight.”

A worthy point. Bane left the room first.

Entering the smoke-filled Leisure Room, Kifter led the way. Bane, as brave as he was, had stopped short of entering first, to the Fife’s obvious humour.

“Kifter!” a loud voice bellowed from behind the ale-counter. The same person who had called Beenie in the Out-house, a score of foreign faces noted their entry before returning to their own affairs.

“Dandin,” Kifter said, covering caution with a smile. “It has been a while.” Sidestepping a large figure staggering towards the door, the Fife leant against the rickety counter.

Hanor, Nole and Bane stayed alert, estimating over fifty strangers populated the sizeable room. The low beamed ceiling felt enclosing, the smoke biting their throats.

“Where have you been?” yelled the stout owner of the Inn. Two front teeth were missing within the bristly grey-streaked beard.

“Travelling wherever these ragged boots take me,” Kifter said, noting those sitting close by. “An ale for me.” Checking behind to see what the others wanted, three boys looked dreary. “You had better add another three.”

“Chimes to my heart to hear such words,” Dandin said, setting about the task. “Work I presume?” he said, indicating the three.

“Companions,” was all Kifter said.

Nothing to indicate where they were from, the barman knew they were not local. “It is always good to see a familiar face, especially one who tells tales like you do.”

“Only when asked.”

“Do not believe it for a moment,” Dandin said to the boys, lining their drinks on the counter. “The best taleteller in all The Freelands. Food?”

“A bit of everything,” Kifter said, turning when the door opened behind. Disappointed when a small fellow entered instead of his Hitorian friend, Hallen, agitation increased.

“Ahh..., there goes those chimes again,” Dandin laughed. “A table is free by the hearth.”

Sitting in an alcove, a small fireplace burned nearby, the heat thawing them through. Savouring the ale, the relief was felt by all.

When their meal arrived, they had not seen a handsome spread for an age. One roast gombol, a cut of fammet served with four generous bowls of mixed roots would have been enough, but the tray of quaner and fammet cheese, short-bakes and a large pot of hot minted broth was mouth-watering.

“Is that to your liking?” Beenie asked, pleased by their reactions.

“You have surpassed yourself as usual,” Kifter congratulated her. “You have made four weary travellers very happy.”

“My pleasure,” she said, twirling, leaving them to it.

“Where do we start?” Bane licked his lips.

“At the beginning,” Nole said, reaching for the sharp meat knife.

Conversations rarely touched upon a few grunts of approval whilst eating. Like hungry pack animals, they devoured what they could as if it was their last meal.

Observant of the three boys, Kifter could see they were close. Doubts now surfaced about his plan to send them home. The fact there were no *Guarders* here that he knew did not help. Deciding a word with Dandin later might produce results, someone had to be heading for Manson.

Drinks flowed, the huge meal ensuring they did not consume too much ale. Laughing, the ale simmering suspicions, Kifter shared a few short tales to his companions' frequent astonishment. As the evening progressed, more people entered. Thick mats of smoke clung to the discoloured ceiling. A chorus of idle talk and banter merged with snaps of laughter.

Relieved, Kifter watched the newcomer settle himself at the far end of the ale-counter. Blidy Liem, a *Guarder* and old acquaintance, sat drinking by himself. About to make his move, a thunderous slap on the back half-winded the Fife where he stood.

"You are losing your touch," a jovial but familiar voice boomed from behind.

Groaning at what this meant, Kifter's plans were briefly suspended, annoyed that his Hitorian friend, Hallen had caught him out.

"I could have been one of those countless enemies you have up and down The Freelands," Hallen said, catching Kifter up by his arms and spinning him around like a plaything.

'*He knows that infuriates me,*' the Fife squirmed, chiding himself at his own lapse. "I cannot believe I missed you entering," he said, wounded as if losing a game. His second failure recently, it hurt. So engrossed when Blidy had entered, he had forgotten about the big Hite; a second entrance behind the route of his assault. Not exactly a difficult target to miss, Hallen's ten hand-spans would invade the upper rooms if he were to stand erect. Kifter sighed. "How did I miss you?"

Handsome features were victorious, forgetting the last time he had caught Kifter. A game stretching back to when they were young, "I knew you would be pleased to see me," Hallen said, putting the Fife down. Towering above everyone, his great hulking frame daunting, "Why did we have to meet here?"

Hanor, Nole and Bane sat staring at the spectacle. Hites visited Manson often, but they had never seen this one. Long, fair hair about his face and over broad shoulders was typical of most Hitorians. Rich green eyes, enchanting to any maiden, showed deep affection. Boisterous and boastful, atmospheres lightened whenever a Hite was present.

Pulling up a bench-stool, the stranger faced the boys. "Well," he said, curious. His height was a little lower than a standing man. "I think there is some explaining to do here." Quite certain Brandor had mentioned that only one boy was to be escorted, he looked at Kifter, disappointed.

"It is a bit of a story," the Fife said, checking Blidy was still there. "But a situation that will sort itself out."

"Hmm...", the huge figure doubted, surprised at the dark curly haired one's challenging manner. The other two he suspected were brothers.

"Help yourself to something to eat," Nole invited, indicating the left-over food on the table. Taught that good manners made strangers feel welcome, it hid how nervous he felt. Just about to help himself anyway, Hallen saluted the boy and did. "Kifter has not yet introduced me," he said, mouth half-full. "But that is to be expected from one so lapse. I am Hallen..., so who might you be?"

Checking with Kifter if it was fine to talk, when the Fife signalled to do so, "I am Hanor," he said. "And this is Nole, my brother."

"I thought as much," Hallen said, turning to the defensive looking Bane. "And you are?" Heart racing, he shifted in his seat. "Bane."

Hallen considered the predicament. "Why are there three of you?"

"We are here to support Hanor," Bane answered, a trace of courage emerging.

"Support...!" The Hite was surprised. "I did not know he needed help."

"Hanor needs people he can trust if he is going to Tarden," Bane said a little too loudly.

"Sshh," Kifter hissed, snapping at the young man. Irritated, checking no one was paying any attention, he scowled at the boy. "Do you not know what discretion is?"

Staggered by the tone, Hallen sensed more to this.

"How was your ride?" Kifter enquired, opting for a safer topic before addressing the larger problem.

Belching, to the three boys' amusement, "It was good," he said, drinking Kifter's ale. "Not as good as this but... reasonably uneventful." A glimmer sparkled in his eye.

"And what does *reasonably*... mean?" the Fife asked, knowing his friend well. Calming down from his outburst, he felt angry at how rattled he was of late.

"Nothing much," Hallen said, working his way through the remainder of the food. "I stumbled across a couple of wealth collectors of the corruptible kind."

"Thieves you mean?" Kifter said, expecting the worst.

"Yes, a couple of worthless scroungers out of practice."

"You were gentle with them?"

"They came at me during the night," he shrugged. "What could I do?"

"What *did* you do?"

"Nothing to worry about. Someone should have found them by now."

Kifter was unsure if he wanted to know. "And where are they?"

Scratching his jaw, "Upside down."

"Where... upside down?"

"Up a tree of course."

Never doing things in half-measures, "How far up a tree?"

Hallen shrugged, raising his hand to touch the ceiling. "As high as I could get them. I could not help myself, I had to do something to teach them a lesson."

"Your Mother would cringe if she knew half the things you did," the Fife managed to laugh. "But you are right, some people do need to learn the hard way." Tempted to look at Bane, he had no idea why the young fellow bothered him so much. '*He is just as you were*'. Discarding the thought, nothing could justify their presence.

"Perhaps we can go over recent travels when these little ones are safely in bed."

Seizing the moment, "It has been a long turn," Hanor said, expecting more arguments if they were to stay. Kifter's ability to go hot and cold was worrying. He had a task to do, but his intolerance of Bane seemed more than that. "We will make this drink our last."

"A wise move," the Fife approved.

"Can I ask you something?" Bane said to Hallen.

The others hesitated, uneasy at what he was about to say.

"Please do."

"Where are you going to sleep tonight? The beds are not big enough."

Disbelieving such harmless concerns were possible in the changeable atmosphere, sniggers swept the group.

Chapter 11: Intrusion at Ags Ole

Leaving Kifter and Hallen downstairs, three young men slumped on their beds. Numbed from the effects of the ale, their arduous travels had finally caught up on them. Sharing a few slurs before snores vibrated the room, only Hanor lay awake, anxious of the new arrival and what repercussions it would have. Burdened by the fact his brother and Bane were not making this journey any easier, Nole was trying his best, but Bane seemed to inflame Kifter without trying.

Head aching, “The rest of the journey cannot continue like this,” he muttered, dejected. Conceding this was the final chance for Nole and Bane to go back home, he could tell that was on Kifter’s mind too. Wagons heading east promised to minimise any dangers, but would it be enough? Drifting into a fitful sleep, he still could not decide.

“What did he say?” Hallen asked, Kifter returning from talking to Blidy Liem. “He has work lined up but will forego it if I need him.” “That is good news,” Hallen said, sympathetic to Kifter’s frustration. Told about their eventful journey, “The Freeloaver sounds incredible, but the *Nyshifter* is what would worry me. I do respect Hanor’s caution.” “What choice do we have? If we take them to Tarden, Brandor will hang *me* from a tree.” “I would not like to guess what he might do.” “Then we must convince Hanor to send them back, otherwise we are done for!”

Snapping awake, Hanor thought he heard something move, but what he could not tell. Waiting in the dark, a sudden flapping noise outside was followed by scratching sounds like knives scoring a window. Creaks groaned as if something substantial had perched on the roof of the Out-house.

Through the pitch of night, fears ignited, further misplaced noises etching into his imagination. Unable to discern anything specific, the only other sounds were of his sleeping companions. A deeper rumbling from the floor at the end of his bed was of the giant newcomer Hallen. Ominous tingles quivered through him, additional sounds outside alarming him to what darkness could hide within its shadows. What was out there?

Situated at the end of the Inn, their room was above the Out-house, the Enclosure running away from their location. Out of reach from the clawing limbs of the two trees on opposing sides of the Inn, there was ample space for whatever it was to walk on the roof. Heart racing through the long silence, it was too big to be a Fliryn. Presuming it was resting and would leave soon, to think it was just on the other side of the wall was disturbing. Eerie, the silence drew his attention out towards the enigma, inviting him to imagine what might be lurking there.

Pulling his blanket up, a sudden lurching scratched at the roof outside, making him jump. Heart faltering when huge wings started beating, climbing higher until barely audible, a deathly stillness followed as if something terrible was about to happen. Balanced on the edge of expectancy, surely one of the others must have heard it?

Before an answer came, a heart-stopping explosion erupted, shaking the floor of their room. As if a falling boulder had crashed through the roof of the enclosure, others leapt to their feet.

“What was that?” Bane cried through the darkness.

Others responded, but Hanor’s attention was diverted to the horrific screams now howling from somewhere below. Terrifying wails cried out for help as the noise of despairing kyboes filled the room. Mixed with an unworldly sound, something was attacking the animals, their stricken cries permeating the walls. Too close for comfort, if it was capable of going through the roof then these thin walls were useless.

“Follow me,” Kifter cried, opening the door.

By now, the whole Inn was alive with frantic calls, bodies clambering into the pitch corridor. A lantern lit ahead helped guide them along the narrow passage to the stairs. Keeping hold of Hanor’s arm, Kifter led them on, the young man gaining a measure of calm from his protectorate. Hallen was at the rear, trying to steady both Nole and Bane. Assurances were drowned out by fleeing bodies or the sickening noises coming from the enclosure. Kyboes were kicking at bolted doors, desperate for freedom. The horrors showed no signs of ending.

Frantic, they filed down the stairs. Not entering the Out-house but following other visitors into the Leisure Room and out through the front door, screams continued wailing throughout the building. No intruder deserved to get away with this, sharp curses burning young ears. Weapons were drawn, knives, swords or anything solid enough to use. Many were eager to put an end to it until they stepped outside where the sounds of death echoed, everyone stalling at the terrible noise.

Double doors to the enclosure lay wide open. Some Kyboes had escaped and could be seen running along the main road, too traumatised to slow down. Others however, were still trapped inside, and at the mercy of the savage in their midst. A few men drew near, only to stop short of entering, fear stalling the bravest. With no clear leadership, people cursed at the lack of direction.

“What shall we do?” cried a large round man just ahead, worried for his Kyboe.

Keeping their group together, Kifter let go of Hanor now they were outside. Taking refuge by the large tree, it was paltry cover, but it would do. Wails of torment continued but still no one dared enter the besieged building. Frustrations increased, arguments between undecided men developing. To enter meant facing the unknown. Even the giant Hallen seemed wary of going close.

“My sword is in the Out-house,” he said, as if to justify his inaction. “They would not let me stay at the Inn unless I left it there.” Pulling out his hunting knife, it was still nearly the length of Hanor’s sword.

About to step forward, Kifter held him back. “We are here for Hanor, remember?”

“I cannot stand and listen to this,” Hallen shouted above the fracas. “We have to act.”

Foreboding shadows between the wide open doors dared them to enter. Conflicting emotions about his purpose tested the Fife’s nerve, beleaguered animals pulling at his loyalties. Their discovery of the Mallen carcass reinforced the need for action.

“Stay back,” Kifter warned three anxious young faces, making his mind up. “And stay by this tree.” Gripping tight his faithful hunting blade, he signalled for Hallen to join him. “Let us go.”

Approaching the building, others joined the Fife and Hite. Screams inside turned to whimpers, the Kyboes too frightened to move. Holding as many as thirty animals, only

half had escaped. Whimpers turned to hopeless groans, scraping every human heart. A rustling noise followed by creaking wood inside forced the advancing group to stop. Waiting, the sinister silence returned.

Edging closer, nervous glances flickered. At the doorway, Hallen halted. Just ahead, the carcass of a shredded Kyboe lay at the entrance of a pen, its blood collecting in a pool. Worried for his own mount, more rustles alerted them back to the dangers. Hearts pounding, Hallen and Kifter peered around the door.

A heart-stopping shrill, cold and lasting, stopped any advancement in its tracks. Piercing, some ran whilst others were stuck fast, too scared to move. Another chilling shriek wailed from the depths in front, a stark warning to those foolish enough to venture close. Scrapes followed by a lurching sound alerted them to movements inside, dreading what was to follow.

Huge and terrifying, a black shape leapt up onto the large wooden crossbeam separating two pens. What manner of creature was it? Walking on long, scrawny hind legs between each pen, skeletal claws the size of a man's chest gripped the upright pillars as *it* moved. Black-pit eyes aside a lengthy elongated head glistened deathly cold through the darkness. Chilling, another ear-splitting cry shook them as *it* heaved as if preparing to attack. Catching their breath, *its* wings spread, filling the whole area. Their petty weapons were useless against such a wretched beast.

Retracting *its* enormous wings, *it* jumped, lifting itself up and out of the hole in the roof where *it* had entered. Splinters of wood and broken roof tiles fell, the monster breezing through the punctured wound in the rafters above. Flapping when free, hovering above the enclosure to absorb the fear generated by *its* presence, those at the entrance stepped back.

Against the patchy moonlit sky, *its* power was unmistakable. Handheld fire-torches cast an orange glow against the creature's ribbed underside. Another deathly shrill pierced all who stared on, huge blackened wings spanning wide. Some ran, expecting more death and destruction to follow. Hovering above the silent tomb-like enclosure, so cold and deadly, *it* seemed to be savouring the effect *it* was having. When *it* turned and disappeared into the vastness of night, those left on the ground could not believe it, staring, too stunned to move.

Fear, the ultimate defeater, bound many tongues. Only a certain Fife from the south knew what beast *it* was. Recalling the Seekers' tale at Tilor, shock now permeated every mutter or wipe of the brow.

Whimpers from the enclosure alerted them back to the sufferings inside. Cautious, Hallen, Kifter and five others approached the entrance. Adjusting to the conditions, no other winged monsters were present, only petrified Kyboes shivering in the dark. Two were cowering at the end to their right, but most of the desolation happened to their left. Two carcasses lay across the doorways of their pens, stomachs clawed open. The dead occupants of the next two pens had also been butchered. Some doors lay open and were empty, but others remained shut, haunted eyes staring out.

"What manner of creature was it?" Dandin asked, traumatised. Beenie was at his side, tearful. The large man, still in his bedclothes, pitied two shaking Kyboes tucked in one corner. This was dreadful.

“A *Nyshifter*,” Kifter said, solemn and ominous.

Others entered when confident the danger had gone. A few reacted selfishly, angry calls complaining about the security arrangements and the loss.

“Where has my Kyboe gone?” bellowed one man, more concerned about the inconvenience of having to go look for it than appreciating how lucky he was.

“I will not be staying here again,” cried another, his Kyboe trembling at the back of its pen.

Placing their mounts at the other end, Kifter and Hallen worked their way through the scurrying bodies of concerned owners. On reaching their allotted pens, they stopped.

“My lady must have got out,” Hallen said, her door ajar. Thankful, he only hoped she had not travelled far, worried that creature might pick her off.

“At least she is alive,” the Fife said, still recovering. Nole and Bane’s Kyboes were cowering at the rear of their pens, a handheld lantern nearby casting its grim glow across their stricken features. Ghostly, unblinking eyes stared back. “I have never seen such a look as this,” the Fife said, finding his and Hanor’s Kyboes together at the end of the Enclosure.

Snapping alert, as if remembering an appointment, Kifter darted past the big Hite.

“What is it?” Hallen called, dismayed by the thought of the creature returning.

Halting outside, the Fife was relieved to see the three young lads approaching. ‘*I cannot believe how long I left him out here,*’ he thought, meaning Hanor. Angry at himself, the code for any *Guarder* was to protect the people hiring them at all costs. It was why he had been hesitant to enter in the first place. Lingering inside without ensuring Hanor’s safety first was indefensible. If the creature had returned, he might have lost his young charge.

“Well...?” Hallen asked upon reaching them.

Cursing inwardly at his lapse, Kifter tried to conceal his fury. “It is nothing.” Unwilling to forgive himself, pressures mounted. With Hallen catching him out, and his inability to deal with the Freeloaver, three times he had failed in as many turns. Not one to make mistakes, this was shameful.

Accustomed to the Fife’s high expectations, Hallen let it go for now. There were more important issues to deal with. “What shall we do?” he asked, concerned for his Kyboe.

“I do not want to get caught out by that *Nyshifter* again,” Kifter said, searching the night sky.

“*Nyshifter!*” Nole said, anxious. “Is that what that thing was?” Hiding behind the tree when it had broke free from the Enclosure, they had only seen it for a fleeting moment. Rattled, those terrible shrieks could never be forgotten.

“I did warn you of the dangers,” was all Kifter said on the matter.

“I cannot leave her for long out there,” Hallen said, meaning his Kyboe. “Especially with that *thing* flying around.”

Distracted, Kifter was still coming to terms with his failures. Deciding he would chain Hanor to himself next time if need be, he considered their next move. “I will stay here with these,” he said, indicating the boys. “It is pointless leaving this place now. If it wanted to wreak more havoc, *it* would not have left. Four of our Kyboes need attention, so we will do what we can before catching some rest. I would go with you but... we have additions here that have to be protected.” It was why he did not want Nole and Bane to

stay. Gazing out across the shadowy hillside, Hallen's search would not be easy. "Watch yourself, and do not try anything foolish."

Hallen headed out in the direction of the fleeing Kyboes. It was to be a long night. "Come," Kifter said. "We have some tending to do."

Just before dawn, Hallen returned. His huge Kyboe, nearly a third larger than their own, refused to enter the Enclosure. In the half-light, Hanor, Nole and Bane stroked it by the tree. Its former abode was now a place of terror and death.

"You look tired Hallen," Kifter noted, the strains catching up on all of them. "I am coping," the Hite said, yawning.

Putting to flame the last Kyboe carcass, a generous offer was made by Dandin - the Inn-keeper. "There is a hot broth and morning meal for any guests still here. No charge. It is the least we can do." Only a few took up the invitation.

"What will you do?" Kifter asked Dandin, the Inn-keeper joining them whilst eating. Appetites fluctuated, although the heat of the broth did help.

"I do not know," he said, not hungry either. "My livelihood will be shattered by this."

"This is proof people need to realise what threatens The Freelands," Kifter said, expecting word to spread about the horrors of this night.

"I had heard rumours of course," Dandin admitted, the light outside increasing. "But... until it happens to you, you carry on as normal."

"What rumours?"

"About strange creatures, and some people going missing."

"I have heard the stories too."

"Really?" the Inn-keeper said. "Did I not hear you give that *thing* a name?"

"*Nyshifters*. They come from the north."

"They...! You mean there are others?"

"If the tales are to be believed," the Fife said. Dandin's reactions were the kind Brandor had promised would come.

"Oh dear, how terrible." The Inn-keeper looked at Hanor, Nole and Bane, thoughtful. Judging by their lack of reaction, they must have heard about them already. "And what are youngsters doing travelling these dangerous lands? For until this night..., the question would not have even occurred to me."

Numb from the night's events, Hanor just shrugged, recalling Kifter's caution about wagging tongues.

"Well, no doubt you regret leaving the safety of your home now, if anywhere can be called safe from a creature like that."

"It has crossed my mind," Hanor confessed.

"At least you are in capable hands," he said, familiar with Kifter and Hallen. Burying head in hands, Dandin sighed. "Ah well, at least no one was killed."

"That is something to be thankful for," Hallen agreed.

Wishing he could have done more, Dandin excused himself. "I need to rest. Eat all you will." He left the group, disappearing into his private quarters behind the counter.

"There is much torment to come," Kifter said, watching him go.

"Brandor did warn us," Hallen added.

“It is but the beginning.”

“What shall we do now?” Hanor asked, after a brief period of reflection.

Kifter stared back at him. “That... depends on you.”

Startled, “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

Conscious of his brother and Bane, both were sitting either side of Hanor. “What options are there?”

Toying with his food, Kifter held nothing back. “You have now seen what threatens The Freelands, and last night was just a small part of what is to come. There are twelve *Nyshifters*, and many other vile creatures just as ruthless. You need to ask yourself, do you really want to put them in harms way?” Unsurprising, he indicated Nole and Bane.

Tensions rising, Hanor had delayed this moment for long enough, weighing the arguments for and against their inclusion. To send them back with a merchant would consume him with worry, but what would he do if something terrible was to happen to them? Doubting he had a choice anyway, would they go just because he said? Probably not. An answer began to surface, and the more he considered it, the clearer it became. Even though he would prefer them to be back at Manson, he could not accept responsibility for their actions.

“I do not have the right to choose their path,” he said, letting Kifter down for a second time. “If they want to fight against this evil..., then who am I to deny them that chance?” Nole and Bane’s yip of excitement did not show.

Displeased, Kifter expected nothing less. “This is your final decision?”

Nodding before looking up, Hanor sighed, surprised Hallen had nothing to say.

“I suggest we get going then.” Standing, the Fife did not wait for a response. Turning, he left through the side door.

“Hey...,” Hallen mumbled, mouth half-full. “I am eating.”

Kifter was in no mood to consider protests.

“What shall we do?” Hanor asked, taken aback.

“I suggest you do as he says,” Hallen said, grabbing a handful of quaner and some nuts before making for the door. “Do it before he changes his mind.”

Nole stopped Hanor. “Thank you... for your support.”

Hanor was blunt, holding his gaze. “I have not supported you at all. It is not a light matter you being here. At home, at least there is protection, what security is there out here?”

“Precisely,” Nole said, patting his arm. “So what chance do you have with so few to guard you?”

Sincerely put, Hanor knew he would be reacting just as they were. “If you insist on coming, then let us go. And try not to upset anyone,” he said, pointing at Bane.

“Me?” Bane said, as if innocent. “Now this has been cleared up, perhaps we can start treating each other as friends.”

Chapter 12: Sharpening the Senses

Slowing to a walk, the morning's ride was gruelling, but no one dared complain. Dulling the senses, fatigue underpinned every ache. Yawns were frequent, the boys finding it difficult to stay awake.

Easing up only because their Kyboes were struggling, Kifter made sure the boys knew of his displeasure. Too much on his mind, this journey to Tarden was turning into a nightmare. Contending with adolescents was bad enough, but *Nyshifters* this far south was horrifying. Longing to reach Tarden, but even then, he could not gain solace; Brandor's fury the reason.

A chill shivered through him. Recalling that terrifying moment when the *Nyshifter* had stared straight at him, paralysing, a great deal had *it* shared in that snapshot glimpse of *its* darkened world. Signs of things to come, the creature had made sure he knew it he was quite certain. Wondering why, his mood deepened.

Pulling in alongside, Hallen drew Kifter back from the internal abyss. "Troubled?" Sighing, "Just... worn out," the Fife said, their predicament preventing any clarity. "You have pushed them hard today," Hallen warned. Kifter's advice in the past about releasing tensions by talking was nevermore needed than now. "Care to talk?"

Kifter felt like screaming. "I am not sure what it is," he said, staring ahead, waiting for the next mishap. Burdened by recent failings, "Three times!" he said, disbelieving it.

"What do you mean..., *three times*?"

Glancing behind, the three boys were talking, oblivious to the Fife's unrest. Lingered on Bane in particular, he knew why; targeting the boy for his own incompetence. "Three times I have failed Hanor."

"I still do not follow," Hallen said, disliking this.

"The Freeloaver," Kifter began, cutting his companion short when about to protest. "You catching me out at Ag's Ole, and... leaving Hanor outside last night. If that thing had returned!" he shrugged, signifying his mistake. "That is without taking into account that I cannot even choose who I journey with."

Frowning at his friend's self-mortification, "They are not failings," Hallen said, needing to snap Kifter out of this. They had touched upon this problem in the past. "Your problem is... you are too critical. How many times I have told you to not take life too seriously? If you think these are failings... then there is no hope for me."

"In my trade, errors are unacceptable," Kifter said. "Getting caught out is failing Hanor."

"Show me someone who does not make mistakes or would react differently if given the chance."

"That is not the point."

"It is. You set yourself standards no other can meet. Believe me, it is reassuring to know you are mortal. We all make mistakes, the important thing is to learn from them. Everybody knows that... except you."

What his friend was saying made sense, but to accept failure raised questions about Kifter's future effectiveness. Self-pity ravaged him like a fever, and just the thought of Bane seemed to tighten its grip. "This is ridiculous."

"Look around," Hallen said, trying a different direction. "Is this not why we are here, and why Brandor has been working so hard to unite the different races? You could not have

done much with the Freeloaver or Nyshifter. As to me catching you out, that is child's play, and you know it." He checked behind. "As to Nole and Bane..., just accept they are not your responsibility. They have made a decision to stay loyal to Hanor, so respect that. It should be admired rather than rejected because of the inconvenience."

"Have you finished?" Kifter said, his companion making headway into his gloom. Checking behind, three young men stopped talking, expecting a sharp word. '*They are the future of these lands,*' he thought, feeling mildly better. If he did not adjust, the remaining turns to Tarden were going to be awkward.

"What was that look for?" whispered Bane to the other two, suspicious.

"Your choice of travelling companion could be better," Nole said to Hanor, agreeing with Bane.

Finding it increasingly difficult to defend the Fife, Hanor expected his guide to be angry with him more than anyone else. "Perhaps he has more on his mind than we know."

"That does not excuse his conduct," Nole said.

"Are you not irritable when faced with trials, you especially Bane?"

"This is different, he does not like me."

"You have hardly been warm to him yourself Bane, have you?" Nole said.

"I do not have a problem, I am just protecting Hanor."

"But that is why *he* is here," Hanor reminded them.

"I know that, but he does not understand how close we all are."

"He is right," agreed Nole. "Look at us."

Being together was all they knew. "I know," Hanor acknowledged. "But try to see it from his side. You two were not part of the plan, and neither was the Freeloaver or Nyshifter. Perhaps we should be more tolerant of him, and trust he has our interests at heart. Do you expect him to leave you two behind if danger arises?"

Nole and Bane did not need to answer.

As frustrating as they were sometimes, Hanor had to admit how good it felt to have them here. "He is a sincere, just try to see past his responsibilities."

"So was my pet Gombol until it bit my finger," Bane shot, a stern look from his friend forcing an apology. "Sorry. I know... and yes, I will try."

Anticipating Hallen's wink of approval, Kifter's annoyance eased after listening to the boys' exchange. Realising the three boys were trying to get to grips with this as much as he was, they certainly deserved better from him. Last night's episode proved where their true enemy was. Encouraged by Hanor's maturity, he was beginning to see the potential Brandor spoke of.

Pockets of sunshine broke through the fine film of cloud as the turn waned towards evening. Digging deep, their mounts needed rest just as much as their riders did. Picking out a clump of trees on a hilltop, Kifter decided to call an early end to their exertive day. Camping on the south side to watch the sunset, for now, they could forget their troubles and the coming of night with its strands of fear.

Leaving the Fink he had caught roasting on a spit, Kifter joined the others. Deep reds and purples lined the sky to the horizon, the distant terrain changing to match the more rocky regions of the south.

“This is an age away from last night,” Nole said, savouring the final rays of sunlight. “It is,” Hallen agreed, the desire for sleep strong.

“Why would someone want to destroy all of this?” Bane asked.

“That is a question many may ask over the coming turns,” Hallen said. “Perhaps our dear leader will shed some light on it.”

Pulled away from the soothing sun, Kifter sighed. “Revenge.”

“Revenge?”

“And power.”

“Is that why *Nyshifters* are here? What can we do against them anyway?” Bane asked, feeling vulnerable now they were out in the open.

“What would *you* do?” Kifter’s question was direct.

Fearing the old Fifanian attitude was returning, “I do not know,” he said, casting a doubtful glare his way.

“What did you do last night?”

Refusing to get drawn into anything explosive, Bane did not answer.

“I am not challenging you Bane,” Kifter assured him. “Answer me, what did you do?”

“I... hid... behind the tree, like most people.”

“Even though I was tempted to hide, through a sense of duty to protect, I faced *it*, as did Hallen and others. But if truth be known, I do not know what we could have done.”

Surprised at the admittance, Bane let him finish to make his point.

“We often think we will react far better than what reality dictates. In tight situations like last night, one has to rely on skill and experience most of all. Living a changeable life on the road has its benefits, for you develop an underlying readiness for the unknown. This minimises the risk of shock.”

“That still does not sound reassuring for Hanor,” Nole said, anxious. “That is why we came. Numbers will help in times of trouble.”

“But that is my point, Nole,” Kifter said. The night was closing in fast, the aroma of cooked meat filtering across. “I asked Bane what he would do, and he admitted he did not know. Indecision can distract others who are willing to act, enough to get everyone killed. I say this not to cause strife, but as a factor both of you should consider. It is admirable what you are doing but... will it aid or hinder?”

A different perspective not considered before, it seemed to undermine their efforts. Detecting nothing devious in his tone, it supported Hanor’s suggestion earlier that the Fife had burdens they were unaware of.

“Fear does not always render a person incapable,” Hanor said. Hardly talking from experience, but he sensed bravery rose from an individual’s character rather than how skilful they were.

“True enough,” Kifter agreed. “And I hope that if other dangers arrive, our two young friends here will prove you right.”

“So..., have you made this point to knock our confidence?” Bane asked, sceptical.

“Quite the opposite,” he said. “If you are to be part of this group, you have to accept your responsibilities. Complacency is a killer. You would not want to be a burden now would you? Tomorrow, I will give you exercises to sharpen you up. You know I would prefer you to be at home, but whilst here, we might as well be productive. Are you willing to undergo some training?”

“What... kind of training?” Bane dared, somewhat chary.

“Nothing strenuous.”

Convinced the Fife was seeking trouble, Bane glanced at Nole for support.

“It does make sense what you say,” Nole said, being practical.

“Good. Now, I believe our meal is ready,” the Fife said, making his way back to the fire.

Three boys speculated if they would be foolish to take up the challenge.

“I have been informed you are heir to the High-house of Manson?” Hallen posed, the group taking a breather the following turn. Riding for most of the morning at the rear for added protection, the big Hite wanted to know more about his young companions.

“That is true, but regrettable,” Hanor replied, trying to stay humble.

“Regrettable!” The Hite was shocked. “Is that not a privilege?”

“To some perhaps,” Hanor reasoned. “But I am not suited to it.” Even with his brother and Bane listening, since coming on this journey, the way he looked at life had changed for the better. Why should he be privileged at other people’s expense?

“Would you exchange with me then?” Hallen joked.

“I would gladly do so,” Hanor said, the Hite’s size exaggerated by the height of his Kyboe. “But that would mean switching mounts, and I would not condemn my poor ride to such torment.”

“You have been around our mischievous Fife for too long,” Hallen laughed.

Resting by a solitary tree, the sun remained veiled behind a thick blanket of cloud, keeping it cool.

“You mentioned about some training?” Bane reminded Kifter whilst eating a quaner. Leaning on his elbows, “I did,” the Fife said, thankful for the interest at last. “I have been waiting for you to ask all morning.” Disappointed, they had failed their first lesson. “You have to be hungry if you want to learn. This is what I was talking about last night. If done half-heartedly, you will fall at the first sign of trouble.”

“We are sorry,” Nole apologised for all of them.

“It did cross my mind,” Bane said. “But I was not sure if you still wanted to teach us.”

Before Kifter could respond, Hanor interjected. “Caution is understandable considering how sensitive some of us have been of late.”

“Doomed if they do and doomed if they do not,” Hallen said, supporting his defence.

“A sensible point,” the Fife conceded. “Nevertheless, my position remains the same. You should be thirsty to learn whilst we are able.”

“We see that now,” Bane said.

“Good.”

“So what is it you would have us do?”

Kifter sat up and looked around. “You see those Fliryns?” He pointed to a flurry of them over by a tree on the next hilltop. The three nodded. “How many are there?”

Counting and recounting, the Fife gave no hint, finding their efforts amusing. Frustrations emerging, the task could only be guessed at.

“Twenty five,” Bane offered.

“Are you sure?”

“Twenty three,” Nole tried.

“And you?” Kifter said, turning to Hanor.

Hanor shrugged. “They are moving too quickly to count.”

“A good answer.”

The other two were stunned.

“What do you mean, *a good answer*? He did not even say a number,” Bane protested.

“Did you count them or did you end up guessing?”

Bane’s annoyance turned to embarrassment. “Well I... think I counted twenty five.”

“You think?”

“It is hard to tell.”

“But a guess is a guess, is it not?”

“I suppose.”

“But I did not say guess, I asked how many were there.”

“You did,” Nole conceded.

“So what is the point of this?” Bane felt cheated.

“You tell me what the point is,” the Fife challenged, getting ready to leave.

Nole and Bane’s puzzlement mirrored Hanor’s.

“Do we have an answer?” Kifter asked, a touch of mirth present.

“No.”

“I thought as much,” the Fife said, far from impressed. “A quick eye takes skill and a sharpness of intent. You cannot do the impossible unless your whole self is involved.”

“Do you mean passionate?” Hanor tried.

“It goes deeper than that.” Climbing into his saddle, the Fife motioned for them to do the same. “You need to tune your mind so it becomes one with the object.”

“I am good at that,” Hallen kidded. “Even though some ladies are not so obliging.”

“It is difficult to do,” Kifter said, ignoring his loose friend. “And takes a keen eye and sensitive mind to work.” They had a long way to go. “Remember, do not to say anything unless you know it is a fact. Your mind will fill in the gaps if you are not careful, and you may end up sounding foolish.” Unsurprised by their frowns, “So..., the task for the remainder of the turn is to sharpen your soft minds. Believe me, it comes in handy when facing uncertainties.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Nole agreed.

“It takes a great deal of practice, so be warned.”

“So how many Fliryngs are there?” Bane asked, doubting it could be proven anyway.

“Nineteen.”

“Are you sure?” Bane checked. Recounting, quick movements did seem to enlarge their numbers.

“Let us go,” Kifter said, expecting the reaction

A herd of Mallen stood on the crest of a rocky hilltop watching them pass. Undulations were prominent in these parts, the young men practicing what the Fife had taught them earlier. Difficult to focus on anything whilst riding, it generated unforeseen problems.

“My eyes ache,” Nole declared, after suffering long periods of focal exercises. “I am no good at this.”

Hallen rode beside him. “I tried and did not last long either,” he confessed, indicating Kifter at the front. “Unlike him.”

“How does he do it?”

“With time and practice, you become immune to it. This is what he does best.”

They could only watch and try to learn. Eventually admitting defeat after a demanding short-turn of concentration, the mental exercises were left to the keen hearted.

Passing through a rocky region, a few tight gaps and sharp climbs were difficult but manageable. Thankful when returning to greener pastures, Kifter pulled them up just before sundown, their Kyboes again feeling the strain.

“See, he is not too bad,” Hallen toyed, pulling up beside Bane. Shrugging, Bane wanted to believe the Fife now accepted their inclusion, but could not help but look for the next sharp word.

Chapter 13 : Boverns Crossing

Some distance ahead, snaking like a discarded rope, the Rapone River lay like a watery scratch across their path. From this far out, the narrow line hugging the waterside looked just like any other bridge. Gradual, the slope curved down before disappearing into the river's edge. Enormous Woodell trees surged at the river from the other side as if desiring to cross but not wanting to get their roots wet.

"What has happened to the trees and bushes?" Nole asked, the surrounding landscape altering for the worse.

Late in the after-turns of the following day, a patchy light brown hue now stained the terrain as though it had not rained for a season. Devoid of vegetation and wildlife, even Fliryns, the hardiest of creatures, were missing. Only Woodell trees seemed to be withstanding the wilting process, everything else dying.

"It looks as if the land has been poisoned," Hallen said, disliking the drabness.

After the trauma of Ags Ole and the Freeloaver incident, the grim mood was gnawing at Kifter again, doubts trying to undermine his purpose. Suffering five turns of the day of this, he just wanted to get to Tarden and be done with this journey. Not needing anymore surprises, he had no idea why the whole area was lifeless. Only dusty beams of sunlight angling down from between patchy clouds retained any kind of normality. Brushing up from behind, a breeze swirled, urging them to move.

"Come on," bellowed Hallen, forgetting about the decay. Spurring his Kyboe forward, "Woo... whooo."

"Not a care in the world," Kifter muttered, at times envious of the Hite's ways.

Bane and Nole joined the big fellow, the three sweeping down towards the ancient bridge.

Regret hammered Hanor, hoping Bane and Nole would just fall into line and not frustrate Kifter. Their reactions were a sad reflection on him and that all-important decision he had made. Seated at his guide's side, "I am sorry... for this," he said, guilt increasing. "I could not have left them."

Kifter sighed. "I know." Following the action below, a slight grin appeared. "I would have done the same."

Startled by the admission, Hanor stared at the Fife, the response signifying traces of respect for what he had done. Following an elder whose hands he had to trust, the veteran traveller was used to doing things his way, and Hanor's decision to make that stand had stamped his mark on the relationship. Trusting their friendship was about to head in a new direction, a great burden lifted.

Sturdy, spanning the river like a huge finger pointing west, the bridge was over a hundred strides across. Deep and ominous, the river oozed south like a dirty lava flow heading for the sea. Low-lying, the weathered bridge was wide enough for two Kyboes abreast. Upright supports, strong but ancient, protruded like deformed legs rising just above the waterline. Branching supports stretched from post to post, with thick, warped planks across the struts. Durable, surviving hundreds of seasons in the open, the lack of a side rail left any traveller vulnerable to the winds and a possible slip into the murky waters. On the far side, the forest closed in like giant spectators. Lacking lower branches,

the enormous columned Woodell trees rose to a thick canopy of foliage high above. The drabness of the surrounding fields reflected even more so here. Widespread, a carpet of needle-seeds suffocating the ground ensured no straying germ could take root near this isolated crossing. Early evening closing in, shadows within the forest's depths increased.

Hallen, Bane and Nole stood talking at the bridge's edge. Their mounts feeding, trying to gain sustenance from the withering grass before entering the sombre looking place across the river, spirits were high.

"Hallen was just telling us about the time his Kyboe threw him off into the Trino River," Nole said, laughing as Hanor and Kifter approached.

"His Kyboe is always throwing him off," Kifter teased. "Like the many fine ladies that come to their senses."

"At least my mother never rejects me," Hallen joked in defence.

"Does she reject anyone?"

"Now you are getting personal."

Dismounting, Kifter walked to the edge of the bridge. "Boverns Crossing is as solid as ever," he said, kicking one of two small upright posts marking the first step. The boards, uneven but firm, were in good condition.

"Boverns Crossing?" Nole had never heard of it, checking to see where it was on his map. Showing numerous crossings along the river, but there were no names.

"Why is it called Boverns Crossing?" Hanor asked, thinking it an unusual name.

"Long ago, vile creatures called Boverns used to prowl these waters," Kifter explained, stepping onto the bridge with his Kyboe in tow. "Attracted to people of power, they used to attack any such person who crossed."

"Like Members of the Hisian-Set?" Nole asked, eager to learn more.

"Yes," the Fife said, Brandor sharing a few tales about those encounters. Walking further out, the bridge groaned under their weight, but the structure held firm. "They fought them off with fiery powers."

"Fiery powers!" Bane said, imagining what it must have been like.

"We should be thankful that not everyone can wield such energies," Hallen smirked, indicating Bane. "Or a certain Fife we know would probably not be here."

Pockets of laughter were minor, Bane shrugging.

"What happened to the creatures?" Hanor felt uncomfortable about the idea, checking up and down river.

"They were silenced a long time ago by the Yarmi Folk."

"The bridge is safe to cross then?" Hanor, asked, seeing it as a foolish question considering Kifter was already on the bridge. After the Freeloaver and Nyshifter, no one could blame him for being sensitive.

"They disappeared hundreds of seasons ago Hanor," Kifter said, now nearly a quarter of the way across. "Are you coming or not?" he called over his shoulder.

"I like to hear about our history, and what it was like to live back then," Nole said, permitting Bane go next before following him.

"Today is tomorrow's history Nole," Hallen said, signalling for Hanor to move. "Make sure you enjoy it."

Peaceful, the setting stole away any risks that existed here in the distant past. With the sun peeping over the treetops, the mood was surreal. Hanor paused, making a final check before crossing.

“Come on,” his younger brother pressed, stopping a short way out. Kifter was already approaching the middle.

The setting felt weird, of another time almost. Warming at the thought of walking across with Lara, Hanor walked onto the bridge.

Subtle sounds of the faint chime were barely noticeable at first, blending with the draughts of wind. Taking no notice, thinking about his reunion with Lara when returning home, the delicate sound merged with the scenery, soothing any subtle doubts Hanor initially had. Rustling of the treetops, like a chorus of tiny clapping hands, complimented the enchanting setting.

“Stay next to me,” Nole said, sarcasm present when Hanor pulled alongside. “That is why I am here, remember?”

Grinning at his cheekiness, “In some ways..., mother will be glad that we are together,” he said, not entirely persuaded.

A few steps further, Hanor stopped and looked up river.

“What is it?” Nole asked.

“Can you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“That sound.”

Nole listened, but only the occasional whistling of the wind was apparent. “Just the breeze and the treetops.”

Shutting his eyes to block out any distractions, the subtle chime now sounded different, far more profound. “That ringing sound, like tiny bells?”

“I cannot hear anything,” Nole said, suspecting his brother was teasing.

“Why have you stopped?” an impatient Hallen said from behind. The last thing he wanted was for the bridge to give way.

“Hanor says he can hear something,” Nole said, standing next to his brother. “Perhaps it is the ringing of the wind swirling around inside there,” he joked, tapping Hanor’s head. Kifter and Bane were nearly across the other side.

“Come on,” Hallen urged, edgy. “Let us go.”

Pressing on, Hanor kept gazing up river whilst his younger brother started humming close by, lost to daydreaming in the late after-noon sun. Arcing to the right, the river meandered down towards them, but nothing moved to say where the hypnotic sound was coming from.

Verging on dismissing the chimes as a freak of his senses, halfway across, a shudder ran down Hanor’s back. Hairs stood on end forewarning something awful was about to happen. Halting, searching the water, he could feel invisible, leering eyes glaring up from beneath the surface.

Wanting to run, to hide, to warn the others, it was too late. From the flowing calm of the river, an explosion of noise erupted to his side as a huge hideous head came lurching out of the water. Two unblinking eyes had only one thing in mind, a sharp gleam enhancing that ugly intent. Penetrating, the glare froze Hanor’s muscles tight, the shock stalling his breathing. Slimy, dark olive skin, caked with boils and swelling ulcers, glinted

as the creature's long willowy body catapulted through the air. A head the size of a man, its gaping jaws exposed heavily stained, dagger-like teeth, each one longer than his hand. A slathering tongue flicked and slapped, awaiting its meal.

Instinctive, Hanor dropped like a stone. To his utter relief, the monster's momentum carried *it* over and away from his position towards the other side of the bridge. Flying from *its* own propulsion, the foul creature's thick oily tail trailed behind, slapping across his back, leaving a cold gel-like substance clinging. Calls from behind and to the front went unheard, blocked out by a short, sharp scream to his left, wailing with fright. The despairing cry ripped into the silence and lasted but for a petrifying moment. Terrified, falling silent when the invading beast crashed back into the water beyond, an eerie disquiet replaced the commotion.

"No..., no," a sudden, horrifying yell echoed. Helpless and desperate, shrieks of dismay from Bane rang out. Inconsolable cries bore deep, confusion sweeping through the unsuspecting party.

Hanor, with his head still on the bridge, looked up, adrenalin throbbing his temples. Confounded by the unexpected invasion, what had happened? Kifter was running towards him past a hysterical Bane, his friend pointing at the river. Tears gushing forth, Hanor still did not know why.

"What...!" he yipped when two huge hands grabbed him from behind. Struggling when lifted high, convinced the creature had returned, Hanor lashed out, kicking and screaming but to no avail.

"It is me," Hallen shouted, throwing him over his shoulder.

Running headlong towards the other side, Hanor was unable to move. Three Kyboes followed, a sense of terror apparent. "What is happening?" he called, wanting to get down. Bane kept screaming in front, but why? Scouring the water for that grotesque creature, *it* had come so close to getting him. Pungent, an awful reek hung in the air, a potent reminder that this was real. Concerns turned to his brother, presuming he was somewhere ahead. Where is he? What had that scream been? Panic started forming, soul-destroying fears rushing in to choke him.

"Nole...! Nole," he cried, waiting for the reply. *'Everything was fine, he was panicking, there was nothing to fear,'* he thought, trepidation rising. But what was Bane reacting to, and why had Nole not answered yet? Hanor's mind raced and started to whirl. "Where is Nole?" he shouted, dread convulsing. "Where is he?" he repeated. No answer came, only a natural urgency to get to the riverbank was evident.

Hallen's thumping boots pounded the bridge. Kicking harder "Nole!" Hanor screamed. Reaching the bank, Bane was crying further on in the forest, reaffirming Hanor's worst fears. "Nole!" He tried once more, imploring that familiar voice to answer. Hallen refused to let him down, and the more he struggled, the tighter the Hite gripped him. "Where is... he?" Beside himself with worry, the clench held fast for his own sake. "Let me down." Tears started pouring, fears getting the better of him. Desperate to be freed, "Let me see Nole," he tried, but it was no good. Heart burning, a fiery flush overwhelmed him, the realisation dawning. Clamping hands over his ears, "That... scream. No...," It was too grisly to believe. Anger turned to rage, his struggles continuing. Blinded by tears, not accepting the worst had happened, "Not... Nole! please..., not Nole."

Hallen fell to the ground on his back, rolling over to pin the overwrought youngster down. Burying his head into Hanor's chest, he held tight as the boy strained to release his arms. How could he look him in the eyes and explain what had happened, that his brother was lost?

Tears welled as the memory returned, so quick and cruel. Hanor had dropped to the bridge, but Nole had been too busy humming to react. Missing the first, the vile creature had taken the second. Nole's terrified face was now stamped into his mind's eye. Happening so fast, the jaws had crunched and snatched his life in one mighty crack.

'*What in all The Freelands...?*' he thought, speechless at the atrocity. Knotted inside, so much had he seen over the seasons, but never such as this. Nole's innocent, helpless face haunted him. '*That scream, that terrible, terrible scream.*' Hallen kept his head buried, too upset to move.

Sore, glazed eyes stared up at the treetops, numbness paralysing the young heir of Manson. The burning in Hanor's chest increased in potency, torching the grief like a cremation. A dreamlike calm settled over him, no sound audible. Even the rustling of the trees faded. Unaware of where he was or why, it did not matter. Tranquil like a sedated animal, the peace enclosed about him, heavy eyes giving up the fight for life.

"He is sleeping," Hallen said, sitting down. Glancing across at Bane, the boy's empty gaze flickering in the firelight, they were all still in shock. Lying nearby, Hanor was soundless, exhaustion claiming him, the blow too much to bear. A spitting fire gave little warmth and solace to their dilemma.

Continuing into the forest for a time after the tragedy, a sobbing Bane had not wanted to leave. Determined to find his lost friend, he had gone back with Kifter shortly after the strike, desperate but hopeful. Combing the river for a limp but living companion, but nothing had been found. Kifter's fears were that they would stumble upon remnants of Nole, causing even more distress. Promising to return in the morning, night had released them from a futile search.

Making camp as far from the bridge as possible, Bane had said nothing since. Lolling along, following their lead like a helpless form drawn to where its master demanded, he too had witnessed Nole's final moments. Retching many times, unable to succour him then, they could do little for him now. Relieved that Hanor had blacked out, he would probably want to return home in the morning.

"What do we do now?" Hallen spoke softly, unsure if Bane's haunted stare meant he was not listening.

"I... do not know," the Fife said after a lengthy pause. Stunned by the swiftness of the incident, he had not come to terms with it himself.

"I thought the foul creatures were a myth," Hallen said, needing to say something.

"Me too."

"How does one console them after that?"

It was a fair statement. "I feel...!" Kifter did not finish his sentence.

"I know," the big Hite said, patting his friend's back.

"I promised that all was safe."

“I would not dwell on that for too long,” Hallen warned, recognising its implications. “It is true though,” Kifter said, unwilling to let it go. “I said there was nothing to fear. I gave my word, but what is my word worth if it does not hold true?”

“How many times have we passed this way over recent seasons?” Hallen said, attempting to silence the Fife’s woes. “How were we to know *they* would return? Boverns have not been seen for hundreds of seasons. There is no blame here.”

“That is not the point. An oath is my bond, so what am I if it fails? How can I look at Hanor again and ask him to trust my judgement?”

“Your judgement is not at stake,” the Hite said. Riled, Kifter’s strict observance of perfection was wearing thin. “You have to get to grips with this!”

Failures were charging at the Fife from every direction. Rubbing a straining brow, he could not believe this. “Perhaps I am not the right person for this journey. How can so many things go wrong?”

“Is it not a sign of the times?” Hallen stated. “Is this not the start of what is to come?”

“This is different.”

“Is it? Darkness exists in the most unlikely of places, perhaps it is calling to its own.”

“No,” Kifter rejected. “I have become too complacent. Did not Hanor say he heard ringing sounds... like bells?”

“He did,” the Hite had to admit.

“And we ignored that warning, such was my arrogance that all was safe.”

“That does not justify blaming you.”

“You are a faithful friend, but my word has been destroyed. I failed again to recognise a danger. Nothing you say will alter that. A life has been lost.”

“What do we do..., just sulk around and blame you for this? Kifter, they both need you.”

Peering across the simmering fire at a vacant looking Bane, Kifter doubted it. Beside him, Hanor lay like a corpse. “Do they? I fear they will not be able to look at me.”

“There is wisdom in Hanor, he will see past the obvious.”

“Nole was more than a brother to him, and a friend to Bane,” the Fife continued. “They had a bond that was as tight as my own word was to me. I have lost part of myself too.”

“What is your purpose here?” Hallen growled, struggling to keep his voice low.

Not answering, the Fife’s narrow eyes stared at the flames, desiring its purifying heat to cleanse him of his failings.

“Kifter!”

“I think we have covered everything,” he answered, unwilling to bolster himself.

“If you want to blame yourself then do so,” Hallen rumbled. “But at least complete the task given you, and let Brandor sort out the rest at Tarden.” The Hite stretched himself out, pulling his blanket up. “One final thing,” he said, leaning on his elbow. “I do not like who you have become. This is far from the sharp Fife I knew. What has happened to you?” Kifter did not react. Huffing, Hallen lay down.

Respecting his friend’s words of kindness, but in all his turns, Kifter had never felt so lonely and weak. Even as a young cheeky Fife, when ignored by his busy parents, he had learned to suppress the longings of his heart by doing whatever was necessary to succeed. Adapting, entering the adult world ready for anything it threw at him, naiveté had protected him a great deal. But recent turns had brought him crashing down, to the point of dreading the next corner. Even though forewarning them of the dangers, but he

had not expected this, not so soon. *'You said it was safe,'* were the barracking words rebounding inside his once fortified mind.

Long periods drifted by, the embers burning themselves out. Leaving him to the pitch of night, he gave in to sleep to protect the little hope that was left.

Chapter 14: The Gateway

Throat raspy, Hanor sat up, searching about for a water skin through the dimness. Dawn had not yet arrived and the others were still asleep. Rising, he found one nearby, moving away from the makeshift camp.

Numb, thoughts were cloudy as if only half awake. Sitting down, an odd feeling pressed at him, urging a course of action. Peculiar, tingles on his forehead added to the sensation of not being fully alert. Trying to recall the previous turn's events, but the resultant blankness was as empty as the environment around him. With the fire out, the atmosphere felt impersonal as though he did not belong here. Emotionally detached from his companions, the lack did not bother him. Inner pressures were trying to reach him, as if he was supposed to remember an important issue, but the deadness would not shift.

Scanning the area for signs of life, a deathly hush had enclosed itself about their group. Soundless, moving away to collect himself, the ground seemed to soak up the noise. How weird, even his breathing felt separated as though not his. Peering back through the shadows towards what he sensed to be his friends, their dark profiles on the ground lay like stones. Something was not right, not as it should be.

Huge silhouetted trees, like watchful pillars against the greyness, ran in every direction. About to return to the others, a sudden flicker of light over by the next tree caught his attention. Turning to investigate, it disappeared as if hiding. Certain it was not the trick of an unsteady mind, he had seen something, but what? Watching, he waited.

About to turn away, it flickered again but in a different place this time. '*What is it?*' he wondered. Lasting only a moment, the white glow vanished, leaving no trace. Waiting for it to reappear, it did not shine, but neither did his fears. Dominated by the strange ambience of this odd setting, he did not feel suspicious of the mystery. Instinctive doubts tried to penetrate the veil, but like an inquisitive child, he headed in the direction of its last appearance.

Thoughts of his companions dissipated with this new curiosity, the ball of light appearing again but further away, its radiance daring him to reach out after it. Again disappearing, Hanor's pace quickened. Avoiding the colossal trees, full of wonder, he pressed on. Lighting up again in front but to his left this time, it disappeared the moment he noted its whereabouts. To his right, how could it move so fast? Zigzagging, he did not care where it was leading him. So captivating, nothing else mattered.

