

Book 2 of The Centre Vale Trilogy

The
Pillars
of
Life



S.C. Meakin

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by

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Chapter 1 : Awful Discovery

Restless, High-tard Polon stared out across the Flat Planes at the emerging *force* stomping its way towards Tardoc. Thick and menacing, the line streaming down from the Five Passes at the western end of the Treman Mountains was like a slithering serpent searching out its prey. Barely a short-turn after dawn, shadows from the mountains behind made the enemy appear even more fearsome. Regretting that he had not persuaded his old friend Drola to join him to defend the Northern Gap, what was to befall their beloved city?

Around to the left, there was still no sign of the other *force* moving in from the east. Saddened about those guarding the High-bridge, suspecting they had been overrun, he had hoped the Masters might have completed Brandor's *Wall of Power* in time to protect them. Frustrated at their lack of progress, it appeared Tardoc was to suffer the same fate.

Cool and refreshing, the early morning breeze brushed Polon's burning cheeks. Tranquil up here in the highest of Tardoc's seven towers, it seemed surreal when faced with the prospects of war. This circular turret was the highest point to which a person could climb, and until recently, was used as a beauty spot. Now though, the narrow stairs had never been so busy.

Strolling around to the other side of the balcony, the lesser mountain range of Spike Ridge below ran from the heart of the city back to the enormous Treman Mountains in the distance. Steep sides meant Tardoc's outer walls had never been breached. Carved into and on top of the mountain here at the end of Spike Ridge, their home was as elegant as it was robust. Causeways on each side rose to the first level, but without their bridging stones, well protected walls set between huge fingers of rock would be difficult to conquer. Other defensive mechanisms were in place, but would they be enough?

Expecting an attack tonight or early tomorrow, Polon was ready for a long siege. Well stocked from the surrounding area, croppers who usually worked the fields were now safely inside the city. With everything prepared, his people could do little but wait.

"What are your views?" Kifter asked Tarmon, prodding the fire to breathe life into it.

Halfway through the morning, Hanor and Bane were still asleep, and Hallen had taken the Kyboes for a stroll to check for movements on the horizon. Riding for a couple of short-turns after Hanor's incredible light show late last night, they had camped here on the forest's edge to ensure they were not followed. Still coming to terms with the miracle, the incident seemed beyond description.

"It generates both hope and unease," the Tard said, chewing on a root stick. "We are accustomed to the unexpected at Tarden, but this, I am struggling with." Hanor's peaceful state was a world away from what took place. Needing to head out soon, but they had no idea what affect the *Stone* might have had on the boy. Chuckling, "This young man is turning out to be rather special."

Kifter could only agree. "Brandor's wisdom on the matter has paid off, albeit narrowly. It has certainly opened up a new front against *Gorl-darl*."

"I wonder what Brandor knew about the *Stone* and *its* powers," Tarmon queried, sipping some water. Over his shoulder, Hallen strolled into the camp, leading the Kyboes to a nearby bush before joining them. Grey eyes showed the Hite was down on sleep. "Dare we hope nothing stirs?" Tarmon asked.

"All is quiet," Hallen said, stretching his neck. Suffering, the cut in his side from that slinging stone would take a few turns to heal. "What I would give for a pair of soft hands and a warm bed."

"Recent events have been stressing," Tarmon said. "And that brings us to another point, what route do we take now?"

"Manter appears to be the only option," Kifter said, setting a pot of water on the fire, adding spices, roots and cooked rasser meat.

"It is pointless going to Tardoc with war looming," Hallen agreed.

"Could the *Stone* not empower Tardoc against an attack?" the Tardanian tried, wanting to do whatever he could for his distant brethren

"By their Masters you mean?"

"Their motives are honourable like our own at Tarden."

"What if they cannot and we get trapped?" Hallen said, retreating from the idea.

"Hanor can," Tarmon said, glancing down at the slumbering figure. "Is not Tardoc as good a place as any to challenge the *Dark One*?"