Quickening to a run, the spongy, needled ground, released by the sleeping giants around him, enhanced the dreamlike state. Drifting after the mysterious light, he could not help himself. Unconcerned by the barrenness of these parts, a thick canopy of foliage above kept the rising dawn at bay as the light enticed him on. Fascinated, it flashed directly ahead. Glowing for a considerable time, it switched off, as was its pattern. Inquisitive, he ran as fast as he could. Searching the murkiness, where would it appear next?

It did not shine for ages until it flared next to a Woodell Tree. Running hard, exultation beckoned him on. The chill on his face burned like ice rocks, his breath hot against the coldness of dawn. Distant rays of the sun were not strong enough to penetrate the shroud of greenery above. Sensations of life charged him, running blindly after the glowing mystery ahead.

This time, when the light went out, it did not reappear. Sprinting, a long time passed before the realisation infiltrated his passion. Easing up, gasping, the pants were painful but not enough to distract him. Where had it gone? Expecting it to show again, Hanor's sides hurt from the exertion. Feelings of elation lessened, the numbing sensations dissipating as the air of safety lifted. More himself, where was he? Every way appeared the same. Columned trees stood prominent. With no idea how long he had been running, recent memories were vague, further concerns emerging through the grimness.

Standing straight to soothe an aching chest, restlessness increased as if duped into a trap. Nothing but the eerie silence of early morning pierced the shadows. Fear pecked away, the bursts of exhilaration replaced by doubts. Where had the Light gone? Alarm gnawed at him, the chill burning as doubts grew in potency. Larger and more threatening, the scale of the forest increased with each rapid heartbeat. Where were his friends? Unsure which way he had come, tensions amplified.

A sudden breaking sound behind snapped like an invisible foe. What was that? Vulnerable, a heightened imagination filled in the spaces. Spinning, certain he had seen something, but only his fading courage moved. Gigantic trees were daunting, adding to his meagreness. Another break to the left, something was there but what? Why were they hiding? Afraid to call out, surely someone would come to his aid? A crack to his right forced the desire to flee, but which way, they all looked the same? Expecting them to pounce if he did, what should he do?

Long, stifling moments kept him guessing before the noises ceased. Lingering, the silence seemed just as frightening. Unexpected, a breeze swirled, rising to a gust. Warm and unnatural, hisses glided in on the wind; the culprits invisible. Heightened senses dared to imagine what was hiding close by. Swishing sounds arrived, mocking him. Swooping like wraiths, they grew in strength, faint whispers snipping at his resolve. Hairs on his neck rose, the atmosphere alive. Nothing was moving amongst the pillars of wood standing tall. Thoughts of anyone hiding were now lost to this new threat, the hideous whispers getting louder, sensing their evil intent. Teasing, he still could not run.

To his horror, a mist began to form, crawling along the ground like a predator moving in for the kill. Frantic, it was coming at him from every direction! Indecision paralysed him. He was surrounded!

"Help," was the only pitiful thought he could muster.

Spinning, dizziness hampered any control. Faint, the arrival of dawn gave little solace. Blowing harder, wretched voices were getting louder and more confident. Condensing, the wind started encircling him. Dragging the white vapour with its luring power, the ghoulish wraiths continued their haunts, the mist rising. Lurching out at him before disappearing into the depths of the climbing funnel, screams rang in his ears. Covering them to no avail, they were inside his head!

Rolling in waves across the ground, the mist gathered into streams. Enlarging the deathly swirl about him, its size rose higher still. Trees faded, the whiteness blurring everything outside the funnel of terror. Figureless voices inside the mist grew into shadowy blurs, their terrifying cries hitting ever higher pitches. There was no getting out, convinced he was about to die.

Ferocious, its rotations lifted him from the ground. Slow at first, he started turning, the forces gripping tight. Shrills undermined any desire to be free from the terror. Rotating faster, uncaring how far off the ground he was, all sense of who and where he was began fading. Fear dispersing, helplessness replaced it.

'I am going to die,' he thought, verging on unconsciousness. Everything was a haze of white, the screams no longer bothering him. What hope did he have? Arms dropping, he looked up. Through bleary eyes he could see a cloudless sky. Deep blue in colour, was he dreaming? Without the strength to reach it, desperate words whispered to those greater minds that govern this world. "Help... me!"

Windless, the eeriness around the camp was troubling, but Kifter put it down to being oversensitive after yester-turn's trauma at Boverns Crossing. Lying on his back staring up at the blanket of foliage high above, carpeted by the yet to be dissolved night, how was he going to face them, Hanor especially?

Acute senses extended out to his travelling companions, listening to the gentle sighs of their breathing. Hallen, with his usually long steady breaths was still asleep. The loss weighed heavily on the Hite too. The steady light of day was increasing above, his attention moving to Bane next. A slight whistle escaping with every discarded breath, for now, the lad was at peace. Expecting fire when the young man awoke, he deserved no less. Rested after his unusually heavy slumber, the guilt however, was just as potent. Hallen was right of course, he had a task to finish.

Turning his attention to Hanor, this exercise of scanning the camp before rising was a way of heightening his senses, a method to keep them sharp and ready to act. Tuning in to where the heartbroken lad lay, the boy was strangely quiet. Unable to detect him as if no longer breathing, awaiting that expected sigh or sign of movement, the deathlike silence was disturbing.

Sitting up, searching through the half-light to where the boy had slept the night before, he gasped; the mat was vacant! Checking the vicinity, expecting to see the distraught lad nearby, nothing moved. Leaping to his feet, he was not behind the nearest tree either.

"Hallen," he hissed, having to admit the problem.

The Hite, for someone who a moment earlier was lost in sleep, jumped to his feet preparing for an attack. "What is it?" he asked, reaching for his sword.

"Not what..., but where!" Kifter said, worried. Deciding not to panic, his young charge had to be here somewhere.

Disturbed by the commotion, Bane momentarily forgot about the terror of yester-turn. Not until he sat up did reality kick in. Memories surging, a mixture of sickness and anger whirled. Distracted by a anxious looking Kifter, "What is going on?" Turning to where Hanor should be, "Where is Hanor?" he cried, their reactions fuelling fears. "Where is he?" he yelled, climbing to his feet.

The two did not answer, too busy searching the area. Finding the water-skin nearby, clues were patchy.

"Hanor!" Kifter hollered into the early dawn, hoping to help the boy if he was lost.

Hallen echoed his call. "Hanor," he bellowed into the dimness. "Hanor!"

Raising a hand for quiet, Kifter waited, but no returning call came.

“I thought you were supposed to be his protector?” Bane shouted, his temper biting. “I swear if we do not find him I will...!”

Refusing to be drawn, the Fife darted across to Hanor’s mat. Pinpointing his tracks, he followed the marks around to where they headed off into the forest.

“Hallen,” he beckoned, peering into the greyness. Only cold shadows reflected back, with no signs of a straying Hanor.

The Hite bounded over, following his gaze. “How long has he been gone?”

“Half a short-turn, maybe more. We had better pack and get moving. The light is growing to our favour.” Passing the still flustering Bane. “No questions!” Kifter warned the upset young man. “We will talk when we find Hanor.”

Curbing frustrations, Bane did as ordered.

Keeping close to the zigzag trail, “He is now running hard,” the Fife said, eyes pinned to the ground whilst riding progressively faster.

“How far ahead?” Hallen asked.

“We are not catching him at this point, he is running as if chasing something.”

“Or running from it?” The Hite noted, meaning the horrors of yester-turn.

Kifter had little choice but to quicken their pace. “If we are to catch him, we had better hurry. Tired as he may get, we do not know what frame of mind he is in.”

“You focus on the ground while I watch up ahead,” Hallen said, peering in front.

The light was now bright enough to see the tracks clearly. “He cannot keep this speed up,” the Fife exclaimed, afraid for their young friend. Gliding between the trees, the soft ground was spongy, their Kyboes unable to run fluently.

“I still do not like how bleak it is here,” Hallen said, life refusing to grow in this infertile region.

Kifter did not reply. Travelling this way many times in the past, the lack of colour and vegetation was the last of his worries. Fighting anxieties about yet another failure on his part, he still could not believe Hanor had left their camp without hearing him. Brandor’s caution aggravated him. “*Protect him more than you would your own mother.*”

Glancing ahead for that elusive movement, when he looked back at the trail, his heart jumped, pulling them up. “Stop!”

Beneath them, a huge circular pattern stretched nearly two-score strides across. Dreading its implications, the pattern’s neatness was as if someone had combed the area into an unnerving disk formation. Needle-seeds lay like a great woven mat, each one pointing to the right.

“What is this?” Hallen said, confounded. Concentrating on finding Hanor ahead, the Hite had missed the blatant shape altogether.

Dismounting, Kifter was careful not to upset any clues. “I do not know.” Sober words reflected his unease.

Bane too stepped down, checking for signs of his lifelong friend. “Are you sure he stopped here?”

Launched into action, Kifter skittered across to the other side to see. The northern rim fell just short of a huge Woodell tree, its towering presence a clear witness to the mystifying event. “Nothing has stepped beyond here for many turns of the days.”

Rubbing his forehead, pressures increased. Examining the entire rim, the other two waited, hopeful that something would be found. Halting periodically, Kifter picked up the odd bent stick or broken needle. But search as he did, there was nothing to go on. Twice he walked around, double-checking in case he had missed anything. He knew he had not, but graven doubts forming in his once indomitable mind demanded he look again.

Satisfied Hanor had not left the area, "His trail ends here," he said, stepping over to where Hanor's last footprint was. Undecided, he went back to the central point, peering up as if the answers were hiding in the treetops. Disbelieving a freak of nature may have caught the young man up into the clinging limbs above, but nothing was there, not even a Fliryn to prove life existed here. Dread emerged, creeping nearer, sneering at his crumbling determination not to fail again.

"Hanor!" His cry verged on despair again, both for Hanor and a last stand against the inner foes determined to conquer him. Bane echoed his cry. "Hanor...! Hanor," he repeated, grief choking his fading hopes.

Pulling Tunder up, Brandor dismounted, climbing the small mound to invoke the Yarmorians. Concerned by the deterioration of the southern regions of Tardania since last passing through here nearly two cycles of seasons ago, he wondered what the Masters at Tarden would make of it.

Concentrating on the necessary words required to cross the boundaries from this world into the Yarmorians', he started humming the sounds until hitting the right pitch.

"*Mas sum oll as a ma,*" he chanted, lowering the tone, the powerful incantation reverberating through the atmosphere. "*Mas sum oll as a ma,*" he repeated, tuning his will behind every word. On the fourth attempt, the right note was uttered. Continuing its call until they answered or he decided to end it by focusing on something else, he waited, keen to see them after such a long time.

Waiting for as long as was reasonable, to his dismay, they did not answer his call. Refraining from jumping to conclusions, tempted to believe the desolate terrain was evidence that they had their own troubles, he needed to talk to them as soon as possible. Deciding to talk to Maloree at Tarden later, the High-tardess being a Yarmorian herself, she would have to contact them on his behalf.

Mounting Tunder, he sped off, determined to reach Tarden by nightfall. Successful at drumming up support from the peoples of the south, he now had to sort the mess out with Tarden's leader, Drola. Still bitter about High-tard Polon of Tardoc, a despicable affair that had got out of hand, the next few turns promised to be testing for all. Eager to see young Hanor again, trusting Kifter and Hallen had not stumbled into any problems, at last things were starting to happen.

Cupping head in hands and rubbing dry eyes, Kifter had run out of possibilities. "What in all The Freelands do we do now?" he groaned. Frustrated, he could not answer it of course and neither could Hallen. Three short-turns had passed since arriving at the mysterious circle, checking everywhere with no sign of their missing companion. Bane continued to look and call out of sight, but kept very much within earshot. The atmosphere was heavy. "This is ridiculous."

"We must be missing something," Hallen said, pushing back his great mantle of fair hair. Stretching his legs, huge fur-lined boots were sweaty under the strain. Removing them,

freedom for his feet were the only relief for their dilemma. “We cannot just sit here for a whole turn,” he grimaced, rubbing his toes.

Crouching, doleful, Kifter could not believe this was happening. “How can we leave? What point is there in arriving at Tarden without him?”

“This is not normal though... is it?” Hallen said, troubled at seeing his friend so worrisome. The Fife was usually the one to remain calm when everyone else was losing their heads; recent events undermining a once unmatched character. “This circle is beyond us. To wait here for a miraculous return is one option, but I do not think that will happen. Brandor is at Tarden, he may know the meaning of this.”

“Tarden is another two and a half turns ride yet. If we are wrong, and Hanor needs our help, it is a long time to be away.”

“I will stay if need be,” the Hite offered.

“I do not want that either,” Kifter said, suspicious. “Something unnatural is occurring here. I do not want anyone to stay behind.”

“Just sitting here though is not right,” Hallen said, distracted. “We should be doing something... anything.”

“Guilt already sits heavily on my heart,” Kifter said, a shadow hanging over him. “I do not wish to add any more. Whatever Brandor sees in Hanor, he will be furious.”

Putting his boots back on, Hallen crouched alongside his friend, running a finger through the pattern on the ground. The Fife looked forlorn, the effort to maintain a grip taking its toll. “How long do we wait here then? I am accountable too!”

Kifter peered out to where Bane last called. “How soon do you think *he* will want to leave?”

Grabbing a handful of needle-seeds, “I cannot imagine what he must be going through.”

“I am waiting for the outburst,” Kifter warned.

“We must be sensitive towards him.”

“If we are to go, I feel we owe it to him to wait. When he is ready..., he will come at us with both fists flying. I am surprised he has not done so already.”

A snort from behind caught their attention. Hoping it was Hanor returning, expectant wishes were dashed when the young man’s Kyboe moved closer.

“It is like she knows,” Kifter noted, huge dark eyes staring back.

“Hmm..., maybe she does.”

Just after half-turn of the day, the tirade came. Full of scorn, the cutting tone stabbed at the two who sat mulling over recent events.

“You two just sit there whilst he is lost!” Bane screamed, the rage burning.

Both Hite and Fife stood. The moment had come.

“He has travelled all this way, and you two have already given up on him,” Bane stormed, passing the tree on the edge of the circle. “First Nole..., and now this!”

A quick turn of speed surprised both onlookers, the young Bane hurling himself at the two of them. Refusing to protect himself, a heavy blow to the jaw rocked Kifter. Unwilling to fight back, his failures deserving to be punished, the Fife permitted Bane to unleash his rage. Kicking Hallen hard in the shin before spinning to lash out again at the bruised Kifter, many blows missed but just as many landed on the head, chest and in the stomach. Hurting, the Fife’s only line of defence was to crouch into a ball. Heated, Bane’s contempt was without concern for the damage inflicted.

Kifter's willingness to suffer was painful for the on-looking Hite. Tempted to pull Bane off, but Hallen would be rebuked if he did. Recognising Kifter was very much in control, even though it did not look like it, his own aching shin was nothing compared to the blows pounding his friend.

"You caused this!" Bane screamed, the first signs of tiredness apparent. "And you killed Nole." Dishing out justice for such a contemptible sequence of events, someone had to pay for it, the Fife being the obvious choice. If he had not come to Manson, Bane would be playing with Hanor and Nole by the lake, living life as it should be. Yearning for that past, blurry thoughts mingled with wild emotions, concocting the rage to do this. Hammering away, he could not keep the abuse up. Flagging, his blows lessening, they softened to that of a weak slap. Tears pouring, broken-heart flooding with grief, "You killed them both," he sobbed, his strength drained. The Fife beneath him did not move.

Weighed down and exhausted, Bane slumped to the ground beside Kifter, whimpering like a defeated animal. So much pain, so much guilt for not being there to protect his friends; they should never have come on this wretched journey. Why had they been so foolish? Bane's mind was a haze of emotions. Memories flashed, his head hurting from the misery. Where had his uncomplicated life gone? With the passing of a single turn, his life had been devastated. What had they done to deserve this? That horrendous moment on the bridge, why had *It* not taken him instead? Giddiness whirled through the exhaustion. How could he go on living now his best friends were gone? Darkness surged, the miseries ending when he passed out.

Deciding to set out for Tarden after the attack, strapping the unconscious Bane to his mount, it made their choice a lot easier.

"How do you feel?" Hallen asked, annoyed at his bruised friend's reaction earlier. "I will heal," Kifter said, refusing to comment on why he had allowed the situation to unfold as it had. Relying on his overcoat to cushion a good many blows, only his ear and jaw now throbbed. Limbs would stiffen later, but that was a small price to pay considering the guilt had eased. Shocked by recent blunders, the Fife started doubting his worth, questioning why he had not heard Hanor rise earlier.

"You are a cloud of gloom again," Hallen noted.

"What do you expect?"

"You are blaming yourself for all that has happened."

The moody Fife did not deny it.

"We do not know what has happened," the Hite rumbled. "Much is to befall The Freelands. You have heard Brandor's warnings; when a door closes another opens."

Burdens deep, Kifter did not know how to shift the unbearable weight.

"If you do not snap out of this, I will come at you myself," the Hite warned.

"Be patient, I have to come to terms with this in my own time," Kifter said. "You are a good friend, and I know your words are true, this should pass in time."

"Should...?"

Sometimes wishing for the same juvenile freedoms of his oversized friend, but life had not dealt Kifter the same card. "Patience," he repeated, a flake of reasoning squirming its way above the direness. Searching the way ahead, the endless wooded pillars rose like unmoving hosts to this barren wilderness.

Hallen snorted, far from satisfied.

Easing up, sundown drawing close, Hallen was mulling over the incidents at Ags Ole and Boverns Crossing. Checking that Bane was still sleeping before turning to Kifter, the Fife's mood had softened during the turn. "Do you think trouble is attracted to Hanor?" The boy's disappearance supported the question.

Considering it repeatedly throughout the turn, Kifter was unsure. "I know Brandor is investing a great deal of hope in him," he said, trusting the Dai-laman would figure out what had happened to the boy. "The Freeloaver encounter still bothers me, so too the Bovern. I cannot say if it is Hanor himself."

"It was just a thought, that is all."

"Brandor said Hanor is no different to anyone else. Innate Powers apparently reside in all of us, but with you and me, we have made choices that do not encourage those forces to rise. Brandor asked me once, and only once, to seek after *The Hidden Mysteries*. Did I fail to seize the opportunity whereas Hanor did not?"

"Maybe," the Hite said, disliking anything to do with the supernatural. Trusting his sword instead, at least it could be relied upon. "Is that why he charged at the Freeloaver?"

"I do not know."

"Would you have charged?"

Kifter chuckled for the first time today. "Not without securing a route for escape."

"Did Hanor have any thoughts of escape?"

"No."

"Why did the Freeloaver not charge him down then?"

"I do not know... what are you getting at?"

Glancing at the resting Bane, "I am not sure but... too many things have happened. How many times have we crossed Boverns Crossing?"

"So you *are* saying there is more to Hanor?"

"You cannot deny the irregularities."

The Fife shrugged.

Leaving the issue for now, the big Hite turned to a more immediate problem. "What shall we do with Bane here when we get to Tarden?"

"Our path is not to care for boys, even if this whole affair makes a man of him. I cannot see him staying with us if Hanor is not found."

"I am not looking forward to him waking. Outburst number two may come. I presume we will not have a repeat of before?"

"No..., not this time," the willowy figure confirmed, rubbing his jaw.

Chapter 15: Yarmoria

No suitable clearing presented itself, so Kifter and Hallen set a makeshift camp against a tree at dusk. Calculating they were far enough from the scene of Hanor's disappearance, they were tired and hungry. The ground was dry and spongy to appease bruised joints. Clearing a space, a few stacking stones made a bed for the fire.

Lifting Bane from the boy's Kyboe, Hallen considered whether to wake him or not, laying the lad on his mat. "Shall we leave him to sleep until the morning?" he asked Kifter, who was preparing a hot meal.

Triggered by his words, Bane's eyes snapped open, startling the big fellow.

"He will sleep until he is ready," Kifter replied, unaware of the lad's stirrings. "He needs to eat, but food will not be what he wants. He is young, he will decide for himself."

Rising and stepping back, Hallen clipped Kifter's head. "Our young friend is awake," he said, sitting on his mat opposite.

Not looking up, the Fifanian kept stirring the pot, waiting. If the boy was to come again, he would be ready.

Surprising them both, Bane just lay there staring up into the growing darkness. Expecting the worst, the two seasoned travellers looked at each other, doubtful at the lack of response. Full flavoured, the aroma of Kifter's cooking wafted high, but no one was ready to eat. Warm and inviting, the glow of the fire gave little solace.

Awaiting the eruption, to their surprise, the sounds of sobs emerged instead. Quiet at first, like a distant call vying for attention, the young lad showed no signs of anger, only sorrow at what had befallen them. Full of pain and loss, the gentle resonance of grief confused the two onlookers on how to respond. Awkward, Kifter and Hallen shrugged. Not the sort to show affection, a kind word could ignite an explosive response, yet no support might appear as though they did not care. The two waited.

Burdened, Nole's horrific death ensured Bane would never forget the scale of his own failures. Blaming Kifter earlier because he had said the bridge was safe, but the Fife *had* warned them about predators. Deciding it was only a matter of time before he was taken too, he could do nothing now but pour out his feelings. Stripped by one dark moment on a forgotten bridge, at least Nole could not see the second catastrophe, that of Hanor's disappearance. What a pathetic friend he was.

Surprised Kifter and Hallen had not left him behind, deserving nothing less, tears started again. How could he talk to them after what he had done? Ashamed for attacking Kifter, an apology seemed meagre. Eyes stinging, what was going to happen to him?

Sighing, he sat up, achy. Sitting across the flames, Hallen was watching Kifter stir the pan, recalling how hard he had kicked the Hite. So angry, disbelieving he had taken them both on, there was no way they would tolerate another attack. Daring to look at Kifter, the orange light reflecting in sharp narrow eyes, the Fife was waiting for him to react. Shocked by how little resistance the slim figure had put up, questions rose as to why. Feeling guilty perhaps, accepting responsibility for failing to keep Hanor safe, what other reason could there be? A mark of respect seeped in at the possibility.

“I... I... am,” he stammered, Hallen’s glare falling on him. Through the shimmering light, they held so much weight. “This is... hard,” he said, tempted to just blurt everything out. “These last few turns have been... horrifying. I... I never believed it could get this bad. On the bridge I...,” he stalled, curly locks upon his brow tight from the sweat. Thinking about it was bad enough, to talk was even worse. “I have never come across these creatures before. I did not know they even existed. At the Inn with that Nyshifter..., and before that, chased by that huge white thing, then the bridge... and now Hanor, I do not know how to deal with this.”

Overpowering, grief threatened to cut short any efforts of reconciliation, his audience staring into the fire as if sharing the trauma. “I lost control..., and you were the only ones to blame. I... never thought we would be separated.” Pausing when tears started rolling again, he forced back the despair. “What will I tell their parents..., and our friends? I... hated you so much earlier.” By now, he was saying what he felt. “If I could have, I would have killed you.” Spluttering, “Can you believe that..., me... trying to kill someone? I should have known better, and stopped Hanor coming on this hopeless journey. I know I am grasping for an excuse, but I feel *we* let them down.” Finishing, a blurry mind prevented him from saying anything more.

Pulling the pan away from the flames, Kifter gazed back into the fire, finding it just as difficult to express what he felt. “Losing loved ones is never easy, and I commend you for talking as you have Bane, but... we must remember, The Freelands are on the verge of ruin. Why do you talk as though Hanor is dead? He is lost to us, but that does not mean he is in danger. There are powers at work here beyond our understanding, and so we need help to unravel this distressing mystery. There are people at Tarden who should be able to explain what that pattern is, and what has happened to Hanor. Worrying is natural, but to go to war is something else altogether.” Rubbing his jaw, for the first time, the Fife looked at the young lad.

A notion Bane had not considered, deciding on the worst possible outcome after the horrors at the bridge, the idea of Hanor still alive pierced his misery. Peering out into the darkness, daring to believe the incredible, his stomach churned at the likelihood. ‘*Hanor might still be alive!*’ he thought, the prospect fragile. “Where... are we?” he questioned, supposing they were far from the mysterious pattern and place of Hanor’s disappearance.

“We are on our way to Tarden,” Hallen said, the tone strong.

Disapproving, Kifter glared at the Hite, trying hard to keep the mood calm. “It is true Bane, we have journeyed far from that place.”

The thought of Hanor stumbling in the dark cut Bane. “What if...?”

Kifter was quick to interject. “We searched everywhere, but decided that waiting was not the best option. We need the help of Brandor.”

“Brandor!” Anger heaved at the mere mentioning of the name, convinced he was the one who had instigated all of this. Betraying Hanor by leaving without him, Bane peered behind as though the very shadow of his best friend was calling him. “What can... *he* do?” The question was more of a bite.

“If you are willing, I will explain.”

“How far... have we come?” Bane asked, thinking that he should be looking for Hanor.

Kifter knew the boy had not heard him. “Bane!”

Shrinking back when Hallen rose like an expanding tower of might, Bane gulped, the red tinge enhancing the Hite's position.

"You have a choice Bane," Hallen said, getting to the point. "We have made a decision to go to Tarden, and there is no turning back. We have not abandoned Hanor, but seek help whether you agree to it or not." Respecting Bane's grief, but their path was set. "You are free to choose what you will. You have no obligations to stay, but you need to remember that there are dangers out there that would scare even the hardest of travellers. You already know this. You are welcome to journey with us to Tarden, and what you do after is your concern, but there will be no more confrontations. Fighting each other is forgetting who the real foe is. Do you want to be part of this or go your own way?" For him to leave would be awful, but to force him to come was just as bad.

Not moving whilst the other spoke, quite unexpected, Bane felt a trace of security at the Hite's attentions. Distressed as he was, what could he do on his own anyway? How would he retrace the way they had come? *'But Hanor might be out there'* a whimpering thought tried to distract him from being sensible. Emotionally charged, he needed a clear head. "This is difficult," he sniffed. Maybe they were right. That circle did suggest immense forces were at work. "But what if you are wrong?"

"But... what if we are right?" Kifter countered.

Pulled back from the brink of running into the void behind, Bane still found it hard to commit himself. "You have given me hope, but the idea of him wandering out there alone would break me."

"How do you think he would feel if you were lost out there too?" the Fife posed. "When we find him, will he not insist on looking for you? Tardania is many times larger than the region around Manson, so choose wisely what you do."

Surviving a dash of guilt, Bane grimaced. "I want to scream!"

"It means you know we are talking sense," Hallen said.

"It still does not make you right."

"It is a matter of choice Bane. Do you go your own way or come with us?"

After his outburst earlier, another issue arose for Bane. "Do you... want me to come?"

Peering down at Kifter, a polite nod showed their agreement. "Yes..., we do."

Hiding it, a leap of joy skipped in Bane's heart, which felt out of place considering recent losses. "Then I would be a fool not to accept," he said, dreading the thought of getting it wrong. "I will come, and without bitterness towards you," he said to Kifter.

"A wise choice," the nimble fellow said, relieved this was now over. Reaching down for the warm pan, "Are you hungry?"

Sighing, but relieved, "I could do with something to warm me up."

On the edge of consciousness, absorbed by the captive forces binding him, Hanor did not register at what point everything stopped. Landing on soft grass, his mind was ablaze. Lying down, eyes closed, he could not move. Whirls in his head began easing, silence replacing them. The haunting shrills that had pierced his heart were gone, disbelieving it was over.

Warmth comforted him, daylight arriving. No shadows or darkness cloaked him, the solitude easing initial fears. Presuming he had died and was in the *Realms of the Soul*,

savouring the calm, thoughts of his friends did not enter his distracted mind. Basking in the sweet silence, opening his eyes meant shredding the peace, but open them he did.

Astonished, the clear blue sky he had seen inside that vortex stretched out above with the vigour of a bright turn of the day. No clouds invaded its richness, just an ocean of serene blue. The Woodell trees had gone, bemused by their disappearance. Attempting to lift his head, a stabbing pain shot up his neck to halt his eagerness.

Far from disappointed at having to stay where he was, he looked to the side, catching his breath. *'Where am I?'* he thought, gazing across the grassland at the trees a few throws of a stone away. Quite unlike the giant ones of before, from the ground to their peaks, branches brimmed with foliage. Risking another stab, he sat up. Situated on a huge grassy glade, trees lined the edge in every direction. Nothing moved. Bewildered, what had happened? A world away from that raging storm, it did not make sense.

Strange, a feeling that he was no longer alone sent a shiver through him. Sensing a presence draw close behind, upon turning, his heart jumped. Sitting ten paces away, a most intriguing fellow stared back. Scrambling to his feet, whirling from a rush of blood, flurries took a while to settle. Calming down when the lean figure smiled as if welcoming, there was more to this place than was obvious.

“Who... are you?” was all Hanor could muster.

Sitting cross-legged, hands folded in the lap of his pale speckled brown, short-sleeved gown, the odd-looking male was in no hurry to respond. Narrow features were poised, the striking bulge at the rear of the fellow's hairless head suggested high intelligence.

“Can we not ask *you* the same question?” the figure replied, unthreatening.

Youthful in appearance, Hanor suspected he was much older. “I... I,” the heir of Manson stammered. Confused at the swiftness of it all, “Where... am I?” He could not think straight let alone recall any personal details.

The newcomer's eyes narrowed, suspicious. “You have not answered our first question.” “I... am in a strange place..., and... in shock.” This person had not been here a few moments ago, where had he come from? An additional thought stopped him. What does he mean... *we*? Checking behind in case others had appeared, they were still on their own, supposing it was a phrase used in these parts.

The stranger remained civil. “We accept that, but is your name still so valuable? You are the one who has entered our home.”

“I... am not sure if I entered at all,” Hanor said. “I do not know how I came to be here.”

“But here you are, and entered you have, is your name still so precious?”

Hanor had nothing to hide. Concerns for his companions did not form, so mesmerised by this strange place. Trying to recall who he was, that detail eventually penetrated a cloudy mind. “My name is... Hanor.”

As if a significant barrier had been removed, “I am Yarma Torna, and I see no ill intent in you,” the fellow said, bowing his head. Convinced of the young man's innocence, “No..., you do not know what you have achieved.”

Rising to his feet, he was to Hanor's chin in height, the voluminous gown covering his feet. Sweeping his arm wide, other figures broke through the trees, hastening towards them from every direction. Taken aback, Hanor froze, believing it to be a trap. Preparing for an attack, but only inquisitive eyes approached.

“You have nothing to fear,” Yarma Torna assured him.

Defensive instincts calmed down when the others drew close, encircling him. With his past lost to him, Hanor felt self-conscious. Perceiving a trace of hesitancy in the newcomers, younger and older ones alike, females too, each one appeared similar to Yarma Torna. Mystified, to be on the verge of death, how could he have been transported here? Estimating forty in number, he could detect something more about these people, but knew not what.

“Not too close my beloveds,” Yarma Torna urged, their collective intrigue a force unto itself.

Polite acknowledgments greeted Hanor wherever he turned. Panged by shame at how suspicious he felt, “I am sorry but... I do not know what has happened.”

“We understand that,” Yarma Torna said. “As I said, you do not realise what you have accomplished.”

Identifying a definite undercurrent, their charm not shielding the resonance of power beneath the surface, he dismissed it as a natural reaction to the unsettling circumstances. Even so, the point was noted. Checking the many surrounding him, one person in particular caught his attention. A female, she seemed to stand out from the rest. Embarrassed when she smiled, flushed, Hanor looked away.

“It is fitting that you have picked someone to show you our home,” Yarma Torna said, indicating the exchange.

“Have I?”

“Do you now say no, for your eyes said otherwise?”

“I... I did not know I was choosing,” Hanor said, astonished.

“You require answers, do you not?”

“Er..., yes.”

“It would be unfitting for everyone to ask you questions, but Coreema here, who you have already met, is more than adequate for the task.”

“I have met her before?” Hanor was baffled.

Approval swept the onlookers before each one started back towards the circle of trees. Even Yarma Torna left, leaving the two alone at the centre of the glade.

“Shall we go?” Coreema said, her words soothing, leading him by the arm.

“This is so...”

Hanor did not finish. Reaching across, she put a finger to his lips. “There is no rush here,” she chimed, softening him more. “You have many questions, but for now, be at peace. You need to recover from what you have overcome.”

Dark, penetrating eyes caressed his heart, drawing him in. There was no resistance.

Similar to her brethren, hairless and young looking, her filmy purple robe was simple in design and hung loosely from her shoulders. A tingle ran through him as they walked, strengthening his feelings towards her.

Reaching the trees, what was previously indiscernible, now lay open for their passing. Branches drooping to either side of a narrow corridor had grown into an archway. Taking hold of his hand, she led him through. Passing a short corridor to their right that led to the stout trunk of a tree, branched steps climbed to one side, spiralling

upwards. Without stopping, she continued along, her sweet scent captivating. The wooded passage came to an end, emerging onto another grass clearing. Much smaller than the first, lined again by trees, she led him across, questions now lost to the wonder.

Reaching the other side, entering another corridor similar to the first, spindly branches intertwined with thicker ones to give the passageway shape. Passing another trunk and set of branched stairs, they arrived at an even smaller clearing spanning twenty paces. A natural ambience seemed to minimise any shadowy spaces. Crossing, she slowed when entering the other side, turning to him as if about to reveal a secret.

“This is my Stay,” she said, signalling in front. “We talk quietly now as there are no doors or walls, everything is open. It is a point of rest, leisure and study. We do not live hectic lives like your people. I will explain more when inside. Come.”

Still holding his hand to his pleasure, she led him through the wooded tunnel before turning down a short corridor. Climbing the branched stairs when reaching the tree, she glided up with ease. Matching her, he tried to do the same but failed miserably. Close-knit as the branches were, his foot slipped leaving his leg dangling through a gap. Embarrassed, ignoring the ache in his shin, he pulled it free.

“Be careful,” she said, keeping her voice low.

“I am fine,” he whispered, hiding the pain.

Careful this time, he followed her up. Spiralling twice around the trunk before levelling out, lines of tiny branches intermingled with larger ones to make an open floor area. Stretching between two trees, the room was large enough to walk around. Branches, thick with foliage, filled the space above and to the sides. Dense, the fragrance was breathtaking.

Delighted by his reaction, “Look here,” she said, pointing out of a narrow but wide split in the brush along one side.

“Incredible,” he said, apologising for talking too loud. Staring out through the gap, the view was spectacular. Her domain was on the edge of a plateau, countless trees sweeping away below into the distance.

“I am glad it is to your liking,” she said, moving to one of numerous branched seats by the leaved wall opposite.

“I am not sure what to make of it all.”

“Take your time, there is a great deal to take in. Would you like a drink?”

Rising, she walked to the end of the platform. Unable to see what she did, but certain something had been uttered, she returned with two wooden bowls filled with water.

“A gift from *The Sacred*,” she said, sipping.

“Thank you,” he said, wondering what she meant. Checking to where she had obtained the drinks, there was nothing to indicate how she got them. He drank anyway, not recalling the last time he had.

Memories of his sleeping companions invaded his thoughts, breaking the charm of the surroundings. Fading before he could make sense of them, his expression alerted her.

“What is it?”

Confused, Hanor tried to answer. “This place is incredible but... it is like... it is not quite real.” Vague thoughts of his friends left him guessing to who they were, a thick mist clouding any recollection. Certain he should be remembering more, but try as he did,

nothing came. Undetected, a subtle force caressed his mind to let go, promising there was more to life than worrying about the past. Concerns faded.

“This place is unlike what you are used to,” Coreema said, her warmth filling the room. Easing him back from his quandary with the gentle tug of her invisible will, her soft manner concealed the mental manipulations. Vital to stay in control, the young man was an enigma, innocent yet mysteriously capable. “If it suits you, I will explain more about our world..., and then, you can tell us about yourself.”

“I am not very interesting,” he said. Lacking a memory no longer bothered him, her subtle persuasions the reason.

“Learning about people is fascinating,” she began, flashing a smile. Eager to know more, she had to be careful, his vulnerability unpredictable. “My name, if you recall, is Coreema. I am born of the Lani Folk, one of the Five Clans of Yarmoria. Yarmoria of course is the place you now find yourself in. I will tell you more about our history at another time, for it is lengthy and involved. This then is my Stay, the place where I live.”

“Where do you sleep and cook your meals?” Hanor interrupted. Where she had collected their drinks still baffled him.

“Once you are familiar with where you are, I will answer your questions.”

Too engrossed by this place to worry, he motioned for her to proceed.

“Good,” she said, monitoring his thoughts and feelings. An ability shared by her people, using it to quieten his woes earlier, it was necessary to get the information they needed.

“This place was granted me when I achieved my *Higher Stage*,” Coreema continued, peering out through the opening in front. “Which means, I reached a level of maturity that requires time and space to reflect. Most people live like this, even Yarma Torna. We live a simple life close to the land, learning about its natural laws and the forces flowing through it. Peace loving, we have strong beliefs about the natural laws of life and those who govern it. We do not populate our lands like the people where you live, so our numbers are few. We concentrate on the finer ways of life, and spend less time pursuing our own gratifications. Knowing the ways of life is a primary motivator in our lives. I will not wear you down with specifics, just ask if you wish to know more.”

“There is one thing,” Hanor said, bemused. “Yarma Torna said I have seen you before, but... how can that be? I cannot remember much at all, not even where I am from.”

“Lack of memory may be due to the intensity of your entry,” she explained. A smirk crossed her lips. “What he said is true, you have seen me, but not like this.”

“I have?”

“Of course,” she said, staring into his eyes.

Probing his mind, it felt strange, but Hanor was untroubled by the intrusion. Willing to let her do as she wanted, he did not even question why. Looking away when finding the relevant details, she paused as though awaiting permission to proceed. Sitting straight when satisfied, Coreema’s manner altered, a determined look appearing.

“Can you recall seeing anything before you entered Yarmoria?”

Surprised as if reminded of important matters he had neglected, remembering was difficult. Vague images of his recent past were distant, only hinting at what took place. Straining, the attempt made his head hurt.

“Tell me if it is too much,” she said, cautious.

“I... will,” he promised. Only the desire to do her bidding mattered.

Picturing when he had first arrived in Yarmoria, the serenity of that moment was wrenched from his sensitive mind in a heartbeat. From lying on the ground, he leapt back in time as strong sensations of helplessness whilst spinning in the funnel followed. Dizzy and feeling sick, the force of the recollection felt potent as if reliving that extraordinary entry. Terrifying screams filled his ears, the ache in his head increasing as though this exercise was reckless. Coreema seemed fascinated as though she was observing it too. Kind on the outside but...?

The impression dissolved, Hanor refocusing on his memories. Slowing, the spinning eased and the mist dissipated. More images flashed. As one situation rose, so too did traumatic feelings. He was now running, chasing something, amazed at how lifelike it was. Travelling back through the pages of his memory, but what was he looking for? The answer was there, the Light. Flicking on and off, it had beckoned him on.

Tight-lipped, Coreema was astonished at how vivid his memories were, observing them as her own.

Further back the imagery went to when he had first seen the Light. Standing, he was amongst... friends, his companions. Their silhouettes lay asleep, but he could not recall their names. Tempted to travel even further back in time, but the setting froze as if suspended by an outside force. Intense images were replaced by an unfamiliar void that felt strange, alive almost. Staring into his past at what he could not understand, a sudden *Presence* filled his inner vision. Unobservable to the eye, but he could feel its magnitude, its power and sense of purpose. Who or what *It* was he did not know, but he felt connected to it like the blood running through his veins.

Repelled from the memory recall by the magnificent *Being*, he jolted back to the present, a sharp pain shooting behind the eyes. Lurching forward to his knees, beside him, Coreema yelled, shaken by the encounter.

Gasping, Hanor had no idea what had happened. Before he had the chance to work it out, a mist swept in to cloud his thoughts, protecting him from what he was not ready to see. The calm returned, smoothing the edges of what he had just experienced.

“How are you?” a composed voice asked beside him.

Sitting back, he turned to face Coreema. “What was that?” Disorientated, questions started fading, soothing sensations comforting him like a worried lover.

“You must be tired,” she said, concealing her own turmoil at the outcome. “Would you like to rest?”

“A lie-down perhaps,” he said, feeling sleepy all of a sudden.

Shocked by the encounter, a tight smile covered her astonishment. “Wait here.”

Standing, she walked over to where she had collected the water. Watching after her, Hanor felt intoxicated by everything she did. Uttering some words again, any doubts were irrelevant in her presence. Under her spell, he could not wish for more. Not anticipating anything, when the wall of bush in front of her moved, branches and leaves twisting as if preparing to seize her, he had to act. About to leap forward to protect her, a commanding voice stopped him where he stood.

“Stop!” she ordered, turning, her glare boring into him. When satisfied he was not about to do anything rash, affections quickly returned, mentally comforting him. “I am

sorry, I should have warned you.” Branches and leaves continued moving behind her as she spoke. Waiting for the movements to complete their task, no signs of her potent words remained. “You said you would like to rest, and you asked where I slept and cooked.” Confident everything was under control, there was no way of knowing what the young man was capable of. “I do not cook... but sleep I must. Here,” she said, indicating the now flat bed stretched out.

All traces of her fiery reaction were gone, Hanor not registering just how pretentious his peace was. Surprised to see part of the branched wall had converted itself into a bed, the thick mat of soft leaves looked comfortable.

Reaching up to his face, “There are many things for you to see,” she said, her stare hypnotic. “But you have to let go of your fears. In Yarmoria, we are in control. Nothing can enter without our knowledge, so you have to learn to trust me. In time, you will gain confidence and understanding.” Melting his will, “Come, you need to rest.”

Chiming like a chorus, he obeyed her wishes and lay down, feeling strange to be so blessed. As the newcomer, it made sense to follow her lead and let go. Drifting off, the last thing he saw were her dark eyes. Convinced she was hiding something, but it no longer mattered.

Chapter 16: Mental Manipulations

Leaving Hanor asleep, Coreema left her Stay and headed for the Gathering Ring. With so much to consider, this was too important to discuss using mind-waves alone. Her brethren had witnessed the scenario too, and their tense thoughts now mirrored her own. Encountering that mysterious *Presence* at the end of Hanor's remembrance was disturbing. Vital he knew nothing of what they had seen, but what *had* they seen exactly? Who was *he* really? Influencing him like a child, but he had achieved the miraculous.

Needing to investigate the restored powers of the Boverns after their forebears had rendered them docile creatures of the water long ago, they had anticipated evil at work. Expecting someone of great power in the vicinity, discovering Hanor's group sleeping instead had left too many questions unanswered. Revealing their *heart-glow* to tempt Hanor into the Whirlwind of Sorrow, the vortex and gateway to their invisible realm, those incredible forces should have loosened his mind enough to scrutinise his past. Gleaning nothing to explain why the Boverns' powers had returned, the fact he had somehow ended up in their realm had cut to the heart of her people.

Sitting in a large ring numbering sixty, the gathered Elders of the Lani Folk waited, constraining their demands for answers. Mental images at the centre of the ring charged their words and thoughts to a deeper level. Sitting on the grass close to where Hanor had first entered, when Coreema arrived, a round of voices sought to be heard.

"Where do we begin?" Yarma Torna opened, motioning for Coreema to sit beside him. Raising a hand to quieten everyone, their plans had not foreseen this. "This latest event is astonishing, and the possibilities more so."

Gathered here, the other Folk, the Mani, Runa, Seema and Pasi Clans would be most displeased at not being part of these proceedings, but this demanded clear heads and a quick solution. Long-term plans did not include the other Clans either, so caution was necessary.

"You all saw the *Presence* and felt *its* power. What was that *Presence* and why can we not detect *it* now? When Coreema tried to take Hanor back to the bridge, it is clear the *Presence* did not want that to happen. We would normally associate such a *Presence* with the *Sacred*, but our new arrival has seeded many doubts. We cannot detect dark forces at work, only power and great intelligence, yet the mystery remains."

Waiting for the central area to fill with images and colour to support any incoming views, it was an ability the other Clans had not developed yet either. A higher form of emotion, the images added dimension to their discussions.

"I sense the *Sacred*," Yalno said, breaking the silence, a few others agreeing. The rushing forth of a radiant star filled the centre space before them.

"But why would a boy be the focal point for something so majestic?" Eama asked. An Elder of the Clan, her words always held weight.

"We have strived for an age to experience a mystery such as this," Morn said. "Rewards in the past have usually reflected our efforts. This is no different." The image in front of a golden dawn reinforced his meaning.

"Life in The Freelands is changing," Mali said, nearby. "Especially now the vengeful *One* is remaking *his* claim. *His* wounds run deep, but our Lore says opportunities must be given to both the good and evil forces in this world."

“I did not detect evil in that *Presence*,” Tamo noted.

“Only power of a higher kind... a detached sort, capable of anything,” Eama said.

“Coreema was at least permitted to take him back to their camp.”

The centre now showed the whole scene, the powerful *Presence* unmistakable.

“But what if *it* is not the *Sacred*?” Yarma Torna tried another line of enquiry.

“Then a disturbing force is in our midst,” Morn said, alarming everyone.

Reacting to that last comment, the central area went blank, and a protective screen of power rose in its place. Linking mentally together, everyone turned, inspecting the glade for any potential foe. Convinced control of Yarmoria was theirs alone, the thought of something listening in rattled even the faithful. Scanning everywhere possible, nothing was detectable. An unsettled atmosphere remained thereafter.

“We must proceed as if such a *Presence* is not here,” Torna prompted. “There is little we can do about it anyway.”

Fliryns formed at the centre, inviting freedom of thought to return.

“Why did the *Presence* stop us from going to the bridge?” Mali restarted the discussion.

“Were *the Sacred* stopping us or... Hanor?”

“A good point,” Torna said, perceiving it to be a step in the right direction.

“Is this a blessing or a warning then?” Coreema posed, a streak of red shooting to the heavens reinforcing her qualms.

“A warning against what?”

“The plans we have set before us have generated much debate and variance. Is there something in those plans we have overlooked?”

Disgruntled murmurs swept the ring, anxious old arguments were about to resurface. Not everyone was convinced it was the right path, and Hanor’s arrival gave some hope that another way could be found.

“Delicate affairs lie before us,” Coreema continued, getting back to the problem of Hanor. “Inducing another memory recall before he is ready is ill advised, as tempting as it is. The *Presence* has shaken us enough to be cautious. Hanor is fragile; you have seen how easily I move him. Is it acceptable to the *Sacred* what we are attempting to do?”

The point was seized upon by Mali. “If we agree that *they* are involved, then we must move forward carefully. He is a simple young man, nothing more. The *Sacred* have used this opportunity to bless us, revealing *their* holiness like never before.”

“That does not explain the Bovern.”

An image of the bridge with triumphant folk on both sides filled the centre, a timely reminder of the work fought for in times past.

“That I cannot explain,” Mali conceded.

“Could it be the vengeful *One*?” Pina asked. “We did not detect *his* evil, but *his* influence reaches far.”

As always, when discussing *Gorl-darl*, thunderous clouds churned before them.

“Every possibility has to be considered,” Yarma Torna said, careful not to upset the proceedings any further. “When here in ancient times, taken in to heal *his* wounds by our compassionate ancestors, it is said how bitter *he* was towards *his* enemies. But their love for all things enabled them to see past *his* intent, even though *he* was determined to destroy those who had nearly killed *him*. Invited into their lives, we of the Lani Clan are a result of that love, *his* distant offspring. *His* blood is in us, and we share similar passions

for knowledge and power. However, we differ because we seek to do the *Sacred's* bidding to enhance our lives..., not destroy it. We also have the blood of the Yarmi Folk, the other four Clans of which we have now surpassed. This gives us an edge over our dark *forefather*, who verges on madness. But in such darkness great danger lies, for we now know how strong *he* has become. Even when *he* came without form to show us the suffering of our ancestors at the great Tomb of Tarkon, *his* might was clear. We have set plans that come into contact with that evil, but by walking the higher path, we cannot be drawn to either side of the coming battle.

As far as our new arrival is concerned, I think the *Sacred* have revealed this for a reason. There is purpose behind all that *they* do, and *they* often leave a trail of mystery behind. I detect not the vengeful *One's* hand, but will not dismiss it entirely. We will probe our new guest, but he is still worthy of respect. I leave him in the hands of Coreema, so approach him only with her approval. This has been a blessing as much as a sharp awakening for all of us, so let us learn all we can, and not disrupt the opportunity to grow ever closer.”

“Yea... to the *Unseen*,” they answered in unison.

Exhausted, Bane sighed, the turn's ride had been hard. Checking Hanor's panting Kyboe close by, the animal strolled across to a bush for nourishment, no doubt missing Hanor's affections. Walking over, he stroked its neck, the pungent odour of an extensive run matching his own. Forgetting how long it was since his last soak in a hot tub, he was not brave enough to guess when the next one might be.

“You miss him too,” he said, rubbing its ear. “We will find him,” he promised, unnerved that he could be wrong.

Timely, Nole's Kyboe joined them to feed, the upset immediate. Curbing the rising grief, he had still not come to terms with the loss. Missing them both, the future looked stark, scary even. A changing landscape through the turn had done little to lift his spirits either, colour and life returning. Leaving the decay behind, it felt as though the desolation had claimed part of him too. Thick yellow leaved bushes were good for their Kyboes, but did little to brighten the drabness of his inner world. Wiping a tear, the upset was deep.

“You have been asleep since yester-turn,” Coreema said to Hanor, the young man stretching into life.

Dazed, Hanor took a while to gain his bearings. Comforted when gazing across at her, she came over and sat next to him. Running a soft hand over his brow, he was powerless in her presence.

“How do you feel?” she asked, fascinated by him. Utterly in her hands, and yet, there was something they were clearly missing.

Cool and fresh, the morning was bright. “I am... well,” Hanor managed, taking stock of where he was. “There are questions I want to ask but... I cannot think of anything specific.” Glancing around, a void seemed to encapsulate the treetop chamber, blocking his senses. She was all he could wish for, but something was not as it should be. A pulse of warmth filled his being, caressing his will to let go of the doubts.

“Is there anything I can get you?” she asked, unsure how soon she should start probing for what was hidden. If he was in the hands of the *Sacred*, then she too was in an

honoured position. Praying for guidance on the matter so as not to undermine *their* purpose, nothing stirred in her heart, interpreting it as a sign to proceed but with care.

“I am a little hungry,” Hanor admitted, not wishing to be intrusive.

Returning from the bush, she handed him a plate of varied fruit and roots along with a small bowl of chilled water. Watching him eat, Hanor was just happy to be in her company. Captivating, even the expanded shape of her head was not unattractive. Unable to think of anyone to compare her with, the fact he could not did not bother him. When finished, she took the plate and returned it to the leaved wall for its removal.

“Today..., I will show you our home and explain what life is like here,” she said, turning back to him. “I will do my best to answer any questions.”

Spindly branches retracted with the plate; there was no shocking reaction from Hanor this time. “Is there somewhere... I can freshen up before we do?” he asked, implying his weathered clothes.

“This place tends to most needs, for it is a living creature of its own accord. We are blessed to live like this.”

Trying to recall how he used to live was difficult, fuzziness blocking any clarity. Again, concerns dissipated, Coreema motioning towards his left. “How wonderful,” he said. Two huge leaves interlinking like hands made a shallow recess for a small pool of water. Without asking, a light purple garb similar to Coreema’s lifted up as if from a storehouse below. “Amazing,” he said, getting used to the movements.

Spending the turn together, Coreema was careful of the affect she was having on Hanor. Respect grew as they walked and talked, he being the delicate flower in her hands. *‘How can someone so weak be so blessed?’* she thought, monitoring him by one of the many small pools populating Yarmoria.

“All of this... does not seem right,” Hanor said, reaching down and dipping his fingers into the dark liquid. Ripples disturbing his reflection were a subtle reminder that he had lost a valuable part of himself.

“It can be a dreamy place,” she said, bending down beside him. Easing back on her mental manipulations, if they were to get answers, he needed freedom to think.

“I do not mean it like that,” he returned, doubtful, his reflection forming again. “It is like these are not my eyes.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are questions I want to ask but cannot put any real meaning to them.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Yes,... and no,” he said, looking up, trying to conceal his feelings for her. “Something inside is trying to be heard, as if suppressed.”

“And what do you think this something wants to know?”

Scratching his head, “Who I was before.” He stopped, relieved, as if the question had been yearning to escape since first arriving.

“Before you came here you mean?” she asked, preparing herself. Numerous times she had retracted her control over him, but this was by far the furthest.

“Yes,” he said, a chain slipping from around his imprisoned mind.

“What can you remember?” Allowing the memory of when they were in her Stay to return, Coreema knew the risk, keeping his emotions under control.

Standing back at the camp in the darkness, Hanor's recollections were again vivid. Three sleeping figures were familiar but held no meaning. "I do not understand," he said, disheartened. "I know these people but... why was I with them?" "Take your time," Coreema said, watchful, sensitive to his needs. Tempted to take him back to the bridge, but a sharp impression within warned her, Yarma Torna tuning into this exchange. He was right, but the thought of finding out more or experiencing the *Sacred* again was strong. Refraining, it was for Hanor to remember when he was ready.

Something clicked in Hanor, turning to face her. "You are seeing what I am!" Unexpected, his insight startled her. Quick to reassure him there was nothing to be frightened of, "You are right, Hanor. I said before there was much to show you, things which at first you would have trouble dealing with. Do you remember this?"

"Er..., kind of."

"And some of what I have shown you today has taught you what?"

Frowning, "I do not know."

Determined not to re-impose her control, they had to grant him more independence. "All of what you see here is joined, interwoven, similar to the cupped leaves earlier. This oneness and unity is real and very much a part of our lives. The longer you stay here, the stronger your bond will become. The fact you have realised that I can see some of your past indicates this is true, does it not?"

He shrugged, it did seem reasonable.

"It is nothing to be fearful of, although initially it can be very unusual, and for some, uncomfortable."

"Can you read all my thoughts?" he asked, in case she could read his feelings for her.

Admitting his whole character was quite delightful, a liking she would have deemed unnecessary, she put his qualms to rest. "No Hanor, I cannot."

Relieved, "That is good," he said, staring back into the pool. More himself, but far from free, he felt he was getting stronger.

"We of the Lani Clan do know each others' thoughts and feelings intimately," she continued. He deserved to know more, hoping trust could open the door to his past.

"You mean nothing is private?" Oblivious to his own history, he suspected there were parts of his past he would want to keep quiet.

"Everything is open," she laughed, respecting his doubts. Pleased the situation was easing back in her favour, "There are many benefits from this sort of relationship. I told you we do not live as others do, this is because our course is on a higher path. We overcame the lower parts of our nature long ago, with all of its dark secrets and selfish ambitions. We live as a community, where the whole is greater than the individual. There is much freedom in this, more than you can imagine."

Hanor remained doubtful. "Where is the mystery of surprise?" His thoughts were definitely clearing.

"But that creates suffering and loneliness. To live for the whole is most rewarding."

"So how many of my thoughts *can* you read?"

"I do not see your thoughts individually, I see them as a collection. If you were thinking about your companions at that camp, I would see the camp, and could tell if you were happy or sad, but I cannot see every detail." Still opting for openness, he looked far from

convinced. "Life exists far beyond the limitations of our world, Hanor, with its hasty thoughts and feelings. Have you heard of the *Realms of the Soul*?"

Straining, but then recognition flashed. Upon his first arrival, he had supposed Yarmorica itself was that fabled place. "Yes..., although I am not sure what it is."

"Well, there are reasons why life moves forward as it does, full of mystery and wonder. Have you heard of the *Sacred*?"

Another flare of insight, he nodded.

"The two exist at a higher state of reality than we do. But *their* world is not based on fear, death and hardship, but on life, creativity and love. Do you not *see*... the *Sacred*?"

A flickering memory of an old man in a room talking to him about mysteries shot across his vision. Unable to recall what was said, he pondered the question, dipping his hand into the cool water as he did. Who or what were the *Sacred*? Glancing up at the enchanted surroundings, lush trees and thick-berried bushes concealed much about this mysterious world. With the odd person walking across the glade, there was no sign of what she asked. "No..., I do not see *them*."

"Do you feel *Them*?"

A strange question, but inner promptings directed his attention. Looking within, he closed his eyes. Doubts subsiding, he followed what seemed to be natural.

To his pleasant surprise, a wonderful peace surfaced, filling his whole body. Breathtaking, the fullness felt warm and tender, washing away qualms with a sweep of its soothing touch. A glow emanated all about him, the calm wonderful. Coreema radiated the same aura too. As quickly as it had come, it dissipated, leaving a void behind.

"Words are inadequate to describe it," she said, approving. "Would you not want everyone to experience that peace?"

A ridiculous question, who would not? "Yes..., of course."

"If I asked you to describe to others what you just felt, do you think you could?"

Closing his eyes, his heart felt emotional but uplifted and light. "Probably not."

"This is but one benefit of the Sharing Principle. As one experiences joy, so do the others. Yes, when one feels pain or anguish, the others are aware of that too, but this only deepens our bonds and commitment to each other. No one suffers on their own."

"I am... not sure," Hanor confessed, standing to face her.

"Come," she said, inviting him to hold her hand.

A distraction from the uncertainties, mellowing the edge of his predicament, he accepted her offer. Wanting the peace to return, questions were guilty of causing the unrest. "That peace, was it from the *Sacred*?"

"What do you think?"

"Perhaps."

"When your memories return, I doubt you will find anything that comes close to it."

Holding her hand as they walked, feelings for her were getting stronger. Unsure if she felt the same, she seemed so much more than just a person looking for love. Refined and in control, she was doing this more for him than herself. Determined to enjoy her attentions whilst they lasted, he thought about those people back at the camp. "Why is my memory still lacking?"

Mulling over what she knew, “I can only offer possibilities,” she said, falling silent, her gaze appearing distant.

Able to tell she was conferring with someone, Hanor decided not to mention that his awareness was increasing.

“You have memories of when you first entered?” she asked, looking back at him.

“Yes.”

“You recall passing through the Vortex?”

“The funnel of wind you mean?”

“Yes, that is the gateway to Yarmoria. Very few find their way in, its intensity is too overpowering for most. You however, managed to enter, and we do not know how. It may have been that experience which has altered your memory.” Checking with Yarma Torna, this time Hanor registered who she connected with. Affirming she should proceed, “There is another possibility,” she said. Rich purples and pinks blended into crisp blues above, the end of the turn approaching. “Do you remember back at the camp?”

“I keep thinking about that.”

“We cannot see beyond it. You seem to have a memory block. When we looked before in my Stay, our seeking was denied. Something significant happened there. This we know to be true, for we sensed movements in the *Ethers*.”

“*Ethers*...?”

“Yes, the *Ethers* are fields of energy that encapsulate our physical world and bind it together. I will not deviate now, but be assured, we did register a change. I will not say what those movements are for fear of triggering the unknown, but something happened that may have resulted in your memory loss.”

“I have tried to remember, but that is as far as it goes.”

“Then it is not for us to force it.” Squeezing his hand, supportive, a troubled expression crossed his face. “What is it?”

“Talking about my memories, each one scrutinised by you and your brethren, seems unnatural.”

“I understand, but you are quite wrong. It is very natural Hanor, but not yet for you and others like you. Here,” she turned to face him, clasping his other hand. Deliberate, she focused on her heartbeat, preparing herself.

Hanor could see the immense power and authority she held. Daunting at first, but such concerns dissolved when an unexpected intimacy began forming between them. Detached feelings arose, as if his body was another life form altogether, and he was just along for the ride. Unshackled from its cumbersome weight, a floating sensation felt exhilarating as if free for the first time. Weaving her enthralling powers, his heart fluttered in response to her call. Immersing them both into her being, sharing some of her own experiences, they swept in and out of each precious memory like creatures of the air. Her work and the many challenges she had overcome touched him. Realising that she was giving herself to him, like the intimate embrace of two lovers, his heart beat to the fine tune of hers as though they were one life in two bodies.

Withdrawing herself, the release of her hands severed the union. Leaving Hanor numb, he had never felt so close to someone before he was quite certain. She looked

serene. Eyes closed, recouping from the exchange, she was the one who now appeared delicate. Watery eyes eventually opened, muddled emotions stirring her.

“What is it?” he asked, wanting to comfort her.

Foolish, “I am sorry,” she said, her body still tingling. Normally, she would have nullified such diverse sensations, but they were quite unlike anything she had experienced before. Marvelling at the encounter, their bonding had taken her deeper within herself than ever before. “You *are* full of surprises, and fascinating,” she declared, his puzzlement making her laugh. Wiping a tear, she grabbed his hand and pulled him after her. “Come on, I feel like running.”

Laughing like children, crossing the grassy glade without a care, she brushed aside her sensible attitude. Reaching down to pick flowers, only to toss them into the air with real abandonment, Hanor could sense she was truly letting go. Skipping from pool to pool, basking in each other’s company, it felt so natural.

Coming to rest by a small transparent pool near the outskirts of the clearing, bushy trees stood like sentries nearby. Lying back in the grass, panting, Coreema appeared alive and radiant, as if free at last. Without tight controls and high expectations, her composure was lost for now. Laughing, Hanor registered the others trying to communicate with her.

“I have no idea why I am laughing,” she admitted, out of breath.

“It is good to laugh,” he said. Sitting alongside, this was unexpected.

“I have never felt like this before, how strange it is,” she confessed, a glimpse of her youth penetrating the moment.

“I think you work too hard.” His statement reflected one of the many impressions he had received from their unifying experience. Unable to see much fun, peace yes, but where was the laughter?

His words hit a chord. “I will feel bad about this tomorrow.”

“Why do you have to feel bad? Is this not what life is about?”

Looking up at him, she smirked at such simplistic views. “Our people have worked hard to achieve what we have. Abandonment has its place with the lower levels of life, but it is too much of a distraction if we want to achieve the ultimate.”

“And what ultimate is that?”

Gazing up at the now fading light, “To achieve union with the *Unseen*.”

“You talk about the *Sacred* often, but do *they* not laugh? If not, I would not be so eager for *their* company.”

Reacting as though his language was bitter, “You talk from ignorance! Did you not experience *them* earlier?”

“I do not doubt *their* wonder, but I suspect what we experienced earlier is more than capable of laughter. I doubt *they* just work without enjoying what *they* do.”

“Life is too vast and meaningful for such leisure. Too much is at stake.”

“Your people have been looking at life from just one perspective. I cannot see how you can have power, love and peace, and not have fun.”

“There is fun in our work, and great rewards in achieving what we have. When dealing with the infinite, the satisfaction we feel when a mystery is understood is priceless.”

“But fun is a different experience. There is only one word to describe what we just did.”

“It is a limited point of view.”

“You sound like the old you, the disciplined person of before.”

The others were still waiting for her to gain control. “Perhaps this is where I should be.”
“Say the word that describes what just happened.”

Reflections of the trees on the other side of the pool glared back, warning her not to entertain such looseness. She knew the word of course. “I do not see the point.”

“Say it,” he urged, encouraged that he was feeling more himself. Only memories of his distant past remained hidden, confidence increasing with each concerted question. Aware their conversation was being monitored, there were things he wanted to ask her and her alone.

“It is pointless.” Tempted to use her powers of control to defend herself from the truth, much appeared to hinge on this. “I know the word, but...”

“Say it then.” Something was stopping her.

“I...,” she stuttered, struggling to maintain her stand.

“Please,” he said, softening his tone.

Defeated, “Freedom.”

The word reverberated around the open space with force, a warning to all who were watching. Freedom! Such a simple word, but it contained so much power and meaning. Since his arrival, their mental manipulations had undermined his freedom, and now such actions were seen for what they were. Pummelling hearts, Hanor perceived traces of guilt, the *Sacred* cautioning the Yarmorians for it.

Gathering his thoughts on the way back to Coreema’s Stay, the minor victory was not something to celebrate. Just wanting this mess straightened out and his old self-back, memories included, but that was only half the problem. Missing more than just a memory, his feelings had somehow altered and been nullified.

As rich as Yarmoria was, he could not savour it as he would like. Without answers, he climbed the branched stairs of his guide’s abode, drained from the episode.

Chapter 17: Fire of the Forest

Shadows receding, “*The others deserve a rest,*” Kifter muttered to himself, unconvinced, peering out into the grey dawn. Not sleeping well, aggravating woes refused to let him rest. Grating sounds of heavy rain on the forest’s rooftop during the night had not helped either, securing sleeplessness. Now, heavy drips tapping their canopy were like a methodical timepiece counting down to when life for their group should begin again.

Since Hanor’s disappearance, an underlying fear of attack kept nibbling away at him like a mental throb. Still not accepting that Hanor had left their camp without him detecting it, genuine concerns for the boy’s well-being conflicted with the prospect that his abilities were falling into rapid decline. The catalogue of disasters was, in truth, beyond comprehension. Hallen said it was a sign of the times, but as a Fifanian, he could not believe that, too cosy and far from conclusive for his liking.

A flicker of light penetrated the gloom, realising Bane’s loss far surpassed what he himself was going through. Redoubling his efforts could recoup some of that lost effectiveness, but Bane would never regain Nole, and with Hanor lost, just taking the next step would be momentous. Condemning him as an excitable boy out of his depth, beneath the noise was perhaps someone worthy of respect.

Pitiful, a rogue chuckle escaped, surprising him. Pathetic, the reaction was quite painful, titters getting louder. A need to shout grew. Verging on fulfilling what Brandor had advised as a young Fife, “*When all else fails, call out to the Sacred, for they will hear your cry if it is from the heart,*” a number of times he had come close to doing it, but had always withdrawn for fear of being a hypocrite. Vulnerable now like never before, the giggles were a defence to fight off that urge to call out. Strange, why was the impulse there anyway, his life was not in danger? Rejecting that inner prompting, he sat up, laughter erupting at his own misery.

Wrenched from slumber by the disturbance, Hallen and Bane thought trouble was at hand. Only settling when certain nothing untoward was happening, through the breaking dawn, the boy and Hite questioned what the unusual display of hilarity was for.

“What are you doing?” Hallen asked, unable to see the humour.

Kifter’s raucous laugh continued. “I..., I do... not know. It seemed a good thing to do.”

“What do you mean... *a good thing to do?*” Hallen was rattled at being woken in such an extraordinary manner. “I have not seen this for a while.”

Still laughing, “I am actually... in pain. I cannot see how things can get any worse.”

“So, why... are you laughing?” Bane could not help himself, and neither could Hallen.

“I..., I...,” he shrugged, “What does it matter?”

Diabolical, the three lost themselves briefly to madness.

“You must have sipped some of my Sasta,” Hallen said, calming down.

Normality seeping back into his despicable life, Kifter sighed. “How strange,” he said, seeing no reason for it. Declining the desire to lie down, they had to make a start. “Let us eat, and get going.”

“You *are* peculiar of late,” Hallen said, sceptical.

“What is Tarden like?” Bane asked, slowing to give their mounts a breather.

Covering many leagues before half-turn of the day, Kifter had already said they would not arrive until late the following turn. Needing to know of Hanor's whereabouts, holding onto what Kifter had said about Hanor not being in bad company, such possibilities kept his moods fluctuating.

"There is no other city like Tarden," Hallen said, looking forward to arriving.

"What is so special about it?"

"You will not believe it, but the city is built by the living power of trees."

"Built by... trees?"

"Not built by them..., built of them."

"I do not understand."

"The trees *are* the city."

Enormous as Woodell trees were, Bane found visualising a city worthy of such praise difficult. With more colours now inhabiting this region, signs of life returning to normal, ground hugging vines embraced anything that fell within their spindly reach. Huge bushes added a sense of scale, but nothing to his imagination.

"What are they?" Bane pointed left.

Dusty white rays of light breaking through the treetops half-hid a group of long legged animals standing barely a stone's throw away. Blending into the landscape, camouflaged by their deep green and brown coats, the creatures seemed tentative and watchful. Standing between a huge bush and even larger Woodell tree, they appeared edgy as if ready to run at the first sign of danger.

"They are Chios," Kifter said, without even looking. "Timid animals, served regularly on the tables of Tarden."

Deep emerald eyes followed the three riders. Narrow in body and tail, with an extensive neck, a pert head flicked back and forth, suspicious. Bane thought they were most odd. Reacting as if startled, the creatures started running the way they had just come. What he took to be a score, turned out to be a few hundred. Kifter pulled up, checking for what had disturbed them.

When nothing materialised, "Always jumpy," the Fife said, heading off when satisfied everything was fine.

Watching after them, Bane was surprised they made little sound for such numbers. "I can hardly hear them."

"That is why they are hard to catch, and highly valued by Tardanians," Kifter explained.

"We have been blessed we got so close. Their numbers are large throughout Tardania, but that takes nothing away from the skill in finding them. For the untrained eye, you will not see much of a trail either, even with so many to the herd."

"Amazing," Bane said, enthralled. Living a sheltered life, he was thankful to be active rather than just existing like before. A stab of guilt reminded him of his lost friends and that he should not be feeling any kind of relief. Cursing, any satisfaction seemed to be cut short by the guilt. Glad when Kifter increased their speed, he just wanted this over with.

The following turn of the day's ride was less forgiving. Damp, the musty atmosphere made breathing difficult as if saturated by an unknown force. Dismissing the stuffiness as a minor inconvenience, the desire to get to Tarden was clear. Kifter, Hallen and Bane progressed into the after-turns. Passing numerous grassy clearings, open spaces were a contrasting pleasure to the unchangeable line of wooded pillars. Motivated at the prospect

of reaching the treed city before sundown, they stopped for a short reprieve at a glade, one of many populating this region. Surprised the grass was dry considering the damp atmosphere, two Fliryngs flying close by suggested all was normal.

Lying down, eyes closed, Bane enjoyed the quiet, ignoring the wildlife. Weird as the circumstances were, the dampness not like a normal wet day, he left it for his guides to work out.

“I do not like this,” Kifter said, sitting irritable, peering across the glade.

“I agree,” Hallen said, rousing from his momentary doze. “What do you think it is?”

“I do not know,” the Fife said, detecting another change. “Is it getting hotter?”

“Now you mention it... yes, as if the sun has just come out.”

Kifter climbed to his feet, Hallen joining him. Bane felt no urge to get involved, even though it *was* getting warmer.

“The Kyboes... do you see?” Kifter noted.

All five stood watchful, ears pricked, wary whimpers of discontent unnerving.

“Phew,” Hallen hissed, unfastening his overcoat. “It *is* getting hotter.”

“Bane, get up,” the Fife ordered.

Groaning at the disturbance, the young man obeyed, undoing his overcoat.

“What is causing this heat... an underground spring perhaps?” Hallen’s suggestion was reasonable, but the signs declared otherwise.

“The temperature increased *after* our arrival.” Strolling further out onto the grassy glade, Kifter halted, an edge to his voice. “Come here.”

“Wow, this is hot,” the Hite said on reaching him.

“Too hot.” The Fife looked around the clearing. Bushes lined the outer edges, with odd ones scattered across the field. “Do you hear anything?”

Listening, “I see what you mean,” Hallen said, dubious. What was lively a short time before was now silent and eerie. “It is like everything has left the area. What do they know that we do not?”

Peering skywards, thick cloud proved it was not a trick of the sun, Kifter checking the ring of trees surrounding them again. Intense, there was definitely a power at work here. Just wanting to complete the rest of the journey without disruption, he had a bad feeling about this.

Heading back to the ring’s edge, Hallen took his overcoat off, sweat running down his back. “It is now just as hot here,” he said, strapping the coat to his Kyboe. She snorted, dissatisfied at the changing environment.

“I know,” he said, patting her neck. “Everything will be fine... I hope.”

Bane and Kifter took their coats off. Stifling, the heat was becoming unbearable. Watering themselves and their mounts, time was running out.

“What shall we do?” Hallen asked, fanning himself.

“This is a direct route to Tarden,” Kifter explained, certain they had not strayed into an unknown part of this immense woodland. It was difficult to breath, the air blistering.

“Like that mysterious circle, is nothing ever straightforward anymore?” The Hite’s concerns were understandable. “The heat is increasing, if we do not move soon, we will be cooked alive.”

“What is causing it?” Kifter grimaced to himself, wiping his brow.

“Well...?”

“We need to backtrack,” the Fife said, finally deciding on what to do.
“How far back do we go?” Bane’s concerns were for Hanor. “Can we not go around?”
“Go around what? I see nothing to go around.”
“When it cools,” Hallen reassured him. “We will try another direction.”
“Hanor, hold on tight,” Bane implored, a grim pain at failing his friend rising.

Riding back the way they had come, disgruntled at the inconvenience, the mysterious force did not leave at first. Convinced the heat was following, warning them not to return, a considerable time passed before it subsided. Relieved when it did, the three pulled up.

“That was odd,” Hallen exclaimed, panting. Confident the force was returning to its boundaries, the notion triggered an idea. “I think it was protecting something.”

“I agree,” Kifter said, pondering the phenomenon.

“What could it be shielding? What is local that needs defending?” Gulping a few mouthfuls of water, soaked with sweat, the Hite felt clammy and tired.

“I do not know. If we avoid the glade, the main causeway between Tarden and Tardoc is north of here. If we head for it, our journey should be less eventful.”

“Sounds good to me,” Hallen agreed.

“Let us go,” Kifter urged, setting off. “There will be no let up until we get there.”

Bane, for once, could only agree.

Pressing hard, an abundance of wildlife added confidence to their decision to head north. Settling into their ride, but it did not last long. Furious, Kifter raised his hand to slow them down.

“I do not believe it,” the Fife stormed, cursing.

“What is it?” Bane asked, looking for trouble. Plenty of colour and vegetation, everything appeared normal.

“Do you not feel it?”

Slow at first, when beating hearts eased, the temperature increased, energising the air.

“It had nothing to do with that glade then?” Hallen said, leaving his coat off just in case.

“What do you suggest now?” Kifter asked, running out of answers.

“Do we do the same again?”

“It does not want us to reach Tarden,” Kifter said, the heat still rising.

“Then we may never get there.”

“Can we not charge straight at it?” Bane tried, frustrated. “If we cannot go around, let us go straight. We may just have to pass through it.”

“Our young friend has a point,” Hallen said. “It will not be well whatever we choose.”

A rational, albeit risky idea, with the temperature still intensifying, the Fife had had enough of distractions getting in the way since leaving Manson. Bold, Kifter shrugged, grinning as if giving up on caring. Burning as if an approaching tormentor held aloft a mighty flame, breathing was tight. Removing his top, a bareback warrior declaring war on the invisible power, the other two did the same.

“Let us go,” the Fife ordered, defiant.

Wild fervour spurred them into action; the madcap choice being made. Charging in the direction of Tarden, three half-naked figures hurtled into the unknown. Searing, the atmosphere burnt as if by a naked fire. Agonizing, but their skin did not blister, and no

pungent odour of sizzling flesh occurred. Pitiful cries screamed, soon realising they had made a terrible mistake. Roasting, the atmosphere scolded like a fire licking the base of a cooking pot. Nothing else moved, no sound erupting apart from their desperate cries of determination. What in all The Freelands were they doing? Cries turned to howls, the pain fierce. Certain their skin was peeling, but nothing failed to prove their suffering. Horrified at the prospect of being consumed by this powerful force, pleas began to falter, their hopes fading.

As if the air itself decided to be merciful, their courage revealed for what it was, a great booming voice called out. Foreign, and wielding great authority, the words were powerful enough to control the elements.

“*BALLA UM TA MAN UALLA!*”

Breaking from intense heat into a biting cold, the three charging figures were released from the clutches of the intense force. As if a strong hand had let go, the abrupt change staggered them. Cool air filled their lungs, disorientating the intruders to the edge of consciousness. Penetrating, the transformation threw them into confusion. Light-headed, gasping for air before slumping against the supportive necks of their Kyboes, bodies thrummed, pounding like the beat of a drum.

Long moments ticked by, cooling as a result. Sweat saturated their slacks and lined weary faces. Recouping, if challenged now they would willingly give up the fight. Thoughts of who had called out at first did not register, be it friend or foe did not matter. Their fatigue was total, their will to carry on, drained. Staring at the ground was the only way to stabilise. Sitting back and looking around, nothing signified a force had even been there. Trees and bushes were the same in every direction, concealing any evidence.

Many times Kifter had passed through this region to Tarden without experiencing anything untoward. What had just happened? Reaching for his water skin, he stopped, an abnormality emerging in front. A shimmer of light started forming. Guarded, it stretched and began to elongate, the steady glow increasing as if a person was approaching with a white fire-torch. Charged, hairs tingled, the atmosphere humming to the new developments. The luminous shaft kept expanding. Spellbound, the light condensed, the glow turning to a mist before changing again to something solid. Apprehensive, the three did not move, the essence finally transforming into a person.

Tall and thin, the figure glimmered like a radiating light in a predawn fog. Hovering above ground, gaunt features were that of a female. Floating a trace higher than themselves, high cheekbones and a tight mouth were not as pronounced as the shape of her head. Bulging at the rear in the Tardanian fashion, her lack of hair was striking. Eyes shut, concentrating on the process, she was like an apparition. A shoulderless gown wrapped around her like a sheathe protecting a delicate but sturdy flower.

Flicking open, the newcomer's eyes were piercing. Staring down as if deciding what to do with them, she was mature of many seasons, yet youthful like most Tardanians. An air of wisdom and power emanated, warning them not to cross her.

“I am a Master at Tarden, and Guardian to the *Fire of the Forest*, what is your purpose here?” she said, her voice commanding.

Assuming there was no threat from the mysterious figure, Kifter now understood what was going on here. Deducing the Masters at Tarden had created an invisible wall of

fiery power to keep the enemy at bay, he was just relieved they had not stumbled on another despicable scenario.

“I am Kifter of Fion,” he said, cautious, pointing at his companions. “This is Hallen of Itab... formerly of Ebanor..., and the young man is Bane of Manson.” Confidence returning, even under her intense gaze, the illuminated Tardanian did not flinch. “I have travelled many times to Tarden, and am known there.”

“What is your purpose?” the enigmatic figure repeated, not wasting time with cordialities. “We are to meet Brandor of the Sleep,” he said. The Dai-laman was well known at Tarden.

Waiting for a response, a childlike reverence for a dominant parent gripped them. Without adding anything more, as she had come, the Master from Tarden faded. Expecting further instructions, when nothing happened, fleeting glances queried what they should do.

“Well?” Hallen said, stressing their need for action. “We cannot stay here forever.” Kifter considered their next move. “I did not detect animosity.” “Then let us dress and go,” the Hite said, breaking the hypnotic lull.

The fourth turn since his dramatic arrival in Yarmoria, Hanor could not get used to this strange world. Frustrations drifted in, promising there were other purposes to his life, and to go look for them. The tranquillity here was enticing, but something was amiss. Lush as the environment was, with its deep greens and contrasting colours, there was an unnaturalness underlying it all. More himself, a great deal needed explaining.

Feeling somewhat isolated, since that incredible bonding with Coreema, she had kept her distance, saying urgent matters were keeping her busy. Tuning more into what they were thinking just as foretold, but even that had changed as if a mental shield was in place to shut him out. Sensitivities increasing, but where was the promised unity?

Coreema’s lack of time for him fuelled doubts about wanting to stay here. The previous evening, when returning late to her Stay, she had apologised for leaving him on his own. But when pressed with questions, she had been quick to say she was too tired to answer, and would do so today. Sleeping on an adjacent bush-like bed, he had stayed awake for a few short-turns stewing over the same uncertainties. Listening to the soft sounds of her breathing, he had so much wanted to go to her. But when waking this morning, unknowing what short-turn of day it was, she had already left.

Now, this was the second turn of the day he had been left to his own devices. Avoiding him because of what had happened, shamed because of their mental manipulations, it seemed too petty to believe. Occasionally, someone ventured by, but with their mental screens in place, he felt like a true outsider.

Spending time in Coreema’s Stay, the reading material she had left him were of a different language, and far above what he could absorb. Not enjoying the comforts of his surroundings, it was not as though he could just walk out to find his own answers. Now on yet another walk, he wondered how far he should stray. Without the sun for guidance, he had no idea what short-turn of the day it was. Strolling through branched tunnels felt like impinging upon someone’s privacy; a few steps up a tree the only thing separating him from their living quarters. Odd, he doubted he would ever get used to such openness.

One of the books he had read showed outlines between the differing Clans and their localities within Yarmoria. Approaching one of those borders now, upon passing through

a curtain of brush, he stood atop a grassy slope. Sweeping down to another line of trees below, the view, similar to Coreema's Stay, was breathtaking. An ocean of emerald extended to the horizon, shimmering even though the sun was nowhere to be seen. Puzzling, where was it? Memories of him standing alongside that old man talking about moonlight proved the sun was not the only detail missing.

The lower regions showed no signs of life. Eager to understand this place, Coreema's warning that no menace existed here without their knowledge helped. About to begin his jaunt into the unknown, someone spoke behind.

"How are you today, Hanor?" a male voice asked.

Catching his breath as if caught in a mischievous act, Hanor turned. Standing at the entrance of the wooded tunnel, an elderly fellow concurred before stepping forward. Dressed similar to Coreema, a light gown differed only by glints of shimmering gold. "I am... fine," he stuttered.

"My name is Morn..., of the Lani Folk. We have a beautiful home here, do you agree?"

"Er... yes, you do. I was just looking to explore other parts," Hanor confessed, presuming his intentions could be read anyway.

"Did not Coreema warn you to be cautious of what you do and where you go?"

"She did," Hanor said, picking up an underlying edge to the tone. "I thought all of this was Yarmoria." Indicating the lower bank of trees and beyond, "She also said there was no need to worry about dangers. Should I have something to fear then?" The mental shield registered in others was there in him too. This was not right.

Morn peered down at the lower regions and then back at the young lad, hesitant. "We Yarmi Folk do not number our lands like your people do. Selection and breeding are not decided by emotional desires but by practicalities that need to benefit the whole. The five Clans of Yarmoria are collectively one race, but each Clan stays separated on daily matters. Only when interaction through bonding takes place do the five Clans meet."

"This is a border between two Clans then?"

"It is," Morn said, standing beside him.

Mature of seasons, Hanor wondered how old he was. "Can I go down there?"

"If we say no, then you will presume we are hiding something from you. If we say yes, then a great furore will result, for it is not widely known that you are here. Many questions would demand answers, and you would come under intense scrutiny, more so than you have already. We have granted you time and space to free up your memories, but it is a slow process. Involving the other Clans would hinder that freedom. Can I remind you..., we still do not know how you entered Yarmoria."

A reasonable response, but the Yarmorian seemed overcautious for what was below, hiding behind the politeness. "I have been left on my own, so I want to find out more about your homeland," Hanor said. "I have questions... but no one wants to discuss them. You cannot blame me for looking."

"I assure you it has not been intentional, Hanor," Morn promised. "But... it would be unwise for us to share everything with you, for we have many plans in the making. You are an enigma, and we are not revealing all when your own past remains undisclosed."

"These past turns have been awkward," Hanor said, as though his sensitivities deserved an apology. "Even now..., I can sense your shields are up." Morn did not flinch but Hanor sensed his surprise.

Unexpected, a subtle sensation tingled inside Hanor's head; Morn was trying to probe him for understanding. Staying calm, Hanor acted as if oblivious to the intrusion. Eager to know more about these people, the only way was to let them reveal their intentions by their actions. Like nimble fingers filing through some papers, the foreign sensations were unpleasant but manageable.

Withdrawing, unnerved, Morn considered what he had found. "What you see as a shield in me is not what you think. My words and thoughts are quite open to you..., if you can see that is." Pausing, the young man deserved respect and truth, disbelieving the depth of the boy's perception. Slicing straight through everyday thoughts, the boy's awareness reached to the centre of his own heart where mysteries of the *Soul* lay hid. A holy shrine within each person, Hanor was knocking at the door of the *Sacred*. Amazed how the boy could see so deep, he had no idea what this meant. "The screen you sense inside here," he said, putting a hand on his heart. "Is a place that no other can enter but me. If truth be known..., even I have not yet entered."

Confused, "What do you mean?"

Captivated by the young man's genuineness, Morn broke into a tame laugh. "One's heart... is a place where one can meet the *Sacred*."

"I still do not follow," he admitted, somewhat unqualified.

"Did Coreema help you experience the *Sacred*?"

He nodded.

"Where did that feeling come from?"

"From here I suppose," Hanor said, placing his hand on his chest.

"That wall you register in me is what keeps me separated from the *Sacred*. Through the gateway of the heart, the supernatural can sometimes be reached. A few do, those who are considered worthy enough to enter behind the barrier. Your perception Hanor, takes you to the core of my being. Perhaps it is I who should fear *you*!"

Gulping, the barrier was real enough, it just seemed too extraordinary to believe. "I thought everyone was shutting me out."

"Hanor, you have shaken me and my people. How can someone see so deep?"

Hanor shrugged.

"I think you know that I probed you for your original meaning," Morn admitted, regretful. "Hearing of your pains, I needed to know what you meant. I have tried to explain what it is you see but... you must come to understand in your own time. I assure you Hanor, it is only because unexpected circumstances have developed that we have not given you the time you need. Your words implied exclusion, and this is not so. On seeing these barriers through your eyes, I knew intuitively what they were. It appears you have opened a door of perception for us. Again I ask, should we not be wary?"

"I can only say what I see."

Appreciating the boy wanted answers, Morn obliged.

"When in our world, one's mind is heightened due to the nature of Yarmoria's creation. Your early enquiries may suggest to you that this place does not exist in the traditional ways of time and space. If you recall, you were surrounded by trees before you came through the gateway. On entering, you found yourself on the central glade of Yarmoria. Where did the trees go?"

It was a question Hanor had asked himself many times.

“Here, I will explain,” Morn said, pulling a thin white chord from a pocket in his gown. Stretching it tight between opposing fingers, “Strum it like an instrument.”

Doing as requested, it twanged.

“See how we have one string, but now there appears to be two large ones and many that are smaller? This is a simple way of showing you what vibration means, for this is the core principle behind why Yarmoria exists as it does. It is not fixed to one place, but can move from place to place by the direction of our combined will. We move Yarmoria through your world without upsetting either side’s natural order. Looking at this string, we are able to travel along one of these other lines that you see in the illusion. It is complex Hanor, but what I say is true. The substance of mind is prominent in creating and sustaining life, and by incorporating that power along with that of our own will, our lives are enriched. We understand a great deal about how life operates. It is far more involved than just the things you can see and touch. Coreema said your perception would increase, and as we can see, it clearly has.”

Such explanations echoed the books Coreema had given him, but this time, traces of comprehension filtered through. An image of the old man crossed in front of Hanor again. Unable to pinpoint the location, but the word *mystery* accompanied it. “I kind of understand what you mean.”

“Reflect on it further and insights will, I am quite certain, come.”

“Before I entered Yarmoria, I am quite certain life was not so mindful.”

“With respect, most people who live in The Freelands are oblivious to the Mysteries of Life. You cannot be condemned for what you are not taught. Then again, you are far from the normal sort of individual we encounter.”

Repeating the word *Freelands*, a vital clue to something far more substantial, Hanor sighed, hoping he was not doomed to this condition. After a brief pause, “I do feel better now I have spoken to you.”

“We have just as many questions about you Hanor that we desire answered.”

“Can we not try talking about life outside of Yarmoria? I would like to know what happened to my travelling companions for a start.”

“We thought your memory would have returned by now, so your request is the next step.” Even though this domain seemed to be the most wondrous place, it was still lacking something. “I like being here, but I do not think I am supposed to stay.”

“Perhaps not,” Morn agreed, stretching his legs. “We will eat and talk more. I know Coreema would like to apologise for her absence.”

Chapter 18: The Wonder of Tarden

Forgetting about the intense experience earlier, Bane tried savouring the richness of the surroundings, riding on into the after-turns. Crawling plants covered the ground, so too small and large flowers. Fragrant and full of colour, splaying their beauty, it was a sure sign they were approaching Tarden. Sweet scents filled the air as buzzies skittered about, the whole setting a paradise. Tempted to lose themselves, but another commanding voice ripped away their tranquillity.

“Who dares venture so brazenly into the realms of Tardania?”

Halting, expecting the apparition to reappear demanding to know why they had not waited, the voice had come from in front. Hallen’s hand rested on the hilt of his sword. Kifter too was ready. Bane just waited, anxious.

The voice boomed again, “What is a Fife, a Hite and a boy doing so far from the protection of their mothers?”

Laughing, “Tarmon...! Where are you?” Kifter called, as if to an old companion.

Stepping out from a huge bush, a Tardanian fellow with similar features to the illumined Master earlier jumped up onto a bulge of rock coated by wild-leaf. Dressed in a murky brown outfit, a stylish cape dropped to his knees.

“Dear Kifter..., it is so good to see you again,” the fellow said, cheerful. Bounding like a buzzy-jumper, he was soon at their side. “It has been sometime.”

“Too long,” Kifter agreed, his relief obvious.

“Does this mean we are safe?” Bane wanted to know, praying there were to be no more surprises. Desires to find Hanor battled with an urge to rest. Staring at the newcomer’s domed head, apart from the female Master earlier, he had never seen a Tardanian.

“As safe as anywhere in all The Freelands,” the one called Tarmon declared, proud, unfazed by the lad’s scrutiny.

“We are tired of surprises,” Kifter said, dismounting to give the Tardanian a welcomed hug. “We wondered if we were ever going to arrive.”

“Problems on the way?”

“It is not fitting to go into details without a warm fire, hot meal and strong drink,” Kifter said, dull eyes revealing the yet to be shared trauma. “It has been a *long* journey.”

“When you are ready,” the Tardanian assured him. Turning, he looked at Hallen and Bane. “And who do we have with you? Is this the young man Brandor mentioned?”

“It has been a *very* long journey,” Kifter repeated, giving Bane a wink of comfort. “This is Bane of Manson.”

“Bane! Was not the name...?”

“In good time..., I will share all,” the Fife promised. “This is Hallen of Itab. He has been to Tarden a few times, but I do not think you have met.”

“The face is familiar,” Tarmon said, clasping the Hite’s enormous forearm. “I look forward to getting to know you.”

“Your people are fascinating,” Hallen said. “And good tempered, unlike Fifanians.”

“Careful Hite!” Kifter said, his defences easing from the strain of late.

“No doubt you are as colourful as your brethren,” Tarmon joked.

“Our reputations always precede us..., and I have no idea why.”

“Shall we walk as we talk?” Tarmon said. “My Kyboe is just beyond that mound. I have been expecting you, and was notified of your... entry.”

“Entry? Is that what you call it?” Kifter said, scarred by the experience.

“It pains me to know what you went through, but these are troubled times, and a defence of our home is paramount. What you witnessed is our first line of defence against the coming foe. Do not worry, you would not have been left to its power. Our Masters are attuned to any movements within the *Fire of the Forest* encircling Tarden. The first time you tried entering, if you had stayed there I would have come to you. I was already on my way when you entered again back there, so I had to deviate. This protection is a recent addition now that dark forces are at our northern borders.”

“The darkness is finally on the move then?” Kifter said. “Brandor’s fears have been proven true. Is he at Tarden?”

“Our guide, teacher and friend is at Tarden awaiting your arrival. Presently, he is in discussions with High-tard Drola and the Masters.” A glint in his eye suggested there was more to the comment. “We have our own problems in addition to the enemy.”

Arriving to where Tarmon’s mount stood, his Kyboe was a slender animal, bred for speed. Mounting, “The division between Tarden and Tardoc remains, and if not careful, the implications could be the end for both peoples if not rectified soon.”

“The dispute between High-tards Drola and Polon continues then?” Kifter was aware of the feud between the two.

“Yes. Their stubbornness surpasses all reasoning, and hinders any reconciliation. It is a pitiful situation. As rulers, they are dutiful and much loved by their people, but this friction has gone on for too long. I am sure Brandor would have come to greet you, but his struggle is an arduous one.”

“Much like our own,” Hallen said, the group setting off at a walk.

“Yes... you have said of your own troubles.”

“For now, there is but one issue I will press you for.” Kifter kept it simple. “Have you come across a large circular pattern on the ground, as if formed by a whirlwind?”

“Circular pattern...? How big?”

“Twenty strides.”

“On the ground you say?”

“It was more than a random pattern,” the Fife explained, discouraged by his friend’s initial reaction. “The needle-seeds spiralled towards the middle.”

“Here in Tardania?”

“Yes, much further south.” This was not good.

“The southern regions can be mysterious; natural powers there are wild. The formation you speak of may well be linked to the Yarmorians, for they alone move through the area with confidence. Some Masters at Tarden say they are the cause of the problems there, but that is another issue. As to this pattern, I am sorry, I cannot help you.”

“Then to Tarden we must ride with speed,” the Fife said. “Brandor may know.”

“If not he..., then the Masters.”

“Have you ever been to Tarden, Bane?” Tarmon called behind.

Daylight fading, up ahead, a band of light stretched across their path, the forest’s end near.

“No,” he yelled above the noise of their ride, recalling Kifter and Hallen’s remarks about how splendid it was.

“Then I look forward to sharing our home with you.”

Ignoring the guilt that was already attempting to latch onto any rush of excitement, Bane felt like a child, keen to see the treed City. Temporary breaks in the trees and surrounding brush revealed unusually wide bands of green up ahead, wondering what they were. Light increased with every Kyboe stride, adding a sense of scale to the City yet to be viewed in its entirety. Rounding the last colossal bush, what was concealed amidst the flourishing woodland now lay wide open.

Easing up, transfixed by the magnitude of what stood before him, the sight dissipated any of Bane's woes for the time being. The others slowed, enjoying the setting. Gathering at the edge of a narrow grassy plane stretching hundreds of paces in both directions, at each end, the narrow belt of land turned to follow the line of the forest, disappearing behind this mountain of green. Vast and rectangular in shape, the treed City was surrounded by islands of small bush and tree.

A masterpiece of nature, what a prize beheld their gaze, straining to take in the full glory of Tarden. Its height was that of a small mountain and its width like Freemans Lake. Bane could only guess at its depth. What stood proud before him was the Tardanian Peoples' home. Hovering seemingly above ground, the multi-levelled city rose as if to touch the sky. Five tiers, narrowing slightly as they climbed, were the green bands he had seen a short time before. Consisting of branches and leaves, each wall enclosed a level of the city as its own. Thick bands of foliage ensured nobody could fall over the sides. Platforms were so wide they fired tender imaginations to what each section was like. Amazed, Bane could only guess at why it had grown in such a structured way. Speculating how tall it was, it dwarfed Manson.

"It is over five hundred hand-spans high," Tarmon clarified.

"How can... something be so big?" Bane's response was like so many before.

"The energies in the ground feed it like a living creature. Its size will move dependant on the requirements of our people. If our numbers grow, it will grow. Likewise, if they fall, it too will shrink. We are like a huge family, Bane. Much power is centred here, the essence of life flows freely. Your stay will be what you make it. There are places of solitude, with beautiful gardens to wander and ponder in, places of leisure and study too. There are activities here that can be found in any city. However, the cities of men can be unwelcoming. We have our disagreements here, but you will not find one Tardanian strike another, or take what is not theirs. We have overcome these lesser traits. Your stay should be pleasant and restful."

"I look forward to it," Bane said, peering up at the various levels. "Are there people up there?" Small heads were just discernible at different points on each floor.

"Yes," the Tard said, following his gaze. "From there, you will see marvellous views right across Tardania. Come," he said, starting off.

"This is incredible," Bane said, captivated.

Hallen agreed. "It is quite a place."

Riding the short distance across the grassy plane, wild-flowers and grass lined the way. Further along, a herd of large animals broke from the trees.

"What are they?" Bane asked, never seeing a creature with four legs and four gangly arms before. An oval head with a wide snout looked peculiar.

"They are Mallen," Tarmon answered, their bulky frames agile. "An interesting creature."

Counting forty, they began jumping and play fighting, which Bane found amusing. Eight tangled arms flailing about was hilarious.

“They are behaving like people,” Bane laughed.

“They have a temper like people too,” the Tard added, enjoying the exhibition.

“Much like our Kifter here,” Hallen joked, shoving his smaller friend.

The Fife, although wanting to savour their arrival, remained focused, fearful of how Brandor was going to react. “I cannot imagine how unbearable you would be with four arms,” he said. Surviving Brandor’s wrath a number of times, Hallen’s carefree attitude was at times to be envied.

Tarden’s base, veiled by a wall of shadow, looked even more daunting the closer they got. Suspended nearly a hundred hand-spans high, resting on the bed of darkness beneath it, the lowest and largest level hovered before them. Without external pillars or walls to support the higher levels either, each floor appeared to be levitating.

“How does it stay afloat?” Bane asked, perplexed.

“Afloat...?” Tarmon laughed with the others. “No, it does not float. You will see.”

Reaching its outer edge, some Tardanian children started waving from the second level. Passing from view when drawing near to the underbelly of the city, the thick green bands of each platform were, as Bane had supposed, countless leaves attached to trim branches. Hiding the yet to be seen properties of its formation, only when entering beneath the outer rim was the staggering truth revealed.

“Are they... branches?” he asked, confounded by the size of the main supports.

Gigantic arms stretching forth from a central point somewhere in the murky shadows in front, he could now see his error. Carrying the load of each level, there were scores of giant wooded limbs running along the entire length of the City. Upright like a hand, at the end of each monstrous branch, finger-like branches climbed and spanned out to create the distinctive band of foliage when viewed from a distance. The design was remarkable.

“Each floor has major bearers like these,” Tarmon said.

Their diameter was that of a man’s height, and their girth could hold the weight of an army. Entering the shadows, young eyes readjusted to survey the underside of the City, fascinated by its configuration. An endless number of smaller branches ran parallel to the main ones, creating the wooden floor for the people living here. Stunned by the numbers and scale, walking deeper into the dark, the wooded limbs got even bigger. ‘*What are they joined to?*’ he wondered.

“Keep behind me,” Tarmon warned. “Either side of this causeway is a bog to which the City waters itself.”

Sounds of trickling water accompanied droplets splashing down into the surrounding waters. Glancing behind, reflections from outside mirrored up from the ground. Reeds and bushes sat like islets everywhere. A secondary light emerged to guide them along. Unable to pinpoint its source, it showed just how vast this place was.

Walking for a considerable distance, “Where does this take us?” the young man from Manson asked, struggling to take it all in.

Halting just in front, Tarmon and Kifter shared the same idea. Steering their mounts to the side, like two doors opening, Bane froze to what was in front. Astonished, it was the final piece to a mighty puzzle. Thinking he could not be staggered any more, up

ahead through the half-light, standing like a pillar of all pillars, stood the widest tree he had ever seen. Dwarfing the Woodell trees outside like putting a finger to his leg, the colossal trunk filled his vision. Estimating it to be fifty strides across, the massive wooden branches supporting the floors above joined the hub of the gargantuan tree like that of a wheel. Sending out its mighty limbs in every direction, there were ten great beams of strength on this side alone.

Reverent, the tree glistened at different points, trickling water the cause. Moist as the atmosphere was, it was far from unpleasant, with no foul odours either. Behind, the fading light of the outside world was but a thin band of silver in the near distance.

“Come, there is more for your innocent eyes,” the Tardanian promised, setting off.

Raising his arm as if saluting someone, a slow creaking, rumbling sound croaked just ahead. Juddering, the ground seemed to respond to his call. Peering ahead and to their right, a vertical slither of golden light cracked its way open at the base of the mountainous tree, prised open as if by huge invisible hands. Opening wider, wonderful golden rays from within expanded out in greeting, shedding its soothing light upon the dirt track leading up to its entrance. Only when drawing close could Bane see the tree had stretched itself open. Gleaming, the brightness inside invited the weary travellers in. Tingling with anticipation, “This is incredible,” he said, approaching what was now an internal ramp rising up and around inside the belly of the tree.

Illuminated, the tunnel was wide enough for three kyboes abreast. No lamps were needed, the natural ambience of the golden wall enough to light their way. Glowing from an unknown power, the intelligence of this place was extraordinary.

“It is a living city,” Tarmon said, reading his thoughts. “There are twelve of these outer trees surrounding a central one, the very heart of Tarden. The inner one is nearly twice the size, but is out of bounds for guests. Much of the mystery and power of Tarden is held within its core. Come,” he motioned, his Kyboe stepping onto the ramp-way before proceeding upwards. Kifter went next.

Bane looked at Hallen, shrugging at the detail.

“If you do not venture far, all manner of things will you miss,” the Hite said.

“I *have* lived a sheltered life,” Bane conceded. “Eleven others..., and a central one, where are they?” Through the murkiness in both directions, he could just discern a massive form each side before the shadows closed in. Like great stone pillars of some exotic temple, ‘*If only Hanor and Nole could see this,*’ he thought, missing them. The loss was not enough to undermine the awe. “No turning back now,” he exhaled, urging his mount on. Hallen pulled Hanor and Nole’s Kyboes behind.

Daring, Bane extended his hand to touch the tunnel wall. It felt oily and malleable. Pressing his finger hard, it sank into the wall like soft mud. Pulling back, the imprint disappeared, concealing his inquisitiveness. Confounded, the substance on his finger was absorbed into his skin, softening the hardness of recent turns.

“Now you know why they look so young,” Hallen said alongside. “A natural balm, in the marketplace it would sell for a small fortune. Unfortunately, it does not last long away from its source.”

“Fascinating,” Bane said, a warm glow stirring within.

“And medicinal too.”

“Yes it is.”

“We are nearing the first landing,” Hallen said. Kifter and Tarmon had already disappeared from view. “Let us be going, we have to find someone, remember?”

“Yes..., of course,” Bane said, guilty of betraying Hanor for getting sidetracked.

Encircling the tree one more time before an exit appeared, hesitating, various noises could be heard, inviting Bane to view more splendours if he dared.

Entering a clear area, Kifter dismounted and lead his Kyboe towards an opening to their left. Taking in what they could, the circular enclosure was a sizable meeting point where people could prepare for a journey. Constructed of leaves and branches, the circular wall was splashed with patterned colours of both flower and leaf. The wall itself was high, hundreds of intricate offshoots extending to the ceiling where more gargantuan branches stretched forth. Bright considering there was no direct sunlight, the natural ambience was comforting to a lone boy from Manson.

Seven archways lined the enclosure, leading to other parts of this fascinating place. The floor was solid, and it was hard to imagine that he was high up in a tree. Lines of tiny twig-sized branches, compacted for evenness, ran away from the main trunk towards the far wall and beyond.

Stepping down, Bane led his Kyboe after the Fife. The archway had a band of light-blue and purple dinka-flowers from floor to crest. Entering, another large room had others like Tarmon going about their business. Slender frames wielding unknown strengths were swift but orderly. Relaxed considering the unnerving circumstances, Bane was way out of his depth here.

Tarmon stood talking to one of his brethren, the other pointing at a doorway to their right. Waiting for them to catch up, their Tardanian host was tolerant of the stragglers.

“Through there is one of many holding bays where guests can leave their Kyboes,” he said, indicating another archway with red and yellow flowers lining its edges. “Here at Tarden, no Kyboe belongs to any one individual, the needs of all outweigh the needs of the few. Possessions are not considered worthy of attention either, but we know guests may not want their mounts *borrowed* for a period of time. If you have to leave Tarden in a hurry, please remember where you put them. If you ask for the *Explorer’s Enclosure*, someone will guide you here.” Turning, they entered.

Leaving their Kyboes to rest, Tarmon led the small group up an elaborate stairwell, Bane gasping at the size and complex designs of both the branched stairs and the columned walls reaching to the very top of Tarden itself. Rising like a funnel through every layer of this enchanted City, the stairs, coated in both flower and leaf, rose like a skeletal frame up the middle. Attached to each level were four short functional bridges for support, granting access between each floor. At the very top, the roof was pulled back, the last rays of sunlight filtering in. A reddish hue, enhanced by sparkling flowers lining the walls, masked the fact that evil would invade this place soon.

Reaching the second level, it was similar in layout to the first except there were no Kyboes. Heading along one of many corridors, a welcomed aroma of cooking meat and savoury spices tempted hunger pains to grow.

“It looks like we are heading in the right direction,” Hallen said. Hitorian appetites were renowned right across The Freelands, even here in Tardania.

“You can freshen up later,” Tarmon said, stopping just outside a large chamber. “I have sent word for Brandor to come as soon as possible. The Masters are unavailable at the moment, so you may rest and eat here.”

Entering the large Eating Hall, many faces looked up. A few nodded whilst others talked and joked with Tarmon. Large enough to seat a few hundred people, the hall seemed a popular place to meet. Some were not local, mainly men of fair complexion. A couple of odd-looking people caught Bane’s eye. Trying not to stare, their unusual features however were difficult to ignore. One was as big as Hallen, but of another race. Enormous eyes like that of a night creature stared at them before continuing his meal.

“That is a Baltian,” Hallen whispered from behind when out of earshot.

“A Baltian?”

“Mysterious people,” the Hite said, as though suspicious. “Trustworthy but...,” he clicked his mouth, lacking a description.

Led outside onto a long wide balcony that encircled the entire level, spindly branches were hanging from the high ceiling and poking out from bushed walls. Containing tiny golden orbs of light similar to the tunnel entrance when first arriving, the warm atmosphere encouraged them to relax. Low murmurs of many voices hummed, Bane realising it must have been along here that the children had waved. Half-filled seats and tables lined the entire length of the terrace, each one somehow growing out of the floor. The outer bush-like wall was small but steadfast, allowing one to sit up close to enjoy the breathtaking views.

Gazing out across the ocean of treetops sweeping away from their heightened position, now coated in shadow from the failing dusty light, the sunset was magical. Deep orangey reds just above the horizon merged into purples and blues high above, a wispy veil of cloud reflecting the light. Troubles seemed a long way off. Soft and welcoming, the gentle breeze hissed its soothing song of rest. They needed it.

“Sit here and I will bring some Tardanian hospitality,” Tarmon said, disappearing back into the hall.

Following orders, they sat down, joints groaning.

Lifting his mighty arms above his head, Hallen yawned, unashamed. “I am famished,” he said, stretching his giant legs out. Nearly tripping over a Tardanian coming up from behind, “My apologies,” he said, reining in his slothfulness for once.

The affected Tardanian looked, but seeing there were no ugly motives, thought nothing of it. “Your feet are welcome here,” he said, before carrying on his way.

“You seem to be settling in as usual,” Kifter remarked.

“A Hite’s home is where his feet are.”

“And so is your intellect.”

“Now be careful my beloved friend, for these have a tendency to squash little buzzies,” he said, pressing his foot on the floor.

Weighed down by what was to come, Brandor’s wrath for one, Kifter sighed. “You are too much.”

Four Tardanians came over with trays of food, and sat at the table next to theirs. Two younger males and one female waited for the oldest fellow to sit before they did. Continuing with their conversation, their meal looked tasty.

Sun hovering a short distance above the horizon, Hallen started talking to Bane about various adventures he had when young, the setting triggering memories of old. Kifter just sat stewing over how Brandor was going to react when he got here. Glancing at Bane, a stabbing reminder of the storm to come, he drifted between his woes and the discussion on the adjoining table. He was no longer hungry.

“There is increased movement throughout the north,” the female behind Kifter said, biting into a quaner filled with roots and a slither of meat.

“How serious is the threat?” one of the others asked.

“It is difficult to say,” the oldest member replied. “Reports suggest developments right across the Northern Gap.”

“It is strange that the Dortians are preparing for war,” the female Tardanian noted.

“I remember as a child the trade exchanged between our people,” the old one said, considering it. “The relationship was one of mutual respect and goodwill.”

“When did the relationship end?”

“Over twenty-five full seasons ago. No explanations were given to explain why, people were just turned away at the border.”

“You are older than most,” another continued. “What were the Dortians like?”

“They were a stern sort, and never easily humoured,” he said, relaying what he could remember. “But they were polite enough. Dortia is a harsh environment, with cold spells to test the strongest. Coarse in their ways, quick to temper and very proud, but nothing threatening. If respect was given, trouble rarely surfaced. It is not as if many people travelled there, and likewise in return, but just enough to retain contact.”

“Other reports suggest a new breed of Dortian, born deformed. Some are small while others enormous, what do you make of it?”

“I do not remember seeing any disfigured Dortians.”

“It is many cycles of the seasons now since ties were severed, do you know of any internal wrangling that may have caused this separation? We have our own situation with High-tards Drola and Polon..., was there anything to suggest foul play?”

“I did not hear of any disputes, although I was only young then. Even so, clearly something significant has happened. Under banners of peace, we have tried to reopen the channels, but without success. The threat is looming, so we must prepare. What else can we do?”

Kifter returned his attentions to their own group when Tarmon stepped out from the Eating Hall accompanied by another Tardanian carrying a tray each of steaming food.

“Nothing but the best from one of Tarden’s many Cook-houses,” Tarmon said, placing his tray on the table. A good-sized roast on a wooden platter was something Bane had never seen the likes of before. Surrounded by many large roots, it still looked good. Ground shoots mixed with seeds, nuts and various chunky looking leaves filled a white basket. A red one contained short-bakes and quaner, and a long oval bowl was full of stew. The basket of berries and mint-leaf completed the display along with a jug of rif to quench their thirst.

“This was the other reason why I like coming here,” Hallen said, satisfied.

The Tardanian cook concurred before leaving. Tarmon sat down as the Hite and Bane tucked in. Kifter looked dazed, his thoughts on other matters.

“Kifter!” Tarmon said, clasping his forearm. “We all have troubles, but we still eat.”

Listening in on the other table raised further concerns for the Fifanian. Far from a worrier, but Brandor’s emphasis on Hanor’s worth could not be dismissed. Uncertain if it was fear of what Brandor will say or his dented pride laughing at him for failing, such moods were hard to shift. “Grrr...,” he growled, trying to unhitch the grim feelings. He took a bite anyway.

“It is good to see you again Tarmon,” a voice said from behind Kifter, the Fife recognising it to be the oldest affiliate on the next table.

“Timal, I have been meaning to see you,” Tarmon replied, sincere.

“You know I am always ready to receive you.”

“Have there been any developments?” Tarmon asked, meaning discussions involving Tarden’s High-tard Drola and his subsequent refusal to unite with his opposite, High-tard Polon from the city of Tardoc.

Hesitant at the three newcomers, trusting Tarmon’s judgement of their worth, he continued. “There have been no new developments. They are like two squabbling children.”