"We do not know what Brandor intended for us or the *Stone*," Kifter reminded him.

"Is it not worth the risk?"

"This is about the Freelands, not just one city," the Fife said, respecting the Tard's concerns. "If your plan fails, how great will the loss be?"

"That is a fair point." Pained to think they were abandoning the Tardocians in their time of need, Tarmon knew only a decision from Hanor might change things. "The madness in their eyes last night has made me realise just what the Freelands is facing. Manter does appear to be the sensible option." Unconvinced, the *Stone* was still a blessing. "I am not eager to see one of those *Nyshifters* again."

"*They* stir a dark fascination," Hallen confessed. "Brandor said there are twelve, and the fact one person controls *them* worries me."

"Our knives bounced off," Kifter said, their meagre efforts at the river futile. "But a *Stone* empowered by the *Sacred* sent that thing on *its* way."

A murmur from a rousing Hanor silenced them, the young man sitting up, wincing. The *Stone* was still in his deadened hand, recoiling when trying to open it. Black and mysterious, the smooth surface gave no hints to *its* inner powers.

Pulled from sleep by a subconscious desire to protect Hanor, Bane sat up, regretting it when his head whirled. Thankful that his friend was alive, initial concerns simmered, taking stock of the situation. "How... are you?"

"Fine," Hanor said, astonished by last night's dramatic encounter.

"I cannot believe..."

"I know..., me too," Hanor admitted. His head hurt just thinking about it.

"You both did extremely well," Tarmon said, sensitive that he was not intruding. Needing to know how soon they would be fit enough to proceed, "How are you both?"

"Exhausted," Hanor declared, unashamed.

"And you, Bane?"

"I could do with another night's sleep," he said, yawning.

Savouring Kifter's meaty broth, Tarmon permitted the two young men time to wake up. Not pressing Hanor about what happened, eyes red, the lad did not look well. Hoping

the *light* from the *Stone* might have recharged him, but it did not look promising. Unwise to push them on immediately, all the same, the enemy was too close for his liking. Tarmon still had to be sure of one thing.

"We can see you are tired, Hanor," he began, careful. "And I speak for all of us when I say how grateful we are that you are here. The *Stone* is as remarkable as you described back at the Valley. I am tempted to ply you with questions, but I will only ask one thing. Do you understand what happened last night?"

Taking a moment, Hanor's reply was sincere. "Only patches, most of it is a blur."

"That is fine," Tarmon assured him. "It has settled an earlier issue. We can now move ahead knowing this." Apologising to Hallen and Kifter for his moment of weakness, the Tardanian had needed to know for his own conscience's sake if there was a chance of defending Tardoc by using the *Stone*. It would be too grave a risk if Hanor had little control over the dynamic *powers*. Hard as it was, but his commitment was to this group and not Tardoc. The *Stone* seemed to demand a price of *its* own. "When we have eaten, we will make for Manter."

"Manter...!" Hanor said, surprised.

A place he had visited with his father, after all the travelling, to see something familiar again lifted him. Enduring so much - the *Stone*, Tarden, Yarmoria, *Nyshifters* and more, his old self urged him to give it all up. Insights obtained when first retrieving the *Stone* had abandoned him, and feeling normal, Manter was what he needed. Sitting beside him, Bane seemed full of doubts. Promising they could both sneak off and forget about this journey for a while when they got there, it hurt to see Bane troubled. "How are you coping?"

Forcing a smile, "Well enough," Bane replied, staring at the hot flames, the gloom returning. Concerns upon waking had lost their sparkle, and he knew why. Failing to be at Hanor's side when that *Nyshifter* struck had left him feeling inadequate again. The notion of losing his friend to *higher ways* only reinforced the gulf separating them. Awash with uncertainty, there seemed to be little he could do to counter it. Just a pathetic boy out of his depth, he sat sulking, uninterested in what the future held.