“Brandor has not got through to him then?”

“He is far more patient than I,” Timal admitted, a faint chuckle escaping before turning serious. “This needs sorting now. If *he* cannot do it,” he said, shrugging his narrow shoulders. “Then who can? We should be protecting our northern borders, Tarden and Tardoc, side by side. But without that trust which they shared in their youth, neither is prepared to risk being duped. Both hide behind lame excuses, but I sense something more to this... I am certain of it.”

“I have heard the whispers too,” Tarmon agreed. “Drola seems adamant not to give in.”

“I fear the inevitable will happen in the end.”

Aware of what Timal meant, there were a growing number of Tardanians urging Caldon, Master of Tarden’s Forces, to take control and do what was right. Tarmon let the sensitive subject be. Turning to his guests, “These are friends of Brandor.” Indicating the others, “This is Kifter, Hallen and Bane.”

“I am always pleased to meet new people,” Timal replied, gracious. Peering behind them, “Talking of friends, here comes Brandor now.”

Staring behind Hallen and Bane to a purpose driven figure striding further along the balcony towards them, Kifter gulped. Turning away, Bane recognised the old man to be the one he and Nole had seen at Manson. Out of place, an alarming reminder that this was not a game, he swallowed hard and waited. Checking on the Fife, his travelling companion appeared just as grey and anxious.

Chapter 19: Wrong Boy

Avoiding gestures from individuals trying to catch his attention, Brandor stayed focused on the recently arrived group ahead, pleased that at least something had turned out right. Wasting the last turn trying to persuade High-tard Drola to unite with Polon of Tardoc, they were still no further forward.

‘*What a fool,*’ he cursed. How much time had he spent charging around The Freelands drumming up an alliance only to be undermined here by a petty argument dating back twenty full seasons. Permitting that despicable dispute to come between life and death for The Freelands was beyond words. Unable to contain his anger, he had left Drola to Maloree, the very reason behind this whole ragged affair.

Born of the Yarmi Folk, Maloree had come forward to re-establish a link between her people and the peoples of Tardania. A link severed scores of generations ago during a period of great darkness, only the mountain city of Tardoc had existed in Tardania at that time. Greedy men from the planes had started influencing the ancient Tardocians, threatening to destabilise that early society. Amongst the turmoil, a small group had withstood those influences. Honourable people with a love of life, they had separated to form a new civilization, known today as the Yarmi Folk. Receiving numerous revelations, they had manipulated reality and created a realm running parallel to this one. Inaccessible to the aggressors who had vowed to wreck their plans, the Yarmorians’ harmless ways had been saved.

A similar initiative had emerged a few generations later, when a splinter group had left to form what is now Tarden. The one city of Tardoc, eventually splitting into three, it had been a tumultuous period in their history. Nevertheless, Tarden and Tardoc had retained a link across the generations. Not until the two present High-tards had come to blows over Maloree had a wedge formed between them; some saying Maloree’s original efforts at reconciliation had caused more damage than it was worth.

Attracting the attentions of the young Drola of Tarden and Polon of Tardoc, getting close to both, she had set a number of challenges to see who would win her hand. Drola had won but not convincingly, to the disapproval of many. To say Maloree, now High-lady of Tarden, had manipulated the circumstances was unacceptable. Intelligent, her sincerity had won countless admirers, himself included. Witty and sensitive, just like her brethren, he had visited the Yarmorians many times in the deep past. Their kindness had always been consistent, and Maloree was no different. The fact the Yarmorians had not answered his call recently did not warrant the suspicious remarks talked about by some. Huffing, Brandor let the issue go, concentrating on more immediate matters instead.

Approaching the table, the familiar face of Hallen nodded to the Dai-laman, and so did Tarmon and Timal. Stone-faced and without his usual friendliness, Kifter appeared detached. Trusting they had not encountered trouble, he was keen to see Hanor above all. Sitting with his back to him, the boy continued to pick at the food. Taking a second look, he could not recall Hanor having dark locks of hair.

“It is good to see you made it,” he said, his eagerness obvious. Whatever potential lay dormant in the young man was to be encouraged when considering the diabolical situation here at Tarden. Powers of the unseen kind would be vital to defeat the *Dark One*. The Masters here were eager to meet him too.

Swallowing a slither of tasty meat, Bane gulped. Cowering inside, he could do little but get it over with by facing the old man. Turning, apologetic for not being what was expected, "Hel... hello," he dared.

Brandor's mind raced when looking again. "Who is this?" he asked, confounded that he had even considered it to be Hanor. Was this an ill-timed joke?

Kifter, who had closed his eyes at the moment of impact, steadied himself. Wary, peering up at his powerful friend, the Dai-Laman was staring towards the Eating Hall expecting Hanor to walk out.

"Well...! Where is Hanor?" Brandor pressed.

Hallen spoke before the Fife could answer. "We ran into some difficulties."

"Difficulties!" the man of power cut him short, forewarning he was not in the mood for surprises. "What do you mean? Hanor is here..., is he not?" Glancing again at Bane, certain he had seen him before, "Kifter!"

The bark snapped the Fife from his daze. "There were a number of incidents," he blurted, rattled.

"Incidents...! Where is Hanor and who is this?" The Dai-Laman demanded to know, temper held at bay by confusion. "Did you not do as I asked? What did you bring *him* for?"

"I did set out with Hanor as requested, but... complications arose. This is Bane, Hanor's friend."

"Bane... yes, I will deal with that in a moment. Where is Hanor?"

Whatever reasons Kifter gave, he would be slaughtered anyway. "After losing Hanor's brother Nole at Boverns Crossing," Brandor looked aghast, but Kifter continued before he could interrupt. "The next morning, Hanor disappeared. We followed his tracks until they vanished too."

"Disappeared...?" The Dai-Laman could not believe what he was hearing.

"His trail led to a mysterious circular pattern on the ground, and he never came out." A deep-seated shame drew over the Fife, especially as Tarmon was hearing it for the first time as well. Discerning now that it was for pride's sake and fear of losing his abilities that he had been so moody of late, he waited for the outburst.

"Come here," the Dai-Laman ordered.

The command lifted the small Fife automatically from his seat. Failure, the word was more painful than a knife. Standing before the powerful man, disgraced, gloom returned with a vengeance.

"Look at me."

Again, Kifter obeyed. Wise piercing eyes stared down, the Dai-Laman's disappointment clear. Mortified, he had been set an important task, why should he be trusted to do so again? His parents had half-abandoned him, he expected nothing less from his mentor.

"I need to see what happened," the determined figure said.

Unsure of its implications, Kifter waited for his old friend to do as he pleased.

Extending both hands, Brandor placed one on Kifter's forehead and the other at the back, clasping tight. No words were uttered, the Dai-Laman concentrating on the Fife.

Tingles behind Kifter's eyes developed as images of their recent past emerged, presuming his trusted friend was surveying them too. The force of the Dai Laman's mind unnerved him but he held steady. Observing just how small his own part in the struggle for The Freelands survival was compared to this man of power, he was but a short knife alongside a mighty sword.

Memories filed through his mind. From the outset when leaving Manson, images of the Freeloaver, the *Nyshifter* and Boverns Crossing surfaced before disappearing. Tuning into Brandor's thoughts whilst undergoing the scrutiny, Kifter was shocked to sense his old friend's dismay at the potential threat of the *Dark One*. If Brandor was inadequate to meet such a challenge, then just how powerful was their enemy?

Finally, images arrived at the mysterious circle, the intricate spiral baffling the Dai-Laman. Examining every detail, Kifter hoped his friend would know what it was, but he was giving nothing away. Flicking back and forth through the Fife's memory, nausea started whirling, clouding Kifter's thoughts. Losing strength in his legs, dizzy, Brandor registered the change.

Cringing as if a tiny needle was withdrawing from his eyes, Kifter staggered, relying on the Dai-Laman's firm grip to prevent him falling. Thankful for Tarmon's additional support, he took a few moments to recoup his balance. Not knowing at what point Brandor let go, a sense of intrusion attacked as if violated. Shuddering, Kifter felt sick.

"How do you feel?" the man of power asked, sensitive to what he had done.

"I need to sit down," the Fife said, Tarmon ushering him to his seat.

"I am sorry, Kifter," Brandor's apology was unexpected. "But under the circumstances, I needed to know. We cannot afford anymore mishaps."

Composed at last, the Fife knew his inquisitor had overstepped the mark. Conceding no description could have portrayed the right picture, whatever it was about Hanor, the Dai-Laman was pinning a great deal of hope in him. Sipping some water, when looking up, he was pleased to see the Dai-Laman's blood was no longer boiling.

"Well...?" Kifter queried. Better now the burden was lifted, a genuine concern for Hanor's whereabouts moved him. "As you can see, our journey was far from uneventful. Do you know what happened to him?"

Pursing lips, Brandor was still far from happy. "Fortunately for you, I have a good idea, but that does not mean it is acceptable."

"I know," Kifter said, the relief observable.

"He is not in trouble but... that does not mean he is out of it either."

"Is he still alive then?" Bane asked, hopes firing.

"You, young man, need a good talking to," Brandor said, whirling to face Bane. "But yes, I would say he is quite alive."

Yelping, delighted, the sense of loss and guilt evaporated before tears got the better of Bane. Others along the balcony were staring but he did not care.

"What has happened to Hanor then?" Hallen asked.

Cutting a slither of meat, Brandor ate it before taking another slice. Life on the road was becoming tiresome, especially when covering for others. "I will tell you when I get back," he said, grabbing a handful of short-bakes when leaving. "I will return tomorrow at sunset. Tarmon and Timal, sort out your leader!" Entering the Food Hall behind, he was gone.

“You still do not remember the names of your parents?” Coreema asked. It was the third time of asking since beginning these exercises.

“No,” Hanor replied, disappointed. Some names seemed to stick but the most important ones did not. “It is annoying.”

Seated by a small pool trying to search out his past, he had already forgiven Coreema for leaving him on his own. Those tender words, “I am sorry, Hanor,” had melted away any lingering upset. Even though she was mentally beyond him, just her presence was enough to unbalance him, finding it difficult to concentrate, just like when with Sulie.

“There I go again,” he said. “Another name remembered..., Sulie.”

“Sulie...?” Morn queried.

“I think she was a girl who lived near me.”

“Nothing more?”

“No,” he said, hoping to see a glimmer of heightened attention from Coreema. Such hopes were pointless.

“You vaguely remember the people at your camp but not the reason for your journey?”

“Correct.”

“This is very strange,” he said, mulling over what they had covered.

The turn was drifting towards evening, and they had spent a considerable time searching Hanor’s past without any control on their part. He was a free agent, so whatever was blocking his recollections had nothing to do with them. Undecided whether to mention Boverns Crossing, the fact Coreema was prevented from going there with Hanor by that *Presence* raised a great many concerns within their Clan. Some wanted to try whilst others sought the patient way. The fact the *Sacred* had shown some interest in this was enough to persuade everyone that caution was still necessary.

“You want to say something to me but you are wary of how I will react?” Hanor said, saying what he saw. Both Coreema and Morn did not flinch, but his heightened senses detected their surprise.

“You are merging with the Oneness Principle of Yarmoria, and your mind is becoming evermore attuned to ours,” Coreema said, a flicker of disquiet present. Shocked, the Lani Clan’s Plans were now potentially open for his discovery.

Picking up on the fear, Hanor was confused. What was so important it could keep them occupied for the best part of two turns of the day?

Dissolving the alarm, she continued. “You are correct, we do want to talk about a particular issue, but the risks are high.” Waiting for her heart to flutter, ordering her to retract from this direction, but nothing happened. Discovery of her people’s long-term plans by Hanor was one thing, but to upset the *Sacred* was quite another. Yarma Torna did not respond either. “We know your group was involved in a serious incident the night before you entered Yarmoria.”

“Like what?”

“Are you certain nothing comes to mind?” Morn asked, cautious.

“I am eager to know anything that will rid me of this blindness.”

Pausing just long enough to be sure, Coreema proceeded. “Have you heard of Boverns Crossing?”

Preparing for an impulsive rush, a sudden dawning of something terrible, the two waited alongside the many others tuning into this process.

Willing for a glimmer of recognition, Hanor rubbed his hands, now oily from the tension. But hope soon faded the longer he waited, his memory staying blank. “No.”

“You do not remember being at the bridge with these people?”

“I cannot even remember if I have a family.” Deciding he should not stay in Yarmorica, even if Coreema were to draw near again, he felt empty and lost.

Tuning into his sadness, Coreema reached out and held his hand. Unable to suppress her feelings for him completely, he saw the sparkle, the glint that would reach out and embrace freedom if she so desired. Sadly though, her hand left his, a pang pinching his heart. Choosing otherwise, at least it made his decision to go easier. With the so-called openness of this place, he wondered how many of his thoughts they could now see. Ridiculous to pretend, staring at her delicate hands, to have his memory back now meant everything to him. Looking up at the two, “I do not think this is going to work.”

Running out of answers, Coreema and Morn knew the last option was precarious. To take him physically back to Boverns Crossing would be going against the *Sacred's* wishes, their encounter with the *Presence* in Coreema's stay proof enough. But what else could they do? Hanor's question interrupted their thoughts, too preoccupied by his own problems to note the next possibility.

“Where are my friends now?” Supposing they had left the area, whatever their original purpose, they had probably given him up for dead.

“We did not follow their direction, Hanor,” Morn said. “Our attention was on your unexpected arrival.”

“So they are no longer looking for me?” Solidifying the emptiness around him, it was a foolish question that did not need answering. Exhausted from the endless questions, cupping head in hands, Hanor felt quite alone.

“Come,” Coreema said rising, holding her hand out to him. “We will sit and watch the fading light in my Stay.”

Limp, he took her hand. Sensing her defences were in place, determined not to fall for him again, he said nothing when leaving the tranquil pool. Subdued, even her sweet scent did little to succour him.

Chapter 20: Retrieving what was Lost

Riding through the night, Brandor urged his beloved Tunder on, relying on his Kyboe's keen sight to avoid any obstacles in the dark. Considering the extraordinary details of the group's journey, Kifter's memories were astounding. From the mystery behind the dead Freeloaver to the return of the Boverns, the fact *Nyshifters* were flying this far south again was an additional nightmare he did not need.

Continuing undeterred through the early short-turns of the morning, dawn arrived, the lush terrain succumbing to the encroaching barrenness of the south. Trees began solidifying around him, needing to travel this far south to ensure the Yarmi Folk's power did not conflict with Tarden's. Trusting his call would be answered this time, he would not leave until it was.

Bleak, the region's sorry state *was* getting worse. Some Masters at Tarden decreed the Yarmorians were starving the area of vital life-giving properties, but his once close affiliation with them prevented him agreeing with the idea. Those old affections he knew were a hindrance, generating a bias not easily dispelled.

Presuming Hanor would be fine, but something grim kept gnawing at him. If in their care, why did he feel nervous?

Daylight arrived. Pulling up, he watered and fed a panting Tunder before resting. Checking the silent setting, a rise in the ground in front would be a good place to invoke the Yarmorians. Trees stretched in every direction, the thick canopy above swaying in the breeze. Brown and drab, a thick bed of needle-seeds suffocated the ground. Only the hardened, well-lined stomachs of Kyboes could eat such bland seeds. Something had to be done, it was just a matter of what and by whom.

Starting a few breathing exercises to steady himself, he made his way over to the low mound. Re-checking his bearings, Tunder was chewing nearby. A final sharp intake of air, he closed his eyes and began chanting the words of beckoning.

"*Mas sum oll as a ma.*" Repeating the words but with a deeper tone, each utterance took him closer to the correct pitch. "*Mas sum oll as a ma.*" Saying it for a third and final time, the last one vibrated as it should, unifying with invisible powers. Hitting the right note, he waited.

Searching the area with his mind's eye for anything approaching, the invocation registered, his call vibrating like a continuous knock at the door. When invoking them previously, he had been sensitive to their needs, and not forced the issue. But with Hanor at stake, he was not going anywhere.

A sudden rush of energy came hurtling forward like an invisible wave about to crash down on his vulnerable position. Daunting for the humble individual perceiving such an approach, the Yamorian's immense power had grown beyond measure. Their arrival encompassed the entire region, vibrating the surrounding area into insignificance. Proving they were the reason why the lower regions of Tardania were dying, the evidence hovered before him.

Aggrieved, convinced they were examining him from their still hidden position, had it been so long since he was last here that nobody recognised him? Did the once loving

Yarmi Folk now harbour suspicion over openness? Disbelieving they could not see his peaceful intentions, this was distressing.

Radiating energies that were not as harmonised as before, reservations increased as to why. Once gentle and welcoming, but this verged on too much power and not enough of the unifying energies that produced harmony. A long time had passed since he had entered their Realm, and he would not have thought such a drastic change was possible. Still scrutinising him, this was not good.

Responding to his uncertainties, the landscape shimmered before transforming. Enormous Woodell trees disappeared, finding himself standing on a large grass clearing surrounded by about thirty, what he supposed were Yarmorians. Slender like he remembered of old, but their features had altered, their temples more pronounced. Catching his breath at the sharpness of their eyes, so dark and unyielding, he could not believe how menacing they looked compared to the tender gazes he had once adored. What had happened to them? Noting the changes in Maloree when she had first arrived at Tarden over twenty full seasons ago, but she was far less prominent than her brethren. A ring of trees at the clearing's outer edge was not the place he remembered either. The sky appeared unnaturally blue, forced to keep its tone by some unnatural power. Details flashed, the whole place unnatural.

Waiting for someone to step forward to welcome him, but instead, he felt like an intruder. Composing himself, searching the onlookers for any recognisable features, but only indifferent expressions stared back. Slightly smaller than what he remembered, there was no sign of the unconditional love of yester-season either. No one was in a rush to speak on their behalf, leaving Brandor to make a start.

“Your answer to my call is gracious,” he said, sensitive, peering around the mixed group. Both males and females of differing age, still no one moved. Accustomed to standing before large gatherings, but rarely in a situation like this, he had no choice but to improvise. “You probably have your own work to do, so I will not keep you for long.”

Responding to his doubt, a figure stepped forward. Slender and toned like the others, his pointed stare softened, a tame smile apologising for their evasiveness.

“You are known to us,” the one said, suspicion still present. “You are Brandor of the Sleep, a Dai-laman and *Knower of The Hidden Mysteries*.” The word *knower* was said as if in disdain. “We know your works and concerns. A noble cause you have undertaken.”

“Then you are aware of the threat from the north?” Brandor said, the Yarmorian still not extending a hand of welcome.

“Yes... we know of the dangers.”

“I have called upon you before but received no reply, I assume you are busy preparing your own response to the *Dark One*.”

“We consider all things before acting.”

Ambiguous, Brandor took it in a positive light. “You intend to repel the attack then?”

“We in Yarmoria cannot live alongside such evil.”

“We are on the same side at least,” Brandor said, managing a slim smile. The opposing numbers however, did not share his gladness.

With that out of the way, the Dai-laman felt more confident about the situation, even under the strain. Still hoping they had come into contact with Hanor, he could not see the

boy anywhere. "Yarmoria appears different since I was last here," he said. Brave enough to turn in a circle, the entire arena emitted a warmth that seemed strange. Illusionary and out of balance, noticing it before entering, it was far more prominent here.

"Times change..., and so do people," the one standing forth replied.

A vague answer, Brandor was still puzzled by their aloofness. "I was a good friend of your ancestors."

"It is known that your seasons are long, and you have a history with our people, hence why your entry was not through the Vortex. We respect decisions already made."

Generating further doubts as to whether they agreed with that original decision, perplexed by their detachment, the Dai-laman could not understand why. What was their agenda? Maloree, High-lady of Tarden, was at least friendly and respectful. It was difficult to imagine that she was born here amongst these people. Contacting them on his behalf shortly after his first failed attempt to reach them, but she had returned and said they were not free to talk yet. Now he could see why they were not so eager.

"You said you know of me and my work, may I ask your name?" Brandor tried. The fellow had not once glanced at the others for support.

"I am known as... Yarma Torna."

"It is pleasing to meet you Yarma Torna, and everyone else here," Brandor said, shedding warmth even though there was none in return. These modern Yarmi Folk were not light-hearted as were their predecessors. Disappointed that a race could change so dramatically, what had crept into their covert world to distort it? A grim reflection of the southern regions of Tardania, he was not enjoying this, deciding to get to the point of why he was here.

"Another reason for coming is regarding a young man who was given into my care. He was on his way to Tarden with friends of mine, but he has gone astray." Recognition charged the ring, encouraging him. "I was hoping you may be able to help. Your reach stretches wide, have you come across him?"

Hesitant, Torna searched the Dai-laman for lines of ill intent. "Many young men wander through our realm, and many get lost, roaming for many turns before stumbling back out onto the grassy planes. Does this boy have a name?"

"Hanor."

"And what would your interest be with him?"

Treading carefully, "He was entrusted to me by his parents, and I intend to teach him about the *Hidden Mysteries*. At Tarden..., I was to start his training."

"Why Tarden?" Torna asked. Hanor remained an enigma, a fascination deserving closer study. "Why not at the Sleep?"

"You know of the dangers we face, I have other pressing work that cannot wait. I will teach him wherever I can." Unsure what exactly he was to do with Hanor, but he could not just leave him at the Sleep, doubting his fellow members of the Hisian-Set would see the potentials of the boy. "Your questions suggest you know of him or his whereabouts?"

The Yarma required more. "What do you intend to train him for?"

Quick to reply, it was clear they recognised Hanor was different. "I look for strengths in all those I meet, Hanor included. There is great potential in him, and we need all the strength we can muster, young or old."

Unexpected, an older looking Yarmorian left the circle, disappearing into the trees behind. Brandor was hopeful, but stalled when looking back at Torna, suspicion still evident. "Do you doubt me?" he asked, now just wanting the boy and to get out of here.

"Your words appear true," Torna said. "But Hanor does not belong to you or his parents, he will decide his own fate."

"Then you have him here?"

"Yes..., we have grown fond of him."

"He has a rare quality." Brandor's relief was unmistakable.

The ring remained steadfast, no one stepping forward to offer any further assurances. Treating him as an outsider, this was most odd. "I remember your forebears were friendly, but since arriving, I have felt nothing but suspicion, questioning my integrity. Why this reaction?"

Unsettled murmurs from the onlookers proved there were issues.

Torna glared straight at him. "Your present work we do not question, and is commendable even, but great Laws ensure ill works of the past are never forgotten. Those who suffer menace will find peace, for justice is at hand. In time, your past actions and those of your companions will be made known and dealt with."

Disturbed, Brandor had no idea what he was talking about. To think he and others had done something terrible was awful, wracking his mind for what it could be. Yarma Torna returned to the circle's edge, ending the discussion. Wherever the Dai-laman looked, disgust stared back. What was going on?

"Hanor!" the soft voice spoke, wary of startling him. "Hanor!" the voice repeated, more urgent this time.

Interplaying with his dreams, it was difficult to know if he was asleep or not. Troubles for the moment forgotten, but the intruding voice would not let Hanor rest.

"You must wake up," the voice said, accompanied by a gentle touch on his shoulder.

Opening his eyes, Hanor was surprised to see a hasty Morn peering down.

"Come Hanor, something has happened."

"Happened?" Rubbing dry eyes, he sat up. "What do you mean?"

"Someone... has turned up!"

"Do you mean... someone I know?"

"It appears to be so," Morn said.

"Who?" Hanor asked, excited.

Morn turned away, hiding his unease. "That is for you to remember."

"Is it one of those from my camp?"

Hesitant, Morn considered if he had made the right decision to come. "No, for we would have known."

Dressing, anticipation rising, the Yarmorian appeared troubled. "Why are you acting like this? Should you not be happy for me?"

"I am pleased that this person could trigger your memories, but..." He did not finish.

"What...?"

"He claims to know you, but he is not one we would wish to see you leave with."

"Why not..., is he someone who would do me harm?" Disliking the behaviour of his elder, yester-turn, the three of them, Coreema included, had become quite close. What could stir Morn like this?

“You need to make your own decisions, but I warn you Hanor, there is more to him than you know. I will say no more on the matter.” Morn left the Stay.

Considering the words of caution, Hanor followed him. What did he mean, was this a good thing or not? Without breaking into a run, it was difficult to keep up. Heading back towards the main gathering place where he had first arrived, excitement dissolved the doubts. Was this his chance to go home, to leave this place and find out who he really was? Enchanting as Yarmoria was, to live here like this would drive him mad.

“A link to my past!”

Entering the final tunnel, a cluster of Yarmi Folk were gathered at the end of the wooded corridor, peering out towards the grassy glade. Turning, curiosity stared at him as he passed through, somewhat exposed by the added attention. Leaving the tunnel, the grass clearing lay open, enhanced by the glorious blue sky. Did he really want to leave?

Out in the middle stood a group of Yarmi Folk, and in their midst was a tall figure standing on his own. Approaching the circle of people, the man’s short white hair with thin streaks of black was familiar, enough to stall him. The older man’s demeanour was recognisable, but only just. Talking to him somewhere about mysteries, the memory had been one of his first when arriving here. Proving he had not been forgotten after all, Hanor willed a deeper connection to rise. Ignoring the attentions of the gathering, he waited, urging the flood of recollections to surge. But to his grim fate, no emotional eruptions lit up his world to what went before. Yearning for a reaction, but nothing happened, the excitement fading.

Observing the young man still standing behind those encircling him, the Dai-laman was shocked to see the brightness in Hanor disappear. Replaced instead by confusion, thoughts about the loss of the boy’s brother Nole sprung to mind, not considering its consequence enough and what he might be feeling. The lad usually bounced with life, but something was now missing, a part taken horrifically at the bridge. The Boverns were another issue he had hoped to clear up with the Yarmi Folk, but under present conditions, he would be lucky to leave with the boy.

Relieved when the ring parted to let Hanor through, the one who had fetched him fell into line as before, guarded like everyone else. What did they believe he had done? Hanor stood just inside the ring, the young man’s questioning appeal surprising. Wearing a loose purple over-gown, the Dai-laman feared they had tampered with him.

Cautious, Brandor dared a step forward. “Hanor..., it is good to see you are safe and well.” Halting, the boy seemed distant, and not in full use of his faculties. Looking at the ground as if lost, this was worse than expected. “Hanor..., are you all right?” The boy glanced behind Brandor at Yarma Torna and another by his side, a female. What was going on? The Dai-laman took another step. “Hanor, do you remember me?”

Subdued by the lack of connection, an image of them both standing by a window staring into a moonlit garden was the only vivid encounter Hanor could recall. Longing for those deeper stirrings to lift him out of this void, he knew the man he was certain, but why the emptiness? Glancing up, examining the fine lines and sincere appeal, kind brown eyes showed affection, but why was he not feeling anything? This man was a link to his life before, but where was the tide of remembrance?

Peering across at Coreema, feelings for her were strong. Could she not grow to love him? Their intimate union had affected her as well, but the returning gaze was not what he sought. Any cherished thoughts she had were concealed behind a detached exterior. With the others watching, she would not abandon herself to him again, coming too far to let it all go now. Refusing to shy away from her responsibilities, she held his gaze for as long as he wanted. Her destiny was on another path.

“Hanor...!” the older man said, this time a step nearer. Supposing the newcomer was as qualified as the Yarmi Folk, such mindful people was hard to get used to. “Yes..., I am Hanor.”

“How are you?” Brandor asked. At least the boy had not lost everything.

“I am... fine,” Hanor replied, uncertain how to react. “What is your name?”

No doubt in shock after the loss of his brother, the question still startled the Dai-laman. “My name is Brandor,” he said, judging whether the Yarmi Folk would release him without a clear-cut recognition.

Confused, Hanor recalled what he knew. “I see us... by a large window... looking up at patchy clouds and a moonlit sky.”

Much relieved, “Yes, that was at your home in Manson. I asked if you could see anything in the garden, do you remember?”

Rubbing his forehead, he had hoped the memories would just come rushing forth. Forcing the insights was difficult.

“Take your time Hanor. I asked you to look into the garden, at first you saw nothing, but then what?” Brandor was careful not to say too much, needing to convince the Yarmorians as much as Hanor.

Darkness seemed to fill Hanor’s mind. Starting to believe all was lost, a point of light formed, like a lantern on a distant hill. “A light,” he said, the light expanding into a white glowing orb. “It is a reflection of the moon on water.” Boosted by the memory, it fired hopes that the doorway to his past *was* with this person.

“You are correct,” Brandor said, relieved, extending his arm for him to come close.

Confident that anyone who could help him out of this mire should be welcomed, walking over, Hanor stopped just short of the old man. “Who... are you though?”

The whole ring seemed to hold its breath. “My dear Hanor, I am a friend of your parents, High-man Manon and High-lady Lizan of Manson.”

“My... parents!” Hanor wondered at this.

Vague memories skittered, too remote to be certain. Finding those he belonged to was a powerful incentive to go, but Hanor was waiting for something substantial before deciding. A picture of his father doused by a bucket of water from his mother filled his vision. Unable to locate a time or place, but it was enough to go on. “What do my parents look like?” he asked, seeking further clarification. Morn’s warning could not be ignored.

“Your Father is a slim, charming man, with narrow features and kind, dark eyes,” Brandor said. “Black, silvery shoulder length hair is matched by a neatly trimmed beard..., like so.” Using his own face to illustrate, examining his young charge for a reaction, Brandor continued. “Your Mother is a most eloquent lady, who enjoys playing games with her family. A proud Mother, deep brown eyes are matched only by her long dark hair. Your parents love green and blue, for much of your home is decorated by these

colours. They love each other and their two sons very much.” Testing Hanor by mentioning about a brother, the young man’s eyes did not latch onto the comment.

Comparing the descriptions to patchy recollections, some appeared true, but others were unprovable to Hanor. Enough to convince him, but the lack of feelings left him wanting. Sighing, what sort of life was this?

“What is it?” Brandor asked, worried by the boy’s reaction.

“Hanor!” Yarma Torna moved forward, protective of him. “You do not have to rush this.” Still troubled by the boy’s presence here in Yarmoria, especially with the rapid expansion of his consciousness, but to hand him over to Brandor was equally disturbing. Another way could be found. Doubting Hanor would accept their long term plans if he were to stay, it was up to him what he wanted to do.

Respecting Yarma Torna’s concerns, it was difficult for Hanor to think straight when so much was at stake. “These past few turns have been hard,” he began, sensitive. “You have shared your home, and I have not been deserving of it. Much of what you have said is beyond me, even though I am sure greater understanding would come with time.” Sounding like a farewell speech, had he made up his mind? “There is much wisdom and kindness here, but I am not like you, not just physically... but mentally. I am more of a heart person, and whilst I remain, I will not find out who I am. Brandor here, who I know is from my past, has proven himself to be trustworthy. To go, would be the best thing to do.” Glad there were no protests, Hanor finished off. “Is this acceptable to you?”

The unanimous verdict of the Clan was to let him leave. “You are a mystery to us, Hanor,” Torna said, respectful of his wishes. “We do not usually allow unanswered questions to pass, but we honour that which you desire. But be warned, people are not always as they seem on the outside, so look beneath the surface to find the true person. There is strength in you, but in your present condition, be on your guard. Your memory has been blighted, and your eagerness to find your past could lead you into dark places. Not all memories are welcome, but you have our blessing to leave.”

The kindness touched Hanor. “I will do my best to be cautious.”

“Your words are noble,” Brandor said, viewing them in a positive light rather than react to the underlying points concealed within the statement.

Tempted to say more to the Dai-laman, but Yarma Torna refrained, nodding curtly before turning. “Until another turn then.”

Following his lead, each member of the gathering headed back to their quarters, Coreema included. Passing Hanor as if he was just someone on the road, in that time their intimacy vanished. No longer of any importance, leaving her free again to search out her ambitions, Hanor felt relieved, no longer desiring the unattainable.

Before the Yarmi Folk had even left the clearing, the scene shimmered and changed. Standing amongst huge trees where Brandor first entered, the door to Yarmoria was effectively sealed.

Tunder stood nearby, not noticing the return of its Master at first. Jolting when it did, it came over, snorting. Intense as the whole experience was, Brandor was pleased to be back with the now semi-naked Hanor beside him. “It looks like they have taken everything that was theirs,” he chuckled, his young apprentice covering himself.

Still bedazzled by the suddenness of it, Hanor's clothes were nearby. "This is so strange." Even though his past was obscure, now he was away from Yarmoria, Hanor felt more alive, even though cold. Shivering, he scampered over to his clothes to dress.

"Tunder can manage the two of us, so we will talk as we ride," Brandor said, checking his mount whilst his young companion got ready. "Are you hungry?"

"A little bit, food was not really a concern there," he said. When done, he looked closer at the old man, one last doubt needing to be nullified. "Have I made... the right decision?"

Taken aback, taking for granted that the boy knew him, Brandor's answer was sincere. "Yes my young friend. You have made an old man very happy."

Lifting Hanor, "I am glad," he said, believing him.

"Eat this." Brandor offered him half a diva stick and then climbed into the saddle. "It is strong, so eat slowly. It should suffice until we reach Tarden."

Receiving the thin white chewy biscuit, "Thank you," Hanor said, taking a bite.

"Climb up here behind me," the Dai-laman prompted, directing the boy to sit on his rolled up sleeping mat in front of his travelling bags. "And hold me around the waist."

When seated, with a quick lurch, Tunder rose.

"I have many questions," Hanor said, trying to take stock of the new circumstances.

"I too, have just as many," Brandor echoed, setting off. Considering how to deal with the Nole issue, the boy seemed oblivious to the event. Weird as to why, the Dai-laman let it be, permitting Hanor to lead the questioning.

Staring over the leaved balcony, Bane twitched where he sat, agitated. Awaiting the arrival of Hanor, he felt nervous in case the man called Brandor could not find his best friend. Using the sun as a timepiece, the idea of repeating this vigil for the next few turns was unbearable. Keeping a close eye for movements below, the comings and goings of Tarden had not included the Dai-laman or his lifelong companion. Kifter, Hallen and the one called Tarmon had visited him periodically, but he was in no mood to explore other parts of this enchanted city. With the sun setting a short time ago, stars were already taking up their nightly positions. He was tired even though he had not done anything exertive. "Come on Hanor, I know you are out there," he muttered. Fighting to keep his eyes open, recent travels now demanded a reprieve. Tempted to go to his room, but guilt warned him of his disloyalty if he did. Resting his head, he closed his eyes for a short rest. He did not wake up.

"How are you coping?" Brandor asked, stopping outside a narrow entrance on the third floor at Tarden. Passing through the *Fire of the Forest* earlier, the last thing he needed was to unsettle Hanor further.

"I am fine," Hanor said, mesmerised by the dynamics of this treed city. Wide-eyed from the moment he first set eyes on it, the pains suffered by the fiery energies protecting this wonderful place were soon forgotten. Happening so quickly, Hanor could not believe how little he was in control of his life anymore.

"It is best for you to rest before you meet the others," Brandor said, indicating the doorway. "In the morning, we will see how the others are. I will send word, but it would be unwise to greet them now." Sensitive to Bane especially, the Dai-laman had spent most of the turn figuring out how to deal with the situation. Answering Hanor's questions in between, the boy was a long way from his former self and needed protecting. Raising

the prickly question as to whether the young man would be useful anymore, in his present condition, he doubted it. "Friends of mine live here," he said, indicating the short corridor in front, convinced Hanor was stable enough to leave. "You will be in good hands."

Rapidly changing circumstances were difficult to get used to. Entering the corridor, Hanor looked back at the figure of power. "There are still things I want to ask," he said, becoming quite dependant on the old man. It was like starting again.

"Tomorrow, more answers will be given, but for now, I have other pressing engagements." Compassionate towards the poor lad, "Rest Hanor..., you will need all your strength over the coming turns."

Obeying, Hanor headed left along the leaved corridor. Disappointed when checking for a final time behind, Brandor had already gone. Following the short corridor, flowered designs were pretty, turning right at the end.

"We are pleased to meet you," a friendly voice said, when Hanor entered the chamber.

Standing in the middle of a large room, a male and female waited for him to respond. Unnerved by the sudden attention, "I am... Hanor," he stuttered, uncomfortable.

Taking in what he could, the room was also lined with flowers weaved into scenes upon the leafy walls just like everywhere else in this splendid city. A number of cushioned chairs growing out of the floor surrounded a low, wide table, the centrepiece of the room. Homely, but there were no windows, just another doorway at the far end leading to other rooms. Similar to Coreema's Stay in many ways, but it seemed more familiar, designed in a way that felt natural.

"Come in Hanor, I am Ruseem and this is Micarn," said the female Tardanian. "Let me take this from you," she said, moving to take his overcoat.

Getting used to meeting new people, even though a sense of belonging was missing, he allowed her to take it. "I have been on a long ride," he said, feeling grubby.

"We know the trauma people suffer when entering Tarden," Ruseem said. "Not all of us agree with it, but the Masters do have a huge responsibility to protect us. Now you are in, we will do all we can to make your stay restful."

"You need a soak," Micarn said, already making preparations for it.

"Soak...?" Hanor was confused.

"Come..., I will show you."

Leading the way, Hanor followed him through the other doorway. Entering one of three openings inside, a large water-filled tub chiselled out of a huge tree stump was in the middle of the room. Its inner surfaces were coated by the same golden hue as the tunnel when first arriving. Lighting up the hot water, it looked strange but oozed appeal.

"It will help reinvigorate you, Hanor."

"Thank you."

"If you require anything, just call." Micarn said, leaving him to it.

Beside the tub, a short bench had a soft creamy towel draped over it along with a bowl containing a deep blue oily substance. Up above, high walls climbed beyond wide-panelled leafy branches. Set at differing heights to break up the narrowness of the room, they permitted moist air to escape.

Tiredness set in, respecting Brandor's wisdom to bring him here rather than visiting his friends. Not in a prime state for such a reunion, he stripped off, uncaring if someone were to enter. Dipping a hand into the steaming water, it was just what he needed.

Basking like nothing else mattered, the heat assuaging his worn body, he poured in the ointment from the blue bowl. Fascinating, it swirled as though alive, washing over him like a slithery hand massaging every aching muscle. Drifting into bleary slumber, roving colours of distant lands swept in. Unsure if he was asleep or not, his perception widened, him being a tiny creature inside the body of a mountainous *Being*. Untroubled by the concept, tiny bells and soft music now chimed everywhere, sweet voices singing. Thoughts about his friends dissolved, content to stay there forever.

Chapter 21: The Deba Chamber

Gazing through the large opening at the emerging stars outside, Brandor considered the wondrous idea hovering before him. Seated on the floor of one of Tarden's many internal gardens, coming here to rest prior to tackling the Drola and Polon issue again, he had not expected the seed-thought to materialise into what it had. Turning the idea over, inspecting its possibilities, the concept was way beyond anything imagined before. Piecing the details together, an astonishing picture began to emerge. The more he examined the revelation, the greater was the sense of wonder. Composing himself, he had to be right about this.

"I expected this sooner or later," Hallen said to Kifter, both observing a sleeping Bane on the half-empty balcony.

"He has been under enormous pressure of late," the Fife said.

Now dark, only a few golden globes on the leafy walls illuminated the tender scene.

"We cannot leave him here," the Hite said, sympathetic. "Shall we wake him, and tell him of Hanor's arrival?"

"And have him turn Tarden upside down looking for our resting young friend," Kifter said, disapproving. "Such good news can wait until tomorrow. He needs respite just like Hanor does."

Lifting Bane, Hallen carried the young man from the balcony. The boy had serious decisions to make, just like the rest of them.

Making his way through the labyrinth of branched corridors, Brandor reached the central stairwell and proceeded up to the top level. Confident the revelation was genuine, the potential of what had been revealed was astonishing.

Bearing right at the top, heading for the Deba Chamber, the very heart of the city, it was where the Masters lived and worked. Fewer Tardanians moved on this level, mostly those attuned to the *Finer Arts* and others granted power to govern resided here. Passing the enormous trunk of a tree, its vast width reminded him of how much power was concentrated here. A Master would be inside directing energies towards the outer force field protecting Tarden, and it was those energies that he would need to make his plan work.

Expecting Drola to reject the idea, disbelieving how unreasonable the High-tard had become of late, his abhorrence of Polon of Tardoc had soared beyond reasonability. Maloree, his Yarmorian beloved had admitted how protective he was over her. Apologising for actuating the event whereby the two had challenged each other to win her hand, with hindsight, another way should have been found. Growing close to both when visiting from Yarmorica over twenty full seasons ago, she had seen the challenge as a way out of having to choose one over the other. Wanting to make her home here in The Freelands, the two friends had foolishly agreed to the contest. Pitting their wits against each other, it was during the final parts that Drola had won due to a technicality. The trial had been set, but Polon had misunderstood. Finishing the physical trials first, but he had not asked her to unite with him. Too busy celebrating, when Drola completed his round, he realised his friend had not yet asked for her hand. Polon had believed she meant to give the red milly flower to the winner in a ceremony announcing her commitment, so

Drola had seized his chance. Taking the flower, he had asked for her hand and therefore sealed the victory.

The grief caused by the incident drove a wedge between the two, evolving into bitter enemies. Over the many seasons, Drola had become disturbed by the outcome. He had won, but not in a convincing way. Even today, it caused much debate about the fairness of it. Maloree had reasoned afterwards that the challenge had been set, and Polon had failed to complete it. Glimpsing for the first time her strength of character, she had stood by that decision. Loving them both, but if she had backed down, Drola would have insisted that he finished the challenge correctly and was the only true victor.

Juggling the details, it seemed reasonable, observing her regret enough times. Accusations of wrongdoing amongst some Tardanians here were harsh. Nevertheless, the fact the incident was still haunting the two leaders was the real problem.

“Brandor...!” a call came from behind, pulling him from his musings. Halting, he turned. “Caldon!”

The Master of Tarden’s Forces drew near, anxious. “I have to see Hosan about the Masters’ position. I need to be sure where their loyalties lie.”

‘*So much indecision,*’ Brandor thought. “Any advancements on Drola?”

“Not yet.”

“Is there anything to suggest foul play?” Brandor asked, maintaining his own view that Maloree was doing her utmost to calm the situation rather than add fire to it.

“Not that I know of.”

“Your hands are tied until this mess is sorted out, Caldor.”

Some had called for Caldor to override Drola’s reluctance to send a force to cover the northern areas of Tardania, but strong loyalties prevented him from undermining his friend and High-tard. A fair Tardanian, one who looked at the evidence rather than listen to suspicious rumours, his word was his bond. The graven argument was that Drola was being manipulated or had an illness of the mind. Even so, delays here could be costly.

“Drola has nothing but Tarden’s interests at heart,” The Master of the Forces decreed. “I am convinced there is more he has not told us, but what can we do if he is unwilling to state it?”

“He may have Tarden’s interests at heart, but that does not mean his decisions are the best way forward.”

“I know.”

“You are closer to him than most, what has happened to him?”

“This has chewed away at him for a long time,” Caldor said, deciding Brandor had a right to know. “I have seen a gradual change in him where Maloree is concerned. You know how well he deals with everyday issues, so in touch with the hopes and dreams of our people. Look at the new *Ring of Power* protecting Tarden, was that not his idea? His heart and love is with his people but... mention the subject of Polon, the walls come up and he becomes defensive.”

“I have spoken to Polon, and he is prepared to unite with Tarden to cover the northern borders, but appreciates the betrayal long ago is still eating away at Drola. He is saddened but disowns it. Justice is the word he uses, not bitterly, he just accepts that unseen laws *do* influence life.” Staring at the stocky Tardanian, thoughtful, Brandor continued. “A

decision will have to be made soon Caldon, the numbers released to cover the northern sectors are far from adequate.”

“It is like sending those who have gone to their deaths,” he agreed.

“The *Fire of the Forest* has its benefits, but the people of Tarden cannot stay holed up here whilst the rest of The Freelands burn. The *Dark One’s* attentions will turn here eventually with all *his* might once the rest is taken. It is easier for *him* to pick each race off one at a time; you know the tactics of warfare Caldon.”

“I do, Brandor, and a decision will be made soon.”

Mulling over its implications whilst heading for the Deba Chamber, Brandor growled, nothing was ever straightforward with the Tardanians. Strong willed and defiant of any outside intrusion, just to be involved meant he was in an honoured position. Careful not to overstep the mark, he could only hope Caldon would be strong enough to do the right thing.

Cutting through an internal garden with its deep reds and purples, such places were just as important to the Masters here as any Reading Chamber or Meeting Room. Due to the intensity of their work, respite was an integral part of the process. Aligned to the vibrations of the city, some amalgamating when carrying out their duties, those absorbed minds needed to recuperate when released from their work. Common to see individuals meandering along, rewinding their expanded minds so they could manage normal lives here at Tarden, grounding themselves was often a lengthy process. Their service to the city was now even more demanding with the creation of the *Fire of the Forest*.

Passing a room with a handful of young apprentices inside, Woole, one of the younger Masters, was busy teaching. A quick acknowledgement when the Dai-laman passed, Woole was one who might be persuaded. It was the older Masters he would have trouble convincing, some of whom were set in their ways, not too dissimilar to his own colleagues at the Sleep. Trusting this new directive would blow away the dust and cause a stir like never before, if he failed here there was no point going to Tardoc.

Arriving at the vast Deba Chamber, the very pinnacle of the One Tree of Tarden, its enormous girth filled his vision. Massive limbs above formed the rooftop of this living city. Since the *Nyshifters’* attack on the Sleep, he had learnt not to take things for granted, and this was one sight that never failed to move him.

As expected, the entrance was sealed, with nobody in the vicinity. The adjoining Discussion Chamber was empty too. Opting to enter the Deba Chamber instead of waiting for a significant number to gather outside, anticipation energised him, the power radiating from this place enthralling. Thrumming like the heartbeat of a living creature, for that was what the city was, he had to bring his inner world to a peaceful state before he could enter. They would not answer his call if he was not in tune with its vibration. Closing his eyes and emptying his mind, the peace increased as feelings of connectedness proved his readiness. Placing a hand on the wall of the tree, the energies in his heart started beating in line. Conscious of fifteen Masters within, the oneness felt invigorating.

Juddering before splitting, the tree wall opened, a deep red and gold slither of light jetting outwards. Casting the surrounding area in a warm glow, Brandor stepped inside, the immense vibrating powers universal. Penetrating every fibre of his being, he was blessed to be included in such a remarkable sharing experience. Strong desires to serve

was why he had been granted entry two full seasons ago. The *Entity* ensouling Tarden had impressed upon the Masters *its* desires to include Brandor, and he had been allowed in ever since.

Sitting on the floor in a large circle, fifteen focused Masters were committed to their tasks. Eyes closed, no sound apart from the *Tree's* vibrating life force resonated. No audible words were ever spoken here, it was a place of pure mind. Nothing could be hidden either, no deceit or undesirable motives could be veiled, the *Entity's* overriding presence ensuring unity, even when points of view differed.

Joining them, Brandor sank into a trancelike state, merging mentally with the rest. Aware of each other and the direction to which each person served, it was a completeness Brandor yearned for throughout The Freelands. Immersed, to think there was evil in the world seemed unimaginable here. Tapping into vital points of energy rising from the ground, the *Entity* shared those forces with the city and its Masters. Receiving in return from the Masters and Brandor certain human forces that enhanced *its* own experience and understanding, to be part of it was a true blessing.

In a waking trance, Brandor's subtle thoughts extended out, sharing with the others his intentions. Sharing his vision, deep feelings of impression, the very language of the *Tree*, told them of what he hoped. Waves of his desires were felt by all. Expressing the need for their unified powers to reach right across The Freelands like a mighty wall, his vision was to extend Tarden's powers to the Masters of Tardoc, and from there, to Manter. Mandurin, Grovan and Rovot were also to be linked to the yet to be built *Wall of Power*. Creating an invisible barrier similar to Tarden's *Fire of the Forest*, the details were as Brandor had received them. Merging minds meant no lower emotions were involved, no anger or negativity to hinder the process. Staying calm enabled the facts of its potential to be known.

Great Tardanian minds sitting alongside absorbed the whole vision, Brandor waiting as they considered the disclosure. Slow at first, within the settled conditions a steady flow of thoughts began filling the centre ground. Points of view questioning different aspects of the vision highlighted what an extraordinary idea it was. Recognising the amazing potential, only a few reasoned away its possibilities by the sheer scale of what he was proposing. Thoughts passed back and forth, all within the boundaries of peace, seeking a final decision on the matter.

Whilst they mentally discussed the issue, like a great guide and teacher from another world, the *Entity* tuned into the exchange. Observing the situation from a different conscious viewpoint, unable to see it in the same framework as the sixteen individuals sitting within *its* body, when the discussion had run its course, *its* presence filled the space between them, preparing to share *Its* own interpretation.

Within that concentrated circle, subtle sensations started beating rapidly and with purpose. Delicate and graceful, at first it was difficult to discern what the meaning was. Reacting to its tempo, the sensations felt wonderful. Pouring down with an unseen power, the sense of oneness spoke louder than any word ever could. Flowing, minute tingles of goodness stirred everyone's hearts, each person realising what it was. Uncomplicated, the

unconditional love chimed of the *Sacred*. Such fullness could only be experienced under certain conditions, and each member knew what those conditions were.

Agreement swept the group, each understanding the *Entity's* meaning. The abundance of joy resulted from just one thing, a willingness to serve unconditionally, and that meant to serve everyone. No one should be left out from the embrace of their service. The worried few who had concerns about overextending their resources across The Freelands agreed also. Some wiped a tear, whilst others were just thankful the *Sacred* were part of this conflict. Pleased, it was the conclusion Brandor had hoped for.

Standing steadfast on a mountaintop, the stormy wind thrashed against Brandor through the twilight. Heightened, his extraordinary perception scanned the entire scope of The Freelands. To the south, the great city of Manter flickered in the distance. Grovan was to the east, and to the west, Tardoc with its mighty towers, stood proud and defiant. Beneath him, Mandurin waited in shadow.

From the vastness above, a jet of white light shot down with incredible intensity, blasting through the city of Mandurin into the ground beneath. Pulsing with an otherworldly power, the column of white light hummed but did not move. Another beam followed, this time near Tardoc. Two others hit the ground with equal ferocity, one for Grovan and the other Manter. The forces were incredible. A fifth and final jet exploded at the centre of all four. Five columns of the brightest force stood proud upon the planes of The Freelands.

Unexpected, the outer four started moving around the central column. Increasing in speed, in a few heartbeats they were encircling so fast that only a wall of light remained. Perceiving the unbelievable forces, the ring began condensing, moving closer to the central column as if pulled by an invisible chord. The brilliance of its form intensified, the outer four bearing allegiance to that central power. Energies that gave life to The Freelands were converging. Symbolising the ending of an era, and a new Age dawning, the powers involved amplified. Drawing closing, at the moment of unity, the whole heavens lit up with amazing magnificence. Dazzling lights merged, the four rotating columns fusing, leaving just one beam of power at the centre of The Freelands.

From his lofted vantage point, the heat burnt Brandor's face. Heightened senses waited for an event to happen that was beyond his understanding. The Pillar of Light was a living force, an Entity of some unimaginable kind, too vast to comprehend. Invisible eyes from within the Pillar looked at him. Catching his breath, he was looking at something Sacred. Tempted to fall on his knees, a strong impression warned against it. Instead, a pulse of unconditional love swept across the planes, filling his whole body. Immersed in the sweetest peace, revealing the splendour of the vast Entity in front, he felt humbled, and not worthy to be in its presence.

Peering down and to the side, to his horror, the darkest of Shadows was creeping around the base of the great mountain he was standing on. Snatching away the peace, it kept moving, crawling along the ground towards the Pillar of Light. Contemptible, the Darkness was evil and full of hate. The Shadow wanted to engulf the Light, to consume it and be Master of all. Hideous, its distorted desires numbed his senses, crying out at its intentions.

Conscious again of the sacred Entity in front, in awe of its magnitude, it did not react to the new threat. Creeping nearer, the Shadow started spreading across The Freelands,

shutting out that illuminating Light. Shocked at the unfolding drama, the Entity within the Light refused to defend itself. About to be smothered by the Darkness if nothing was done, its loving attention remained fixed on Brandor, and still it waited.

“Do something,” he cried, imploring the Being to shine forth its power and dissipate the wretched Darkness. Stalling, insights cut deep. The Light was waiting, not for its own defence, but for him to help dispel that Darkness. Sickness whirled at the revelation. Dismayed, it was prepared to be covered if he was not willing to help, but how? The Universe had waited for this moment since life began on this planet, and now, he was just watching the Darkness steal away that glory.

To his right, across the planes amidst the vast regions of Tardania, a tiny Light caught his attention. So small and faint he could barely see it, what was the Light for? A shadow to the north was spinning as if trapped. Sensing the two were linked, “Please, what does this mean?” Time was running out. The only thing making ground was the Darkness. This cannot be the end surely?

Snapping awake, the vision imprinted on Brandor’s beleaguered mind, the pain of it was there, so too the hopelessness. Previously yearning for guidance, but not like this. “Help me understand!”

From the depths of his inner world, his plea was heard. Subtle impressions roused, similar to when inside the Deba Chamber. Vague at first, but the insights grew, hinting at what the dream meant. A narrow pathway emerged amongst the marauding perils of what he should do next. Relieved, but the burdens of responsibility were heavy. If he were to fail, that Shadow would succeed, and life in The Freelands would change forever.

Mid-morning on this bright turn of the day, Bane sat chewing a mouthful of quaner on the balcony, wondering what Hanor was doing. Informed by Hallen earlier about his best friend’s arrival the previous evening, at first, he had wanted to find him. But after taking stock of rampant emotions, doubts about how Hanor would react had halted that urge. Sitting here now was as frustrating as it was unnerving, thoughts of what would be said about Nole knotting his stomach. Not yet coming to terms with it himself, he gazed out across the trees, a few teardrops trickling in silent tribute to his lost friend. Things were going to be different now. Promising to avenge his death by committing to fight for The Freeland’s survival, doubts surfaced whether he could keep such a promise. Mood swings came and went like the wind, adding uncertainty.

Waking up the previous evening in bed fully clothed, he had not slept well after that. Lack of sleep was catching up on him. Not in the right mind to listen to Kifter, Hallen and Tarmon, who sat nearby talking about the *Nyshifter’s* appearance at Ags Ole, the Fife’s relief at Hanor’s arrival was noticeable by the periodic bouts of laughter. Trying to sympathise with him, but Bane could not help but question why they had crossed that bridge in the first place. Nole’s map had shown other crossings along the Rapone River, if only they had chosen one of them. Dismissing the idea, he knew where the notion would lead him, doing enough blaming of late to discover its destructiveness. If Kifter was to get his comeuppance, then Hanor was the one to do it. Not looking forward to meeting Brandor again, it was difficult not to blame him either. Supposing they would want to send him back to Manson, but he had come too far to turn back now.

Catching movement to their left, Brandor stood at the entrance of the Eating Hall with a shadowy figure just behind. Eating a slither of meat, the Dai-laman looked pleased with himself.

“I have cleared up your mess,” Brandor joked, stepping forward, leaving a lone individual standing in the doorway.