Setting off just before half-turn of the day, occasional bursts of riding interrupted long periods of walking, ensuring the small group recovered from the night's exertions. Keeping to the edge of the forest just within the tree line, no signs of pursuit were evident, Hanor's blinding display unnerving those foul creatures. Following the gradual curvature of the mountain chain across the plane opposite, patchy sunlight along with Hallen's high spirits lightened the atmosphere.

Aches and pains increased as the turn drifted towards the latter parts, making camp at sundown. Grateful for the rest, Hallen's humming kept the mood upbeat amongst the fatigue.

Barely staying awake during their meal, Tarmon permitted the two exhausted boys to sleep, leaving further questions until tomorrow. Inspired by their resilience, the numerous tales about their journey to Tarden was remarkable even by his own standards. Tomorrow however, they would push harder, keeping an eye on Hanor in particular. Interactions with mysterious powers sometimes generated penalties that were not obvious. Reinforcing his faith that this evil could be repelled, much remained obscure.

"You ask a great deal, Brandor of the Sleep," Anser said, rising. Displeased, the High-grove of Rovot had not expected this. Glad to see his old friend, like a beacon of light before the looming dark, he had hoped the Dai-laman was here to help fight against the massing *forces* spewing out of the Crystal Mountains. Sharing his vision, as he called it, but knowing it would not be ready in time to stop the invasion was unacceptable. Stomping back and forth, his two sons and five of Rovot's Masters were examining the potential of the Dai-laman's *Wall of Power*. Discussing the details in a small side chamber to the main Meeting Hall, the atmosphere was tense. Anser's concerns were for the immediate threat. Power was needed now, not in ten turns or more. The Masters had to defend the city, not build some invisible *Wall* that might not work.

"He is not saying we should abandon Rovot to pursue this," the Master Sissen said, disapproving of the High-grove's response. "This *Wall* might actually save us." Creating it was something none of the Masters here at Rovot could reject.

"Father," Hasdam, the older of Anser's two sons spoke. Understanding both sides of the debate, interested in the Arts himself, the potential here was too great to dismiss for anyone who served as the Masters did. "We have to defend our home, but... it will not be enough to do it on our own, with or without the Masters. I have seen the enemy's numbers increase over recent turns, and there are too many. As honourable as our Masters are, we cannot keep them from this work."

"And how will we defend ourselves against any Masters on their side?" Grasdon said, supporting his father. The youngest of the two sons, he did not share the same passion for openness as his brother. He loved Hasdam, but doing this would be a grave mistake.

"We do not know if they have Masters," Cossan, another Master said, already concluding this had to be done. To create as the *Holy Ones* did was breathtaking. "If there is, we will face that when it comes."

"Is this a question of loyalties then?" Grasdon challenged, staring at each of them.

"Our loyalties are not in question," Cossan warned the young Grove. "We will not abandon this city, a balance between the two is required."

"Have you made your mind up already then?"

"We follow the path of service. If this is unacceptable, then that is for you to deal with."

"Brandor...!" Anser cut in before the situation got out of hand. Trusting the Masters had made their decision, he needed to be sure about this. "Do you believe this *Wall* will work? Details you have given are asking us to withstand an attack indefinitely. How can we fight without the aid of our thirteen Masters? Can you not give us a time frame?"

Sitting in the corner listening to the debate, Brandor had expected this, especially after learning that this grand city of stone was soon to be attacked. Refraining from sharing the finer details about the *Wall's* ensoulment to keep it simple, Hasdam could handle the details but not so the others. Thankful of the young Grove's support, Anser respected his son's views and would be swayed by them, if not for his fears.

Leaning forward, "Challenges sometimes climb beyond our range of vision, but Anser..., if you fight half-looking at what your Masters are doing, your efforts will be divided and cost you dear." Sighing, "I cannot give you a time."

Shrugging, the High-grove's reaction showed he had little left to give. A closing verse to a terrible tale, it concluded what was a hopeless debate. "Then so be it."

A blustery wind blew directly at the group the following turn. Daring to lead them along the edge of the grassy plane, Tarmon loved this time of the morning, so crisp and inviting. Far enough from that marauding horde, the Tardanian set a good pace. Eager to get to Manter, hopes now lay with Brandor's knowledge of the *Stone* and what *it* could do. Praying the Dai-laman would order them back to Tardoc, the slim notion soothed conflicting anxieties. Worried about what other evils were spewing out of the northern regions, the idea of Tarden under attack was even more horrifying.

Keeping to the line of trees when tracking the mountains across to their left, gradual undulations of the ground heightened expectations for what might be over the next rise. Shortly after their half-turn rest, a distant terrifying shrill far behind alerted them to recent dangers. Enough to draw Tarmon back into the trees, the fact *Nyshifters* could move during the day if the sun was not out could not be ignored.

By the mid-afterturns, Hanor and Bane were struggling. At the crest of one of many rises, Tarmon steered them back through the trees towards the open grassland. Halting at the forest's edge, the Tardanian pointed ahead. "Just across there, this great forest comes to an end," he said, sympathetic to their fatigue.

Looking to where he indicated, the trees gradually curved around to a point on a distant rise. To their left, the dramatic ending to the mountain chain sat parallel to their position, a cliff-face rose as if cut off by a mighty sword. Bathed in the late after-turn sunlight, a thick band of dark cloud on the horizon promised any security the sun offered was to be short-lived.

"If we make camp there tonight, it is half a turn's ride to the High-bridge tomorrow," Tarmon continued "Can you last long enough to reach it?"

"How long will it take?" Hanor asked.

"Another short-turn and a half."

Not wishing to let them down, both agreed.

"Can I have a mouthful of Sasta?" Bane asked, to Hallen's amusement.

"Of course," the Hite said, beaming. "Stick with me and I will show you how to live," he joked, handing him the skin.

Grimacing when swallowing, Bane just needed to lighten the shadow hanging over him.

Staying close to the edge of the great forest, they walked for a while, the wind dying down enough to ease their efforts. In a line, Hanor and Bane just followed their guides, numb from the strain. Digging deep when the pace increased, the short burst of running was soon hindered by large pockets of thick underbrush, making it difficult for their Kyboes. Persevering, needing to stay hidden, long shadows started stretching across the plane to their left as the turn waned towards evening.

Hanor's concerns turned to Bane, his aura appearing dark and melancholic. Saying little all day, barely acknowledging him, the signs were not good. Empathising with his friend's suffering, Hanor felt for the *Stone* through his overcoat, *its* familiar contours helping him to cope with his own pains. No different from Bane's request for Sasta, becoming reliant on the *Stone's* presence for comfort, such needs would only get stronger with time. Focusing on Kifter in front, he rejected the fatigue.

The end to the monumental wood was much further than anticipated. Longing for that final signal to declare their ride was over, the waiting seemed as hard as the ride

itself. Bearing left, they arced around, the frontage of the cliff face now visible through the trees. Waning from the strain, Kifter broke the lull, lifting his arm to slow them down. The two boys wanted to rest but Kifter kept scanning ahead as if expecting trouble.

“What is it?” Tarmon asked, peering out through the trees onto the plane.

Making sure he was not mistaken, Kifter sniffed the air, his nose twitching, dissatisfied with an odour on the breeze. “Can you smell that?”

“Smell what?” Tarmon asked. Not doubting his Fifanian friend’s acute senses, but only the aroma of bush and tree was apparent.

“It is somewhere ahead,” the Fifanian said. “And not healthy.”

“It *is* a little quiet around here,” Hallen said from behind, edgy.

Halting, only their Kyboes pants evident, “I see what you mean,” the Tard said, searching the woods around them.

Similar to the Valley, the Hitorian turned to Hanor. “Are you certain those *Souls* are still not scouring this forest for trouble?”

“No, *they* are not,” Hanor said, recalling the strong impressions. “You have to trust me.”

His confidence the big Hite liked, but finding a similar atmosphere here, who could blame him for fearing the worst. “As you say,” he said, peering through the brush.