Shy and uncomfortable, expecting to see a distraught figure full of pain, but Hanor appeared more lost than he was hurt. Awaiting the fury, Kifter, Hallen and Bane were most surprised to see a timid looking friend rather than a vengeful one.

Aching for this moment for so long, Hanor felt vulnerable now that he was here. Any hopes for a flood of remembrance were short-lived, the lack of movement undermining the whole reunion. Three of the four faces looked familiar, but it was not enough. Disappointed, nothing chimed to free Hanor from the mental captivity. Concealing the dismay, this was supposed to be a time of celebration not gloom.

“Hanor,” Brandor said, motioning for him to come forward. Frustrated that no clear recognition from Hanor was obvious, it was disquieting to say the least. Convinced the turmoil would eventually surface, but for the moment, it probably suited the situation. Plans he had for their group could trigger those memories, but time would only tell. “Hanor, these are your friends. Kifter, Hallen and Bane.”

Uncertain expressions flickered across surprised faces, unsure what to make of it. Motionless, Brandor’s words rebounded around the group, implying Hanor could not remember them. Unsure where to look, what had happened to him?

“Hanor here has been amongst... friends, one might call them,” Brandor continued, breaking the awkward silence. Disregarding the strange reception he himself had received from the Yarmi Folk, at least they had looked after the boy.

“It is good to see you,” Kifter said, standing, improvising under the strain.

Unable to place this Kifter person, disheartened, Hanor concurred.

“And I am glad to see you are well too,” Hallen added, staying seated, choosing not to overawe the lad with his size. This was most bizarre.

Searching again for a deep-seated connection, by now, Hanor did not expect anything to happen, and nothing did. Looking at the third person on the table, a young man of his own age, of the three, he supposed he should know him most of all. A tinge of sorrow was there just beneath the surface, sadness that had its own sorry story to tell. Short, dark curly hair with a strong jaw line was vaguely recognisable, but nothing Hanor could place. A timid smile was the only apology he could make.

“I am Tarmon of Tarden,” the final figure said. “We have not met before, but I have heard some great tales about you.”

Unsure why, Hanor was able to respond. “I am pleased to meet you, Tarmon,” he said, still sensitive of the other three. “I am sorry but... my memory is lacking.”

“Do not worry, time is a great healer. You will remember in your own time.”

“I hope so,” he said, gaining a degree of confidence. “I suppose, if anyone is to help me remember... it would be you who know me.”

Dreading what those memories would bring, it was Hallen who changed the subject. “Where have you been?”

Motioning for Hanor to answer when the young man sought his approval, Brandor allowed the events to unfold naturally, trusting his memories would return when ready.

“I have been to... Yarmoria.”

“As we thought,” Hallen said, indicating Kifter, the Fife struggling with this.

Tarmon could hardly contain himself. “You will have the whole of Tarden at your feet desiring to know what you saw, Hanor. Many speculate, but only descriptions from our High-lady speak of its apparent beauty and tranquillity.”

“Well... yes, she is right. It is a lovely place.”

“There is much intrigue concerning the Yarmi Folk, what was it like?”

“They are... friendly and... thoughtful,” Hanor said. This seemed strange. “They are interesting people, and clever, too clever for me.”

“They looked after you then?” Kifter asked, cautious about getting too friendly. Acting as though everything was fine seemed wrong, pretence clanging these proceedings. Bane appeared tense, finding it just as difficult. This calm was but a prelude to the storm to come he was quite sure.

“Yes, they did.”

“Why did you leave?” Bane’s question was blunt, holding nothing back, too upset to stay quiet.

Alerting the others, Brandor stayed quiet, observing Bane’s turmoil since first arriving. Unsurprised by this reaction, the lad was not about to tolerate niceties, which could prove fruitful.

Frowning, Hanor looked at Bane, his upset plain. Recalling what had happened, taken back through his memories by Coreema, he could now see how much worry he had caused. “A light,” he said, needing to be open if he was to regain his memory.

“A... light?” Bane said, sitting forward. “What do you mean... a light?”

Quiet as the setting was, as if the whole city was listening, Hanor felt awkward. “I woke and saw a strange ball of light. I could not help myself, so I followed it.”

“Even after the shock of what happened at the bridge?”

“Bane... I do not think...” Kifter started but was stopped.

“No..., Kifter!” Brandor silenced the Fife, permitting this to happen.

“Well...?” Bane repeated, unconcerned by what anyone else thought. Hanor’s discomfort was irrelevant, needing answers to quieten the storm within. The false interchanges of this gathering had triggered a surge of betrayal, upturning his stomach. To know and see Hanor was safe was one thing, now accountability needed apportioning. Old angers rising, the blame too, it did not matter, he could not continue without answers.

“I... I do... not,” Hanor stuttered. “When I look back, it seems... not real I suppose, dreamlike even.”

“A dream?” Bane said, his tone sharp. “And what about the bridge?”

Aghast, Hallen and Kifter could not believe this was happening.

“I do not follow,” Hanor said, bemused. “What about the bridge?”

Shocking, for Hanor to forget about that horrific incident was appalling. “Can you not remember what happened at Boverns Crossing?”

“Boverns Crossing...?” Coreema and Morn had mentioned the name, but trying to think beyond that camp was futile.

“You do not even...!” Spluttering, Bane’s chest tightened, nauseating his mind. Was this the sickest joke? “Does Nole... not mean anything to you?” Tears lined heated cheeks.

Traumatic, Hanor felt Bane's suffering, longing for his own life to re-ignite. What was he talking about? Why was there just an empty space beyond the camp? Who did he mean... Nole? The name held no weight, just like the rest of this sorry life. "I... I... do not know... what you are talking about." Frustrated, the numbness covering Hanor's heart was the cause of the blankness.

Rising to his feet, Bane had to turn away, the hurt too strong. Staring out across the late morning setting, the sweeping trees below swayed in tune to his aching heart. Desperate to control wild emotions, to see his closest friend devoid of feeling burnt like a hot flame. This was not the Hanor he knew, that person would not be able to contain such grief. A twisted denial, his heart was about to burst.

"Nole was... your brother!" Cutting words to help shake Hanor from his ignorance, but the blank stare received when turning back revealed quite the opposite. "Your brother," Bane repeated, tears streaming. "At Boverns Crossing, your brother was..." he could not say the word. Fury consumed by a flood of grief stopped him. Distraught, if he did not sit he was going to fall. Determined to see this out, owing it to Nole, he owed it to Hanor as well. Failing them, he wanted Hanor to hate him, to blame him for letting them down. "Your brother was... killed! Does that not mean anything to you, Hanor? Is your heart now made of stone?"

Even though Hanor's imploring eyes ached for him to understand, that his memory loss was not his fault, Bane was having none of it. The fact there was no condemnation at his failings, this unforeseen reaction was too much. He could not stay here knowing he had not suffered the wrath of his friend, blaming him for encouraging his brother to come. How weak he was, how wretched.

Clambering over the seating, the others prepared themselves. Tears flowing, Bane left and ran, shaken and full of sorrow, along the balcony until out of sight. Questioning appeals from others meant nothing to him.

Surviving the dramatic twist of events, Brandor had watched the emotional reaction bombard Hanor, hoping the blistering truth would register and clear the air for his grieving to begin. But judging by the young man's gaunt look, it was not to be. Disturbed and bemused, the veil surrounding Hanor was thick indeed. Identifying discomfort, but where was the emotion?

Disquieting, the tight atmosphere kept everyone on edge, wary of upsetting the situation further. At least the pretence was no longer an issue, the distressed Bane finalising that. Without the dream that morning, Brandor would have considered abandoning this group. Nevertheless, they had been thrown a lifeline, which was sure to cause even more unrest.

"All of you should have a time of quiet, including you, Tarmon," Brandor ordered. "I will send for you later. Grant Bane time to calm down, and then one of you go after him. Hanor!" he said, peering down at the young fellow. "What would you like to do?" Still coming to terms with Bane's outburst, Hanor did not feel like doing anything. The potent words, full of passion and meaning, had bounced right off. Confused, he shrugged. "Would you like to sleep..., read... or go for a walk?" "A quiet time in one of those inner gardens will do," Hanor said, mulling over what had been disclosed. '*Brother... killed... at Boverns Crossing!*' But where were the memories?

“I will take you to a secluded one suitable for your needs,” Tarmon said, empathising with him. “If you are willing?”

Attached to Brandor more than he would like, in this fragile state, Hanor needed answers without the baggage of expectancy. This latest incident seemed to be part of an emerging pattern, one where he found himself increasingly under scrutiny. Confident he would not be pressured, he agreed.

Chapter 22: Sharing a Vision

“This is wonderful,” Hanor said, leaning on the leafy-branched railing. Checking its strength before giving it the burden of his weight, he felt weary, the mental trauma draining. Spectacular, the view across the treed landscape of Tardania gave him something different to reflect upon. On the fourth level of Tarden, this high up felt like being on top of the world. “I do not think I had a tree-home like this.”

“We are fortunate to live here,” Tarmon said. These peaceful gardens would help the young man deal with the strife. “Tarden tends to our needs, just like we look after it.”

Hanor rubbed his eyes, irritated by recent developments. “This is so... annoying,” he said, thinking about Bane’s outburst. “He said I had a brother! I kind of know what that means, but it does not have the impact I know it should. Nole was killed at the bridge, but I have no idea what bridge he is talking about. Where is the remorse?”

Further along the lengthy balcony, two people appeared, a male comforting a female. Deep down, Hanor recognised that he should be experiencing grief too.

“How should I be feeling, Tarmon? What has happened to me?” Urging the sorrow to flow, “My brother is dead! How can I grieve when I do not recall whom I am supposed to be mourning? Am I not letting Bane down, betraying him?”

Tarmon had never encountered anything like this before. Shock was at play, the reason too grim to reveal. “There is an old saying in Tarden,” he said during a lull in Hanor’s frustrations. “Darkness exists when no light is present. You are surrounded by darkness, Hanor, and what you lack is the light of understanding. Our healers would say you need to steady both your heart and mind. When quiet, flashes of insight can shine forth, and healing may result. I sympathise with you Hanor, but wishing the trauma of losing Nole upon yourself will not help.”

Wise words, but Bane’s blazing eyes burnt Hanor.

“The pain of your friend Bane is obvious,” Tarmon continued. “However, he feels betrayed because he sees only himself grieving for your brother. It is hard when nobody else can relate to your suffering. Do you not think there may be a reason behind your memory loss? Why are you so eager to experience the pain of it? Perhaps you have blocked out the experience to protect yourself from the horrors.”

“Do you know what happened, what horror took place?” Hanor asked, the prospect of triggering a memory enticing. Yarma Torna had warned of the dangers such passionate seeking could bring, but to know was surely better than this emptiness?

“Should I be the one to tell you, or should it come from one of your friends? Is that wisdom at work or impatience?”

“You do not know what this is like,” Hanor snipped a little too loud.

“This is a place of peace and rest,” Tarmon cautioned, the two Tards further along peering up at the boy’s outburst. “Shall we go somewhere else to finish this? I do not want to get into a debate; my concerns are only for your welfare. Your memory has lapsed, but sometimes Hanor, that can be a blessing until the time is right when you can handle it. Your brother has been lost to you, and that is not a small issue. I fear for you if you desire anything just to have your memory return.”

Resting his head in the cup of his hands, what was he to do? During Bane’s tirade, Hanor had searched for a connection, his friend demanding he remember. How can this be? Frustrations continued until Tarmon’s advice started filtering in. Through the distress,

the light of understanding did reveal his error. As enslaved as he was to this illness, the fight to recall his past was like another form of slavery, imprisoning himself inside that desire to know. It did make sense. Brandor had said he still needed his help, even with his memory gone. It would be far more profitable to concentrate on what good he could do rather than fumbling in the dark. It was sobering thought.

Respecting its possibilities, the burden seemed to ease, accepting the memory loss was maybe there for a reason. Thankful for the insight, "You are right," he said, feeling better for it. If Bane could not accept his illness, there was little he could do about it. "It will come in its own time," Tarmon assured him. "I have to believe that."

Alone in one of Tarden's numerous Reading Chambers on the top floor of the City, Brandor sat browsing through an old manuscript. Waiting for Hosan and Woole, both were Masters of the Arts, and good friends. Following a prompting to look, the book was based on energies and Principles that influenced life. Unsure where it would lead, his knowledge was limited in this area.

Marvelling at the union with the Masters earlier, and their unanimous agreement to his unifying plan, pressing ahead with the idea was nearly as astonishing as the concept itself. Condensing so much raw energy into a *Wall of Power*, was it possible? Could the Masters in each city across The Freelands unite to form such a barricade? It was why he was here, to discuss it in detail.

Stopping on a page containing an obscure picture with various lines adjoining a number of dots, the image triggered an idea. The small paragraph written in the old style underneath was faded but still legible. Running a finger along its length, the words seemed to jump off the page.

Ily ana moosum sol soona bos... tisa bes net bina lof.

When the smaller parts unite, a greater power and life is formed.

Sitting back, it took a moment to steady himself. Was this what the inner promptings were directing him to? By the gentle resonance of his heart, he knew it was. Rechecking, there was no mistaking it. Proof that his plan could work, but would it be enough to show Drola the importance of their proposal? The Masters would proceed whether the High-tard agreed or not, but receiving his blessing would save considerable friction. A written text from an ancient source would help convince Drola, especially as Tardanians never retained information that was not based on fact. Smiling, this was encouraging.

"What is that grin for?" Woole asked, entering the Reading Chamber along with Hosan. "Still enjoying the mind-meld from yester-turn?" Beaming, Brandor stood to greet them. "It is good to see you both," he said, clasping their hands.

"It appears I missed out on something special."

"I have shared with him what took place," Hosan said, pleased by the outcome.

Turning, Brandor picked up the book. "Look what else I have found," he said, handing the ancient book to them.

Hosan noted its condition. "It is one of the older ones from the Beela Period."

Both Tardanians looked at the drawing and read the words. Hosan picked up on what it meant, but Woole could not see the relevance.

"This is a core Principle that was taught in the old language," Hosan decreed to his colleague. "It relates to the Principle of Attraction that we now teach. The Principle of Attraction is one of the higher Principles governing life, and this, as Brandor sees so well, is what we would be trying to achieve."

"I see what you mean. Is it possible?"

"The plan is to have a group of Masters from each city join together in mental unity to form a chain, establishing a mental base for the energies to adhere to," Brandor explained. "If we see each group as a unit of energy, when they merge as one mind they will create the conditions for a greater power to emerge. This Principle should heighten the potency of the *Wall of Power*."

"A greater power than the sum total of its parts," Woole said, liking the idea.

"But it is more than just an increase of power," Hosan added. They had missed the important part.

"What do you mean?" Brandor asked.

"Read the words again."

The Dai-laman did. "*When the smaller parts unite, a greater power and life is formed.*" He still could not see the point.

"*A greater life is formed*, Brandor!" Woole repeated, confounded when grasping it.

Touching on new territory, illumination finally dawned on the Dai-laman. "It cannot be!"

"An extreme idea..., but quite possible," Woole said.

"Let us stay sensible about this," Hosan warned. "This is not the kind of language that will persuade Drola."

"To be sure I have understood," Brandor said, heart fluttering. "Are we suggesting this *Wall of Power* will be *ensouled* by an entity, just like we *ensoul* our bodies?"

"That is what it appears to be saying," Woole said, daring to believe it.

"Extraordinary!"

"Not only will we have an increase of power, but the *Wall* will have intelligence!"

Brandor started chuckling. "The idea about uniting the Cities has been churning away in the back of my mind for many turns of the seasons. Taking many forms, but I never dreamed it would turn into this."

"It is a Principle we teach when observing life around us," Woole said. "A tree is not just a trunk, with branches and leaves but much more, just like people are more than their limbs. Never could I have imagined what this new idea is proposing."

"How shall we deal with this?" Brandor asked. "The average person will find it difficult to understand."

"You mentioned the protective barrier was your motive?" Hosan said. "We will proceed as if that is our intention. Drola, and others like him, will understand the concept of a protective *Wall of Power* right across The Freelands. The fact this force will be energised by a higher life form is something we should keep to ourselves, and only reveal to those who can comprehend. If it is ensouled, what a boon that will be."

"It will," the other two agreed.

Snapping awake, Bane sat bolt upright from slouching against the bushy wall. Panicking, his bearings misty, it took a while to recognise his location. Falling asleep here after his outburst earlier, for how long, he did not know. Huddling in a corner, tired and lonely, the colourful garden tucked away at the far end of the balcony had been a safe haven for his grieving. Racing from exaggerated ideas, his head had started to hurt from the sobbing. He had only closed his eyes for a fleeting moment.

Peering around, the small sheltered spot hid him from anyone passing on the path just a few short steps away. Not in the mood for talking, he just wanted to be swallowed up, to find a cure for this nightmare. The unbelievable reunion with Hanor was still painful. Horrified how angry he had got, stirrings of guilt hissed at how sharp his attack had been. The fact his best friend had lost his memory was one scenario not anticipated. Still yearning to be blamed, the twisted idea was mad. Pleased in one sense that his friend did not have to go through what he had, but the pretence had seemed so wrong, hence the outburst. Condemning his friend for weaknesses that were not his to judge, Bane could not believe just how callous he had been. Hate had climbed within like an evil hand reaching up to claim his vulnerable mind.

Cupping head in hands, the hostilities were no longer there, just frustration at not knowing what was happening. Tear-lined cheeks were sore from the deluge. Vowing to stand by Hanor, doubts about whether he could keep such a promise had proven true. What could he do now that his wrath had passed?

“I am sorry, Hanor,” he whispered. A lone tear rolled down his cheek, wanting to hug his friend. Emerging through the gloom, ashamed, what would the others say? Such an abusive tirade would no doubt forge their views even more against him. Chiding himself, Kifter and Hallen had accepted his inclusion, but what about the old man, Brandor? A person of authority, he supposed the fellow had the power to send him home if he wished.

Picking a velvety-orange flower from the bush in front, its scent was pleasant. Inhaling had a soothing effect. Recalling what Hallen had said about the oily substance in the tunnel entrance when first arriving, not knowing why, he bit off a petal. Filmy, the texture was light and the taste sweet, surprising him.

From nowhere, he started chuckling, pitiful. Peering down at the remainder of the flower, what was he doing in a place like this eating an orange flower? Even though it had helped, he did not eat the rest, deliberating what he should do next. Deciding it was no good moping around here hiding away from the hard choices he had to make, all he wanted was to see a clear way forward. Tempted to promise that he was going to fight for The Freelands survival again, and be there for Hanor, but like eating the flower, it did not seem right. Loyalties were too easily ravaged by his unpredictable emotions.

Swallowing his pride, he stood and stretched. “How long have I been here?” he muttered; it felt like a whole turn going by the stiffness.

“It is past half-turn of the day,” an unexpected but familiar voice replied off to his left. Jumping, Bane’s defences shot up, searching the bushes separating him from the intruder. Being spied on riled him. “What are you doing here Kifter?” He could not see where the Fife was. “You are the last person I would expect to see here.”

“I considered allowing Hallen to come find you, but I guessed that would be taking the easy way out.” Standing, Kifter’s manner was respectful and contrite.

“How did you find me?”

“We Fifes are good at finding people, although, you did leave a trail of witnesses to your passing.”

“How long have you been there?”

“A short-turn,” Kifter admitted, stepping out from behind the bush, cautious. “I was tempted to leave you, but I felt it was necessary to talk without any interruptions.”

“Talk about what?” The idea seemed strange.

“The safe return of Hanor is what we both wanted,” Kifter said, rubbing his chin. “You may be surprised to know that I have grown quite fond of him too. Even though my reasons to be glad of his return differ from yours, if we can find some common ground on how to move forward, it should benefit both of us.”

Standing on the path facing each other, like two rivals seeking peace, Bane waited, expecting another upsurge of emotions to spoil this exchange. Keeping in mind that he wanted to stay with his friend above all, if he could get the Fife on his side, Kifter might be willing to defend his cause. In a place as enormous as Tarden, Hanor could be kept from him easily enough. It was still difficult to trust someone you had doubts about.

“So..., how *do* we move forward, and that includes Hanor?”

Kifter was unsurprised that the boy’s desire to stay with his friend had not changed. “It is not for me to decide what your part will be, but with the *Evil* growing every turn of the day, I do know that Brandor will not tolerate anyone who may jeopardise his plans. Your attitude will have to change if you want to remain a part of this group.”

Concluding that already, Bane listened to his elder for once, his future depending on it.

“I am saying this for your own benefit,” Kifter proceeded. “It is ironic I am doing so, considering how temperamental our relationship has been since meeting. But I do respect your loyalty to Hanor.”

Given a lifeline here, Bane felt humbled. “Thank you for putting yourself out like this, even though I am not deserving of it. I know... I have not been the best companion. I just get so... furious when things happen that are beyond my abilities to help.” Images of the bridge returned as painful as ever. “We were not expecting this. Nole, me or even Hanor would tell you. We were just three young men who used to have fun whenever we could. Evil did not exist to us. I have still not come to terms with the fact that it can take shape and be so cruel.”

“You are still in shock.”

“Perhaps shock is what made Hanor ill. Charging at that Freeloaver, and then the horrors of that *Nyshifter*, maybe the loss of Nole pushed him over the edge. Is Hanor up to what Brandor is expecting of him?” It was a slim hope.

“We cannot discount anything,” Kifter acknowledged. “But would you have Brandor send you both home? I see the attraction of going back to how it was, for that is what I think you mean, but do not be fooled into a false ray of hope. This *evil* will arrive there eventually. Yes..., Hanor may not be up to it, and Brandor may recognise that, but if there is a chance he is, he will give Hanor every opportunity to succeed.”

Bane sighed, the prospects of staying or going faced the same shadows of uncertainty. “If I am to stay with Hanor, it looks like I will have to control my temper.”

“Yes, you will.”

No one spoke, the disbelief stalling those gathered here in the large Leisure Room of the High-Chambers. The scale of what Brandor, Hosan and Woole were proposing was immense, even for the untrained minds amongst them. High-tard Drola, along with four members of the Upper Council of Tarden, sat trying to digest what had been disclosed. Frequent nods and shakes of the head revealed both wonder and doubt. Even Caldon, Master of Tarden's Forces, who had joined Brandor before they entered, was amazed.

"In simple terms," Fillern, a Council Member began. "Instead of just having a *Ring of Fire* around Tarden, you want to project those energies east, all the way to Rovot?"

"That is so," Hosan said, surprised Brandor had got his message across with the minimum of fuss.

"It is a powerful idea," Drola agreed, even though unconvinced.

Too early to celebrate, trying numerous times before, Brandor was not holding his breath.

"It is achievable," Woole said, enthused. "A *Wall* so powerful that no darkness could ever get through."

"We need more details," Drola said, a glint proving earlier consternations.

"Ask what you will," Hosan invited.

"This *Wall*, how will you generate the power to sustain *it*? Rovot is a long way from here."

Hosan took the book Brandor had found earlier and gave it to his High-tard with the relevant page open. Trying to keep it simple, a buzz charged the atmosphere. "There is a Universal Law stating that energy follows thought, and when an idea is supported by a focused intent, it can draw to itself the necessary powers it needs to sustain itself. Hence, we have all been amazed at the effectiveness of the *Fire of the Forest* surrounding Tarden. Initially, the work involved was intense, but it has since eased to a point where it energises itself. As long as our will is focused behind its purpose, it has a life of its own. So it will be on the larger scale."

Glancing up from the page, Drola was still unsure. "If your focus is on the new *Wall*, what will happen to the *Fire of the Forest* around Tarden?"

Hosan's tone stayed even. "There will be a short period with no *Fire*, but once the new *Wall* is in place, it will no longer be necessary."

Spawning a few uncomfortable murmurs, Drola was horrified at the prospect. "And how long will this period of vulnerability last?"

"It is difficult to say," Hosan admitted. Tempted to project figures that might persuade his audience, it was not the way of a Master.

"A turn of the day, five or more?"

"I will not speculate. The complexities involved will be incredible."

"The *Ring of Fire* took how long?" Brais, a Council Member, inquired.

"Once we understood the basic mental formulas, it took four turns of the day to create and then stabilise," Woole answered for his colleague.

"Four turns?" Anden, another Council Member said, anxious. "I like the sound of what you are proposing but... to be left unprotected for that long is dangerous."

"That is if it can be completed within four turns," Fillern noted.

"On such a large scale, will it take longer?" Furl posed.

Drola did not have to comment, the mood shifting.

“Much was learnt creating Tarden’s present defences,” Woole stated. “We will not make the same mistakes. Yes, the *Wall* will be larger, but Masters from other Cities will be working on it as well. We are not alone on this, many minds will contribute.”

“But if the northern *Hordes* were to charge, they could reach Tarden within those four turns could they not?” Fillern asked, doubts increasing.

“Hence the need for a unified force across our northern borders,” Woole countered.

“How large is the enemy across the Gap?” Fillern asked, turning to Caldon.

“Seven to eight thousand,” the Master of Tarden’s Forces explained. “But they stretch right across the Rangle Mountains, so we cannot be certain. What concerns us is the steady stream arriving every turn. There appears to be no urgency. Not all are Dortians either, many are misshapen. The thought of Tarden being attacked disgusts me.”

“It revolts me too,” Furl said, sensitive to Caldon. “But... Tarden is a mighty stronghold. It is unlikely the enemy will breach its defences. *The One Life* of the City will protect us.”

“You are mistaken, Furl,” Hosan warned. “Our home is a living entity that exists in a different way to what we do. Fighting our enemies will not register in its consciousness. It lives to serve, and will do no more than what it presently does.”

“Point taken,” Furl conceded.

“The options have turned a new corner,” High-tard Drola said. “What you propose is remarkable, and deserves further consideration.”

“This cannot be tossed back and forth as just an idea.” Hosan’s tone forewarned of action. “It needs to be implemented immediately.”

“You cannot expect us to decide now!” Drola said, his voice rising. “This is too important to be rushed.” Looking for support, Fillern and Furl agreed. “The *Fire of the Forest* is there to protect us, and is much more effective than sending larger numbers north. You have given an oath to serve this City, you cannot change it on a whim.”

“This is not a whim,” Hosan boomed, his words echoing around the Chamber. Drola sat back. “Revelation climbs far higher than any Tardanian voice; its meanings are far more extensive. Do not disgrace that which is holy!”

Up until now, Drola had got his own way to ensure his nightmare did not become a reality. Were not his dreams a form of revelation? Considering whether to reveal their content, the blood-filled trench running the entire length of the Northern Gap flowed before him like an abomination. In that river was the blood of countless Tardanians, how could he send them? Composing himself, he knew what was at stake here. If he did not agree, they would do it without his consent.

“You are asking us to take a huge risk,” he warned. “Are you Hosan, prepared to go to the *Realms of the Soul* content even if you are wrong?”

The old Master held his gaze. “You try to seed doubt in me, but they are reflections of your own fears. The *Sacred* are involved in this, but it is *we* who have to seize the initiative. I respect your concerns, for if we fail a great harm may befall our people. Even so, power has to be met with power, it is not enough to sit back and wait. Those gathering at our borders are but the start of what is to come. Sacred energies are being abused on a level never seen before. It is not enough to hope we have enough power. Ask yourself, how has the *Dark One* become so powerful? What doors have been opened to gain such might? Caldon has said they are massing without a care for what is to come. Does that not show how self-assured they are? This will not be a war based on fear and cowardice,

but on initiative and power. When understood, this will rouse every person to fight for freedom, for that is what is at stake.”

Questions seemed irrelevant after such a burning declaration from the Master Hosan. Strained, the silence felt thick and enclosing.

“We have explained our intentions,” Hosan said, calm this time. “It is a choice for all to make. We, the Masters, are part of this community, it is a matter of whether you trust our judgement. We will start the preliminaries of what needs to be done, and only if the whole City protests against us might we change direction. Drola, do what you will if you feel we have undermined your position. Talk to the people, and let them decide. But I warn you, this surpasses Tarden. If necessary, the Masters will leave to complete the work. We will not allow this opportunity to be lost.”

Shaken by the statement, Drola leaned forward. “Yes..., I will speak to the people,” he said, determined. “Your words hold weight, but you have not seen the river of blood that will flow across the Gap if more Tardanians are sent. I have seen it Hosan; it is deep and wide. Your aim is just, but that river haunts my every waking moment.” Despair pulled at him, but he carried on. “I have listened to arguments for this unity with Tardoc, but I am the dam that stops this river of death from running. If I agree, the river will flow, and my heart will bleed. Let the battle come to Tarden, and it will change everything.”

Appalled, those Tardanians present were shocked. Even Caldon caught his breath.

“Not all visions are from the *Sacred*, Drola,” Brandor said, now understanding why they had encountered so much resistance.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Woole intervened. “There are powers capable of planting fears into unsuspecting minds. Your vision generates fear not hope, and so is not from the *Sacred*. If this is what has been worrying you, then you should have said sooner. Much time has been wasted.”

“Are you telling me blood will not be spilt?” Drola challenged. “Thousands are coming, do you expect the trees to defend us instead then?”

“That is not what he meant,” Hosan interceded.

“If more go north, the river will flow,” Drola said, low and penetrating. “Even if you can handle that, you are free from condemning our people to such a fate. I know of Caldon’s position, and you may contest that I am ignoring his views, but tell me, if the river of blood flowed before his eyes, would he not see it differently? The carnage is inevitable, and I can smell the terror.” Wiping a tear, it was difficult to talk. Exhausted, he needed to see his beloved Maloree, she would tend to his breaking heart.

Touched by his pain, Hosan was sympathetic but sensible. “The river may run, nevertheless, permitting that river to flow here at Tarden would be a travesty. If you fight here, there will be nowhere for our families to turn.”

Unresponsive initially, Drola’s head was hurting. Lately, he would have flared up, but he was tired of arguing the same point. Standing, he looked around at those present. “I do not see much of a Tardanian people if there is no Tarden. Do we expect those we love to hide in the barrenness of the south with little chance of returning, or should they fight here to the death, even down to the youngest? I think the latter.”

Making his way across the ring of onlookers, he turned just behind Hosan. “This is my home, and this is the place I choose to die in whether we have a *Wall of Power* or not.” Grim and heavy, he left them to contest the issue amongst themselves.

Chapter 23: Impossible Expectations

Due to meet Hanor, Kifter and the others shortly, Brandor took a moment to recuperate, sitting on a tree stump in one of his favourite gardens on the highest level of Tarden. Dwelling on Drola's last statement, he doubted anyone would want to live anywhere but here, a powerful tool the High-tard could use to sway many. Too soon to say if Caldon would react as he should or if the voice of the people would declare their wishes about the new proposals before he got the chance to do anything, Drola, when at his best, was more than capable of drawing them to him. Satisfied that things were about to move at the very least, a wrong decision seemed better than no decision at all.

Light steps to his left interrupted his musings, surprised to see the slim figure of Maloree come around the dusty peach bush. Unexpected, he thanked the *Sacred* for this opportunity. "Maloree," he said, rising to greet the High-lady of Tarden. Dark keen eyes contained their own surprise. "Brandor! It is pleasing to see you." Robed in a deep red and silver gown, she was as radiant as she was intelligent.

"How is Drola?" he asked, not holding back.

"He is resting," she chimed. "You were a little hard on him today."

"I only want to help the people of Tarden and Tardoc, and the rest of The Freelands."

"But... you need to remember how emotional he can be," she said, picking a crimson leaf from the nearest bush, and taking a bite. "I have trouble resisting these," she smirked.

"Your cook-houses are my weakness."

Pausing as if considering a point, she looked straight at him. "Drola told me about your proposals. They are very ambitious."

"It is but the tip of a greater tree," he said, eager to know her thoughts.

"It will take considerable organising."

"Yes, it will."

"How much time do you think you will need?"

Quite capable of digesting the finer details of the plan, well informed about current events, he considered reaching Drola through her. "I have to travel to the other Cities first, but the Masters here are already working on a formula to merge the energies between Tarden and Tardoc. Primarily, I want to ensure all are willing to create the *Wall of Power*. My colleagues of the Hisian-Set will be involved, for there is much to do."

"If successful, how do you intend to actually defeat the *Dark One*?"

"After the *Wall* is built and stabilised, we will then look at our options."

"You are not certain of what it can do then?"

"It would be unwise to promise anything now. However, it will be substantial enough to make a difference."

"I look forward to its manifestation," she said, picking another leaf. "What energies do you expect to use in this *Wall of Power*?"

Deliberating whether to disclose details about the vast *entity* that could ensoul the energy field, whispers from those suspecting her of manipulating Drola were enough to stall him. Reactions received when in Yarmoria now supported that possibility. Needing to gain her support to persuade Drola, he shared enough to keep her interested. "The energies will be similar to those used in the *Fire of the Forest* surrounding Tarden. I suspect the intensity to be much greater though."

“That will be powerful,” Maloree said, picking up on his hesitancy. “I hope to see the other members of the Hisian-Set here in Tarden soon.”

“If I can persuade them to leave the Sleep, they will be.”

“We all need to be vigilant, and also willing to contribute any way we can.”

“I will pass on your comments when I next see them,” he joked, disbelieving how people could mistrust her. Tempted to mention about his frosty reception with her Yarmorian brethren, he stayed the idea, presuming she had enough to contend with. Returning to the present dilemma, “Do you think Drola was influenced by our meeting?” The Question was more of a vague hope than expectancy.

“He has mellowed,” she said. “But he has said nothing about changing his mind.”

“Do you see the importance of what we are trying to accomplish, and the need for the Northern Gap to be defended?”

“I do see the need,” she said, to his relief. “But... you have not been there when Drola has woken up screaming in the middle of the night.” Peering down at her hands, she seemed full of pain. “He says he can taste the blood.” A tear welled up.

Respectful, the Dai-laman preferred to avoid such sensitivities.

Composing herself, she continued. “It is hard to stay impartial with this in mind, watching the person you love torn. He knows what should be done, tactics trained for, but when frightened to go to sleep because of what you might see, we cannot imagine what he is going through.”

Timely, Brandor’s dream that morning halted any sentiments. The covering of that *Being of Light* by the Shadow still made him feel sick. As much as Drola was suffering, it seemed nothing by comparison. Sympathetic to her grief, it was clear she would not persuade Drola to do anything he did not wish to. “I pray these dreams will lift.”

Pleased to see everyone present, including Bane, Brandor headed for the large circular stone fireplace in the centre of the room. Waist high, with a domed ornate covering supported by six crafted poles of polished steel, odourless white Dorba rocks burned bright in the middle.

“Brandor! How does it fair?” Tarmon welcomed him, meaning Drola.

“There is movement,” was all the Dai-laman said on the matter. “How is everyone?”

“Rested,” Kifter said, rising to his feet.

“I hope you have not eaten too much,” Brandor said, to Hallen in particular.

“Only you could eat more than I,” the Hite joked.

“No room for that lately.”

“If you deny yourself pleasures of the body, then what is life worth living for?”

“When you are old, and look back on your seasons for what it was worth, at least you will remember the times when your stomach was full and your head empty.”

“I never like playing with you!”

At the end of the long arched seating, Brandor was surprised but encouraged to see Hanor sitting beside Bane, both boys staring at the fire. “How are you, Hanor?” the Dai-laman asked. Bane seemed fidgety as if embarrassed.

“I am fine,” Hanor said, getting to grips with Bane’s presence. Awkward, he could not tell if his friend was still angry at him.

“Good,” Brandor said, satisfied the situation was stable enough to proceed. “And you, Bane?”

Gulping, every word now weighed carefully, Bane dared to look up at the prominent figure. Forcing a grin, "I am... fine too," he managed, still reeling at Hanor's lack of a reaction to his entry. Unsure if his friend had forgiven him for the outburst, in the past, he would have insisted on clearing the air, for nothing was worth this division. Yet, in the presence of these others, whose ambitions were far more important than his, he felt inadequate and out of depth.

"We have an interesting collection of people here," the Dai-laman began, moving around the fire to look at them, appreciating its warmth. "I will get to the point of why I have gathered you all here, as I cannot delay for long. As you know, Darkness threatens The Freelands, and our way of life will be lost if nothing is done. There are forces at work that are as active as they are evil. Fortunately for us, there are some willing to counter its advancement." Ensuring everyone was paying attention, it was vital nothing was missed. "A new plan has been set, one that will demand my complete attention. The details are not for you to know at this time, for your path takes you in another direction." Turning to the Tardanian, "You Tarmon, will not like what I have to say."

Surprised by the statement, "Why?"

"I need this group to go somewhere, that for many here in Tardania, is a sensitive location. A great deal of history encompasses the place, but I need you to find an item of extreme value." Still looking at Tarmon, "You have to go to Tarkon's Tomb."

"Brandor!" Tarmon exclaimed, now understanding his concern. "You must be mistaken. Tarkon's Tomb is not for the fainthearted, not even for the *Dark One*."

"I know, but it is imperative that you go."

"I have heard about the Tomb," Kifter said, intrigued as much as alarmed. "What could be of any worth within the Valley of the Dead?"

"You must retrieve a *Stone* that was placed there a very long time ago."

"I have not heard of such a *Stone*." Tarmon still could not accept the plan.

"Because it is not recorded by your people. But a *Stone* there is."

"What value does this *Stone* have? Few have reached the valley's perimeter let alone entered. It is madness."

"The *Stone* is vital for the coming battle."

"I... I respect you Brandor but... you are asking the impossible," Tarmon said, pacing back and forth. "You would not waste time by sending us on wild errands, but this seems absurd. Please clarify more of this *Stone's* value."

"I will explain what I can, but then I have to leave."

Tarmon agreed. "I am sorry Brandor, I was not expecting this."

The Dai-laman began his narrative. "Your history books tell of a time when all of Tardania's peoples lived at Tardoc; Tarden had not even been envisaged." Tarmon already knew the details, but he continued for the benefit of the others. "During those times, the Tardanian people used to interact with men from the planes. There was an unwritten rule, that still persists today, that no Tardanian male or female should unite with a person from another race." The small group remained attentive. "During that period, there lived a young Tardanian male called Tarkon, of whom the Tomb I mentioned belongs. He was a courageous young fellow, who rose to a high position at Tardoc. Possessing an astute mind, countless natural abilities and courteous manner, he

became very popular. Proving himself during the conflict with the Dortian people, he fought like a mighty warrior, and became a living legend, a hero. Ending the conflict by convincing the Dortians that wars were only for the foolhardy, you can understand why this person was thought of so highly.”

“For a time, life was pleasant for the Tardanians, and Tardoc prospered. But then something happened that shook the foundations of that ancient society. A young lady from the planes came into Tarkon’s life, and turned it upside down. Delightful, and the daughter of a rich merchant from Manter, her name was Shoona. Tarkon fell in love with her. Causing uproar, their relationship threatened the beliefs and traditions of the Tardanian people, and still would if it were to happen today.” Concurring to Tarmon, not wishing to offend, the Tardanian had nothing to say. “Their love however, was pure. Ignoring the barriers of cultures and creeds, of unnecessary beliefs and demands, they refused to bow down to that system. Even today, discussions about it are common here at Tarden. The two would meet at night whilst the City slept, determined not to be apart.

In due course, the two lovers were seen slipping out of the City together undercover of darkness. Unbeknown to them, a group of Tardanians recorded their movements so they could charge Tarkon with what was considered unnatural behaviour. Fortunately, a friend heard about these insidious people conspiring to condemn them, and warned of the anger their relationship was causing.

Even with the growing dangers, both decided the risks were not enough to stay apart. In the darkness of her room, Tarkon gave Shoona a black stone as a token of his love, promising nothing would ever come between them, not even death. But when heading home after leaving her, a rabble of Tardanians confronted him, forcing him to flee. Pursued by the angry mob, some reports said hundreds chased him, baying for blood at the profanity of his behaviour. Convinced he was about to pollute their race, they wanted to stop him at any cost. Leaving Tardoc, torches held by those behind was said to be like a city on fire.

Across the Flat Planes surrounding Tardoc he rode, travelling up through the Five Passes of the Treman Mountains and down into the immense woodlands of Tardania. And still the many chased him as if nothing else mattered. Through the night the pursuit persisted. Without a torch for guidance, Tarkon’s pace was slower than those behind, enabling them to catch up. Expecting to be captured, quite by accident, the whole saga came to a tragic end. Just before dawn, his Kyboe stepped into a divot and lurched sharply. Checking behind, Tarkon was unable to counter the jolt. Hurling through the air, he hit a tree, the force of the impact breaking his neck. His precious life was blown out by a moment of ill luck.

Found in a heap at the base of the tree by the baying crowd, it is said a hush descended as if facing the dreadful results of their rage for the first time. Shame crossed over them, but it only lasted a short time. Anxious whispers turned to shouts of denial. That predawn place soon filled with cries of “*The Sacred had decreed this,*” and “*Their reactions had been justified.*”

Refusing to face up to their own wretched actions, the excuses were eventually embraced by most. Enough to placate those back at Tardoc, who were horrified to learn of the tragedy upon their return, some could see through the illusion and wanted justice. However, their concerns were outweighed by the sheer numbers involved. No one had

struck or killed him, stating that *higher forces* were at work, sealing the opinion of many. At least the situation was no longer an embarrassment.

Those who knew him well, took his crumpled frame and buried him in a cave. The Tomb, cut into the side of the valley, is the place I need you to go. Shoona, who later heard of what took place, was said to have died soon after from a broken heart. They buried her with him, along with the *Stone*, the symbol of their love. At a later date, others entered and removed her body, disgusted at her involvement in the undoing of a hero. Strange how bitter people can react, even when the person has died.”

Respectful, Brandor ended, a quiet tribute to the tragic tale. A tender moment, it was Kifter who eventually broke the sullen silence.

“And it is the *Stone* he gave Shoona that we are to retrieve?”

“It is,” the Dai-laman said.

Tarmon felt saddened. “I have never heard the Tale of Tarkon like that before,” he said, reverent. “There are questions I would like to ask.”

“Of course.”

“What is the significance of this *Stone*?” the Tard asked, still troubled by what Brandor was asking them to do.

“I know not what *its* ultimate purpose is,” Brandor admitted, peering across the white fumeless flames. “But I do know *it* is important.”

“I trust you, Brandor,” Tarmon said. “But... you ask an incredible thing. Tarkon's Tomb is haunted, and evil thrives there. I cannot see how we can retrieve this *Stone*, even if there were a thousand of us. We used to send our young there to experience the reality of fear. I was one of them, so I know what you propose cannot be done.” Harsh memories were vivid, a chill shivering through him.

Contentious as Brandor's plan was, there were other details about the Tomb that the peoples of Tardania were unaware of. Long ago, members of the Hisian-Set, himself included, had constructed an energy field designed to attract those very *Souls* who had contributed to Tarkon's death. Stranded in the *Netherworlds*, the Hisian-Set's intentions had been to help the darkened *Souls* realise what they had done, and therefore free *them* from *their* self-induced imprisonment. It had succeeded to a degree, but not entirely. A significant number had not seen the location as a direct connection to *their* original crime. Feeding on the surrounding life forces to sustain *their* insatiable appetite for this physical world instead, anyone who ventures in now suffers the haunting attacks. A sorry story that still generates controversy within the Hisian-Set, but his vision that morning proved it was where they had to go.

“You said you have other things to deal with,” Kifter prompted. “Does that mean you will not be accompanying us?”

“I am afraid not.”

“That does not help the situation either,” Tarmon said, disapproving.

“You are more than capable of dealing with this,” the Dai-laman said, emphatic. “I would not ask if it were not possible.”

“If we were to retrieve this *Stone*, what should we do with *It*?” Hallen asked, sceptical.

“I will meet you at Tardoc, and we will decide how to proceed from there. The task I have to undertake is vital. No assurances can I give, as I have to travel far to ensure this new plan is implemented. If I am delayed, you should head for Manter.”

“Manter?”

“I only have outlines of what needs to be done. Time is against us, and decisions have to be made.”

“So what does this have to do with Hanor’s importance?” Kifter asked, puzzled by the original urgency surrounding the boy. Hanor felt awkward at the sudden attention.

Considering his point, Brandor made the most of the fire whilst he could. “Mysteries encase much of what we do. Hanor has shown himself to be a remarkable young man, even in his present state of mind. There is great potential in him that can still be used to do good. What I decreed before still stands, protect him well, and each other of course. We have Bane here too, who like the rest of you, will contribute in his own way. If his intentions are honourable then much can be achieved, if his temper holds that is.”

“Are others joining us?” Kifter asked. “A Master or two perhaps?”

“No..., those in this room are all we shall use,” Brandor said, to their disappointment. “I do not believe in large numbers, but prefer stealth. Too many people may attract attention. I know what you seek, but the Masters are occupied with the same project I am. Their work is my work. If there is a will to achieve, then a way can be found. The *Stone* will not be retrieved by large numbers. We have very capable people in this group, I am confident you will find a way.”

“Your confidence is gracious,” Tarmon said. “But it will not be enough.”

“All have to cross boundaries that we would prefer not to, such is the demand in these pressing times.”

“So when should we leave?” Kifter asked, daring to look ahead. A renewed confidence since Hanor’s return prompted the Fife to meet it head on. The journey to Tarden, he could now see, revealed arrogance towards his own abilities. Hallen’s words now rang true for their wisdom. Too much self-criticism did not allow for failures that occasionally unravelled inner motives. Worried about his reputation, he had become detached from the things he got involved in. He would approach this new challenge differently.

“I suggest you get a good night’s rest, and leave in the morning,” Brandor encouraged, keeping an eye on Tarmon. “I am nearly finished here, so be sure there is nothing more you want to ask.”

“I am glad you have invited Bane to join us,” Kifter said, meaning it. “We have not seen eye to eye, but his intentions are what matter.”

Surprised by the declaration, Bane acknowledge Kifter for the kind words, even though embarrassed.

“That is a good start,” Brandor said. With Kifter’s memories, its implications meant a great deal. Looking at the two boys, Bane would need to be there if Hanor’s memories were to return. “Hanor..., I have already explained the threats we face, are you willing to go on this quest?”

Trying to discern how he felt and what he should do, there was no clear way forward for Hanor. Even when Kifter had mentioned about his importance, he had waited for an impact, but no emotional connection had occurred. After talking with Tarmon, at least his past was no longer an obsession. Hoping to strike a friendship with Bane and the others again, it was the only way. “I will go, if it is acceptable to the others.”

“Good,” Brandor approved. “Tarmon, you will have to follow your heart on this one. It is difficult because you know what to expect whilst the others do not. Sometimes ignorance can be beneficial. It will not be well if you approach this negatively, for fear obstructs the intuition, and can be contagious. If you are willing to go, approach it as if achievable rather than pointless. But you need to decide.”

Entering the Valley had helped Tarmon to appreciate what fear was, preparing him for the future, but something had touched deep within. Recalling all too clearly those deplorable *Souls* swooping in like wraiths, he still could not see how they could enter the Tomb. Some had tried in the past to reach the lower parts of the valley, and if lucky had managed to escape, albeit barely with their lives. Others however, never made it out. Kifter and Hallen’s loyalties were understandable, but his concerns were for the two boys. Preposterous for the four to go in their own, Tarmon smirked; Brandor knew he would not reject the offer.

“Yes...., I will go, even though doubtful.”

“That is most fortunate,” Brandor beamed. “Your experience and familiar face will be needed if this is to work. Without you, they will have trouble travelling through Tardania without being challenged. You also know where the Tomb is.”

“I had not considered that.”

“If you are willing Tarmon, I propose you take the reins of this group. As an accomplished leader that you are, I know Kifter will agree under the circumstances. This is your territory, and your experience will be central. I will repeat, Hanor’s welfare is still to be considered when facing difficulties.” Pleased at the outcome, this small band was but another tool to be used against their common foe. Praying the *Sacred* would guide them, Brandor had to trust they would find a way.

Chapter 24: Journey to the Valley of the Dead

“How are you coping?” Hanor dared to ask, not courageous enough to actually look at Bane.

Kifter, Tarmon and Hallen had left to carry out various tasks after their evening meal, leaving the two boys sitting on the balcony in strained silence. Waiting for the others to return, it gave them a chance to cross the divide separating them.

Stalling, what could Bane say to justify his outburst earlier? The last time he had spoken to his best friend was before the bridge and its subsequent horrors. Losing all sense of time and direction lately, he just wanted to blurt it out, to free them of the pent up anguish. But with Nole gone, he found it difficult to talk without referring to their lost brother and companion. Angry for coming on this trip, passions did not ignite.

“I am... managing,” Bane said, unwilling to look across at him. Difficult as the meal had been, the two just sitting as extras to the discussions between the other three, what were they to do?

“I... I need your help, Bane.”

Unexpected, Hanor’s plea caught Bane off guard. Looking up, large brown eyes of his friend proved the depth of his need. Reaching out and clasping his forearm, guilt about his reaction earlier returned to condemn the reunion. “I am... sorry for screaming at you.” “It is I who should apologise to you,” Hanor said, surprising Bane again.

“But you have not done anything. I am the one who has not been at your side like I should have been.”

Rejecting his point, “I have not acted properly since returning. My brother, your friend, is no longer here.” Pausing, it all seemed so hazy. “I know his death is important, but I cannot feel its impact. I have tried to feel the pain like you do but... there is just deadness inside. I should be happy at seeing you as well but there is nothing, not as it should be.”

Bane gripped his arm for reassurance. “I do not understand how or why either, but I reacted like a fool because I could not believe how calm you were. I wanted you to hate me for letting you both down.” A tear lined his cheek.

“We are both innocent,” Hanor said, supportive. Emotions were still lacking. “You should not blame yourself. I want to know what happened but... something inside warns me to wait. I have no recollection of the incident, so would it be right to ask you what happened... or foolish? I have accepted my illness, but this deadness makes life seem pointless.” Holding his gaze, the following question had to be asked. “Should I know the details now, Bane?”

Releasing his grip, Bane sat back, the need to express his grief easing. Such a simple question carried more weight than he could have possibly imagined. Memories of the shocking incident were clear, but could he relay the details without breaking down? Trusting eyes waited for a response, a cold temptation daring him to speak. Reading beneath the surface, Hanor’s desire to connect with the world gave Bane a glimpse of what he was suffering. Hanor could not *feel* life like he normally did. It was not just a lack of memory, his emotional state had been affected too. Doubting his friend would react even if he did share the horrific episode, but what if he was wrong? Such gory details would be like driving a blade into his heart. Shuddering, he could not do it. “No, Hanor. No..., it would not be a good idea.”

Sighing, the familiar pattern of wanting to know and then not jostled Hanor. Needing to believe his feelings would return in their own time, relief comforted him. "We should talk more over the coming turns. I need to know about our past, small details that make life worth living. They are what I am missing most of all."

"We need memories for a sense of belonging," Bane said, thoughtful, convinced he had made the right decision.

"Can we rebuild our relationship?"

"We must..., for Nole's sake as well as our own."

Their group, five in number, set out at dawn. The weather was favourable and the air fresh. Entering the forest across the plane, the crispness moved with them. Deep colours ushered them onto their grim destination. Rich yellows and reds, oranges and purples decorated thick shrubs and climbing stalks. Wildlife skittered about, so too Fliryns in the treetops, ignorant of evil at their door.

Darting between enormous Woodell trees, trusting their new leader to take them to the foreboding Tomb of Tarkon, the familiar smell of Kyboe sweat soon filled the air. Soft poundings on the spongy forest floor duelled with hot pants of rhythmic breaths.

Little was said during those first few short-turns, anticipating what was to follow. Bane and Hanor rode side by side, smiling frequently to keep the mood upbeat. Purpose motivated them on to fulfil Brandor's wishes. Tarmon said it would take a couple of turns to reach the Tomb, which meant lots of riding in between. He also recommended they savoured the peace whilst it lasted.

Passing through two picturesque glades, they stopped just past half-turn of the day at the third. Any breach in the tree line was welcomed, although grey clouds above were not. Resplendent colours of brush lost their shimmer at the prospect of rain. Sitting down on the grass, their kyboes chewing nearby, supplies packed by Tarmon were dry and bland, unlike the fresh delicacies enjoyed at Tarden.

Hallen and Bane started rummaging to the bottom of their bags for something else to eat. Tarmon was far from impressed. "We want food that is good for you and will last," he said, putting away his water skin. "No suti-sweets or cakes..." "Quiet Tarmon!" Kifter hushed, checking the other side of the glade. "Someone is coming!"

Before they could move, a rider broke through the trees, a male Tardanian who slowed upon seeing them.

Beckoning the individual forward, "He is a scout from the Northern Gap," Tarmon said, not recognising him.

Approaching, cautious, the young Tardanian was relieved when recognising one of his brethren. "Tarmon," he said, pulling up. "It is good to see a regular face after what I have seen of late."

"My friend, I cannot place you, forgive me."

"I am Finall, born of the Sen-pa line," he said, dismounting.

"Finall..., greetings to you."

"And I to you Tarmon, you are known throughout Tarden."

"What news do you have, for that is why you are heading this way at speed is it not?"

“It is grave news,” he said, disheartened. “Numbers from the Rangle Mountains keep increasing, especially to the east. I need to see Caldon, Master of the Forces. There are too few of us to last a turn once that horde moves.” Calming down, concerns getting the better of him, “I am sorry Tarmon, but the Dortians are not alone. There are creatures of terrible size and form.”

“I know,” Tarmon said, already aware of the descriptions. “How many are there?”

“A vague estimate..., over ten thousand.”

Tarmon’s dismay was clear. “You had better be on your way.”

Obedying his superior, Finall remounted. “I do not know where you are headed, for it is not my place to ask, but... I would not journey much further north. I cannot say when they will move, but I fear it will not be long.”

“Your guidance has been noted,” Tarmon said, standing to the side to let him pass.

“May we meet again in better times,” Finall said, urging his ride on.

Tarmon agreed, watching him disappear into the bush behind.

A gloomy atmosphere descended on the group from such a powerful warning. Danger lay just ahead!

“We will not stop until nightfall,” Tarmon ordered, mounting and setting off, the need for haste understandable.

Halfway through the after-turns, large drops of rain fell from the leafy rooftop to their displeasure. Sheltered from the full downpour, oil-lined over-coats kept out most of the damp but not all. Lifting hoods for protection, it secured the dullness for the rest of the turn, a quick reminder that life on the road was not always pleasant.

Encountering nobody else for the rest of the turn, no surprises to test their purpose arose either. A large group of Chios did cross their path, promising the enemy was not in the region just yet. Dusk beckoning, a small clump of looping trees had managed to grow amongst the larger Woodell ones, and was ideal to shelter in. Plenty of cover in case any straying Dortian invaders were to pass this night, they were fortunate to find it.

Ducking inside to check the layout, Kifter returned a moment later. “It will do,” he said with a grin, looking up at Hallen. “It is small, but dry, just how you like it.”

Leading their Kyboes through the gap, the enclosed area was rare for Tardania, with space in the middle for a small fire. Large, leafy crawling plants were welcomed, granting comfort when lying down as well as food for their mounts. Unpacking, bags stayed strapped to their mounts. Without much room, it was to be a crowded night.