Nearby, Woodell trees showed no clues to what had alerted the sensitive Fife. Wary of committing, Tarmon permitted Kifter to lead, the Fifanian starting forward at a cautious pace.

Soft steps of their Kyboes crunched, pressing twigs and leaves beneath their weight. Eerie tensions again accompanied them. Steady as they went, a scurrying rasser bolted from beneath a nearby bush, startling them.

Lifting his sword, Hallen cursed as the petrified creature scuttled away. Satisfied there was no immediate danger, “At least there is life here.”

“Hmm..., let us hope so,” Kifter said, the foul odour getting stronger.

“I can smell it now,” Tarmon confirmed.

Passing another three large bushes, all could sense the change.

“What *is* that... stench?” Hallen groaned, disgusted. “Something must have died.”

Signalling for silence, Kifter was certain it was just in front, the thick undergrowth capable of hiding anything foul or dangerous.

Moving beside Hanor, Bane was determined to stand by his side this time, both boys fearful of what was to come. Not needing this, darting eyes were dry and unblinking.

Rounding an enormous bush, the group stopped, appalled by what lay in front. Covering sensitive noses, Bane and Hanor closed their eyes, the scene snatching their breath away. Reacting first, Tarmon leapt from his mount to inspect the despicable atrocity, the others stalling where they sat.

“I do not believe this,” Hallen growled, the smell nauseating.

Scanning the area, to their horror, the grim setting echoed the carnage of those dead Dortians after the attack from the *Souls*. Counting nearly fifty corpses, half-naked and bloodstained, they were set together in pockets of fours and fives as if ritually placed. Left here to rot amongst the trees, nothing could have prepared them for this. Similar features and stature to Tarmon, they were of Tardanian descent. Bloodied clothes meant they had died in battle, and not because of a haunting as feared.

“Who... are these?” the Hite asked, shocked at the devastation.
“They are... from Tardoc,” Kifter said, respecting Tarmon’s dismay.
“Who would do this?” Hanor had to look away. More death, when would it end?

Obedying Tarmon’s promptings, Kifter dismounted and joined him. Walking and talking when stepping out amongst the dead, a couple of times the Tardanian turned away, such was the disgust. Pointing at one of the dead, he shook his head, distressed. The two made their way along one side, checking every detail. Inspecting the ground for clues, trying to unravel why they lay in this manner, even the surrounding bushes seemed to give nothing away. Reaching the far end, discussing something that Tarmon seemed to disagree with, Kifter’s objections and quick tongue eventually persuaded the Tard enough to proceed. Circling round, the two continued muttering, seeking clues as to what had happened. Frustrated and grief-stricken, they finally halted before the other three.

“What is this?” Hallen asked, impatient.
Kifter answered for his disturbed Tardanian friend, Tarmon heading over to rest against a tree. “We cannot decide how or why this has happened,” the confused Fife said. “There are abnormalities that do not make sense. Tarmon recognises one who is from Tardoc, but no others. They could have been a patrol out checking these parts.”
Heart-wrenching, Hanor felt like crying such was the hurt.
“How long have they been here?” Hallen probed, still reeling from the smell.
“Three full turns, no more.”
“This seems worse than those Dortians,” Hanor said, alarmed.
“I agree,” the Fife supported. “At least these were not set for war.”
“What wounds do they have?” Hallen noted the large patches of blood on their garments.
“This is something we both agree on. We are certain Dortians and Gorls are to blame. Some have... teeth marks.”
“Teeth marks!” Hanor was aghast. That black creature Hallen had put an end to was a quick reminder of what evil was out here.
“This will be a cruel war.”
“Why the irregular patterns, the way they are laid out?” Hallen could see no reason for it.
“We do not know,” the Fife said, turning back towards the atrocious scene. “One might think the Dortians have held a ritual but..., and this is the difficult part, there is no evidence to suggest Dorts were even here.”
“What do you mean?”
“It sounds ridiculous but... these have appeared from nowhere.”
“Nowhere...! I do not follow.”
“We are just as bemused as you Hallen, but there are no marks on the ground to suggest anyone else has been here. Dorts are not light, signs of their presence should be easy to find. Even those wretched Gorls would leave a clue, but nothing outside of where the dead lay indicates movement. The ground is as it would be if these were not here.”
“That is ludicrous,” the Hite declared a little too brazenly. Apologising, the glare received from his companion warned he was not mistaken. “What do we do now then?”
Checking on Tarmon, whose eyes were closed, Kifter answered. “We have decided to leave this place. Time is too short to give these people a fitting place of rest, there are too many. A fire we cannot attempt either for obvious reasons.”