Setting out his stacking stones, Kifter added some bunched powder to the neat pile of damp wood to get it going. Placing a fire-canopy over the top when alight, thin poles of smoke soon escaped through various vent holes, leaving the heat to radiate from its base. Simple but effective, the device gave the option of how much light was to be released. Not taking any chances, even at this early stage of their journey, Tarmon wanted it secured to its tightest position, wary of any undesirables heading this way. At its peak, metal bars unfolded when the six legs were pulled apart. Kifter set to work on a hot stew.

“Steady on the spices,” Tarmon advised, taking off his overcoat.

“Low on aroma, low on taste,” the Fife said, unpacking a large pouch of tasty herbs and spices. “I know a couple of recipes that will suffice over the next few turns.”

“Anything hot will do me,” Hallen said, stretching out his legs and arms. Cumbersome, the Hite’s huge frame seemed even larger in this enclosed space. His Kyboe was having difficulties getting comfortable too, disadvantaged by its size. “These limbs of mine need some medicine,” Hallen said, retrieving a long thin skin from his Kyboe. “Just a sip of Sasta to warm the spirits,” he said, taking a gulp.

“Not too much,” Kifter warned, aware of the drink’s addictive qualities. Declining the Hite’s offer, having spent many nights under its snare, this was not the time or place.

“Can I have a sip?” Bane asked, the damp and cold getting the better of him.

“Of course little Bane,” Hallen said, grinning. “It is strong, so be careful. The hairs on my throat have long been burnt away by its fiery bite.”

Taking the skin, Bane dared a sniff.

Rising to inspect the wooded area close by, leaving the others to unwind, Tarmon ignored Bane’s yelp, the resultant laughter behind frustrating. Conceding these folk were of a different breed, he granted them space for now, knowing the coming turns would be devoid of such cheer. Disciplined, as were all Tardanians, he could not afford to relax. When satisfied with the layout of the small wood, he returned to the others.

“You never fail my friend,” Hallen said, to Kifter’s pleasure, satisfied after eating the mix of roots and slithers of salted Mallen brought from Tarden.

Clearing away, the night had closed in whilst eating. Huddling around the smouldering fire for warmth, reds and golds flickered across thoughtful features. Taking care of personal duties before resting for the night, the cosy fire softened the atmosphere. It was Tarmon who spoke first.

“Tell us about your home, Bane,” he invited, startling the boy from his half-doze.

“I... err..., I am sorry, it seems... a long time since I was there,” Bane stammered, agitated. Resting on his elbow, he had to think hard just to remember. “Err... Manson is a... nice place. Not as grand as Tarden, but... simple.”

“Do many people live there?” The Tardanian asked.

“A few thousand,” he estimated, not comfortable with this attention.

“And what about the people, your friends and relatives?”

“They do not treat each other like yours do,” Bane explained, now alert. “Some are friendly, but others would not give you a moment of their time. I have not travelled far, so I do not have much to compare it with.”

“I have travelled much,” Tarmon continued, careful. “But I have not been to Manson.”

“It is a quaint place, but lively enough,” Kifter added but stopped, apologising when realising what Tarmon was trying to do.

“And what about the young ladies?” Tarmon asked, continuing after the Fife’s untimely interruption. “Are you in a relationship?”

“This is my kind of topic,” Hallen chuckled, protesting when Kifter kicked his foot.

Embarrassed, Bane scraped the ground with a stick. “No. Hanor was the one who attracted the girls. We used to play by the lake, Hanor, me and... Nole.” Determined not to stop, talking about it seemed to help. “There were girls who used to join us, to the disapproval of Hanor’s Father. But we did not care,” he said, far from proud. “We were not very disciplined, which has proven to be our downfall.”

“Discipline is good for you,” Tarmon said, agreeing with him. “We teach our young lessons to help them realise its importance. If taught at a tender age, they grow up not knowing the difference.”

“I have never been one for discipline,” Hallen said, matter-of-factly.

“And look how you turned out,” Kifter teased, unable to resist.

“Discipline brings control to a person’s life,” Tarmon explained. “Learning about integrity and respect; living life dominated by the lower desires can be very hard.”

“Hard but enjoyable,” the Hite interceded, chewing on a twig.

“That is a matter of debate of course,” Tarmon said. “But I am not about to dispute the wisdom of a large Hitorian.”

“Some discipline is good for you,” Bane acknowledged, interrupting their banter. “I can see that now.”

“What interests, apart from the girls, did you have?” The Tard continued.

“We used to... hunt, and have sleep outs like we are now,” Bane said, trying to recall circumstances worth mentioning.

“By Freemans Lake you mean?”

“Yes,” Bane said, looking at Hanor, hoping he would remember something. Grim, his friend’s gaze was blank even though attentive. “We mostly stayed at a local wood, hunting Rassers.”

“Rassers?”

Tempted to exaggerate to look impressive, Bane resisted. “They are small animals, harmless, and local to Manson.”

“I see. And what about your family?”

Bane’s personal life had been far from adequate. “I am an only child, and lived with my parents at Manson. I was a bit of a handful, so we were never close.”

“I am sorry for intruding.”

“No, it is fine, I know of others in similar circumstances. You learn to get on with life.”

“A wise reaction to difficult conditions,” the Tard praised. “How did you meet Hanor and Nole?” Getting round to the delicate issue, Tarmon supposed Hanor needed to hear it.

Bane was happy to answer.

“I was only seven full seasons old when we first met,” Bane began, thinking back to that precious time. “Hanor was six, and Nole five. My Mother used to work in the High-house for Hanor’s parents, which was great fun. One hot turn of the day, I was getting up to mischief as usual, running around the kitchens doing as I wanted. Under orders not to leave the kitchens, but that was too much of a temptation. I tried sneaking out whilst my Mother was not looking. When hearing a yell behind me, I ran along the corridor to get away. Unsure where I was, the person chasing was catching up, so I barged through a heavy door looking for somewhere to hide. Unbeknown to me, Hanor and Nole’s Father was introducing them to some important people from Manter. Not looking, I ran right into this large person, spilling red berry juice down his white tunic and trousers.” Enjoying the chuckles from his audience, Bane finished off. “I panicked, and snatched what I thought was a towel draped over Hanor’s Mother’s arm to wipe it. I only realised it was part of her dress when she stepped back.” Hearing laughter felt good, taking great delight when telling such stories to others. “What was I supposed to do?”

“I can see that youthfulness today,” Kifter smirked with a wink.

“No doubt it is one of many tales,” Tarmon said, checking Hanor for signs of recognition. The boy seemed to enjoy his friend’s recollections, but nothing more. Deciding not to press him now, “Perhaps tomorrow Hanor, something of your past may spring to mind that you can share with us?”

Wrapped up in a mental cocoon, Hanor only just heard his name, snapping him from his mood. Listening to Bane was great, but without any associations in his heart, it was like listening to a stranger. Resisting the rising gloom, he nodded. Tired, he left the others to talk amongst themselves, sleep the only real place he could find peace.

Washing down a hot brew when rising at dawn, the atmosphere of the group was high considering the unusual circumstances.

Playful, Hallen was full of himself as usual. “If you want to grow big and strong like me, you must remember to think big.”

“What do you mean?” Bane asked, loading his Kyboe.

“Do not settle for being just a small nobody trying to fit in where you can, be confident and determined. Accept only *large* portions of life, not just what you are given.”

“Like the large ladies you end up with,” Kifter teased, packing away his stacking stones.

“See, young Bane, our Kifter’s humour here might be termed small, not one to give pains in the stomach from too much laughing. Do not settle for mediocrity like he has.”

“You wound me,” the Fife toyed.

“Kifter..., I am trying to give important advice here,” Hallen said, winking at both Bane and Hanor. “By thinking big, you get used to minor itches.” Pulling Kifter’s hood over his head before poking him in the side, to the other’s irritation, the good-natured Hite returned to sharing his wisdom. “Remember, think big and life will give to you abundantly. This is what Hites are taught as youngsters, and look how big we become.”

Turning, he caught his face on a limp branch, feigning an attack. Beating the leaves with a couple of slaps, “See, not even trees can stand up to a mighty Hite,” he laughed, picking a few leaves from his long, fair hair.

“That is not the only time you have been beaten by a stick,” Kifter teased, finishing his own packing.

“Careful Fife, we have youngsters here. I knew it was there,” he said. “Honest!”

Easygoing and larger than life, Hallen’s playful nature helped the boys avoid too many worries for what could follow.

Rather annoyed by the Hite’s lapse ways, Tarmon led them out, concentrating on what had to be done. Checking the area before mounting, “We must ride hard today, so stay alert. I doubt the enemy will come, yet I cannot be certain.”

Increased tensions added fatigue as the turn progressed. A changing terrain added further worries, fewer colours blooming as they should. Pointing out its link to the yet to be seen Valley of the Dead, Tarmon’s discomfort was obvious. Less greenery climbed the trees or lined the forest floor, leaving larger patches of brown needle-seeds in their place. Similar to the southern regions of Tardania, the trees were more spacious here, with larger gaps between the mighty uprights. Foliage high above thinned, allowing more light to filter through. Even so, an eerie atmosphere developed.

Unruffled by the changing scenery, Tarmon searched for suspicious movements ahead. The threat from the north could arrive without warning. A gradual incline steered

them towards higher ground, lifting their expectations to what lay over the brow. Comparable to when approaching a glade, a thin band of light appeared through the trees. The Tardanian eased their pace.

Content they were near enough, Tarmon stopped. Pulling in alongside, the others waited, searching the area in front. Difficult to define where the last trees stopped, the incline obscured their view, keeping the valley out of sight.

Turning to face them, a grim countenance confirmed the Tard's concerns. "Up ahead, you can see a clear line to where life on the ground stops." A few scattered bushes went no further than a small ridge that ran right across their path. "That is because of what exists in the valley. We will camp over there tonight," he said, indicating the last sizeable clump of bushes just off to their right. "A word of warning for all. Just beyond that ridge, there is a gradual decline for about two hundred paces until you reach the edge of the basin and an end to the tree cover. After that, perhaps a hundred paces more, it starts sloping into the valley itself. It is possible to reach that edge before our fears get the better of us. It would be unwise to enter tonight, for darkness has a way of exaggerating our fears. We are quite safe here, for that ridge is the boundary to the *Souls'* presence. Cross that ridge and you invite *them* to come at you. We will make camp, and then I will answer questions when we have eaten. Hallen's light-hearted attitude should help our two young friends here. Think not that this is going to be easy. I mean not to add fears but you need to know what we will be up against tomorrow." Turning, he headed for the proposed site to make camp.

Chapter 25: A Brief Description

Mulling over the debacle, Brandor stood in Polon's main Meeting Chamber at Tardoc, awaiting the arrival of the High-tard. Weary after two nights and turns of the day on the road since leaving Tarden, it was just after sundown. Intending to stay the night to recharge, the next few turns were to be gruelling. Travelling nearly the entire breadth of The Freelands and back again, he would be pushing himself and Tunder he knew.

Familiar with this wood panelled chamber, diamond patterns on the polished floor and ceiling were as skilfully crafted as the wooden plinths and other shapely designs upon the walls. Smouldering ash-stone in the grand fireplace at the far end emitted heat and a comforting radiance to what was normally a function room on formal occasions.

Behind him, the swish of a door opening permitted the tall prominent frame of Polon to enter. Tired from the pressures of running a large city, a natural smile however, said otherwise.

"How is it with you, Brandor?" High-tard Polon asked, approaching the Dai-laman. Due to the love of singing, his voice was as smooth as his bronzed hairless head. Refined, a deep red-brown tunic with shoes to match were separated only by a pair of velvety black trousers.

"I am well, considering my lengthy travels of late," Brandor replied, grasping his forearm. They had a lot in common.

"Has he changed his mind?" Polon asked, getting straight to it. Standing alongside Brandor to warm his hands from the glowing embers, he was not expecting much.

Pursing his lips, "Drola has moved a few steps..., but not enough."

"He is trapped in his beliefs," Polon said, annoyed.

"I now know why," Brandor said, briefly describing Drola's dream about the river of blood and the effect it was having on his decision-making.

"I suffer from reoccurring dreams, which I must confess shake me in my bed," Polon admitted, staring into the fire. "The details can be quite horrific."

"I know," Brandor agreed, his own visions like another reality altogether. "Even so, your northern borders are vulnerable."

"You know my views, Brandor, my position has not changed."

"Fortunately, we do not have to dwell on the absurdness of the situation..., so I will proceed with the main reason why I am here."

Sharing the incredible details about his insights and the merging at Tarden with the Masters, he explained his plan and the involvement of the *Sacred*. Describing the *Wall of Power* stretching across The Freelands as a defence against the *Dark One*, he opted not to share the higher revelation about the *Wall* itself becoming an actual larger life form. As intelligent as Polon was, the details would be beyond his understanding.

"This is very impressive," the High-tard said, pacing away from the fire, contemplating its implications.

"The Masters here at Tardoc should receive an inner confirmation too," Brandor said, pleased with his initial response.

"You think it is possible then?" Polon said, satisfied when Brandor nodded. "A revelation you say?"

“It is what drives me away from other commitments.”

“I know not the depths of what this means but... if it were to succeed, life would change forever,” Polon said, returning to the fireplace. “Tarden’s *Ring of Fire* has caused much debate, but if the Masters at Tarden are willing to do this, then we must join that effort.”

“The Masters are in a difficult position,” Brandor said, defending their involvement in Tarden’s defences. “They seek to serve, and the *Ring* was constructed at a request of Drola for their people. Only by revelation will that line of service be severed.”

“You sound like our Masters,” the High-tard said, a wry smile crossing his slender features. “I have experienced that stubborn resolve not to carry out my requests because of some higher calling. Most annoying when one needs something doing.”

“We follow that which is within us, Polon. Our work has to be by way of the *Sacred* if it is to come to any good. *Their* vision far surpasses ours. The *Dark One* is testament to what happens when we follow our lower desires.”

“You clearly know what you are saying, but to someone like me, it is hard to imagine why you do it.”

“In some distant future, in another place and lifetime, you will come to know what we see and do.”

“I enjoy hunting to go the way you and the Masters have.”

“The hunting we do differs only in nature and prey.”

“I will have to take your word for it,” Polon said. “What do you propose to do now?”

“I must see your Masters, and then, I was hoping to rest here tonight before heading out in the morning.”

“My Second Aid, Sorsan will take care of you. Where are you heading tomorrow?”

“Mandurin.”

“Mandurin...!” Polon said, horrified. “If ever there was a place I would not wish to be, that is it. Whatever monstrosity oozes down from the north, surely Mandurin will be hit first. I fear for them truly, Brandor.”

“Hence the need to get this *Wall* up.”

“I will do all I can.”

Larger than most, the bush the group camped by was flowerless, leaves of a darker shade. Advocating there *was* an unnatural atmosphere suppressing its desire to bloom, something they could sense but not see, the whole area was a place of sorrow. Without the swift movements of wildlife about them, it was most eerie.

Eating the hot meaty brew with quaner and dried fruit, it was appetising, but not enough to settle anxious minds. Hallen’s Sasta was passed around, only Hanor and Tarmon declining the offer. Their Kyboes stayed close, feeding off the large bush, each mouthful accompanied by a tentative glance in the direction of the valley. Large, wary eyes suggested they could tell what Tarkons Tomb represented. Two at one end and three at the other, the valley was kept in view as if expecting an insidious monster to emerge. Even when finished eating, they sat nervous, awaiting the worst.

“Do you see?” Kifter said, indicating their behaviour. The others already had.

“What is it they are frightened of?” Hanor asked, unable to connect with the fear of what tomorrow would bring.

Finishing his last mouthful before answering, Tarmon spoke evenly, not wishing to create any additional worries. “They sense what is down there. It is a place of the dead, Hanor.”

“How long has it been like this?” Bane asked, uneasy.

“Some say just after Tarkon was buried, others suggest later,” Tarmon said, wiping his bowl clean.

“What is it that haunts this place?” Hallen’s question surprised the two boys, expecting him to be fearless.

“*Souls* that are lost,” Tarmon explained, traces of sorrow apparent. “A friend of mine had serious problems when visiting here as a youth. You cannot usually see anything, but you hear and feel *them*, picturing *them* in your mind. But he could see *them* as if *they* were physical. His account persuaded my brethren that the practice of bringing our young to this region to experience fear was no longer acceptable. There are some benefits to doing it, but we are talking about *Souls* here who were once just like you and me.”

“Sounds dreadful,” Hanor decreed, imagining how bad that must be, especially after his visit to Yarmoria where he had felt very much trapped.

“It is,” Tarmon could only agree.

“So what keeps *them* here?” Hanor enquired. Without his history, it was easy to get drawn towards anything new.

“People have different views as to why. Some say *they* are all the evil *Souls* from this world who are being punished for *their* selfishness. Yet others say *they* are lost and cannot find *their* way to the *Realms of the Soul*.”

“You said *they* could be heard and felt,” Hallen said, juggling with an idea. “Is this in every case? Does everyone experience the haunts?”

“Yes, they do. This is very different from a nightmare, for there is no waking up. The only way you can get away is to cross that ridge. Strange, but it just stops.”

“Has anyone reached the bottom of the valley?” The Hite asked. One for challenges, he could picture himself as the victor of such a mighty deed.

“No. Sometimes, young Tardanians run down into the valley to test their own courage. Warnings are given but some need to learn the hard way. They never fully recover after their bout of foolishness. It has been recorded that some have not come out of the valley.”

“How are we to achieve this then?” Kifter asked, unsure now they were here.

“I have been here before to know it cannot be done,” the Tard said, unashamed. “I promised Brandor I would stay constructive but... the last two turns have given me ample time to figure something out.” Shrugging, “I am no further forward than when Brandor first revealed his intentions for us.”

“It is odd that he has sent us considering the risks,” Bane said.

“Brandor was confident this could be done,” Kifter assured him. “Otherwise he would not have sent us.”

“Are you volunteering to go first then?” Hallen teased.

“If it is necessary that a Fife has to lead the way, then... yes, Hallen. And if successful, I will return to hold your hand and lead you down.”

“Your words have an edge,” the Hite grinned. “Be careful, you might cut yourself.”

“Not much chance of that happening,” Tarmon said, not believing it for a moment.

A long pause ensued, the night now closing in. Kifter kept adding small twigs to the fire to keep the flames alive, deep shadows appearing more menacing this night.

“Will you tell us a tale?” Bane broke the silence, asking the Fife.

“A good idea,” Kifter said, this place in need of some good cheer.

Chapter 26: Temptations of a Foolish Heart

Dawn approaching, Tarmon sat amongst slumbering companions, wondering what perils this turn of the day would bring. Only Kifter was up, the Fife already over by the ridge searching through the half-light for a clue to help them succeed. A snort behind alerted the Tard to their Kyboes. Shifty and restless, they crouched where they had lain all night with no desire to move. A reminder of what they were up against, his watch during the early short-turns had not produced any fruitful ideas either. Annoyed, he still could not see how this could be done.

Needing to stretch his legs again, he had already stood with the Fife earlier, but come away when no insights were forthcoming. Rising to his feet, the Kyboes would stir if anything untoward was to venture into the sleeping camp. Expecting the turn to be a fine one, but the rising sun would do little to help their predicament. Ferocious attacks from those despicable *Souls* would be the same no matter what the weather was doing.

Standing where he had left him, upright and rigid, Kifter was a handful of paces away from the ridge. Tarmon approached. Initial signs were not good. “Any inspiration?” “There has to be a way,” Kifter said, frustrated. “I checked in both directions but... every way is the same. This is as good a place as any to enter.”

“It is,” the Tardanian agreed.

“At some point, someone has to climb that ridge.”

“Yes, they do.” Tarmon was respectful of his friend’s process of elimination, but the outlook was still bleak.

“How soon do *they* come at you?”

“It can vary. The initial strike is moderate to draw you in,” Tarmon explained, staring over the ridge at the increasing band of light where the tree line ended. “Then *they* strike like a wind of terror. It is as if you have something *they* want, so *they* attack you from the inside. This distracts you to the point of forgetting to escape. That is one of the most frightening aspects, and where the danger lies. Only when you pass beyond this ridge will you be rid of *them*.” Recognising the glazed expression etched on the Fife’s face, Tarmon had seen it before. A seductive appeal to attract the unwise, many had succumbed to the temptation. “Kifter!” The Fife did not respond as if in a trance. “Kifter!” the Tard repeated, the slender figure drawing back to the present. “Do not be foolish and think you can do this,” the Tard warned. “A person convinces himself he can, but it is a grave error. Tell me Kifter, you are not thinking this, are you?”

Breaking into an embarrassed grin, the lure was strong. “Yes..., it is tempting.”

“I have stood where you do now, most young Tardanians do, but it is a test of one’s character to listen to reason. Enough people have fallen for that enticement. This is reason enough to keep you out.”

“What choices do we have then? A nagging feeling keeps telling me there is a way. I must hold onto that.”

“That feeling may be true, but if it is, then copying those who have failed previously is not the right way. If another path can be found, there has to be logic behind it.”

Kifter agreed.

Behind them, Hallen drew near, yawning. “Any luck?”

“No,” the Tard professed, looking back at the ridge. “I was just reminding Kifter..., you cannot outdo *them*. Another way *has* to be found.”

“Can we not all go in together?” The Hite suggested, rubbing sleepy eyes. “It matters not whether one or a hundred go in, *their* numbers are many.”

Peering beyond the ridge, suggestions were proposed, only to be discarded. Even with the turn getting brighter, it did nothing to ease their dissatisfaction. When Hanor and Bane joined them, five individuals stood staring, seeking that all-important revelation.

Leaving shortly after dawn, an air of excitement charged Brandor. Savouring the delight of its Master, Tunder, his Kyboe, snorted into the early morning light. Crisp and fresh, wispy grey clouds could not keep the sunlight at bay or steal away the Dai-laman’s eagerness. Ecstatic that the Masters of Tardoc had embraced his idea late last night, it now meant Masters from the other Cities would probably do the same.

Exiting Tardoc by one of its three main causeways, the other two were situated on the east and west sides of the ancient City respectively. Seven prominent towers of finery climbed high behind. Perched on interlocking levels, the unique City was carved atop and inside the mountain situated here at the end of Spike Ridge. Steeped in history, dominant walls built between enormous fingers of rock held high the first level of the city. Higher up, columned buildings and terraces gazed out at the surrounding terrain with fine views for its people. Layers of bush and tree were islets of colour amongst balconies of iron and buildings of grandeur.

Protruding from the side of the larger Treman Mountains in the distance, this lesser mountain chain of Spike Ridge was like a long, jagged arm holding a mighty sceptre at its end. Picturesque, this freak of nature had created a perfect abode for the Tardocians, firing imaginations about human possibilities.

Running adjacent to him as he rode, the Treman Mountain Range stretched far behind before looping round to form an arc, enclosing Tardoc within its curving embrace. Only the eastern end was left open. With no wall of rock as a natural defence, it was the way by which the invasion would come. The Five Passes at the western end was another possibility, but it made no sense to come by that tricky route.

Pounding the soft causeway, passing numerous early morning travellers, Brandor did not stop for light talk, determined to see his plan completed.

“This is ridiculous,” Hallen griped, irritation getting the better of him. “We have stood here long enough.” To the others’ astonishment, he took a few steps and leapt to the top of the ridge.

“Hallen!”

Kifter’s concern did not faze the confident Hite. Waiting, he turned to the others. “Fine so far,” he said, looking around. “Ooh, a bit scary though,” he joked.

Displeased, Tarmon rejected Kifter’s apology for his oaf of a friend. “I am tempted to let you go in on your own,” the Tard grumped, detecting a foolish heart. “But your sword will be required at a later date.” Taking a short run and leap, he joined the Hite. “Even if you are unwilling to listen to advice, you need to remember that you are too large to be carried out.”

Hallen’s tight grin was polite, not responding to their recently acquired leader. “I would have preferred something to eat before doing this,” he said as Kifter, followed by Bane and Hanor, joined them. “But a full stomach would soften my edge.”

“It was never sharp anyway,” Bane joked, trying to ignore the unease.

“Hey..., no need for that!”

“Will you behave,” Kifter warned, checking ahead at the band of light in front. “Is there anything else we need to know?” he asked, turning to Tarmon.

Now they were here, the Tard just wanted this over with. Previous anxieties were replaced by a shrewd alertness. “*They* will attack when we are further in, so do not be fooled to think we can make it once clear of that tree line.”

From their new vantage point, a gradual decline led to the line mentioned, triggering imaginations to what was beyond. No grass or bush grew amongst the needle-seeds and broken branches scattered across the dusty soil. Passing through the southern regions of Tardania had been dire, but the atmosphere here felt much worse.

“It will help if we keep talking to each other, especially if we hear or feel anything,” Tarmon directed, braving a step. “Otherwise, you will drift into *their* world, which is what *they* want. Above all, try to keep calm. Think about pleasant things, and do not listen to the lies or take notice of images forming in your mind.”

A place fitting of death, senses extended in every direction, the group edging forward. Cagey glances flickered, unsure what to expect and when. Reaching the tree line, patchy brown and white rock now replaced the soil. Wary, like animals creeping through a predator’s territory, they shuffled on, leaving the relative safety of the trees. Waiting for that rush of *darkness* forewarned by Tarmon, they kept walking, now halfway between the trees and the valley’s edge. Still nothing moved.

“I cannot believe we have reached this far,” Tarmon whispered, guarded. The further in they went, the harder it would be to get out.

“Maybe the *Sacred* are on our side after all,” Hallen said, mixing sarcasm with a subtle hope. Tempted to believe Tarmon’s fears were exaggerated, the thought came too soon.

Surging like a raging storm thrashing against the intruding five, wailing cries swept up over the crest of the valley and hit them head on. Howling shrieks shook the small group, stalling their progress. Unable to see who or what *they* were, only Tarmon’s brief description helped them understand what this ferocious attack was. Staying calm was futile. Swift and sudden, scores of the vaporous *entities* dived from all directions. Deathlike, the icy presence encircled them. Sealing off their escape, it was impossible to think straight.

Someone screamed, but Bane could not tell who shouted. Dizziness whirled under the onslaught. In his mind, a wretched *Soul* sneered right before him, the fear paralyzing. Closing his eyes did not help, intensifying its grotesque appearance. Others swooped in. *Their* bodies were made of finer substance, without shape, so haunting and terrible. Frantic, Bane tried pushing the spectre away, but his hands passed right through *it*.

Am I not the real you?

The voice filled his mind, blocking everything else out.

Come to me..., for I am part of you.

Terror surged at the prospect of it being true, the invisible force caressing Bane’s will. Attempts to reason faded, his denial but a whimper in the storm.

You and I are one.

Drawing closer, the *entity* filled the space before him. Hovering, triumphant, Bane no longer scratched at *its* presence. Losing all sense of time and direction, what was happening? Giddiness hindered his attempts to steady himself, draining any courage that was left. A chill anchored his feet to the ground. He could not move. Biting, he was helpless against *its* lifeless touch.

Gliding right up, the *entity* prepared to merge with him, gloating. Powerless, Bane could feel *it* reaching up from inside to seize control. Fingers and toes went numb, dulling his senses. Lapping at his sides, stroking his will to let go, he felt himself drifting away to another place, accepting his end.

It is only the beginning.

Callous, the whispering promise chimed in response to his weakened thoughts. Resistance shattering, Bane's body went limp. The ghoulish *entity* grinned, fiendish, *its* mouth opening with an ugly delight.

About to give in to the madness, the *entity's* face contorted. Lurching backwards as if punched by an unknown source, the wind was snatched from Bane's lungs as if lifted, saved from his doom. Leaving the *entity* behind, it did not linger there for long. Chasing after him to seal off any escape, *it* was quick to catch up, but could not connect to him as *it* had before. Pitching in a frenzy, *it* disappeared from view before rushing in from behind. Now convinced he *was* being carried, but it did not matter, the *entity* draining him of such concerns.

Reappearing in front, *its* face looked aggrieved as if about to lose *its* prize. Disoriented, Bane's sight was blurry as if caught between this world and the next. Images of the ground moving were there but lacked realism. Sucked down into *its* dark abode, a sinking sensation turned his stomach as if being snatched from this world. Panic erupted at the prospect of being entombed in the *Netherworlds* forever. How was he to get out?

At that point, the dreadful imprisonment broke off as if cut away by the utterance of a mighty spell. A short flying period was followed by a heavy landing, thrown backwards and banging his head against the ground. Oblivious to his surroundings, his mind kept spinning. Nauseated, he rolled over and threw up. A comforting hand on the back of his head slowed the whirling, a compassionate and familiar voice steadying him.

"Are you all right?" Hanor asked from behind.

Bewildered, Bane tried opening his eyes. Blurry, nothing was discernable to assure him he was safe. Thinking it was a trick played by that monstrous *entity*, he wanted to run and hide, to leave this barren wasteland. A considerable time drifted before he could settle. Patient voices granted him time to recover. Aching as if trounced upon by a score of Kyboes, his head pounded. Suffering the throb, relieved that he was indeed safe, it was a small price to pay for his freedom. More aches shot up his back and down his legs when he sat up. Rubbing his forehead, the intensity blinding, his ears hurt too. What in all The Freelands had happened?

"Bane..." Hanor appealed again. "How do you feel?"

Disorientation and sickness passing, carefully, Bane looked up. His sight was still hazy, the reassuring features of Hanor solidified. "What... went on in there?"

Bearings returning, they were back beyond the ridge, explaining the jump and heavy landing. Tarmon was kneeling alongside Hanor, also concerned for his welfare. Behind them, Kifter was comforting Hallen, talking quietly to him.

"I... cannot..." he tried, but the shock of it stalled him.

"You will be fine," Tarmon promised. "No need to rush. Just get back on a level, and then we can talk."

The iciness of that thing proved how close he had come to losing his life. "What... happened?"

"We all nearly had a fatal experience," Tarmon said, checking over his shoulder on how Hallen was doing. The Hite was shaking his head, finding it difficult to come to terms with the encounter. "There is no shame in what you faced."

Bane rubbed his eyes. "*It* tried to take me!"

Hanor was uncertain how to respond.

Tarmon decided honesty was the best option, "Yes Bane..., and *it* nearly succeeded."

Closing his eyes, a shudder ran through Bane. Reliving that last moment when he was trapped, the concept could barely be measured. "It happened so quickly."

"Yes, Bane," Tarmon agreed. "No one has ever mastered this place..., no one. Be glad you are here, for that experience was far from normal. Usually, small numbers come at you, building in size and intensity. Ample time is given to decide how much you can bear. But this today..., we were in the fire from the outset. Even I was shaken by the ferocity of it. If I had not warned Kifter early on, we might have all been lost."

"Was it that bad?"

"Yes. I think it happened because we no longer send our young here to be tested. *They* have become desperate. *They* must have grown accustomed to such visits, and that absence has driven fear of a different kind into that shadowy place."

"I never want to go through that again," Bane declared, unashamed.

"We will have to re-evaluate our position," the Tard agreed.

"So who carried me out? Do I have you to thank, Tarmon?"

"No, Bane..., Hanor here carried you."

"Is that true?" he asked, amazed.

Self-conscious, Hanor nodded. "I did."

"How...? Were you not affected like me?"

"Not exactly."

"Why not? Did you not see... *them*?"

"Yes."

"Were you not frightened?"

Perplexed somewhat himself, Hanor tried to explain. "I... recognised the fear of it but... it did not affect me like I think it should have."

"Is that so?" Tarmon's intrigue ignited at this admission, wondering how Hanor *had* remained alert enough to respond like he did.

"I am still confused about this illness," Hanor continued. "It seems I cannot experience things the same as you. Laughter, sadness, fear or doubt, somehow there is a shortfall. This was clear to me when we were out there. I saw *them* in my mind, just as you did, but it was like looking at something not real or as it should be. Much of the fear *they* generate is due to *their* nature, and how people like us respond to that. Our fear becomes a reflection of that nature, and so *they* see themselves in us, which empowers *them*."

Understanding it whilst one of *them* was trying to frighten me was most odd. The *entity* became enraged when it was not having the desired effect, but seemed powerless to do anything. The fear stayed in my stomach but kept trying to rise to my heart as if that is where our courage comes from. I did not like it. I saw Hallen ushered away by Kifter, but when I looked for you Bane, I could see how bad you were, so I helped.”

“This is very interesting,” Tarmon said, encouraged. Cautious, he was tempted to believe a window was appearing before them.

“And you were able to carry me out?” Bane asked, stunned.

“Yes. The *Soul* that was attacking you tried to frighten me so I would drop you, but it had little effect.”

“When fleeing with Kifter and Hallen,” the Tard said, thoughtful. “*They* tried to gain control of our minds. Did you have the same trouble?”

Running through the events, Hanor could not recall anything getting inside him. “No.”

Tarmon could not conceal his smile. “Maybe we have been blessed this turn.”

“I am not sure I like what you are suggesting.”

“It is fine Hanor,” Tarmon assured him. “We need to discuss this before we do anything.”

Hallen and Kifter were already standing, the big Hite dismayed by the traumatic episode. Eyes now a dullish grey, he looked a sorry state.

“We will make a fire and get some food on the go,” Tarmon said, expecting this. Humbling for the big fellow, in a turn, he would be back to his old self. “It is important that we share our experiences as part of the healing process.” Tempted to mention Hanor’s unusual encounter, he refrained, not wishing to burden the boy.

Concerns about marauding hordes from the north were discarded, the aroma of cooked meat filling the air. After the shock, they needed to regroup to sharpen their weakened resolve.

“Do you want to share your story?” Tarmon asked Hallen, receiving his steaming broth from Kifter.

“Not yet,” Hallen answered, flickers of fear permeating his thinking.

“Witnessing one’s self about to be undone was most unnerving,” Kifter said instead, dishing up Hanor’s portion. Brandor’s hopes seemed worthless now they knew the gravity of the task. “I am in no hurry to return.”

“And you used to send your young in there?” Bane said, appalled by the cruelty.

“Yes, but it was not as bad.” Far from reasonable, Tarmon did not justify the point.

“I... I... want to share what happened,” Hallen said, during a temporary reprieve. Desiring a drink of Sasta, he resisted, needing to do this with a clear head. Scraping the ground with a stick, this was new territory. “I believed I could succeed even when everyone else had failed,” he began, unused to opening up. “Proud as I was, Tarmon’s caution beforehand did not register as it should. Many battles I have fought, by hand and word, but never have I felt such an invasion like back there. *Their* screams did not bother me, even though I struggled at how it was possible, living without a body that is. It was the intrusion inside that disturbed me. I commend all of you..., for you seem to be handling it far better than this laughable Hite. I feel so... dirty.” Stalling, this was difficult. “A chilling hand seemed to reach up in here.” Punching his chest, emotions were high. “When realising *it* was inside me, I was undone. I apologise Tarmon for not

respecting your concerns. Brandor needs to take account for this. His fine talk about the *Sacred* will not do either, something is wrong down there. How can *they* be left to live like that?" Nauseous, just the thought of it sickened him. "*They* were after something inside me," he continued. "The part that is the most treasured place in any of us. We are all guilty of pretence, hiding the real things that matter to us, but deep inside, there is a child, too pure to be blighted by the world."

"Your words have great weight," Tarmon agreed.

"There are two voices also," the Hite continued, following moody thoughts without restraint. "One tries to lead you astray, whilst the other seeks to move you towards bettering yourself. That goodness comes from within, I should know, I have ignored it enough times doing as I pleased. Whatever that source of good is, that *thing* was after it."

"May I help to clarify this?" Tarmon asked, sensitive.

Motioning for him to do so, the Hite needed time to recover.

"This is difficult for all of us," Tarmon proceeded. "Your description has been well documented back at Tarden. Our Masters teach us that life has many levels, and is not just physical like we see about us. There are deeper areas of our nature, and darker parts too. They teach that at the core of each person is an *essence* that is Sacred. Those *Souls* are not reaching for that *essence*, which you said is like a child, for our Master's say *it* is beyond *their* grasp. Instead, *they* reach for something that mirrors *their* own nature, a darker part that is in all of us, the part which you said tries to lead us astray."

"You have been talking to Brandor too much," Kifter mused.

"I apologise," Tarmon said, sincere. "I felt it necessary to explain."

"I just cannot believe this has happened. How is it possible?" Hallen tried.

"Life is complex," the Tard said. "Unless we seek to comprehend these mysteries, what can we do but accept it? Fear rises from ignorance, and we react emotionally to what we do not understand. I applaud you Hallen for being so open. It should free you from later anxieties, and help the rest of us cope with our own experience."

"If my weak confession helps another, then fine, but that would be most surprising."

Peering across at Hanor, who seemed lost to his ponderings, Tarmon wondered if the boy's confessions earlier could be a doorway to retrieving the *Stone*. Early signs suggested it was. Even though they had no right to expect him to go in, alone if necessary, it seemed impossible to imagine. "Your experience Hanor was different to ours, do you want to share it?"

Expecting the request, Hanor remained suspicious of Tarmon's intent. Without his past for reference, it was difficult to understand what he *had* experienced, and what it meant. "After hearing your tale Hallen, I want to be well again, to be part of life with all of its commotions. But then, to feel what you did out there is not what I had in mind." Sorrow evident behind a tight smile, he shrugged before continuing. "My tale is less dramatic than yours. I saw *them*, and heard the cries, but I was not frightened. Instead, I sensed loneliness in *them* that underlies *their* condition. *They* long for home but know not how to get there. *They* have trapped themselves here, and do not know how to leave."

"That is a peculiar concept," Tarmon said, surprised.

"I am certain *they* could leave if a way could be found," Hanor said, detesting *their* imprisonment as if it were his own. "*They* are stuck because of their decision to remain as

they are. *They* refuse to change. How *they* appear to us is more to do with *their* attitude rather than actually looking like that.”

“What do you mean?” Tarmon asked, intrigued.

“Just as Hallen said about pretence, and everyone suffers it, *they* have no means by which to hide *their* attitudes, no physical bodies to cover that ugliness. Unlike us, *they* cannot conceal *their* nature. When we are selfish, inside we do not look much different than *they* do. We do differ however, because we are seeking to do good, which will change us for the better. *They* are not. *They* do not realise how beneficial it is to change. If *they* could see the error, *they* would be able to free themselves.”

For someone who lacked a memory, his ideas were extraordinary.

“Does that mean you are not frightened to go back in?” Kifter’s question was a little too hurried for Tarmon, the Fife picking up on where this could lead.

Avoiding that point ever since Tarmon first implied it, to go back in and witness that deprivation was a lot to ask. Although detached from it emotionally, the grim setting troubled Hanor. Whether Brandor had hoped this would occur, he did not know, but he had not anticipated connecting to life in this manner. Without background details, it was difficult to make an informed decision. “Do you think I should go in?”

His question caught the Fife off guard. “Well,” Kifter stuttered, awkward. “I... I do not think... I am in a position to say or even advise.”

“In my present condition..., do you think I am?”

“That is... a fair point,” Kifter conceded. “If truthful..., I would not recommend anyone go back in there. I am glad young Tardanians no longer have to face their fears either,” he added, looking at the Tard, dubious. “It is cruel.”

“Enough has been said on the matter,” Tarmon defended, sticking to the present. “But Hanor’s illness is unique, and needs examining. His explanations about *their* suffering does seem likely.”

“I agree, but would you recommend he go in?” the Fife said, realistic of the risk.

“It is a hard question, and perhaps you are right not to answer.”

“I do not think he should go in,” Bane declared, shocked at the idea.

“As his friend, your opinion is more deserving than ours, Bane,” Tarmon said. “But let us look at the options so Hanor can make up his own mind.”

“Proceed,” Kifter urged.

“Brandor sent us to find a *Stone*, of which we know little about... or *its* worth,” Tarmon said, peering around the group. “Some of us know Brandor well, enough to trust his judgement. But how well do you know Brandor, Hanor? Your illness is a problem, so maybe Bane could answer for you here.”

“He did not know him well,” Bane said. “A few turns before setting out on the journey to Tarden, he had not heard of him.”

“So, you have little reason to trust Brandor, other than following what we might say?”

“I suppose,” Bane agreed.

“From what you have seen of Kifter and Hallen, do you trust them? Remember Bane, I am asking because of Hanor’s lack of memory. He needs to hear your answer.”

Respecting both, especially after forgiving him for attacking them when Hanor had first disappeared, the Fife’s kind words at Tarden deserved something in return. “Yes, I trust them.”

“If they trust Brandor, then would you too?”

Annoyed at Brandor for getting them involved in the first place, “Yes,” was all he said.

“Good. I also trust our old friend, who unfortunately is not here to clear this up. We can safely say then that it is imperative we get the *Stone* because he has asked us to do so?”

“Yes..., when you put it like that.”

“But... he also said about Hanor’s importance,” Tarmon continued. “Saying he should be protected at all costs. Will Hanor be putting his life in jeopardy if he were to enter the valley again?” It was an important question.

“It is too much of a risk,” Hallen said, breaking from his sombre mood. “Even after what Hanor has said, he would be in grave danger on his own. He would not cope.”

“It *was* intense,” Kifter had to agree.

“Bane?” Tarmon asked, turning to him.

“What will he do if he did gets into trouble?” Bane needed to know.

“A good point.”

“I will go in.” The statement cut the discussion dead.

Four heads snapped towards Hanor, disbelieving what they had just heard.

“What did you say, Hanor?” Tarmon asked, hiding his delight.

“I have decided to go in.”

“Hanor!” Bane’s concerns shot to the front. “Another way can be found.”

“Are you sure about this?” Tarmon asked, trying to stay neutral.

“I am quite sure.”

“We have not concluded about the risks or benefits, do you not want to wait?”

“I am not trying to be brave,” Hanor said, staring at the fire. “The points have been made, and judging by how I feel now..., I have to do this.”

“Hanor..., you do not have to do anything,” Bane said, urgency rising. The thought of losing his friend again was too much.

“What makes you certain you have to do this?” Hallen asked. Humbled as he had been, the thought of being in there alone was horrifying.

“Sitting here,” Hanor said, monitoring his inner world. “Fear is attempting to seize control. But for whatever reason, it is unable to rise above my stomach. It is not a comfortable sensation, but there is also a subtle peace prompting me to act. If I refuse, it feels uncomfortable, like sickness. Your respect of Brandor is enough for me, so I have to trust what I think is the right thing to do. He came for me in Yarmoria because he still needed me, and I am grateful for that. But without these feelings, I would not go in. I am not experiencing fear like I should, so we have to take this opportunity whilst we can.”

Astounded when realising his mind was made up, even Tarmon had to reconsider now Hanor had agreed to go. Hoping his illness was not fooling him into doing it, but what choice did they have?

Rising, and getting ready to move, “Do not worry about my state of mind,” Hanor assured them.

“You are not serious about going in?” Bane implored, begging his friend to think again.

“There is no point delaying, the promptings of my heart tell me to do it.”

“Yes, but what promptings are they?” Hallen asked, disturbed.

“I know if I do not go..., something significant will be missed.”

“What are these feelings you speak of?” Kifter asked, divided.

“I am not sure, there just seems to be an urge, like... a sense of knowing.”

“Sense of knowing?” Bane said, close to losing his temper. Hanor’s attitude seemed decisive, a glimmer of his old self, which only made matters worse. Torn between fears and the necessity to support him, the knot inside was back again. ““I cannot decide for you Hanor..., but I need to know you are in control.”

“The reasons are not clear, but I need to do this.”

Turning away, Bane was desperate to repel the doubts clawing at him. “You had better know what you are doing,” he demanded. Facing him again, eyes red, his companion looked so much older in that moment.

“Since my stay in Yarmoria, my sensitivities have increased significantly. Without them, I would be lost.”

After a brief pause, Tarmon spoke. “You seem adamant about this Hanor, and... under normal circumstances, I too would question your intent. Even though my initial desire was to see you enter, your confidence suggests this could be out of our hands anyway. For you to enter is unnerving, but one thing Brandor would say is *‘try with all your might, and if you fall short, the Unseen will help if you call out.’* I know not if you have called out, Hanor, but if this *is* your final decision, then we must support that.”

“Thank you, Tarmon. If we are to succeed on this journey, we have to do it together.”

“A wise thing to say my young friend.”

Chapter 27: The Tomb of Tarkon

Five pensive figures made their way back to the ridge. Odd comments of support were given along with additional words of caution. The sun was now high in the sky, shedding its golden rays upon the haunting valley lying beyond the tree line.

Stopping at the ridge, Hanor checked the rhythms of his heart, ensuring he had made the right decision. Pulsing smoothly, he knew he had.

“If you get into trouble...,” Bane said, wiping a tear. “Shout as loud as you can, and I promise..., I will come and get you.” Hugging him, it felt like a farewell.

“And you had better come running,” Hanor joked.

Rubbing his head, Hallen disliked the whole affair. “I cannot believe I am letting you do this. You, a mere lad doing what a great burly Hite dare not.”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of Hallen,” Hanor said, prudent. “It is because of my illness, and not because I am courageous. You would do the same.”

“Your words are kind Hanor but... a Hite’s pride is too large to be softened so easily.”

“I feel like Hallen does,” Kifter said, patting his back. “But since first meeting you, I have grown evermore respectful. Even though you remember so little, there is wisdom in you to have confidence in.” With a final wink, “Call if you are in trouble.”

Tarmon had the last words. “I am tempted to give you a whole book of advice, but... only you know what you must do. Just remember about illusions, for they will be your toughest challenge. Go well and take care.”

All seemed quiet at the ridge, memories of what went before trying to unsettle Hanor as he got ready to move. Fears increased, whirling again in his stomach. Taking a few quick steps, Hanor climbed the small ridge. Those pursuing forces had shut off as soon as he had left *their* territory, half-expecting *them* to be waiting. But like the first time, nothing moved. Glancing behind at the others before braving the unknown, ignoring the rumblings inside, he had a task to do.

Starting forward, Hanor strode with hope and purpose. Anticipating *their* first strike, on leaving the cover of trees, the four onlookers behind disappeared below the curvature of the land. Now isolated, his footsteps were the only sounds in this barren place. Soon passing where they had first been set upon, movements in his stomach heightened, sharp stabbing pains the result. The fears seemed determined to get out. Staying focused and strong, he continued, awaiting the explosive rush to come. Permitting him to enter this far to make certain there was no escaping, it was difficult to concentrate.

To his surprise, the other side of the valley came into view. Drab browns and greys, a bleak reflection of this side, there were no bushes or crawling plants anywhere, no wildlife either. A lack of wind added to the disquiet. Holding his stomach, it felt tight as if dehydrated. Images of him drinking water somewhere arose, the memory lingering for a while before fading. Encouraged, he hoped more would come. Daring to glance above, the clear blue sky showed no signs of life. Hopeful of seeing a Fliryn, but none were there, this deadness reaching to the invisible stars and beyond.

Bewildered, the valley floor on the other side crept into view, and still there was no attack. Light and patchy, the brown rock levelled out and merged into a grey stone ridge that encircled the valley’s base. Unflinching, when reaching the crest of the valley rim, he

did not chance a pause to take stock of the situation. Whilst moving, he had something to focus on.

Aiming down to his left, the descent was gradual, the rock rough minimising the risk of slipping. Catching his breath, numerous piles of stick-like shapes were scattered upon the ground. Without needing to investigate, they were skeletal remains of unfortunate individuals who had tried reaching the bottom, proving Tarmon's tale to be true. Too far in, their deaths were a testament to the damage a foolish heart could do. Turning away, he looked around for additional pointers, landmarks to find his way back. A slight bend hid the far end to this bleak valley. Searching for the Tomb, it was nowhere in sight.

Disbelieving the *Souls* had still not struck, down he meandered, opting not to run in case he tripped. Intense, such concentration took its toll, expectations drawing a different kind of fatigue. Determined to last the distance, he guessed the Tomb was past that bend around to his left. Jumping down, the wide ridge encircling the valley floor was higher than he first thought. Standing on its edge, he checked the final drop. Patchy grey, the valley floor was some twenty hand-spans below, hard and unforgiving. Standing atop the rock wall, there was a slight gradient near the bottom, daring him to slide down. Leaping could result in a broken limb, which would make his escape less likely. The other side of the valley looked more accessible, but it would take too long to get there. Unwilling to take the risk, *they* would attack before he even got there.

Scratching his head at the problem, briefly distracted from the original purpose for being here, his guard slackened. Not until the immense surge from behind swooped in did he realise the mistake. Forgetting about *their* presence, the lapse cost him dear.

Floodgates opening, cramps of fear in his stomach shot up to his heart like a chilling blade, dislodging whatever had been protecting him. For the first time in his short memorable life, strands of fear stabbed at his unsuspecting nerve. His dream of reconnecting to life was in that moment realised. Shattering the invisible veil of his illness, a sense of dread started choking him. Losing balance, the momentum of *their* drive knocked him backwards, falling like a loosened boulder. Broken only by the curving base of the wall, he tumbled, rolling out into a heap on the valley floor. Winded and disorientated, shivers ran through him at the shocking change. Struggling to get up, his leg ached, his knee especially. Managing to stand, where were *they*? Why were *they* not already upon him? Remembering why he was here, the Tomb was nowhere to be seen. No gaps or holes were to his right, so he went left.

Desperate to stay calm, pulses of fear accompanied every straining step. Vulnerable, the others would not hear him from here. Expecting to be attacked again, he tried running, but a throbbing knee had other ideas. Agonising, a shooting pain ran up his leg, enough to slow him. Conceding to the grim ache, he started limping. Peering up and around, where were *They*?

Not waiting for long, tormenting him like a hapless animal, in his mind's eye he could discern *them* sweeping along the valley floor from the other side towards him. Heart-stopping, terrible shrills filled his ears, *their* delight obvious. Anxious in case *they* could detect the change in him, closing his eyes when *they* hit, the force again knocked him to the ground. This time, a few lingered, gleeful. Sneering at what was to come, but as if pulled by a higher will, to his surprise *they* returned to the pack.

The *Souls'* imprisonment here was partly of *their* own making he could now see, *their* movements proving this. Each one could release themselves from this open tomb if only *they* knew how. *Their* desire to exchange places with anyone who entered the valley had become an obstacle to *their* freedom. That error was again at hand, seeking to exchange with him rather than change within themselves. Discerning *them* as a collection of individuals, but moving as one by a united desire, he did not question how he knew. Accepting the insights as they rose, the vibration of *their* evil shivered through him.

Daring to move, his leg continued throbbing, demanding rest. Digging deep, he forced himself on. Scanning ahead for the Tomb as well as the surrounding area, he kept close to the wall restricting any attacks from that direction. To his horror, *they* descended like a preying beast in front, blocking his way. Calculated, Hanor paused, indecision striking him.

Savouring *their* power and the dread generated, he was flooded by grisly insights. *Their* presence, *they* hoped, would increase his fears, granting supremacy over his wavering will. Needing him to react, it was a tool used to overcome any unwitting individual. Holding his nerve, it was too late to escape now.

Fears were strong, proving he had taken a substantial step towards recovering his emotional health. That inner peace of earlier was gone, disappearing just before he had fallen. Unable to recall his history yet, a full recovery was still lacking. Comprehending the details in a few rapid heartbeats, that healing would be short-lived if he did not do something soon.

Stepping forward, Hanor decided to seize back control. Concentrating, tuning into that original peace he had experienced prior to the veil of his illness breaking, he started running, courage rising through the madness. Heading straight for the crowd of *Souls*, the defiant reaction superseded all pains in his aching leg. Charging, *their* twisted hate emanated like a polluted dust in front, preparing to snatch him from this world.

Staring down at the One, his Light brighter than anything witnessed before, through him they could see their freedom lay, but how they did not know. Registering it on his previous visit, it was imperative he did not escape this time. Concocting a plan to trap him, but what was this charge, this defiance confronting them? Did he not fear them still..., even now?

Opening up like a cavern, they accepted his sacrifice. Closing in behind when he surged to the centre of their domain, the entire assemblage concentrated on the centre of his Light. Condensing like an imploding force of immense power, two hundred and seventy three Souls rushed at him, seeking that promised freedom. Drawn to his Light, howls of desperation followed, determined to gain that ultimate release.

Running hard, Hanor saw his chance of escape shut behind. But to his astonishment, his perception altered dramatically. Sensations of running faded, replaced instead by a floating as if moving through water. Surreal, his body began dissolving from his conscious mind, trying to understand what this place was. As if venturing into another world, the overpowering sense of mind was unmistakable here. Coated by a thick layer of evil, the darkness was the governing force of this Realm. Tuning in further to the vibrations of the obscure surroundings, he could not detect any warmth or love here, only

selfishness with all of its egocentric thought forms. No true life existed, only illusion. Saturated by greed and hate, this stark environment housed only dark *entities* eager to satisfy *their* own deranged appetites.

Understandings of *their* plight flashed through his mind, the details like beams of light piercing the shadows of this *underworld*. Not lasting long, his perception altered again. Conscious of the many *Souls* about to descend on him from all sides, there was nowhere for Hanor to turn. Terror rattled him, whirling sensations forming in his stomach again. Writhing back and forth, he could not believe it possible. Getting colder, the feelings condensed into a single form like a hand trying to seize him inside. Horrified, it started rising as if alive, just as Hallen had said.

Split between what was going on inside him and the external forces about to crash down on his position, time altered again to yet another rhythm. Certain he was not going to survive, inspiration flared to his rescue, triggering an idea. His attention was focused in the wrong place! Unsure why, he tuned into the poundings of his heart instead, concentrating on its rhythmic beats. It seemed to slow but intensify. Each pound now echoed around him like an explosion, time slowing to a trickle. His mind seemed to merge with his heart, a sense of oneness developing through the panic. The merging generated a wave of mental energy that pulsed outwards in every direction.

Uncertain of the effects, Hanor stayed in that concentrated state for a short while before coming round. Something unique had just happened, but he knew not what or why. Daring to look up for the attacking *Souls*, he could not perceive *them* anywhere. Searching with his mind's eye as well as his physical ones, where had *they* gone? Standing close to the valley wall, he had somehow reached the bend in the valley. Checking in both directions, but nothing moved. Stalling when looking behind, a natural crack in the rock face was like a gaping wound in the hillside. Assuming the narrow cleft was the opening to the Tomb, the idea of getting trapped inside stalled his eagerness. Doubts throbbled, indecision gripping again. Relieved the sharp stabs were no longer in his stomach, he did feel more connected to his surroundings, a sure sign he was recovering. What should he do?

Desperate, the Souls regrouped, blinded by the incredible Light emanating from the boy. Many voices now spoke as one, questioning what that Light had been, so bright and powerful. Through the blistering pain however, the same impression remained; he was the key to their freedom.

A shudder within alerted Hanor to something approaching behind. Braving a look, the qualms were justified. Sweeping in, to his dismay the *Souls* were coming again. Delaying his flight, curious, the field of energy surrounding *them* had somehow changed. Unsure why, *their* presence was now far less menacing. Certain the edge to *their* evil had been softened, as if an awakening was taking place within *their* dark realm, it was only a seed of potential, but it was there and growing. If it continued expanding, there was a chance of real change taking place, enough to set *them* free.

Not lingering on the matter, for *their* intent was the same, he turned and slipped through the opening into the dusty atmosphere of the Tomb.

Cloaked in darkness, Hanor felt his way forward, convinced the *Souls* were about to follow. Anxious about banging his sore knee, he could not discern anything in front. Behind at the entrance, a brilliant fan of light was aglow, slicing its way into the pitch-like night. Expecting a flood of shrills, but there was no sign of that mass of evil entering.

Stopping when reaching a considerable depth, it felt like he was in a tunnel, shuffling feet echoing back supporting the idea. Expecting the worst, silvery rays beaming through the entrance still showed no signs of those *Souls*. Waiting, the thought of *them* sneaking up whilst he fumbled in the dark was enough to halt any advancement. The longer he waited, the more convinced he became that *they* would not, or even better, could not enter. Generating other doubts, did *they* know something he did not?

Spinning at the prospect of what might be lurking here, checking the blackness, he half-expected to see something move. Fears thumped his heart, pleased that he was at last on the mend. Far from an ideal location, but it was better than the emptiness of before. Healing to this degree, there was nothing to stop him healing altogether. Memories were still not forthcoming, trusting it was only a matter of time. Thoughts of his brother's death hovered close, daring him to tune into the travesty. Discarding the temptation, it too would come when ready.

"One step at a time," he whispered, wary of waking any creatures living here.

Creeping forward, half-step by half-step, the dull throb of his knee hurt. Movements of his hands disappeared altogether. The slither of light behind at the entrance was now but a fading glimmer. Wondering how deep this tunnel went, finding the *Stone* without torchlight was laughable. Walking blind like this was equally mad, the possibility of falling into a ravine slowing him further. Daring to believe nothing did live down here, concluding there was no food for any creatures to feed on, he was not convinced.

"It is good to have doubts," he muttered, feeling more complete with every careful step. Bumping into the side, his shoulder scraped against a cold but dry wall. Feeling its shape, it bulged before curving into an arc above. Speculating the size of this place, he edged forward, still clueless as to how he was going to find the *Stone*.

Temperature dropping, the noise of his shuffling lessened, clearly approaching a larger chamber. Tempted to call out to check its depth, hesitancy warned him to stay quiet, unsure what was in front. Listening for signs of life, a trickle of water would help, but only an empty deadness was apparent.

Straying out beyond the security of the tunnel, the chamber he sensed was sizeable. Floor solid like the rock outside, it seemed strange that this was an ancient tomb. What would he find?

After many half-steps, his hands reached the opposite wall. Strands of frustration formed, another sign of reconnecting to life again. Considering which way to go, finding the *Stone* here would be a miracle. Brandor should have elaborated on what to expect. Too late to question now, opting to follow the wall, he edged his way round to the right.

Without reference points, his bearings began playing tricks. Unsure how long he edged along, it was a while before he reached the tunnel entrance whence he first arrived. Crossing to the other wall, he was not giving up. Doing the hard bit outside, surely he could find a *Stone* if he was patient enough.

Completing a circle and more, he now had a rough idea how big the chamber was. Growing in confidence, he started crisscrossing the room. When nothing tripped him up,

he walked faster, keeping hands outstretched just in case. Without immediate success, time itself harkened him on, the thought of spending the night here ghastly. And to leave undercover of night was equally bleak. Back and forth he went, careful not to knock his aching knee.

After a lengthy short-turn of searching, Hanor sat down to take a breather. Pressing back against the wall, stretching his leg out in front, his knee ached but was manageable. Closing his eyes, even though in the dark he did not have to, there was an element of strength gained from the safety of his inner world. What was he to do? With each unsuccessful crossing of the chamber, the sense of woe was increasing.

Now he had stopped, he felt sleepy. If he rested here for too long he might not get moving again. Mentally and physically drained, longings for a warm bed at Tarden drew him further down towards slumber. Responding to the futility of his search, Tarmon's vague words ran through his tired mind. "*If you need help, call out to the Unseen.*" The Yarmi Folk had talked about the *Sacred* a great deal, so what did he have to lose? Unsure if he had ever done it before, it seemed strange that *they* might know he was down here in the belly of the earth. Awkward, as if others were listening in the dark, if he did not do it soon, sleep would claim him.

"I have tried... but failed," he said, hoping the words would flow naturally. The darkness appeared uninterested in his call, but he proceeded anyway. "I know not the importance of this, but I am at a loss. Please help me find this *Stone*, and get back safely to the others."

Sitting in the pitch darkness, short moments passed undisturbed, waiting for something to happen. Hopeful, but nothing materialised. Extending into longer periods, those long periods eventually arrived at a complete short-turn, and still he waited. Eyes heavy, the prospect of looking again was grim. Cumbersome limbs now felt heavier after the long wait. Lying down, resting his head on an arm, his eyes closed. The relief from letting go was wonderful, passing from wakefulness to sleep in a heartbeat.

Chapter 28: A Light from the Past

Convinced the chamber was lighter than he remembered, dusty grey compared to the blackness of before, Hanor sat up, not sure how long he had been asleep. Opposite him, a white mist started forming, the air transforming of its own accord. Small at first, growing steadily in size, it started expanding to a more prominent glow.

Revealing the chamber's size, the round domed shape with a high ceiling was simplistic and unadorned. Creamy brown walls with cracks of time were etched into the rock face. Far from elaborate, nothing obvious lay around him, no stone boxes or ornaments to say anyone had ever been here. As the light increased, faint markings of his footprints on the dusty ground crisscrossed in every direction.

Larger and brighter, the *light* grew in height and started solidifying, changing to an actual object. Surprised, Hanor felt unthreatened by its arrival. Shifting into the shape of a person, the absorbing *light* continued transforming, gaining in strength. Undecided about the spectacle, pacifying qualities were radiating from its location, soothing his anxieties. Sitting straight, he did not care if he had fallen back into his illness.

Solidifying into a human form, wearing an overcoat and trousers with fine boots, features on its face were the last to develop. Hair, nose and a mouth, at last, two eyes opened on completion. Startling Hanor, those eyes he somehow recognised but could not place them. The newcomer knew him. Young features waited for him to realise who he was. Patient and kind, shimmering in a white hue, who was he? Stepping towards Hanor, the youthful figure seemed sympathetic to his confusion.

Memories of Hanor sitting in a large room eating a meal at a bulky wooden table crossed before his eyes. A bucket of water was poured over his head from behind, leaping up to chase the culprit. The escapee was laughing, realising this person before him was the one fleeing. Watching the scene unfold, he caught him before soaking him in return, both enjoying the fun. The scene changed. Now, they were by a large expanse of water, and Hanor knew it to be Freemans Lake. They were swinging from a tree and this person fell and hurt his head. Concerned, the next scene was of this person in bed because of the fall. Nearly dying, Hanor's emotions started flowing, connecting with each rising thought.

Another scene was of two people whom he sensed to be his parents. They were chasing them and play fighting. Pouring their love upon the two boys, as the images continued to flow, so too did the feelings. Tears cascaded down Hanor's cheeks, knowing now who this individual was. Full of love and understanding, Nole smiled, sharing the images of their past with him.

From as far back as Hanor could remember, events played out to the finest detail. Observing himself grow into a young man, living a life of ease, he had enjoyed the freedoms without ever appreciating it. Wanting so much to remember this, unfolding here now brought a powerful relief. Intense, the remembrance was exhausting, but he did not want to look away.

Recollections of Brandor entered, both by the lake and when in their Leisure Room. Rainer's severe training preceded the leaving of Manson with Kifter. Rolling like a giant play, images flowed unabated. Moving at lightening speed, every aspect was revealed.

From Kifter's kind efforts at making him a bed in the woods, to the dramatic arrival of Bane and Nole hotly pursued by the Freeloaver, nothing was missed. Moving from his own strange confrontation with it and the subsequent energies flowing from his heart, the setting was as intense as it was real. Roaming forward to their terrifying encounter at Ags Ole with the *Nyshifter*, the illuminated Nole watched it too. With all of the passion, laughter and pain, they were two minds as one. Now conscious of a hurt in his brother, the next scene unfolded. They were approaching a bridge, Kifter, Hallen, Bane, Nole and himself. Sadness was behind Nole's smile, deep dark eyes hiding something. Sensitive to a coming pain, Hanor returned his attention to the inner images.

They were crossing the bridge with Nole walking nearby humming. Shocked, Hanor froze as the horrendous scenario played out before him of Nole's dreadful departure from The Freelands. Hanor had ducked the Bovern, so it had snatched Nole instead. Wrenching sensations staggered him, destroying this reunion. Appalled and aggrieved, Hanor's heart nearly burst from the up surging grief. This long-awaited time of remembrance was annihilated by the potency of what happened. Even the sounds of its jaws crunching was discernible, such was the reality of it.

Consumed by sorrow and disbelief, Hanor slumped to the floor. Heart spewing out all of its hidden hurt, he shook at some points, wailing uncontrollably at others. How was this possible? Where were the *Sacred* when this atrocity had happened? That cruel sound, he convulsed, feeling sick.

Long periods passed, the pain unquenchable. Prayers for help had been answered, but that was forgotten when a biting anger hijacked every thought. Not daring to look at his brother in case this was just an illusion, doubts seized him. Braving further truths, he looked up. Sadness was there in Nole, but so too love. Compassionate, a wave of affection swept across from him, a reassuring appeal to dissipate the grievance. Resisting, Hanor wanted to stay angry and blame the *Sacred* for what had happened. Powerless though against such an all-embracing peace, dispelling the harshness of condemnation and guilt, his resistance melted, more tears streaming.

"*Hanor!*" Nole's sensitive voice chimed through the darkness. "*Hanor!*" Glowing like something holy, Hanor found it difficult to talk to his brother. "I wanted this I know but... I did not believe it would be this bad."

"*Your pain I feel as you do, and as much as it touches me, there is so much more to this than you realise, Hanor. You have to be strong, for so many are depending on you.*"

"Why did you have to be taken? Could it not have been done another way? It just seems so... pointless." Back to his former self, Hanor's memories now belonged to him, the veil of his illness finally disintegrating.

"*There are reasons within reasons and plans within plans, but all work towards a final purpose. As hard as it appears, if you stand firm and succeed, the glory at the end will mean so much to so many.*"

"What purpose? There is nothing that can justify what happened to you."

"*Because you see it from a restricted perspective, and not from a higher point of view. If I were to show you the Higher Plan, it might distract you from actually achieving it. You would probably deem it beyond your capabilities, but we know it is in you to achieve this. Therefore, you must learn to trust that which is within you.*"

“I... do not know what you mean,” he said, unable to think straight.

“The fact my life was taken has enabled you to achieve the impossible. The fact you are here is miraculous. But if I had not, how would you have got down here?”

“You make it sound as though it was pre-planned?”

“There are many plans but not all come to fruition. Take our situation here, you can choose to turn away from your purpose and go home, to see Mother and Father again. It has not been planned for you to do so, but you have that choice.”

“What you are talking about is... fate or destiny, I am not sure I believe in that.”

“It is similar to that, but nothing is fixed. There are many pathways we may take, but it is up to us.”

“You ask a great deal if you expect me to accept that after what I have just been through.”

Hanor’s resistance was determined to fight back.

“My dear brother, you will not go any further than you desire. And with what you have just undergone, you are right, nobody can expect you to carry on as if nothing has happened. But that is not what is being asked of you. I am saying you must be strong if you are to succeed, nothing else. How you deal with it is up to you, but a choice has to be made. In seeing me, your eyes have been opened to the reality of the hereafter. All of our youth was spent ignorant of this possibility. We did not even care about it, did we? If we are to help save The Freelands, we must decide whether to see it through. You feel the love radiating from me to you, the harmony of it, if we want The Freelands to come to know such love, we have to help bring it about. Those who oversee our world will not just hand it to us, it is in our journey that so much is learnt and experienced. Pain, laughter, hate and love, but we must choose how we want it to end.”

“This does not make sense,” Hanor groaned, shell-shocked. The fullness of Nole’s love he could feel, but he could not get his mind around what was happening here.

“I would not encourage you in a direction you should not go. I would not condemn you either if you chose not to follow through with this. I love you no matter what..., but I can only help if you are willing.”

“I have questions but do not have the strength to ask. You are well, and I should be leaping with joy, but I feel dead inside as if something precious has been taken from me.”

“I have not been taken anywhere. I am part of you like you are part of me, and in that, we shall be together always. This is what it is like on this side, where pain and separation are seen for what they are. As you see me now, you will see me again when it is your time, but until then, you have to make the most of your life and do what you think is best. Not just for yourself, but for those around you. You have to search within and try to connect to the larger Life that surrounds you. In this you will never feel lonely or without purpose and meaning.”

“Are you talking about the Sacred?”

“It would not mean much to you if I simply said yes. You have to seek for yourself and then you will know. But you will not find it by living as we both once did.”

“I am so angry at them for this.”

“I know, but... do you want to stay angry or put it to one side and move forward?”

“How are you so calm about this? You lost your life here, does it not bother you?”

Nole smiled. *“You seem to think that reality is more real than this one. The truth is both realities are interconnected, even closer than our relationship was as brothers. There are also other areas, of darkness and light, but it is all part of the wonderful Life we live in.”*

“You are getting beyond me,” Hanor said, his mind a muddle. Possessing all of his memories, he needed time for this to sink in, but time was not on his side. Thoughts about his objective here turned towards the *Stone* and its importance. Leaving the present jumbled topic, emotions settled enough to press forward. “What is so important about this *Stone* I have to find anyway?” Peering round, “And where is it?”

Pleased to see his brother move on, hard as it was, Nole answered. *“There is little I can say about it, for its purpose remains a mystery known only to those who are higher. But what I will say is... it is still here!”*

From the glow of Nole’s presence, the chamber was bathed only in twilight. “Where?” Searching the ground and then the wall, Hanor could see no evidence to where *it* was. Looking back at his brother, when Nole took a few steps forward, Hanor stopped. “You really are... dead from this world,” he said. “But you seem... so alive!”

“I have never felt so alive,” Nole beamed. *“So be glad that you have seen me. Countless people suffer the loss of loved ones, and know not that they still live.”*

Hanor sighed. “I am... kind of getting used to this..., even if only in a small way.”

“That is a good sign,” Nole said, encouraged. *“By the way, you are looking in the wrong direction.”*

“I would love to give you a hug,” Hanor said, his brother sounding like his old self. Calming down, anger subsiding, somehow he felt connected to Nole like never before.

“If you tried, it would probably cause you further discomfort,” he joked. *“Now..., why can you not see the *Stone*?”*

“I do not know.”

“If you cannot see something..., does that mean it is not there?”

Considering this, he smirked. “You cannot see a smell.”

“Good Hanor, I did not think you would understand straight away.”

“You mean *the Stone* is a smell?”

“No...,” Nole laughed. *“But the fact you can register something other than what you see is a great hint to where it is.”*

“You mean I can smell my way to it?”

Nole did not respond.

Even though tired, the thought of actually obtaining the *Stone* lifted Hanor. Mulling the problem from various angles, he paced back and forth. “To register something invisible to the eye,” he kept repeating, searching every bump on the wall and ground. “Would it not be easier to just tell me?”

“Would it not be easier for the Sacred to just hand life to us without any toil?”

Hanor went back to his contemplating. “To register something,” he mused again. Some of the other senses he supposed fell into the same category, but tasting or hearing seemed wrong too.

“I will give you another clue,” Nole said, his brother coming to a standstill. *“The outer *Stone* is... a reflection of the inner *Stone*.”*

After some deliberation, “I do not get it,” Hanor said, looking back at the radiant Nole for help. Receiving no response, frustrated, he tried again. Brandor’s tale about Tarkon and his true love Shoona then sprung to mind. The *Stone* had represented his love for her. Love, he figured, you could not see. “Is it... love?”

"Can you see love?" Nole asked, straight-faced.

"No."

"Show me love."

"Show you... love? How can I show you love, it is not a physical thing? I can... share my love or express it. I do not see where this is going."

"I know, it is a good thing one of us does. I said to you earlier that where I am is related to where you are, did I not?" Hanor nodded. "And if I was to add, over here, as we may call it, is much nearer to the Sacred than over there, is that reasonable?"

Experiencing the waves of love pulsing from Nole earlier, he would have to say yes. "I suppose."

"So, something like the Stone, which is so highly regarded, would perhaps be more suited over here than over there, would you agree?" Hanor nodded again, befuddled. "Well, show me your love, and I will show you the Stone."

Dissecting all that Nole said, what he was asking could not be understood by ordinary means. The *Stone* was probably hidden to protect it from being stolen or lost. Trusting his brother, his glowing countenance comforting, Hanor tried conjuring strong feelings of love towards him. Warm memories of the many things they had done together sprung to mind. No longer separated by the illness, his memories were his again, and he was now able to bask in their reruns. Reminiscing about different occasions, the one that worked was recalling the moment prior to his loss on that fatal bridge. Humming without a care in the world, Nole's commitment to him showed what a loyal and loving brother he was. Dismissing his own turbulent reactions concerning the chimes and the horrors that followed, he felt harmonised, the love for Nole swelling. Reacting to the tender moment, joy soared above the sadness, the special moment belonging to both of them. Hot radiant feelings rose up in Hanor's heart as a result, burning away all darkness and forms of separation. Intense, the heat felt like white fire blazing from the core of his being.

Lifting his hand, Nole pointed at the wall behind Hanor. Following the line indicated, Hanor caught his breath, marvelling at the spectacle. A crystal stone embedded in the wall shone brilliantly, its purifying rays lighting up the whole chamber. Signalling to a darkened world that *it* had returned, only now could Hanor see *its* potential, explaining why Brandor had sent them to retrieve *it*.

"Reach for it Hanor..., for it is yours to behold."

"I... cannot take... that!" he stuttered, overawed.

"Take it whilst the love flows Hanor..., or its time will be missed."

Edging forward, Hanor reached up. The light was dazzling. As his fingers broke *its* rays, his hand glowed red, each ray penetrating. It did not burn but stirred in his heart something even more wonderful. Hot like the sizzling sun, his whole chest was aflame, mirroring the power now emanating from the *Stone*. A timely reminder of when by the lake with Brandor, somehow igniting that inner *light*, he supposed the Dai-laman had planted *it* for this reason.

Leaving the questions for now, concentrating on the *Stone* instead, *its* smoothness and warmth was surprising. Feeling *its* shape, probing *its* edges, he gripped with his fingertips before pulling *it* from the socket in the wall.

Gazing down, Nole stood beside him in quiet awe. *“It has waited this long..., hidden from the eyes of the people of The Freelands, until one would come and shine forth what it knows to be like Itself. And that is love Hanor, nothing more simpler than that. But love can only come from a pure heart with a pure intention.”*

Savouring the experience for barely a moment, the *light*, like the blaze in Hanor’s chest, went out as if his hand had corrupted *its* splendour. With the fading of *its* rays, the chamber turned dark, disappointed by the change. Rotating *it* in his hand, feeling *its* size and weight, the flat rounded oval shape nestled in the palm of Hanor’s hand. Without the *light*, the *Stone* now looked black as night, and shinier than a polished floor. Mesmerised, his brother had said something. “What did you say, Nole?”

“It knows itself only as love,” Nole repeated, patient. *“And in you, it saw itself. It will always remind you of the joy of love, for the Powers flowing through it are the essence of the Sacred. But to those who know not love..., I do not know how they will see it.”*

“I am hardly worthy to hold this.”

“It is what is in you that it knows. It sees not the outer form but... the inner man.”

“I do not understand,” Hanor said, half-listening whilst turning *it* over.

“A time will come when you will.”

Lost to wonderment, the *Stone* now seemed no different from those found by Freemans Lake. To be so vibrant a short while before was astonishing. Holding *it* up between himself and his illuminated brother, not a trace of light penetrated *it*. How odd. Thoughts turned towards *its* use.

“So..., what am I to do with it?”

“You are certain you want to go forward with this rather than suffer your anger?”

Grinning, Hanor shrugged. “It is too late to turn back now.”

“Then I am pleased for you,” Nole said, peering down at the *Stone*. *“In due course..., its presence in The Freelands will be made known and great hope will it give.”* Considering another point, a detached look underpinned Nole’s gaze.

“What is it?” Hanor asked.

Acting as if agreeing with someone who remained hidden, *“My time with you is drawing to an end,”* he said, his regret plain. *“You are more remarkable than I could ever have hoped for in a brother, and I am honoured you hold me so dear. But now Hanor, it is time for you to return to the others. Darkness is descending on The Freelands, and time is of the essence.”*

Distracted from the *Stone* at the prospect of his brother leaving, he knew what this meant.

“Can this not be done another way? Can you not visit me again?”

“No, I have work to do over here just as you do there. Our worlds are united, and there are many on both sides striving to make this world a good one.” Indicating the tunnel, *“Let us go. I will lead you to the exit, so if there are other questions then keep them short and I will answer what I can.”*

Obedying his brother, Hanor walked alongside Nole, sad and retrospective. Sometimes it was difficult to say anything when there was so much to be said. Thoughts about what his parents would want him to ask emerged, Bane too. Discarding such

distractive ideas, he opted to just walk in his brother's company and savour what time was left. Leaving the mystery to what the *Stone* was for, he did not want this to end.

When the slither of light appeared in front, concerns about the *Souls* rose. "What about those outside, will *they* not attack now that I am back to health?" Fears snapped him back to reality.

"You have seen the essence of the Sacred, and felt it in your heart, it is a power far beyond their ability to handle. They generate fear in their victims, but the Stone you now carry knows no fear, for fear does not exist in its heightened state. So it is with your inner Stone, the holy place in your heart. But you have to learn how to tap into its power. Doors will open if your intent is pure, but fear will close them just as quickly. Belief alone is not enough to manifest the powers through the Stone, only knowledge and a humble heart can. But remember Hanor, it is not the Stone that is the power, but that which lies behind it."

"I do not understand."

"Consider what I have said, and in time..., knowledge will come."

Nole stopped and looked ahead. Narrow, the slit of light beamed like a fluorescent watchman, the rays dim compared to when entering earlier.

"This cannot end already," Hanor said, grief-stricken.

"It would be better for you to leave whilst I stay here, than for me to go as I arrived."

Hanor's heart was heavy. "What should I say at a time like this?" Silver tear lines glistened in the half-light.

"Sometimes, just a smile suffices, for a full reunion will come in its own time."

Sniffing, regaining control, Hanor managed that fragile smile. "Then I had better not linger," he said, taking a last good look at his beloved brother. Surprised at his own strength, he turned and headed for the outlet.

Not even glancing behind when reaching the hole, to do so would break him. Checking outside, Hanor estimated it to be a short time before sunset, large sections of valley now cloaked under shadow. Not detecting the *Souls'* presence anywhere, imagining *they* had a familiar spot in which to commune, he looked left and right. The immediate problem was how to get back onto that ledge above. Pointless going back the way he came, going left would take him away from Bane and the others, but was the only sensible option. Braving the unknown, knee feeling better, he stepped out.

Back in the tunnel, Nole watched him go. So much still lay ahead, praying the Sacred would sustain his delicate brother. Those Greater Lives looked upon strength, not by way of brute force, but by courage to do what was necessary to get the work done. Proving himself in previous lifetimes, Hanor had accepted this task of his own accord. Even so, the most courageous still carried doubts.

Deciding to run, Hanor searched ahead for that vital escape route. Staying close to the wall, if the *Souls* were up on the hillside, there was a slim chance he could sneak away at the end of the valley. Nole would not have let him go if it meant certain death, so the likelihood of getting out was reasonable. Keeping this in mind, the pace was quick, his knee holding up. Split between finding a climbing place and looking to where his

adversaries were, he felt empowered, not wanting to let Nole down. Holding the *Stone*, the idea of that blazing *light* protecting him added confidence.

An anomaly in the rock formation ahead was just what he needed. Approaching, the hillside over time had forced its way into the valley, causing a break in the ridge. Encouraged, checking the surrounding area for signs of his foe, still nothing. Considering if the *Stone's* return had freed *them* from this place, it was slim hope.

Reaching the jagged rocks, some lay loose, scattered from a tumble further up. Proceeding carefully, sharp edges promised serious injuries if he were to slip or fall. Leaping from one to another, his knee started aching from the exertion. Disregarding the inconvenience, his purpose lay outside this forsaken place. Scanning the area as he went, where were *they*?

Nearing the top of the craggy climb, his heart stopped. To his dismay, the *Souls* were approaching along the crest of the valley. Trying to stay calm, one trip could be his end. Half-expecting an attack, he doubled his efforts, doubting he would survive another explosive encounter like on the valley floor. Focussing on the last few boulders, he could feel *them* approaching without even looking.

Moving like a fearless swarm, *they* swept along with incredible speed. Preparing to be knocked over onto the sharp edges below, Hanor was stunned at *their* response when *they* arrived. Grinding to a halt twenty strides from his position, *they* did not strike, but just watched him instead. Hesitant, he stood and looked straight at *them*. Why were *they* not attacking? Looking with his mind's eye, he could picture *them* in scores of numbers. Dispirited features stared down and across at him, puzzled by his presence. Chilling for the lad from Manson, indecision crept in. Convinced *they* were waiting for something, but what?

Not waiting for *them* to react, deciding action was the best course, Hanor started forward. Late in the turn, to be out here after dark was not an option. Watching for *their* reaction, within a few short steps, he could not believe *they* started moving adjacent to him. Levitating as if travelling on invisible wheels, *they* maintained the same distance apart, scrutinising his every move.

Testing his nerve, he scuttled over the last few rocks. Walking up the remainder of the hill, tops of the trees came into view ahead. Moving whenever he did, what were *they* up to? Tense, tempted to sprint the last stretch to the trees, he stayed the idea. If he did nothing rash, there was a chance *they* might let him leave. Turning the *Stone* over in his hand, was that the cause of *their* unease? Uncertain how to react, maybe he was in a stronger position than first presumed.

Walking on, heart racing, respecting that at any time a strike could come, it was difficult not to panic. *They* wanted or needed something from him, but what? Senses heightening since Yarmoria, his once untrained mind now had too much to think about.

Trees were now within a short stone's throw, their shadows stretching across the valley. A rush of confidence urged him to turn and angle his walk back towards his friends. Trusting his companions had not done anything rash by coming in after him, qualms however, pressed him to get out of here as quickly as possible by going straight. Climbing above the latter haunts, he decided to follow the original impulse.

Cutting across diagonally, he made his way left. His friends were towards the other end of the valley, giving him time to see what these tracking *Souls* would do. Forcing down anxieties, concentrating on the smooth rhythms of his heart, he waited for further changes within that following mass.

To his surprise, *they* adjusted *their* direction to follow him. Confusion seemed to affect every decision *they* made, wondering what reaction would he get if he held up the *Stone*. Refraining, his brother had said the *Stone* symbolised love, and was not to be used lightly. The fact these poor *Souls* had not attacked suggested there was enough happening within *their* Realm anyway. Recalling earlier insights, inaccurate conclusions on *their* part actually kept *them* here, and was not due to some external force imprisoning *them* because of a wrongful past. Softening to his presence, he prayed for *them* to realise the error. Odd to see it that way, the tender cares were from his heart, compassion rising.

Hard rock now gave way to the encircling mud, and within twenty paces he would be at the tree line. The nearer he got to the boundary, the more likely an attack would come. He braced himself. In answer to his thoughts, *their* presence moved ahead and across his path. Fighting to control the ascending turmoil, he stopped.

Blanking out any sense of life within the forest, *they* were a wall of enormous power, he being a boy under the weight of something inconceivable. This, he knew, was it. Unable to go around, after the encounter on the valley floor, he did not want a repeat experience of going through *them* either.

Short periods drifted without incident. Not quite so intimidated this time around, the dominant negative powers vibrating in front were still daunting. Nevertheless, he could detect hints of hope there and a transformation taking place. Catching his breath, another insight touched him. *They did* believe he had something of value, something that was more precious than life trapped in this valley. Praying for this to unfold according to the *Higher Plan* as his brother had mentioned earlier, they were deadlocked. The light was fading, adding to his dismay.

Needing to act or fall prey to the darkness, but he did not have to do anything. Surprised when *they* moved to the side, he could not detect any ulterior motive other than to let him through. Wanting to run, he started walking, careful not to do anything rash. *They* waited for him to pass before closing around behind. Difficult to hold his nerve, sweat poured as he went. Thankful to see the ridge appear through the dimness, ten paces behind, the collective group of *Souls* followed like hungry children waiting for a promised meal. So powerful, yet like straying animals seeking a master, *they* seemed utterly lost.

Nearing his own collapse from the strain, Hanor reached the ridge's edge. Halting just before its short, sharp descent, behind, *they* stopped too. Turning to face *them*, he longed for *their* liberation from *their* imprisonment. Drawn here in the distant past by enticing energies of a supernormal kind, *they* had chained themselves to this region due to powerful desires and thought-forms. Now living *their* lives dominated by raw emotion, albeit of the darker sort, even so, *their* freedom was but a few realisations away. Praying for *their* release, without further ado, he turned and leapt down to the lower ground outside *their* boundary.

“This is impossible,” Hallen huffed, stomping back and forth. Since Hanor’s departure, he had hardly sat down, pride hounding him. Snapping at both Kifter and Tarmon throughout the turn, he could not condone any light talk either. Allowing Hanor to enter alone, and to his death, was unforgivable whilst he stood here out of harm’s way. Twice he had tried entering, and both times Kifter and Tarmon had restrained him, binding his legs before he had time to think. Promising not to go just to get released, such potent moods had mocked him ever since. Preferring to give up his life rather than face this, the terrifying experience earlier was but a distant blur, willing to enter now with blades thrashing just to get Hanor back.

“What are we to do..., just sit here and wait?” he rumbled again, concerned that night was but a few breaths away.

“We cannot go in there,” Kifter said, monitoring the big Hite.

“We should have gone in ages ago..., when I first said,” he barked. “This has driven a wedge between you and me.”

“And I have heard your threats before,” the Fife said, sharpening his blade, slow rhythmic movements helping him to stay focused. He did not like this anymore than the Hite. “You were never one for patience.”

“This is different,” he growled.

“I think not.”

“We will give him until the morning,” Tarmon said, sitting against a tree.

“I could accept it if Bane was turning himself inside out like this, but not you,” Kifter said, glancing over to where the lad lay by the small glowing fire he had prepared a short while ago. Drained from the strains of waiting, Tarmon had insisted the boy get some rest. A hot brew with a splash of Sasta was but a minor offering on the Fife’s part. With the sun setting a short time ago, thick shadows were already drawing in.

“Are you trying to make the rift even larger between us?” Hallen continued grumbling, as was his fashion.

“Stop bickering, someone is coming,” Tarmon hissed.

Kifter heard it too.

Ducking low, the threat of Dortians still likely, the fact their small campfire would have already given their position away did not matter. They got ready.

Bane sat up, alerted by the unsteady snorts of their Kyboes. Expecting Hanor to return the way he had gone, hopes lit up at the lone figure moving through the shadows further along the ridge. Running past the others, Bane’s concerns for discreetness evaporated. “Hanor!” His cry nearly reached Tarden such was his delight. “Hanor!” he squealed, embracing his lifelong companion when reaching him.

“Is that really you?” Hallen’s astonishment was obvious, laughing heartily.

Tarmon was astonished. “This... cannot be real.”

All four gathered around Hanor, astounded as much as they were pleased. Bane surprised them all with the obvious question.

“Did you get *it* then? Even if not, you are not going in there again without me.”

Exhausted, Hanor was just happy to be back. “I have a bit of a tale to tell,” he said, opening his hand. Barely discernable in the half-light, the black stone caught a distant light and glinted like a sparkled jewel.

“I do not doubt you Hanor but... is that really the *Stone of Tarkon*?” Tarmon questioned, in awe. Reeling at Hanor’s phenomenal return, but the *Stone* also represented a part of his Nation’s history.

“Yes, Tarmon..., *it is.*”

Sitting back, drained, Hanor sighed, the others too stunned to comment. The crackling fire spat, echoing the impact of his tale. Humble and candid, even details about the intense encounter with Nole was not missed. Shedding a few tears with Bane at the trauma of his brother’s death, sympathetic that his friend had suffered alone until now, such emotional weight was now catching up on him.

Already eating, the five sat thoughtful, careful not to say anything that might pollute the sensitive atmosphere. Hanor’s fatigue meant they could not ask anything more of him this night. Discerning a soft maturity there, his willingness to impart the whole ordeal just to satisfy their curiosity was a great testament to him. Emotionally connected at last, to have him back to his old self was a relief for everyone.

No one protested when Hanor lay down. Resting his head on his arm, the flickering fire sparkled in his precious eyes. Immense, the moment stirred more tears for the young man, but they were of joy not sorrow. Seeing Nole again meant even more to him now. Considering what his brother could be doing, liking the idea of him here whilst sharing his remarkable story, he rejected any concerns about what his parents would say. Savouring the warmth of the fire on his face instead, what the darkened *Souls* would do now he could not tell. Holding the *Stone* tight in his hand, he was soon asleep.

Leaving Kifter, Hallen and Tarmon to talk quietly about the sensational details, Bane lay down, uncertain how to cope with the astonishing events. Numb from the waiting earlier, he could not take his eyes off his sleeping friend. Seeing the gulf between them widening, what he would give to have their life back to what it was at Manson before they came on this miserable journey. Sullen and tired, a lone tear ran down his cheek, terrified of what the future would bring.

Chapter 29: The Ridge is Crossed

“How do you feel?” Kifter asked, Hanor’s stiffness when leaning on his elbow obvious. Just after sunrise, a dusk-like ambience lingered between night and day.

“Fine...,” Hanor replied, grimacing at intervals. An aching body, especially his knee, was a quick reminder of the previous turn’s labours. Looking around, only Bane lay nearby, huddled under his blanket asleep. Fire sizzling, posting its thawing heat to take away the chill, it was difficult to believe what he had achieved.

“Would you like a hot broth?” Kifter asked, lifting the lid of the pot. “It works miracles for cold bones.”

“Yes..., if you will,” Hanor said, sitting up, wrapping his blanket about him. “Where are the others?”

“Hallen and Tarmon have taken the Kyboes to get the animals moving. Spending a couple of turns sitting by that bush has not served them well.” He passed Hanor the savoury stew, the boy checking the *Stone* before tucking it away in a pocket. “You have come a long way since we first met.”

“I take one step at a time,” Hanor said, sipping.

“Is your memory back completely? You remember your family and where you are from? I only ask so there is no confusion in the future.”

“Yes, Kifter from Fifania, I remember all of what has taken place. If I fail to remember, it will be due to my own inability to recall it, and not because of what I went through.”

“That is reassuring to hear,” the Fife admitted. “It was most difficult talking to someone suffering such an illness. No disrespect to you of course.”

“None taken,” he concurred. “I am sure there are questions I will want to ask you over the coming turns.”

“You know I love to talk, ask anytime.”

“I will,” Hanor said, hoping to re-establish their early relationship.

Sounds of Tarmon and Hallen returning interrupted their brief discussion. Pulling five Kyboes into the makeshift camp, pants confirmed they had been on a run.

“It is good to see you awake,” Tarmon said, encouraged that all was well.

“And he has that look to say he is ready for work,” Hallen added, upbeat that they would be leaving this place soon.

“Whatever you command,” Hanor joked, finishing his drink.

Behind them, Bane stirred.

Relieved at seeing Hanor well, comforted that his return was not a dream, “Are you... all right?”

“I am fine,” Hanor said, assuring the rest of them. “As I have just explained to Kifter, my memory is how it was, and it feels great to be back.”

“That is what matters,” Tarmon acknowledged.

“And what about... the impact of..., I mean... Nole?” Bane stuttered.

Still coming to terms with it, the fact Hanor had seen Nole did make a difference. “I am coping,” he said, understanding that Bane needed to share his own problems. “We will talk about it over the coming turns to help both of us.”

Missing Nole, Bane sighed, savouring Hanor’s return to health instead.

Exchanging light-talk whilst eating, Hanor passed around the *Stone*, fending off the urge to be protective.

“What do you think will happen to those *Souls*?” Bane asked, his own chilling encounter still affecting him. Running his fingers over the *Stone* before handing *it* back, it made no sense how light could shine from within.

“That ridge is like a limitation. *They* believe *they* cannot go beyond it, or at least fear what is on this side.”

“You mean *they* could leave at any time?” Hallen asked, perking up at the notion.

“I think so,” Hanor had to admit.

“You are not serious!”

“Yes, I am.”

“So... why are we still here if that is true?” The Hite was horrified. Peering past the bush towards the valley, the others were equally concerned.

“Is that correct, Hanor?” Tarmon needed to know.

Respecting their unease, Hanor tried reassuring the group. “It is not as simple as that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mentioned last night that *they* allowed me to go without attacking. Something is happening to *them*, which could be to do with the *Stone*.”

“You appear calm at the thought of *them* leaving that place,” Kifter noted.

“I would be happy to see *them* free from *their* illusionary bonds,” he said, saying what he felt. “But to gain that freedom, there has to be a shift, a change in *their* attitude. *They* will have to reject what *they* have become.”

“You sound like Brandor,” Hallen said, dissatisfied with the terminology. Respectful of what Hanor had achieved, but the mysterious quality emanating from the boy was unnerving. Confident yet humble, definite flickers of the Dai-laman were there.

“Please continue, Hanor,” Tarmon invited, interested by his insights. Many of the wisest at Tarden had tried unravelling the phenomenon of Tarkons Tomb.

“What I am saying may not be true, it is just how I interpret the situation,” Hanor said, not wanting to alienate himself from them.

“Would it not worry you if *they* came at us now then?” Hallen challenged, surprised there was no urgency to leave.

“I would not like that at all,” Hanor assured him. “But... as I say these things, my own understandings seems to increase as well.”

“We should start moving then,” the Hite insisted, rising. “No disrespect to you Hanor, for I am eager to hear more, but we need to get as far from here as possible.” Scarred by the fact that something so hideous had got inside him, it made sense to leave.

“It is not as simple as that,” Hanor repeated, surprised at how calm he felt.

“What do you mean?” Kifter asked, needing to be sure before heading out.

“If *they* want the *Stone* then... *they* will come after *it* anyway.”

“Come after *it*?” Hallen’s worries heightened. “Did Brandor forget to tell us about this? If that is true, then why are you all still sitting there?”

“This is important, Hanor,” Tarmon said, trying to steady the situation. “Why do you think that?”

Shrugging, “I just sense it.”

Sincere as the young man was, Tarmon knew Brandor would not have sent them for the *Stone* knowing its probability. Even so, they were clearly not out of this yet. “We will break camp and head for Tardoc,” the Tardanian ordered. “We will talk more of this later, but for now, we must ride.”

“I am sorry,” Hanor felt he was to blame for the disturbance.

“No need to apologise,” the Tard was quick to assure him. “Tools of power are highly sought after. We have been blessed that you have retrieved the *Stone*, but we still do not know what we have here. So we must go, for I fear your words are indeed true.”

Slowing Tunder to a walk, this was probably the last time Brandor would see Mandurin in its age-old state before war descended on The Freelands. Still out of view on the other side of the rocky hillock, it was imperative he speak to the City’s Masters of the Arts, shedding hope against the coming *darkness*. Travelling for two turns of the day and most of the night since leaving Tardoc, his only concerns had been *Nyshifters* coming at him in the pitch of night. Many seasons had passed since last seeing one, but knowing Kifter’s group had escaped the one at Ags Ole was warning enough.

Reaching the rocky hilltop, Brandor pulled Tunder in. Pummelled as if by a mighty blow, his heart dropped, disbelieving the awful sight in front. Expecting an easy ride across the plane to the ancient city, but from his vantage point, the Dai-laman was aghast at the numbers rolling over the opposite hillside from the Ravaged Planes. A black tide of lurching figures washed down towards the city, set for war. Spreading like an oozing tar, its direction was purposeful with only one thing in mind. Splitting in two to surround the doomed city, it was a reflection of his dream with the *Being of Light* and that *Shadow*.

This was it, *Gorl-darl’s* wrath finally unleashing. Where had *he* gained such numbers? Abusing the creative powers of life, but this wretchedness gave a new meaning to abomination. Hopes of getting inside Mandurin were dashed by that black flow of hideousness. The two leading arms continued to march around before joining, cutting off any chance of escape for those inside.

For five full seasons, Mandurin had appealed to other nations forewarning of this. Few had listened, his own attempts to rouse people not enough either. Only during recent times had Masters from each city detected the vile manipulations of the *ethers*, and become concerned enough to support them. A dire reflection of the Hisian-set’s own lapse response when warned by the Sages of Baltia over forty full-seasons ago about this coming *Shadow*, if they had acted then, this could have been prevented. But internal bickering had ended with the snatching of his four compatriots from the Sleep nearly ten seasons later. When their rescue attempt had failed, driven off by *Nyshifters*, they should have regrouped and tried again. But indecision had rendered them incompetent. Seeking secretive knowledge instead to enhance their own powers, he had been sucked into that desire as well, leaving the *darkness* to grow unimpeded to this day. Now, they were about to pay the price.

As if brought here to witness the final heartbeats of Mandurin, he could not believe the timing. If he had come but a turn earlier, at least the Masters inside could have started working on his plan. A similar fate would befall Tardoc and Tarden soon. If *Gorl-darl* had moved here, *he* had probably moved elsewhere too.

Thoughts of leaving them to the slaughter blurred Brandor’s focus. Guilt rising, heckling him if he were to abandon them, but *Nyshifters* would be swarming over this

place once the sun had set. Saying a quiet prayer of encouragement, he turned Tunder east and headed for Rovot, leaving the Mandurinians to their fate.

Doing his utmost to support Hanor, Bane had spent the last turn and a half watching out for his friend, who seemed full of doubt about what he was experiencing. Initially threatened by the unusual statements Hanor had made about the *Souls*, but observing his vulnerability since, he needed support not conflict. Larking about with Hallen whilst taking a break from their ride, he kept a close eye on Hanor nonetheless. Glad to have left the valley far behind, trees and bush had returned not long after leaving the area yesterday. Back to normal, Tarmon had said their only threat now lay to the north. Making the most of it, Bane actually felt quite optimistic about the future.

Preoccupied with what was happening to notice Bane's additional concerns, Hanor had spent most of his time since the Tomb reflecting on recent events. Holding the *Stone*, its smooth, cold texture gave no indication to its otherworldly powers. Worried about having something so precious, he was tempted to give it to Kifter or Tarmon for safekeeping. Refraining, to hand it over to someone who had no idea about its power did not seem right. Whatever the *Stone's* purpose, Brandor was the only person he could trust to have it.

Recalling the overpowering presence of love emanating from the *Stone*, it was why he felt sympathetic towards the *Souls* he was quite sure. Even the love of his parents seemed blemished by comparison. To be in harmony with those *powers* was to love no matter what. Strange, he would not have thought it possible.

Enjoying this rest, especially Hallen and Bane's play-fighting, the Hitorian's size naturally made it a one-sided affair. Leaving them to it, Hanor strolled over to a sizeable branch that had broken off from the nearest Woodell tree. Judging it could carry ten men, idle thoughts drifted until a shiver ran through him. Disturbed by what it meant, he looked back along the way they had just come, attention snapping back to the Valley. Heightened senses extended beyond the boundaries of their vision, crossing the distance between them and the Tomb. Perceiving the change, he barely noticed the Fife nearby.

"What is it?" Kifter wanted to know, drawing near. Following his gaze through the trees and bush, the Fife could not see or hear anything. In response to Hanor's detachment, a disquieting silence descended on the region as if it too could register a difference. Concerns about the Tomb sprung to mind, a potent sense of death emerging. "What is the matter?" Hallen asked, releasing Bane from a headlock.

Motioning for quiet, the Fife's keen senses checked in every direction. Supported by Tarmon, fearing the enemy was upon them, but no rumblings of heavy feet were audible. Only that familiar eerie deadness was apparent.

Chilling words from Hanor struck them cold. "*They... have left the Valley.*" Hitting like a thunderbolt, four companions turned, disbelieving what he just said. "What do you mean?" Tarmon asked, horrified.

Picturing *them* rushing towards their location, Hanor could see the *Souls* surging through the trees in his mind. No blockade could bar *their* way, and it was pointless hiding behind a bush or tree. With his increased awareness came a rise in understanding. Braving the unknown, *they* had crossed the ridge to find the *light* that he had experienced

when retrieving the *Stone*. The cold pebble remained the same in his hand however, as if nothing had changed. Gripping tighter, the others waited for him to respond.

“*They* have crossed the ridge and are heading this way,” he repeated.

Hypnotised, Hanor could not look away, *their* determination to find him relentless. Shattering news, his friends demanded more answers, but their questions could not penetrate his trance. Unable to shift his attention from *them*, “It is no good running whilst I hold *this*,” he explained, unemotional, holding out the *Stone*. Half-expecting *their* arrival sooner or later, he had not wanted to admit it to himself or the others. Uninterested by a flash of steel close by, Hallen’s efforts were useless.

“Do not flee,” Hanor advised, the others mounting, getting ready to leave. Repeating his appeal, “Do not flee. You will not outrun *them*. Stand firm and wait. To run is to hide, and you will show *them* your fear.”

Outside Hanor’s inner world, the four looked at him and each other. Trusting his insights that the *Souls* were indeed coming, but to stay was preposterous.

“Hanor!” Tarmon barked, commanding his attention. Frustrated when the lad did not move, he tried again. “Hanor!”

“Do you want me to carry him?” Hallen tried, his sword held ready. “We need to go!”

Their young friend seemed oblivious to their concerns. Apart from them, the whole area was silent as if emptied of life. Whimpers from their Kyboes supported Hanor’s declaration. “Take him,” Tarmon ordered. If the ridge had been crossed, he had no idea how long it would take for the *Souls* to get here. Imperative they reach Tardoc, if Brandor was not there then at least the Masters could help.

Reaching down, Hallen grabbed the still standing figure, hoisting the lad up to sit just in front. Taking the lead, behind him Kifter seized Hanor’s Kyboe by the reins, whilst Bane fell in beside Tarmon. Riding hard, darting between huge Woodell trees, there was no giving way to caution. Even if they stumbled upon the enemy, at least they would see their foe and be able to defend themselves.

Snorting, their mounts registering more than they, fears increased. Careful not to outrun the others, it was ironic that Hallen was carrying the very reason for their flight. “Can you not just throw the *Stone* away?” he shouted at Hanor. What was the point in keeping *it* if it meant certain death? He did not get a reply.

Holding onto a grim hope they might outpace *them*, the fleeing group refused to accept Hanor’s meek warning. Charging for barely a short-turn, the inevitable finally happened.

“*They* are already here,” Kifter’s cry broke the rushing sounds of their ride.

“I can feel *them*,” Tarmon agreed.

Keeping Bane between them, his inexperience showing, he found it difficult to keep up with the blistering pace. Despite that, Bane battled on, not letting them down.

Arriving like a rushing storm, the *Souls* could now be sensed by all. An invisible *Shadow of Death*, it seemed like they had returned to the Valley. Unable to see *them* with their eyes, but *their* presence was unmistakable. At the periphery of their vision, *they* hovered as if preparing to pounce. Terror ignited at the outcome, awaiting the final onslaught as muscles strained and burned.

For reasons unknown, the *Souls* did not close in. Heightening anxieties, fears dominated every hope. Expecting a strike, the delay kept them on edge. Why were *they* not attacking? A thought echoing around the group, only Hanor stayed detached, lodged in a trancelike state by *their* arrival.

To their horror, the *Shadow* behind split, advancing to either side. Not giving in, the *Shadow* edged ahead, arcing round to close off their escape. How and why did not make sense. Riding hard, the *Souls* maintained their position as if the group were standing still. Dread enclosed fluttering wills, exhaustion taking its toll.

“Hanor!” Hallen shouted, wanting to know what was going on. Running out of ideas, the *Shadow* united in front. They were trapped! “Hanor!” he repeated. Sheathing his sword, he reached down, half turning the wide-eyed lad. Shaking and yelling again, the combination of the two drew the boy back from the abyss.

Coming round, Hanor recognised what was happening. “You have to stop,” he called above the din of their ride.

“Are you a fool?” Hallen said, aghast. “*They* have surrounded us. Whilst we run..., *they* do not attack.”

Where the insights came from, Hanor did not know. “It is pointless running, you have to trust me and put me down.”

Refusing, the suggestion unbelievable, to run meant at least they were doing something. To stop would usher in their demise.

“What does Hanor want?” Tarmon called from behind.

Concerned the others would follow the lad’s proposal, Hallen ignored them.

“Hallen!” Hanor implored again. “You will run yourself into the ground, we must stop.”

Glancing behind, Tarmon, Kifter and Bane glared back at the big Hite, desiring a response. The *Shadow* kept *its* distance, but why? Bane’s Kyboe was struggling.

“Hallen!” Hanor’s call was less demanding this time.

The boy was distressed at not being trusted. Wanting to help, to alleviate the anguish, but he could if only believed in.

“We must stop.”

Unsettling, the Hite tried resisting even though a sharp dose of truth cornered him. Admitting how inadequate he was, once again facing weaknesses he did not wish to see, could he not just fight a real enemy, one he could see? This was impossible.

Finally giving in rather than fighting what he did not understand, he would face *them* the only way he knew how. Easing up, the others pulled alongside. On the edge of his vision, the *Souls* had stopped too. Lowering Hanor to the ground, the Hite felt calmer than he might have thought. Glaring at the *invisible ones*, it was odd to see nothing but trees knowing *they* were there watching. Unsheathing his sword, even though meaningless, to die fighting was all that mattered.

Dismounting, the rest of the group waited a few paces behind Hanor, who stepped forward. Collecting into a huddle, their Kyboes whimpered at the *darkness* surrounding them. Harrowing, no one was eager to start.

Attempting to discern what *they* did want, Hanor was uncertain how *they* could be freed by the *Stone*. Speculating *their* hopes lay within *its* precious powers, the *Souls* seemed equally hesitant, indecision a problem for all. Convinced he had not stolen the

Stone from *them*, Nole had said only love could bring *it* back to this world, so *they* probably did not know the *Stone* even existed. If that was the case, then what were *they* here for? The *Stone* was not ablaze, so what were *they* expecting? Waiting for a revelation of *their* own at what to do next, horrors generated before were not apparent either. Negative energies were present, a reflection of who *they* had become, but there was a definite charge to that aura, a substantial shift in *their* consciousness. The frenzy of before was now a flicker of hope. Now *they* had found him, if *they* did not know what to do next, then there was no point staying here.

Turning to the others, "Let us get back on our Kyboes, and start riding," he said, to the their surprise. "Not to escape, let us just continue on our way."

"What do *they* want?" Tarmon asked, wary.

"It is to do with the *Stone*, or at least the *powers* behind *it*. *They* sense *their* freedom is close, which is encouraging, for *they* desire that freedom more than anything. I was worried what *they* would do when overcoming that boundary. The old way was to try and steal a body, but that is wrong. The fact *they* are here and have not attacked means *they* have chosen the wiser path. *They* are drawn to the *powers* of the *Stone*, and we must hope that desire stays strong, for the *dark path* is very tempting. I understand your fears but... try to understand that these *Souls* have been suffering for a long time. At last *they* are at the gateway to the *Realms of the Soul*."

"Are you saying we are stuck with *them*?" Hallen growled. Not panicking yet, at least nothing was attempting to get inside, for now anyway.

"Would you prefer *they* attack us?"

"That is not what I meant," the Hite grumped. "Do we ride through the night then until *they* leave, for surely you do not expect us to make camp at dusk?"

"We must act normal," Hanor suggested, which was not well received.

"I detect the truth of your words, Hanor," Tarmon said. "Can you guarantee *they* will not strike? I do not want to gain a false hope about this."

"No..., I cannot," he said, wishing he could. The *Souls*' last barrier was linked to why *they* were at the Valley in the first place. Hoping the *powers* of the *Stone* had not become a distraction, he prayed for *their* return home. "*Their* hope is for freedom, and *they* should be granted time to find out how to attain it."

Climbing onto his Kyboe, Hallen clicked his heels for it to rise. "I like the idea of riding Hanor..., that I agree with, but I will not befriend *them*."

"I am not asking you to offer friendship, I am saying *their* aim is not as it was. We need to concentrate on our journey, for that will help calm our fears and stop *them* from returning to *their* old ways."

"And what if that desire to be free fades and the old ways *do* return?" Kifter asked, easing his own Kyboe up.

"The desire to be free has always been there. It is why *they* attacked people, thinking the regaining of a body would set them free. But that is not the way, *their* freedom lies within the *Realms of the Soul*. As there are so many of *them*, I cannot see the larger group allowing an eager few to attack when there is hope for all to be released."

"How *they* reacted last time did not suggest such concerns," Kifter conveyed, getting ready to move out.

“That is true, but something is happening, something that is trying to help *them* home. For the first time, *they* have become aware of a distant time and place that was utterly forgotten until now.”

“You seem quite knowledgeable about this,” Tarmon said, peering down at the still standing figure. Only Bane stood beside Hanor, supporting him.

“A willingness to understand permits the insights to flow.”

“What you are saying may not be true then?” Hallen asked, impatient to get going.

“I say what I see. If you do not believe me, then do what you will.”

“Ahh..., now we are getting down to a hard war of words.”

“I am not challenging you, Hallen,” Hanor countered. “But I have to follow the promptings of my heart if this is to come to any good.”

Hallen grumped. “*Promptings of my heart!* What is that supposed to mean? Aahg..., I am not getting into this.” Turning away, “Are we going or not?” he said to Tarmon.

“Do you want me to lead, Hanor?” Tarmon asked, the two boys getting on their Kyboes. Respecting the young man’s insights, he did not want to do anything rash that could upset this already disturbing situation any further.

“Carry on as normal,” Hanor said. “Do not look at me to lead, we would soon run into trouble.” Meek and sincere, Hanor knew this could divide the group. Praying for their group not to descend into darkness, he was staggered how easily he did pray. A far cry from his old ways, it now felt like a natural thing to do.

The *Souls* moved with them as expected when setting out. Usually timid, their Kyboes opposed their promptings to begin with, much aggrieved. But when the *darkness* was not getting any closer, they stepped up the pace.

Chapter 30: Strike of the Shadow

Light fading, the prospect of co-existing with the *Souls* indefinitely was becoming clear. Riding for three short-turns, night was closing in with little altering for the better. Nothing was said during the after-turns, tensions high. When the inevitable arrived, Tarmon pulled in alongside Hanor.

“What do you suggest we do for the night?” he asked, not hopeful of an encouraging answer.

“We should stop as normal,” Hanor said, to the other’s dismay.

“Are you certain? This does not seem right.”

Hanor just nodded, adding nothing more.

When a suitable place was found, the slight depression next to a sizeable bush would grant them some security, if only minor. “We will camp here for the night,” Tarmon said, loud enough for the *Souls* to hear.

The last one to dismount, Hallen hesitated, having trouble with this. “I will stay awake all night,” he called out. “Attack us when we are tired I suppose.”

Pursing at Kifter, Tarmon was unimpressed.

“Hallen...!” the Fife snapped. “We do not want trouble, control your tongue.”

Ignoring him, the Hite protested again. “Bring me someone I can see..., and I will rip him in two. This...,” he threw out his arm in *their* direction. “Is not the way to fight.”