“It does not seem right to leave them here,” Hanor said, pained.

“We know but... we have little choice,” the Fife said. “We must move on, our path is with the living not the dead. Harsh that may be, but what good is dead flesh?” Potent words to dissipate any sentiment, they could not afford to delay. “We will see worse over the coming turns, so be prepared.”

“You seem very detached from this,” Hallen said, unnerved.

“These are pressing times, to stop for lesser reasons might strip us of opportunities in the future. Look how we missed Tardoc by a turn. Time is of the essence, and so is rest. We cannot spare the resources, unless you want to do it yourself?”

“Calm down,” the Hite snapped, holding his hands up. “We are on the same side here.”

Climbing up onto his kyboe, Kifter urged his mount on, circling around the pool of corpses. He did not wait to see who followed. Three pairs of hesitant eyes looked at each other and then Tarmon, the Tard struggling with it.

Peering up at the awaiting three, the slender figure from Tarden shrugged. “We had better do as he says... before some of us change our mind.”

Chapter 2 : Special Waters

The mood was sombre. Soundless by the small crackling fire, five figures waited for the quiet to ease troubled minds. Darkness was all about, the night's dominance here to whisper into fearful ears. Eating their meal, but no one was hungry, a grim sadness settling in. Picking this spot due to the large ring of bushes now encircling them, their kyboes were resting just beyond the rim of the camp. Seeking as much cover as possible, the forest's end was a hundred paces from where they now camped. Continuing for another half short-turn after that horrendous discovery, getting as far away as possible had brought them to the very brink of the great Tardanian forest. No one felt comfortable, with too many questions lingering.

Declining Hallen's tame offering of Sasta, Tarmon closed his burning eyes, images of those lifeless forms now etched in his mind. Trying to piece together the details, the fact Kifter's conclusions had matched his own meant nothing had been overlooked. Even so, it did not make sense, verging on the impossible. So many could not have just appeared from nowhere. People would be waiting at Tardoc for their loved ones to arrive home. At least that was one reason to be thankful as far as his own circumstances were concerned. Without any dependants back at Tarden, his freedom belonged to him alone. The sense of loss however was no less damaging.

Determined to climb above such suffocating thoughts, he recalled Hanor's close brush with death and the miracle that had saved him. "Please tell us Hanor..., what you felt when you held the *Stone of Tarkon* up to that *Nyshifter* last night," he asked, catching everyone, especially Hanor, by surprise.

The young man from Manson was actually mulling over the phenomenal event as he spoke. Sighing, he wished the pain of what they saw earlier could dissolve. "I do not recall much of it," he said, longing for insights about what did take place. The intense *powers* had virtually consumed both his mind and body. Gazing at the flickering fire, he continued with what he knew. "It started with a pain in my chest, I cannot remember clearly, like a raging fire but without the burns. It is odd but... I am sure the *power* had a type of intelligence." Describing it helped answer some of his own questions. "It was so... alive and powerful."

"It was," the Tard acknowledged, searching for something else. "You mentioned before at the Tomb of Tarkon that you felt unconditional love," Tarmon said, unsure where he was going with this. "Was it present this time?" Needing to talk to help him cope, his sadness yearned for goodness beneath the madness. Part of him had died with the those discovered earlier.