“We are not after a fight,” Tarmon warned, riled by his attitude.

“You will have plenty of time in the future for that,” Kifter said, casting his friend a frosty stare. “Now calm down will you!”

Dismounting, the Hite reached for the Sasta. “Make the fire large tonight.”

Huddling together again, their Kyboes lined the rim of the small depression facing outwards, wary of an attack. Hallen’s mount, largest of all five Kyboes, was far from the bravest, similar to its owner. Collecting leaves and roots nearby, hand feeding them such was their dismay, the idea of travelling all the way to Tardoc like this was demoralising. Trusting something had to happen before then, that too was unfavourable.

Eating in silence, five figures sat gawping at the fire. Appetites were off, only eating in case energy was required during the night if forced to flee. Doubting anyone would sleep this night, daylight faded, firing fears to action.

Hanor knew the dangers of this. “It is important we stay calm,” he said, needing to believe they could get through this. “We must remember, fear is what used to feed *them*.”

“Used to?” Hallen interjected, cold and snide.

“You forget, these *Souls* were once ordinary people like us.”

“Not anymore,” Kifter said, uncomfortable like the Hite.

“At their core, *they* are still no different from you and me. *They* are just lost between realms.”

“You keep defending *them*, why?” It was Bane who asked, seeing no reason for it.

“In the past, I would have viewed this as you all do, but... since touching the *Stone*, I see and feel differently.”

“We have all touched the *Stone*..., and do not see as you do,” Kifter noted.

“Because *its* light was not shining.” Hanor said, shrugging. “I do not have the answers.”

“You seem to have plenty of other answers,” Hallen muttered, moody. Even though the boy was doing his best, he did not want to trust his own survival to someone else.

“You need to back off and leave Hanor alone,” Bane warned, unruffled by the Hite’s temper. “Or go find a tree to argue with.”

Meeting Bane’s glare, the lad’s fiery face glowed in the dark from the fire. Surprised, the challenge made Hallen sit up, now seeing how obstructive his attitude had become. Irritable, a timely nod from Kifter proved he was right. “I had better calm down Bane, for your sake and mine,” he said, cross with himself for losing it.

“You are difficult to be around,” Kifter said, beside him.

“Ahh..., now I am being attacked on both fronts,” the Hite mused, burdens starting to lift.

“We are dealing with this the best we know how,” Tarmon said, composed. “We should not be harassing each other.”

A chime embarrassed, “I just want to know what we are dealing with here,” Hallen said, looking at Hanor, “I said I would listen to you, but it is not easy when surrounded by these others.”

As hard as this was, Hanor had to follow the clarity within his heart. “Believe it or not, I am still the same Hanor you first met at Ags Ole. I have only changed because of what I have been through. Your friendship is important to me.”

“I should know better,” Hallen apologised.

Drained, Bane had to lay down, his head was hurting. Supporting Hanor as much as possible, but that was not enough to dampen down the rising storm threatening their relationship again. Listening to what Hanor had said of late was scary. Where was the friend he knew? The *Souls* returning made matters worse, his confidence sinking to new lows. Trying his best to hold it together, but these otherworldly matters were challenging. Forgetting about the *Souls*, the widening gulf between him and Hanor was all that mattered, feeling increasingly isolated. Resting his eyes, he wanted to go home.

Talking helped distract the group from the obvious. Getting used to the invisible scrutiny, yawns started, Tarmon ordering them to take what rest they could. “Two people on each watch should help the others settle,” he said, looking down at a sleeping Bane. “At least one of us has no worries,” he joked, unsurprised.

Through an unexpected fog, they set out at dawn. Relying on Kifter’s infamous broth to sustain them until their next stop, no one felt replenished. Anxious about the *Souls*, a shortened sleep only furthered the stress. The mood was sombre, the atmosphere heavy. Needing to dig deep this turn, there was no clear way out of this. Enclosing, the *Souls* moved as expected with them.

Trying to stay bright for the group, Hanor rode alongside Bane, who was the only one to get a good night’s sleep. Expecting him to be fresh, Bane’s countenance however, was dull as if a dark cloud hung over him. Lacking enthusiasm, unlike the previous turn, Hanor let it be, presuming he was having as much trouble as Hallen with the *Souls*.

Keeping the pace steady, the fog would not shift, casting an eerie, hesitant greyness to the surroundings. Noises from their movements rebounded back as if repelled by the mist. A chill nipped at their faces like tiny pins prickling. Walking when necessary, a few supportive words eased tensions but nothing more. Trying to act normal, Hanor’s confidence only went so far, the pressures heady. He had no idea how this was to end.

Creaky joints proved Bane had overdone it recently. Occasional shivers kept vibrating through him, whispering that he should rest more. Even though he had slept all night, skipping his watch, the aches suggested otherwise. Emotional upheavals and additional labours of late reinforced the unshakable gloom. When Tarmon signalled for them to stop, his whole body cheered.

Stretching their legs, stiff necks needed warm but firm hands to rub away the aches. A few yawns swept the group, tiredness already setting in.

“We had better not stop long,” Tarmon said, splashing water over his face. Hanor was looking towards the trees, frowning. “What is it?” he asked, standing alongside.

Troubled, Hanor could detect a substantial alteration with the *Souls*. Gasping at an even greater change, the surrounding numbers exploded into a hive of activity, rousing as if drawn by another power. Disliking it, what was happening?

“Hanor...!” Hallen demanded a response. Their Kyboes drew back, whimpers indicating a problem.

Confused, “I... I do not know,” the young heir of Manson said, turning full circle. Facing outwards, the others prepared for the worst.

“Are *they* going to attack?” the Hite pressed. Infuriated that he could only see *them* in his mind’s eye, “Well?”

“Something has caught *their* attention. Oh... no!” Hanor caught his breath. “No!”

“What do you see?” Tarmon called, but the lad was oblivious to the appeal.

Stepping forward, “No..., do not do it,” Hanor pleaded. Something dreadful was about to happen. “No..., please... do not let *them* go.” His cry leapt towards the heavens, urging restraint. Like the frantic humming of a thousand buzzies, destructive desires started rising within the ring. Behind him, Hallen drew his sword. Kifter, Tarmon and Bane got ready for the inevitable. “You have been waiting so patiently, not now, this is not the way.” Hanor’s call was full of hurt and foreboding. Helpless, the pulses charging the ring of *Souls* was sickening. Soon to find *their* way home, but *they* were about to throw it away. Tears rolled, the impulses growing too strong, too powerful to turn back. “This is not the way,” he cried again, the pain cleaving his heart. Descending back into *darkness*, rejecting *their* only hope, the ugly impulses kept increasing. Unable to see the cause, *they* were close to the point of no return.

A choice lay before the Souls. Wait indefinitely for freedom through the boy or seize this opportunity. Desires for it were intense, the boy fading beneath the weight of that yearning. They could not resist.

Burning like a scorching blade stabbing at the wall of his chest, the rising power startled Hanor, shocked by what was happening inside him. Soaring with purpose, the heat intensified as if his heart was on fire. Matching the rising desires within the surrounding ring of *Souls*, the searing heat kept mounting, but could not blaze forth because something was stopping it.

“The *Stone*...!” he remembered, picturing *its* blazing *light* at the Tomb of Tarkon. Certain the *Stone* was trying to save *them* from a terrible mistake, fumbling inside his overcoat, strings to the fastened pocket would not undo. Desperate, time raced against him, *their* urges on the brink of release. Muddling in panic, he pulled on the wrong chord,

leaving a knot. Cursing, his heart sank. Horrified, the *Souls* surged past the group, only to disappear over the distant mound ahead. “No... no,” he cried, struggling with the knot.

Rushing like a predator eager for the kill, the force of the *Soul's* movements could not be halted by anything of this world. Not giving in, if he could only hold the *Stone* high, *its* living *light* could draw *them* back. But the stubborn knot would not give. Dismayed, the burning in his chest started subsiding, already giving up.

Agonising, aware of what *they* intended, Hanor fell to his knees, crying bitter tears. *Their* desires cut like blood red gashes upon the earth. The heat in his chest had gone, leaving him bereft and wanting. Distraught, he had failed *them*.

Chapter 31: Grisly Scene

Picking up a sound in a far off place, Kifter and Tarmon turned to look. Faint, like a haunting whistle on the wind, both guessed at its consequence. Half-expecting the *Souls* to return, charging in from another direction to catch them unawares, but by Hanor's reaction, *they* had found others to haunt instead and were gone for good. Relieved, but Hanor's feelings deserved respect. Indicating a calm response from the others before celebrations started, the boy's reactions were most worrying. Grey and smothering, the fog was heavy as if to hide the terrors of this bleak turn.

"Hanor...!" Tarmon dared, uncertain what response he would get. The lad had simmered somewhat, snivels the only evidence of grief.

Cutting in, Bane ignored the Tard's caution. Bending down alongside his friend, putting aside his own muddled life, he took hold of the situation. "Come on Hanor, let us walk."

Following Bane's lead, distraught, Hanor rose but could not look at anyone. Ashamed of his failings, even though his companions would not share such views, this was dreadful.

"Take your time," Bane advised. Not even attempting to understand it, the fact Hanor was hurting was what counted.

"I will be... fine," Hanor said. "I just need a moment." Red eyes revealing just how much it had affected him, there were now two sets of victims, those who had been overcome and the *Souls* themselves. Sorrow washed through Hanor. Unable to detect *them* anywhere, the *Souls* had descended to Lower Realms, severing all links to The Freelands. Never did he think it would be this bad. Pausing before facing the others, he warned of what he could perceive. "We will not like what is up ahead."

"What do you mean?" Tarmon needed clarification.

Wiping sodden eyes, Hanor did not care what the others thought. "*They* found others to overcome."

Pursing lips, the Tard feared for those poor victims. "Do you know who?"

Shaking his head, Hanor felt sick.

"Will *they* return here?" The suggestion was a heinous one.

The distressed young man shook his head again. "*Their* opportunity to be redeemed has gone for now," he explained, guilty of not doing enough. "Let us hope the *Sacred* will show mercy and not prolong *their* darkness too long."

"And what about those who have been attacked?" Hallen retorted, angry. The thought of others suffering as he had riled him. Appalled by Hanor's pitiful display of sentiment, this was not right.

As if slapped around the face at what *they* had actually done, the comment only made matters worse. "I recognise that."

"What should we do now then?" Kifter asked, keeping thoughts about Hanor's creepy behaviour to himself. "There may be people alive."

"There is only silence ahead," Hanor disagreed.

Sparing a moment in tribute, Kifter continued. "Shall we check who they are?"

"Can we not go another way?" Hanor asked, opting for the coward's way.

Thoughts of the victims being Tardanians from Tardoc needed confirming. "No, Hanor, we have to see what has happened," Tarmon said. "It would be unacceptable for us to arrive at Tardoc knowing some have been lost."

A reasonable point, "It will not be pretty."

Disgusted by Hanor's irregular conduct, Hallen cursed, making his feelings known. Those *Souls* did not deserve a flicker of compassion.

Setting off, expecting the worst at what macabre sight they were soon to see, a sullen quiet descended on the group.

Pointing ahead but to the right, "That way," Hanor indicated.

Agitated, Kyboes sensed death on their trail. Large bushes and ground plants were a darker shade, the atmosphere now similar to the Valley. Walking for nearly half a short-turn, doubts surfaced as to whether they were heading in the right direction, but Hanor seemed resolute they were, so they continued. Up front with Tarmon, he looked rigid, every muscle taut. Stopping, Hanor's reaction was contagious, the others halting too.

"What is it?" Tarmon asked, peering ahead. Nothing was discernible.

"It is just beyond that rise," he said, like a petrified animal being led to its slaughter.

Wary, they pressed on, the gradual incline leading to a final crescendo. Reaching the top, they stopped, appalled. In front, lying in countless numbers amongst bush, tree and wild-flower, bodies were scattered as far as they could see. Twisted, misshapen bundles, some were in bushes whilst others sprawled across each other as if blown here by a mighty gale. Dark, unrecognisable faces were staring into the greyness above. Contorted, capturing the horrors of death, they were not Tardanians! Shocked, then who were these people? Hulking figures, not much smaller than Hallen, crisscrossed as if driven mad.

Leaping from his Kyboe, Hanor ran to a nearby tree to throw up. Bane followed for support, leaving Tarmon, Kifter and Hallen surveying the horrendous scene.

"I estimate over two hundred," Kifter said, shocked by this.

"Who are they?" Hallen asked, never seeing the likes of them before.

Wide, coarse features with large sunken eyes were eerie in that terrified state. Black, patterned skin-lined vests covered chunky undershirts made from tiny ringlets of steel. Aggressive helmets with curving horns jutting from the sides were stylish yet set for war.

"They are... Dortians," Tarmon said, disturbed.

"Dorts..., here already!" Kifter said, aghast. Checking Hanor before investigating closer, the lad was bent over holding his stomach. "How is he?"

"He will be fine," Bane assured him.

"There are so many," Hallen said, astounded. "And they are not here just visiting either." Possessing wide bladed swords, some were sheathed whilst others gripped tight. Reacting to the *Souls* as he would have done, full of woe and panic, in desperation, many had slain their own brethren.

"Here for war," Kifter said, equally troubled.

"What would we have done if we had come across them?" Hallen said, a beat thumping his heart. Desiring physical enemies rather than the spectres, but over two hundred of these fierce looking creatures was not what he had in mind. Previous condemnations of the *Souls* took on another slant. "Looks like *They* have done us a great service after all."

"What do you make of this?" Tarmon said, searching the treetops above.

The Fife was swift to conclude. "This patrol is a forerunner of what is coming. The war has finally started."

"And you, Hallen?"

“I see aggressive people eager for the riches of the south. I have heard life can be bleak up north, no doubt they seek warmer conditions.”

“What is that?” Kifter alerted them to a skinny shape sticking out from beneath a dead Dortian.

“Take a closer look,” Tarmon directed, peering around for other abnormalities.

Making his way over, the Fife skittered between carcasses, stopping just short of the thing in question. A knobbly leg and foot protruded from under an overbearing Dortian. When checking for its head on the other side, scrawny features gawped back, the creature’s skin charred-like as if burnt. No sign of life, it too had been overwhelmed. “I do not know what it is but... it is dead,” he called to those behind.

“Are there others?” Hallen asked.

The area was large, the corpses widespread. Leaping over a couple of bodies, Kifter made his way further out. “Yes,” he shouted, pointing. Another lay behind a bush face down, similar to the other but taller, its head disfigured and oversized. “And another,” he said, spotting a shorter, stumpy looking one off to the right. Lying on its side, it was no taller than his waist. “What manner of creatures are these?” he muttered, horrified. Where had they come from? Leaping up onto a rotten tree stump, he counted nearly three hundred bodies. Another hideous one lay half-hidden by a bush, huge by comparison to the others. Making his way over, nearing the boundary of the fallen bodies, he needed a second look at this one. Enormous, its unsightly face protruded from the other side of the bush. A tiny head atop such a large frame was frightful. Who could give birth to such malformed wretches? Shaken, he counted another fifteen when returning to the others.

“What do you make of it?” Tarmon was hesitant but inquisitive. Safeguarding the Fife’s inspection, he dismounted to take a look himself.

“There are a score of these vile creatures. They are not born as what should be natural,” Kifter said, disliking it.

“Twenty?” Tarmon was dismayed.

“What are they?” Hallen asked, looking for others amongst the dead Dortians.

“We call them... Gorl’s,” Tarmon said, the word bitter.

“Gorl’s! Why...Gorl’s?”

“We have named them after *him*.”

“*Him*...?” The Hite was slow putting the pieces together.

Tarmon did not answer, reflecting on something known.

“In Tarden,” Kifter answered instead, the topic awkward for his Tardanian friend. “They say words have power, names especially. Their Masters teach that words help create life. Talking about someone is supposed to empower them. Gorl is short for... *Gorl-darl*.”

“I do not see how names have power, but then I am far from knowledgeable.”

“I am sure the name *Hallen* has made many a person tremble,” Kifter joked.

“Now you are playing with me Fife.”

“As if I would,” Kifter toyed. Hanor was making his way towards them with Bane. Pale and not at his best, it was hard to know what to say. “Do you need to rest?”

“Not at the moment,” Hanor said, going to his Kyboe for a water skin. Nauseous, the lack of sleep was not helping.

Tarmon and Hallen made their way out amongst the dead, Hanor did not have the heart to join them. Such a waste, whoever these people were, they did not deserve this. Saddened at the loss of the *Souls* too, at least *they* could no longer attack anyone. Dejected, if only he had got the *Stone* out this could have been avoided. Stopping at what that meant, finally seeing straight, what if they had rode into these people?

Daring a closer look at those lying close by, he was thankful they were not innocent folk travelling through these parts. Here for war, many would have been slaughtered by these invaders, taking the edge off his turmoil. Even though the language of his heart did not look upon it in the same light, it was still a waste of life no matter what their intentions. Keeping quiet on the matter, the others disagreeing, he had already alienated himself enough from them.

“This is... horrible,” Bane said, standing beside Hanor.
“And a foretaste of the future,” Kifter said from behind, strolling forward whilst eating a few dried berries. “Proof that Brandor was right.”
“War does not make sense,” Hanor said. Dealing with the *Souls* was bad enough, a few hundred warriors intending to inflict harm was even worse.
“It is part of some people’s nature,” the Fife said, indifferent. “Especially if you do not have much when others do. My people face hardships, but we do not have that destructive inclination as these clearly do. We use our wits to survive and pay our way. I do not know much about these people, but it looks like they have become desperate.”
“Is that what this war is about?” Hanor asked. “Can we not just share what we have?”
“A sensible idea,” the Fife said. “But easier said than done. Take the Baltian nation to the south. They are what one might call... holy thinkers. Their whole environment is dedicated to the *Sacred*. They would not get along with the free speaking, ale drinking, coarse joke telling Hites who live in a much more luscious environment. If anything, the Balts love the harshness..., it keeps them focused on the *Unseen*. It would last but a short moment if they were to live alongside each other.”
“A bit like the Yarmorians,” Hanor said, accepting his point. Their high intelligence would outshine most people in The Freelands, and people like Hallen would not relate to them at all. “They actually constructed another world to escape those persecuting them. It seems this destructive nature is in a lot of people.”
“Most people are of a descent kind, so do not condemn all. If they were not, Brandor, and others like him, would not be working so hard to protect The Freelands.”
“I suppose not.”
“This is still grisly,” Bane said, with no idea what this all meant.
“Death can come so quickly,” Hanor said. To think these people were alive a short-turn ago seemed strange.
“That is why we must put an end to this *darkness*,” Kifter said. “For *it* will turn all to *its* lightless ways.”
“I hope it is over soon,” Hanor wished into the future.
“We all do Hanor, we all do.”

Making their way back, Tarmon and Hallen remained vigilant for further clues to what this all meant.

“Our scouts have seen these vile creatures at the Northern Gap,” Tarmon said, when reaching them. “Which means the Dortians have joined the *Dark One’s* invasion.”

“What do you suggest?” Kifter asked. There were numerous options.

“I am tempted to return to Tarden to warn them of this,” Tarmon said, anxious. “Where were these heading, and what are the chances of us crossing others like them between here and Tardoc?”

“How far are we from the Five Passes?” Kifter enquired.

“I had planned for us to be there by nightfall.”

“What are the Five Passes?” Hanor was unfamiliar with the name.

“The Treman Mountain Range surrounds Tardoc in a huge curve,” Tarmon described for the two boys. “At this western end, there is a break in the mountain chain, and five passes cut through to the Flat Planes beyond.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“No,” Tarmon promised. “There are pitfalls for the foolhardy, but the pathways are wide enough to warrant us safe passage.”

After Kifter’s promise about Boverns Crossing, Hanor could not be blamed for being hesitant. Trusting Tarmon, he was happy for them to decide which way to go.

“If this is just a scout party,” Tarmon said, sharing his thoughts. “It is a question of how close behind are the rest?”

“Are they close or have they sent patrols like this deep into Tardania to craft as much fear as possible before the main attack?” Kifter offered.

“This has sent a shiver through me,” Tarmon had to admit, unashamed.

“What options do we have then?” Hallen wanted to know.

“That depends if Tarmon is returning to Tarden,” the Fife said, looking at him.

“I am sorry for saying that,” Tarmon said, sincere. “My loyalties have to stay with this group. I was just reacting to this, that is all.”

Respecting his decision, relieved, Kifter explained the options. “Then to reach Tardoc, we either try for the Five Passes or go all the way around.”

“What do you mean, go around?” Hallen asked.

“We ride around the Treman Basin and enter Tardoc from the other side.”

“How long will that take?”

“About two turns,” Tarmon decreed.

“Two turns!” The idea did not sit well.

“That is, if we go to Tardoc,” Kifter said, proposing another route. “We do not know how long Brandor will be, so maybe we should head straight for Manter. If Tardoc is about to be attacked, then we do not want to get trapped there.”

“But what if Brandor has left instructions there?” Hallen said. Another three turns on the road, and more if they went to Manter; he had already made up his mind.

“He may have,” Kifter conceded. “But I am thinking of Hanor and the *Stone’s* safety.”

“Just the five of us guarding the *Stone* though is risky,” Tarmon said, tempted to keep to their original plan. “The Masters at Tardoc may know what the *Stone* is for. *It* may even be powerful enough to help repel an invasion.”

“I do not want to be caught by one of these patrols,” Hallen said, wiping a lump of mud from his boot. “I suggest we head for Tardoc, and give them the *Stone*.”

Kifter shrugged. "Each route has merit, Tardoc or Manter. We just need to make a decision."

Surveying the dreadful scene, Tarmon turned to Hanor. "What do you think?"

Unexpected, the young man did not know. "I do like the idea of giving the *Stone* to someone who knows what to do with *it*. I was intending Brandor to have it, but I suppose a Master is just as qualified."

"The Masters are," Tarmon assured him. "Has that decided it then?" Kifter and Hallen nodded. "Then let us head for the Five Passes, and not stop until we get there. Time is now against us."

Chapter 32: The Five Passes

Thankful they did not encounter any other Dortian patrols for the rest of the turn, they could not afford to get complacent, the surrounding lush undergrowth more than capable of hiding any unsavoury scouts. Sun setting, Tarmon eased their pace as a precaution to quieten the noise of their passing. Wildlife in these parts had already settled for the evening, the silence increasing.

Troubled, Tarmon did not know why. Nothing was obvious, but something was amiss. Responding to those doubts, Kifter spoke at his side.

“Do you hear that?” the Fife asked, cautious.

“Hear what?”

Reducing their speed, they stopped, searching through the half-light.

“There is a low din,” the Fife said, turning his head. “Like the sound of a thousand voices in the distance.”

Tarmon still could not hear anything definite.

“What is it?” Hallen hissed from behind.

Signalling for quiet, “I cannot hear... but do sense all is not as it should be,” the Tard whispered to his sharp-eared friend.

“I cannot place it,” the Fife admitted.

“Let us go carefully then,” Tarmon ordered. “And keep quiet.”

Travelling as if through forbidden territory, they rode dreading the worst. Night descended, the two boys struggling to see their companions amongst the trees and bush. Deep shadow seemed to close about them. Even their Kyboes softened their steps as if detecting dangers ahead. For long periods, they proceeded, tensions intensifying.

Eventually, all heard the low din Kifter spoke of. Sounding like a mass of creatures muttering, a faint orangey tinge emerged, painting the area up ahead. Suggesting the noise was in that direction, senses laboured, trepidation settling in for fear of what it could be. Edging forward to investigate, the glow increased, so too the noise.

Halting, the glow now unmistakable, “I will check,” Kifter whispered, leaping from his mount. Slipping behind a tree, he vanished into darkness.

Peering between two huge bushes obstructing their view, such tight conditions kept the rest of the group on edge. Jumping when something touched his arm, Hanor’s relief that it was Bane spoke volumes. Gesturing he was fine through the dark, he felt vulnerable, similar to those first nights when out in the open with Rainer during his training. Composure of recent times had abandoned him. Tempted to reach for the *Stone* for comfort, Hanor refrained, anxious *its* glow could ignite and give them away. Untying the knot earlier, he would not make the same fumbling mistake again.

Time dragged by, every noise heightened by the strenuous situation. Grateful when Kifter returned, the reddish hue in front revealed the Fife’s displeasure.

“Dismount,” he ordered, pulling his hood back. When all were down, they huddled close for what he had to say. “It is not good,” he whispered, frustrated. “There are...,” he stopped, looking up when strange voices behind and to the right filtered through to their position. “We best move, quickly!”

Taking the lead from his Tardanian friend, they expected him to head back towards the darkness and relative safety, but he moved closer to the glow and noise instead. Shielded by thick scrub, they followed, the warning earlier not making sense. Halting beside two adjacent bushes, Kifter ushered them back to him. The intrusive voices were gone, only the din of thousands now audible. Checking the dark again for unexpected movements, he spoke just loud enough to be heard.

“Up ahead..., is a camp of Dortians and those... Gorl things,” he said, angry they had not stopped sooner. “Their numbers are unbelievable.” If they had gone around the Treman Mountains like he originally suggested, they would have avoided this. It was too late to quibble. “I estimate five thousand are camped at the base of the mountains. There is no way through, so we have no choice but to go around.”

“Why have you brought us nearer to their camp then?” Hallen asked, disbelieving it.

“Because we have somehow slipped passed their line of scouts. There are many, so there is a good chance we would be seen leaving. They will not be looking for people inside the boundaries of their watch. Between the camp and scouts, we can make our escape.”

“This is mad,” Hallen protested. His huge frame, and that of his mount’s, would stand out against the glowing light of the camp behind.

“There is plenty of cover to do this,” Kifter continued. “My main concern is any returning scout coming in from the line.”

“That is my point. Who but a blind person would not see us with that light?”

“If you take my Kyboe, I will walk adjacent to you but further out nearer to the scouts,” Kifter said, already deciding their next step. “Tarmon’s keen sight can keep you safe. I will see any returning scout before they see you.”

“I do not believe what you are proposing,” the Hite’s mood echoed the others’.

“I agree with Hallen,” Tarmon said, dubious. “But I do accept your reasoning. There is no room for error here.”

“Leaving is no easier than what I am suggesting,” Kifter promised. “How we got in here in the first place is incredible, but here we are, and a decision has to be made. The longer we stand debating the issue, the more likely we will be discovered.”

Searching each stony face before agreeing, “Let us do it,” Tarmon said, signalling for him to move. “Be careful.” Without another word, Kifter was gone. “You know what we must do,” the Tardanian said, turning to the others. “As impossible as it may seem, there is wisdom sometimes in madness. Stay close.”

Not waiting for a response, he turned, checking beyond the large bush for movement. It was clear. With a quick nod, he made his way to another clump of bush ten strides away. The others followed, tensions soaring. Trusting the Fife was somewhere out in the dark keeping an eye on them, painstaking, they made their way from bush to bush. Sometimes running, whilst at other times they crept, this was not what they needed at the end of a long turn.

Time agonised by, the early stages going without incident. Only irregular noises escaping the encampment fired tender imaginations. Slinking along, delicate senses alert to the slightest of noise, sometimes their own movements forced them to stop. Local night creatures seemed hesitant to stray from their holes, aware of the risk.

The din fluctuated in tempo, worrying how vast the encampment was. Lights from the fires faded periodically, promising an end, only to return further along. Fighting off tiredness, the determined group kept going.

Raising a hand, the glow and din drew too close, Tarmon stopping. Peering out from behind a large colly bush, he gulped, they were now too close to the encampment's edge. The tree-line had backslid into the forest, cutting across their path. From his vantage point, large fires were but half a stone's throw from where they now stood. Around each fire were between ten and twenty Dorts talking amongst themselves. Stretching further, to his left he could see fires extending out onto the plane itself, groaning for there was no end in sight. Daunting sides of the mountains rose in the near distance, reflecting the firelight from below. Their peaks, hidden in the depths of night, were held aloft by curving walls extending up from this bustle of life at their feet. A great barrier between these invaders and its nested egg of Tardoc within, it would not be enough to stall them, the Five Passes promising a way through for this menace.

Looking back to where they had to go, the tree-line returned further down, continuing its arc alongside the mountain chain. They would have to deviate that was all. Signalling for the others to move right, he led the way, trusting Kifter would do the same.

Odd calls and bouts of coarse laughter roared from nearby fires, the small group astonished this was happening. Tarmon cursed. Not considering enough what they would do if faced with this situation, desires to reach Tardoc had faltered his judgement. Now stuck here worming their way through the undergrowth as if intruders themselves, they would be lucky to get out of this.

Covering the short distance, the tree line veered left again, getting back on track. The relief was short-lived. To their horror, bush and tree thinned, leaving them momentarily exposed. The whole area had been stripped bare to feed the rampant fires out on the planes. Alarmed that a sharp eye might see them, they scurried on, gaining some comfort when sinking back into the relative darkness in front. Bypassing the remains of a huge fallen tree, its roots spiralling in every direction, large sections were missing, chopped and burnt by these invaders. Other Dортиans could come for more firewood, so Tarmon did not linger for long.

Checking on Hanor and Bane just behind him, in the half-light, their wide fearful eyes searched their surroundings, expecting an attack with every step. Admiring their nerve, especially after what they had endured, the Tardanian prayed for them to hold, hoping the end was near.

Following the line curve back towards the mountains, it straightened off, at last passing that recess. From bush to tree they scampered along, seeking cover wherever it lay, stopping and starting as was the pattern. Daring to believe they might just make it, a sudden rustling sound caught Tarmon's attention, motioning for everyone to take cover. A voice called out somewhere ahead. Strange and throaty, someone at the forest's edge was calling to another making his way back into the woods. Indiscernible, the hidden few knew not what was said.

Waiting for a lengthy period, ensuring the intruders had gone before daring to venture on, that was too close for comfort. Painful, that untimely interval permitted fatigue to set in like a disease. Whilst undercover, joints started groaning for respite, dry

eyes pleading for rest. When the Tard motioned to continue, the two youngsters struggled to get going.

“Not long now,” Hallen whispered to both, their strength floundering.

Neither commented, hoping his words to be true. Digging deep into near empty reserves, this was insufferable.

Blending into shadow when necessary, they stopped again when other sounds came through the darkness. Dull thwacks of something soft but heavy, and a short yelp leaked to their position. Believing it was Kifter at work, if he had been caught, they were done for. The eerie silence stressed their already exhausted minds. Gladdened when the agile Fife peeped out from behind a nearby tree, words could not describe how relieved they were. Disappearing just as quickly, the Fife was at home under such extreme conditions. Out here, it was survival of the quickest.

Motioning for them to move, Tarmon dashed across a larger opening before vanishing into scrub. Following the Tard, the group stuck to the same shade of orangey red across the backdrop of trees, ensuring their distance from the camp stayed the same. Not wishing to stumble into anyone, Tarmon deduced the line of scouts followed the curvature of the trees as well. Alert, picking out odd movements on the plane, the Dortians were far from ready to settle for the night.

About to follow Tarmon and Bane into the cluster of bushes in front, Hanor stopped, a low beating noise to their right alerting him to danger. Separated, Hallen’s large hand seized his shoulder, halting any attempts to move.

“Quick, into the bush,” the Hite ordered, shoving him in, pulling their Kyboes behind.

Desperate to stay quiet, rustles from entering the huge looping shrub cracked like a whipping stick. Whoever was there must have surely heard them. Waiting for a shout to break the quiet, but instead, the heavy sounds of marching feet emerged, drowning out everything else. Peering through thick leaves, Hanor could see the sizeable bush on the other side of the gap where Tarmon and Bane were hiding. The stomping got louder. Heavy pants from the Hite proved the big fellow’s own misgivings about this affair. Their Kyboes, boxed in by broad leaves and branches, did not move.

Exuding confidence, Dorts filed passed their hiding place three abreast. Well-travelled, a strong odour panged the air, grunts signifying tiredness from a long march. Disciplined, their manner serious like the dead they had found earlier, this patrol was of a similar size.

Bewildered but wholly grateful, they had not been seen or heard. Gorg creatures were walking alongside the Dortians as if in charge. Gulping, one halted directly in front of their position. The skinny wretch, with long gangly arms and legs, was too preoccupied with this procession to suspect anyone was hiding close by. Its rank body smelt like something given up for dead. Gaunt features upon a tapered head were cunning, as if prepared for the unexpected. Huge teeth in a gaping mouth yawned below fierce bulging eyes. Taking it all in due to the light from the camp, Hanor was as fascinated as he was appalled.

The last row of Dorts passed like a mighty arm snaking its way through to the camp beyond. The creature standing in front seemed to savour the power it had over such a

force. A glint in its eye sparkled, its glee felt. Hideous, longing to inflict pain on those crossing its path, much was revealed in that frosty stare. Fiendish, it started after the others.

Behind Hanor, a loud snap cracked, the weight of his Kyboe splintering a branch. Horrified, the creature halted and looked their way. One call for help and they were in trouble. Praying the foul creature was too tired to investigate, silhouetted against the orangey red glow, it scanned the huge bush they now dwelt in. Glancing over its shoulder to where its troops were disappearing, considering whether to rejoin them, but Hallen's Kyboe shifted this time, the rustling sound too tempting to ignore.

Instinctive, the creature crouched like any would be killer of the night. Squatting before edging forward on its hands and feet, nimble and silent, it stopped just short of the bush. Sniffing the air, it turned its head, listening for further movements. Foul stench returning, the evil with it, desires for a meal drew it closer. Snuffling again, it knew something was inside, but what?

A rasping call from behind drew its attention, one of its kind was waiting. Not responding for fear of alerting its prey, still crouching, it leant towards the enormous leafy bush. Easing its scrawny head between leaves, black pitch eyes readjusted to the dark, searching for its prey.

Sudden and sharp, Hallen's arm swept down passed Hanor's ear, taking leaves and branches with it. Short and terrifying, a shrill squealed at their feet before falling silent. Causing a considerable racket, the big Hite tried dragging the corpse into the bush, but an awkward branch was in the way. Risking an even greater noise to get it in, the creature's companion heard it and started back towards them. Soon locating the limp form half-protruding from the bush, wretched and terrible, a squawking cry pierced the setting, the Gorg calling to those now disappearing out onto the plane.

That cry did not last long. A swish nearby was followed by a dull thud, the impact of Kifter's knife staggering the creature. Gurgling, shocked by the strike, any hopes of survival were dashed a few moments later. Without mercy, from the shadows a nifty Fife leapt feet first at the faltering creature's back, breaking its scrawny frame.

Giving the hiding group no time to wait, breaking cover, numerous calls erupted from others further along the track. They had been spotted! Retrieving his knife, Kifter rushed over to his friends, leaping up onto his Kyboe. "No point hiding now," he said. Others were coming their way fast. "Follow me!"

Pandemonium broke loose, growls echoing as more Dortians and Gorgs arrived on the scene baying for blood. Kicking their Kyboes into action, the fleeing group charged through the gap where the Dortians had first arrived. Taking out the first two arrivals with a mighty sweep of his sword, Hallen's ruthless actions generated further howls from those coming up behind. Cries erupted further out on the plane, hundreds of Dorts and Gorgs rising to the battle cry. With an unseen foe, their surge into the forest was blind and hopeful. Out towards the centre of the grasslands, others stood watching the first wave crash into the woods, wondering at the cause.

Leading them on, adrenalin pulsing, Kifter kept it tight. Deafening cries meant the whole camp was rousing. Far-reaching, the growing disturbance heaved like a wave of calling. But the advantage was theirs, nobody at this end knew what was happening. Imperative to outdo that cry, Kifter checked again to ensure everyone was present. Scanning the plane earlier, he estimated the end of the camp was near. Once clear, there was no way their enemy could keep up on foot. Needing to reach the Emor River before certain of safety, wide but shallow, their escape looked promising.

A swishing noise flew past his ear, a knife had been thrown or worse, a slinger. Dreading the latter, sharp star-shaped stones could be fired from a small contraption fastened to the forearm. A nasty tool used by specialists, the fact these Dortians had them was shocking. Searching through the dark, a lone figure standing next to a tree was preparing to aim again. Taking out a throwing barb, a short dart with a weight attached, in his saddle Kifter twisted and threw it back. As another slinger whizzed past his chest, the silhouette lurched to the right, Kifter's blade hitting its shoulder.

Turning back to what was in front, the Fife kept checking every shadowed recess of this wooded landscape as they went. More scouts were sure to come, sounds of their passing far from quiet. Speed was paramount. Out on the plane to their left, curious figures were stretching, inspecting the upheaval back towards the Five Passes. Fortunately for the group, the vile creatures had no idea who was riding nearby.

Through a gap in the brush, Kifter's heart leapt, at last seeing the camps end up ahead. Gladdened, for beyond the final line of firesides lay a silver carpet of open wild-grass touched only by moonlight, they were nearly there!

Rounding a large thicket of bush, in error, they strayed too close to the wood's edge, veering back into the forest. Their passing however, caught the attentions of a sharp-eyed Dortian by the nearest fireside. Craggy and unusual, the indiscernible call was enough to get those at this end of the camp moving.

Entering with a mighty roar, a sudden flood of bodies came whooshing into the dark. Cracks and snaps of trampled bush flushed the shadowed arena into disarray. Unforgiving blades slashed and glinted, the fleeing five outmanoeuvring the assault. Hideous cries sent shivers down spines, Bane and Hanor struck dumb with fright. Convinced they were at death's door, this seemed far worse than the Valley.

More swishing sounds from knives and slinging stones came whistling through the pitch. Hallen yelped, clutching his waist after being hit. Growling in a fit of rage, blood now seeping through his torn overcoat, he swerved towards a small group of Gorf's charging from behind an oversized bush. Observing Kifter first, they did not see the Hite behind, the bush hiding his approach. Huge and foreboding when at full speed, his Kyboe smashed right into them. Flashing his sword to take down another two, a large Dort ran into his path to its ruin. Returning to the rear of the group when satisfied, the cut in Hallen's side throbbed.

Breaking from the trees, a trail of growling figures swarmed out of the forest. Many continued to run, too engaged to realise their foe was going to escape. Those worthless cries echoed under the stars, the remaining moon uninterested by the happenings below. Sweeping down to their right, the tree line followed the undulation of the land, giving the five a clear headway on the upper plane. Up ahead, the river ran like a black groove,

cutting across the terrain from the mountains to the trees. Coming up fast, they doubted their foe would continue the chase once across. Determined shrieks continued behind, fierce but hopeful. Not until that pursuing noise took on a different sound did the group grow suspicious. Glancing behind, the creatures were still baying for blood, the heinous noise heightening as if their group was running into a trap. Searching ahead, but only open grassland waited.

Reaching the river, Kifter halted. The water looked wider and deeper than he remembered.

“It is to be expected at this time of season and is safe enough to cross,” Tarmon assured them, urging his Kyboe on, the water lapping at his boots. Cries of glee kept coming, everyone following the Tardanian.

Urging his mount on, but Hanor’s Kyboe stalled, gawping up and down river as if a Bovern was ready to strike. Sympathising by patting its neck, he tried words of comfort, but it seemed to have little effect. Time was running out. The river was manageable for a Kyboe, the others bounding across. Panicking at being left stranded, when his Kyboe did move, by the time he reached the middle, the others were already exiting the river. Disbelieving the Dorts and Gorls were still coming, Hanor’s Kyboe faltered, pulling up as if terrified by an approaching danger.

A shiver juddered Hanor. Searching around, but nothing was there. About to push on, an unexpected whooshing rush of a breeze swirled, a flapping noise accompanying it.

“Hanor...!”

Hallen’s cry was drowned out by a sudden heart piercing shrill, arresting the boy from Manson where he sat. Recognising that terrible cry, terror paralysed him, his mind blurring with fear. That dreadful shriek echoed again into the vastness of night, Hanor realising what it was and where. Trembling, his poor Kyboe cowered, head bowed down, petrified eyes gawping skywards to what was there.

Another shriek above rendered the area cold like an icy dagger slaying the courage of any would-be defender. A flash of memory at Ags Ole splayed across Hanor’s vision. The *Nyshifter* that had desecrated the enclosure was here!

Shaken from weariness by *its* arrival, he dared to look to where *it* hovered, falling limp when discovering *it* was barely thirty hand-spans above. Four sets of dagger-like claws flexed, *its* long scrawny arms and legs preparing to strike. Spanning wider than his chest, each mighty claw could grip and shred his life with one foul swipe.

Horror dissolved any credible response, nullified by this awesome killing creature. Hovering, preparing to take his Kyboe too, what could stand against such a foe? Two scorched wings blocked out the stars and moon, ensuring not even his hopes could escape. Toughened charcoal skin stretched over a ribbed undercarriage, *its* heaving chest nearly as wide as he was tall. Long and narrow, *its* gaunt head captivated him the most. Extending back to a narrow bone at the rear, tight lips lathered, *its* skeletal jaws revealing bone-crunching teeth.

Objects splashed into the water about Hanor like paltry pebbles, but he was ignorant to what they were. Thoughts of his friends did not surface, too entrapped by the terror of

this monster to care. Jet-black, bulbous eyes drew out any resistance, destroying his will to fight.

Falling limp, the desire to live draining away, Hanor did not notice the stirrings in his chest at first. Like a whispering chime responding to an urgent need, the heat started increasing, holding time itself in check. Alerted to the rising sensations, they drew him back from the brink, recalling who and where he was. Expanding like a white wall of fire, the *Stone* sprung to mind, *its* mysterious powers igniting into life.

Staring down at the paralysed quarry below, savouring the terror generated, the Nyshifter did not register the numerous darts and knives bouncing off its toughened hide. Screeching into the vastness of night, this kill would be just one of many. Waiting for an age for the destruction of The Freelands to begin, only now could it marvel at the dark beauty of its Master's great plan.

Sliding a hand inside his pocket, Hanor took hold of the *Stone*. Unfolding as if in slow motion, no panic hindered his movements, and no clouds obscured his thinking when pulling *it* out. Fires in his chest were now ablaze, eager to be released. In his closed hand, the smooth pebble-like *Stone* felt like any ordinary one, but he knew of *its* mystical properties. Dreamlike, fears of annihilation did not disturb the blissful presence of peace. Only the final revelation that the *Stone* had returned to The Freelands mattered. Untroubled when the dreaded *Nyshifter* descended onto his vulnerable position, his attention was saturated only by these new *powers* rising within. Every resonance of sound dissipated, and the sharpness of life lost its edge.

Gradually, one by one, his fingers peeled back as if liberating a prisoner held for too long. Sudden and without restraint, a rushing explosive *force* pulsated every part of his body, consuming all conscious recognition of his surroundings. Energising him as the *white fire* burned, so pure and true, *its* magnitude could no longer be dismissed. Amassing great power, the *Stone* turned from black to white in a heartbeat before erupting into a blaze of brilliant *light*, all-consuming, radiating in every direction. Empowered by a *force* unknown to the creature now stooping down to where he sat, *its* embodiment represented everything the *Nyshifter* loathed. The essence of the *Sacred* now shone glorious, shedding light upon a darkened world, giving hope to the desperate and lost. Burning with an otherworldly power, the *light* scorched the underside of the *Nyshifter* just as its ferocious claws were about to seize a certain boy from Manson.

Contorting its massive frame, bottomless eyes pleaded for reprieve as huge wings struggled to lift the Nyshifter's bulky weight from the scorching heat beneath it. No fire could harm it, and no power known to man could scold its impenetrable outer sheaths. But what manner of fire did this boy possess? Forcing its wings down, lifting itself up and away from the pain tearing at its flesh, even its Master's temper did not match this. Wailing, the light burning its eyes, there was nowhere to go but up, to rise and leave the fiery heat below.

Barely conscious, Hanor's limp form slumped against the neck of his mount. Mind empty, burned clean by the power of the *Stone*, only the distant sounds of his beating heart indicated life continued. Enshrouded by darkness, he was uncertain at what point

the *light* went out and the rampant energies within ceased. Body vibrating at an incredible rate, a result of coming into contact with *higher powers*, he just wanted to sleep here for the rest of his days.

Splashing sounds filtered into his altered state, various cries of astonishment echoing in the dark. Disbelieving it, familiar voices of his companions were somewhere nearby, not having the energy or desire to look up. Wading towards him, their splattering movements reminded him of where he was. Eyes closed, he did not feel their concerned hands upon him, exhaustion claiming what consciousness was left.

“He is alive,” Tarmon said, checking his breathing.

“Are you certain?” Bane feared the worst.

“He is hot but steady,” the Tardanian assured them, dazed by the miraculous events.

“The *Nyshifter* has gone,” Kifter said from the other side of Hanor’s kyboe, searching the darkness for *its* possible return. “And those Gorl’s and Dortians have fled just as quickly.” The last few disappeared into the trees in the distance. “How is he?” Containing the urge to celebrate, so relieved and hopeful, but Hanor’s wellbeing was what mattered.

Taking hold of the hand that still held the *Stone*, Tarmon tried easing *it* out for safekeeping, but Hanor’s grip was as tight as a muscle around a bone. Content the resting boy was unlikely to drop *it*, “We need to find shelter for the night,” he said, searching the vicinity. “He is stable, but tonight has taken its toll.”

“I do not want to camp this close to those things,” Hallen declared, indicating the distant trees. “They have been frightened... but for how long?”

“I would be surprised to see them return,” Kifter said, confident.

“I... I cannot believe... what has happened here,” the Hite exclaimed, amazed. “There is hope after all.”

“We take one step at a time,” Tarmon said, keeping a lid on his own excitement.

“It appears the trip to Tarkons Tomb was worth it after all,” Kifter added.

“As much as I resent the whole episode, I owe somebody an apology,” Hallen said, indicating the young sleeping figure.

“If you will, Hallen,” Tarmon said. They were still very much out in the open. “Carry Hanor. We will travel for a short-turn before stopping.”

“The honour is all mine.”

Turning to Bane, the boy looked stunned. “Can you ride for that long, Bane?” Tarmon asked, resting a hand on the lad’s shoulder. Receiving a mechanical nod, compassionate, “He will be fine,” the Tard promised.

Awash with doubts and fears, Bane’s mind was in a spin. What in all The Freelands had they just witnessed? What was happening to Hanor? Shivering, shock setting in, he felt paralysed by confusion. Rubbing his eyes, exhausted, he was not sure if he responded to Tarmon or not, convinced he was about to lose his best friend forever.

Map of The Freelands



Glossary

Abban - Six legged winged creatures found in Tardania

Affin - Tardocian male

Aider Nash - Casvern Tarn's second in command

Aln - Leader of The Night Watch at Grovan

Anden - Council Member at Tarden

Anser - High-Grove of Rovot

Ararn Loor - Man from Mandurin

Balkorn - Member of the quest from Baltiar

Bane - Hanor's best friend from Manson

Bearn - Hitorian Fighter

Beenie - Landlady at Ag's Ole

Beela Period - The previous Age of a thousand seasons

Biddel Tree - Tall, elegant looking tree

Blackwing - Another name for Nyshifters

Blidy Liem - A Guarder

Bovern - Deadly river creature

Boverns Crossing - Ancient Bridge crossing The Rapone River

Brais - Council Member at Tarden

Brandor - Dai-Laman

Brorn - Member of The Hisian-set

Bunchy Powder - Highly flammable powder used to light fires

Candal - Cropping Village

Casvern Tarn - Leader from Mandurin

Cela Bush - Large deep red bush

Cern - Fighter from Mandurin

Chio - Animal found throughout Tardania

Clenam - Hitorian Fighter

Cossan - A Master at Rovot

Craskethe - Deep blue medicinal potion

Crissy - Female Master at Tardoc

Daffin - From The Seema Clan

Dai-Laman - Man of power - Spiritual Scientist.

Dandin - Landlord at Ag's Ole

Dageera Tree - Purple leaved tree found throughout Grovia

Dappen - Hitorian Fighter

Diven - Young man at Mandurin, survived a Nyshifter

Doon Clan - One of two Clans of The Shavani Folk

Dota River - River on The Grovian Border

Dried Datter Milk - Firm paste with a milky flavour

Drassalthe - Deep green medicinal potion

Drola - High-Tard of Tarden

Eama - Elder of The Lani Clan
Eleam of The Ree - Member of The Shavani Folk
Ellon - Fighter from Mandurin
Emnee of The Ree - Member of The Shavani Folk
Enclosure - Building used to house kyboes
Evearn - Female from The Mani Clan

Falone - Female Master at Grovan
Fammet - Short chubby creature
Feleeme - Female Master at Tarden
Filly-rushes - Tall, red bulbed plant in Hallows Marsh.
Finall - Tardanian Seeker
Finks - Small common creature
Fire-Canopy - Restricts light escaping from a campfire
Fire of the Forest - Protective force field surrounding Tarden
Fillern - Council Member of Tarden
Fliryn - Cute winged animal
Foarn - Animal from The Treman Mountains
Forar of The Doon - Member of The Shavani Folk
Fordain - High-Grove of Grovan
Freedan Way - Main route running East to West
Furl - Council Member at Tarden

Ganti - Animal found throughout the south
Ginnel - Second in Command of Tarden's Forces
Gillen - Fighter from Mandurin
Gilth Pouch - Magic Pouch that safeguards valuables
Gombols - Friendly animals populating the south
Gorin - Gorl-darl's assistant
Gorl - Wretched creatures spawned by Gorl-darl
Gorl-darl - The Dark One set on revenge
Gorln - Leaders of Gorl-darl's creatures
Gor-up-sa - Nastiest of The Gorls
Grasdon - Hasdam's younger brother
Grav-end - Gorl-darl's abode
Great White Freeloaver - Enchanted animals of power
Greema - Member of the quest from Grovan
Guarder - Highly trained mercenaries

Hader - Member of The Hisian-Set
Hallen - Member of the quest from Ebanor
Hanor - Son and Heir of Manson
Hasdam - Son and Heir of Rovot
Hase - Lost member of The Hisian-Set
Hayla - Member of the quest from Manter

High-Yarma Torna - Leader of The Lani Clan
Hin - Master at Tardoc
Hisian-Set - Group of powerful Dai-Lamen
Hislen - Former High-Grove of Grovan
Histie - Small two legged creature with a sharp bite

Hooslop - A Gorln, and leader of The Watch.
Hosan - Master at Tarden

Illett - Slender creature
Immon - Mandurin fighter
Indor River - Main river of Fifania
Ish-meale - Maddened female, bearer of Gorl-darl's creatures

Jalean - High-Lady of Rovot
Jenti - Popular Tardanian game
Jinn - Fighter from Mandurin

Kale - Lost member of The Hisian-Set
Kenna - High-Man of Mandurin
Kifter - Member of the quest from Fion
Kyboe - Faithful animals, used to ride upon

Lara - Girl from The Cropping Village of Sorle
Larea - Female Tardocian
Leeme - Lost member of The Hisian-Set
Light-fly - Peachy coloured flying insect
Lila bush - Huge multicoloured bush
Lennan of The Ree - Member of The Shavani Folk
Lissa - Female Master at Rovot
Listern - Grovian Seeker
Lizan - Hanor's Mother and High-Lady of Manson

Mage Bush - Wide leaved purple bush.
Mali - Member of The Lani Clan
Mallen - Large animals found throughout the south
Manon - Hanor's Father and High-Man of Manson
Masson - Lost member of The Hisian-Set
Meth - Female Master at Tardoc
Micarn - Male Tardanian, lives at Tarden
Millseed - Seed used to make quaner
Miln of The Doon - Member of The Shavani Folk
Minorl - Commander of Baltian Forces
Mische - A Gorl Spy from the north
Morie - Girl from The Cropping Village of Sorle
Morn - Elder of The Lani Clan

Mowca - A Commander of Rovot's Forces
Mox - Small fury creature lives in the North
Muelly - Cropping Village

Nabban - High-Hite of Hitori
Namol - Member of The Lani Clan
Nassap-Loe - Tame animals in Grovia
Nyshifters - Gori-darl's evil creatures
Nole - Hanor's brother
Nonn - Fighter from Mandurin
Northern Way - Main route running North to South

Obe-Gorl - Huge fanged creature with little intellect
Ooler Leaf - Large leaves, dried and pressed, used to write on.
Orbaddon - Mountainous region in the far North
Orl - Heir of Grovan

Paldone - Messenger from Tarden
Panorn - Hitorian Commander
Pim - A Commander of Tarden's Forces
Pisketh - Deep red medicinal potion
Polon - High-Tard of Tardoc
Prayle - From The Runa Clan

Quaner - Flat bread made from Millseed

Rainer - Manon's second in command.
Raldama - Member of the quest from Manter
Ram - Grovian Seeker
Rapone River - River on the Tardanian Border
Rassers - Small furry animal
Ree Clan - One of two Clans from The Shavani Folk
Reed-bowl - Scented leaves heated in a bowl over a flame
Rif - Fruity Tardanian drink
Rin - Oldest member of The Hisian-Set
Rinar of The Doon - Leader of The Shavani Folk
Risel - Cropping Village
Risp - Commander of Fifania's Forces
Rorsal - Dortian Male
Rosea - Female from Mandurin
Rosa-Tor - Manter's Second in Command
Rune - Grovian Cropping Village
Ruseem - Tardanian female, lives at Tarden
Rymar - Sacred animal for The Baltian People

San - An Entity of Otherworldly proportions

Seary of The Doon - Member of The Shavani Folk
Seeker - Highly skilled tracker
Sef - Master from Tardoc
Selli - Member of The Lani Clan
Senam - Works in Enclosure at Tarden
Sen-pa Line - Tardanian bloodline
Sharn - Member of The Hisian-Set
Shastoc - Nyshifter
Shoona - Tarkon's lover
Simman - Fighter from Mandurin
Simmer - Rinn's kyboe
Sinee - A female Master at Tarden
Sissen - A Master at Rovot
Slinger - Star-shaped stone shot from catapult on forearm
Som - A Master at Grovan
Soo - Balkorn's kyboe
Sorvan - Messenger from Tarden
Soss - High-house guard at Manter
Structure Bearers - Grovian builders and planners
Sulie - Girl who lives at Manson

Tamo - Member of The Lani Clan
Tarmon - Member of the quest from Tarden
The Deba Chamber - Where Tarden's Masters work
The Great Path - Main route into Orbaddon

The Lani Clan -
The Mani Clan -
The Pasi Clan - The five Clans of Yarmoria
The Runa Clan -
The Seema Clan -

The Holy Ones - Another term for *The Sacred*
The Sacred - Divine Beings living beyond The Physical World
The Watch - Gorls patrolling The Great Path into Orbaddon
Thwacker - Dome-headed beasts used to break down gates
Tiln - Man from Mandurin
Timal - Tardanian Elder
Tooly Roe - Lady from Mandurin
Tork - Grovian Structure Bearer
Tralle - Member of The Hisian-Set
Tunder - Brandor's kyboe

Valorn - Tardanian scout
Vinin - Gorl-darl's aid
Vivace - Girl from Manson

Wanal - Tardanian Fighter

Wane - Man from Mandurin

Weemel of The Doon - A Healer from The Shavani Folk

Wenda - Female Master at Tardoc

Whis - Member of The Hisian-Set

Woole - Master at Tarden

Yalno - Member of The Lani Clan

Yevan - Man from Mandurin