Considering the comment, "It did not feel the same as back at the Tomb," Hanor said. Finding the right words was not easy. "The *power* was pure, and as strange as it sounds..., it was like... *it* had a task to do."

Intrigued, "What do you mean... task?"

"*Its* purpose was to reveal itself as if that was enough. *Its* very presence was what burned the *Nyshifter*, and nothing more. I do not know why but... *it* is not a weapon."

"That is hard to believe," Hallen chirped, viewing *it* as nothing but.

"I am tempted to agree with Hallen," the Tard said. "Hence why I am confused by this unconditional love you initially described."

Aware that love was encapsulated in that fiery white *power*, Hanor still could not piece it together. “Nothing has changed.”

Presuming he did not want to go into depth, Tarmon did not pressure him, watching the young man reach up and clasp the *Stone* through his overcoat. The potential was staggering. “We do need to find out just what *it* is you have there.”

The Tardanian’s turmoil persisted like an ache. Peering across at Bane, his straggly, curly hair revealing the extent of their efforts of late, he looked in no mood to talk. Head lolling, he approved when Hanor responded by laying him down. Tarmon could not help but worry. “He is struggling with all of this.”

“He is,” Hallen agreed. “And I fear for him,”

“Me too,” Hanor said, gazing down at the sleeping figure.

“He is at war with himself,” Hallen continued. “I watched him closely this turn of day. He is unable to find a place of peace. This whole trip is way beyond his understanding, and I think that includes you especially, Hanor.” The Hite revealed a sensitive side to his nature. “He does not know where he is going and with whom. I saw him look at you a number of times during our ride, even before the latter parts. Questions were forming like knives. He is lost.”

“I have been worrying too, but I do not know what to say to him or how,” Hanor confessed, despondent. “He seems to represent an old part of me that is fading. I do not want to leave him behind, I want to share it with him but do not know where to begin.”

“This venture has hardly been uneventful,” Kifter said, adding his own piece. “His fiery ways have certainly calmed down since we first met. Exhaustion can do many things. If he is travelling on his reserves, then this is to be expected. Dare I admit it but... I would prefer to see him back to his former self.”

“Do you suggest we slow down?” Tarmon asked, disliking the notion. Sensitive to the boy’s needs, but Tardoc would soon be hanging on for dear life, and the *Stone* may be their last chance of survival. Desperate to see Brandor, every short-turn’s delay was a step closer to the City’s demise.

“We should deal with it as we find it,” Kifter said. “Let us see how he is in the morning.” Concurring, Tarmon kept his desires close to his chest.

Bane’s eyes flickered open. Unsure what short-turn of the night it was, he could not see anything as if the stars themselves had gone out. Sensing he was at the camp, but... it felt different. Searching the darkness above, but for what he did not know. Unafraid, he lay there trying to discern the unusual atmosphere. His legs felt weighty, so too his body. Strains from the turn’s ride had gone, permitting mental clarity he had not experienced for a while.

Unexpected, a *shadow* rose within his mind, obscuring the brief period of awakening. The camp dissipated with its arrival. Head aching, his temples started throbbing. Uncertain where the additional thoughts came from, various ideas began forming as if of their own accord. Slow at first, mingling with his own, they seemed odd but unthreatening. Was he dreaming? An explicit question startled him.

“The pathway is long and treacherous, can you go through with it?”

“Who said that?” He had not heard it with his ears, squeezing his eyes shut to rid himself of the straying thought. Daring to open them, he could not raise his head to look around. Putting it down to his imagination, he froze when another question invaded his thoughts.

“Your destiny is ahead of you, are you going to fulfil it?”

This time there was no denying its validity. “What... are you... talking about?” he stammered, in the not so private areas of his mind. Undecided if he spoke the words or thought them, his head still would not clear.

“I am your guide, for your path is long and your destiny awaits you.”

The words or thoughts were as real as someone talking. “Who... are you, and what do you mean, you are my guide?”

“Be ready next time.”

As quickly as *it* had arrived, the *shadow* left, leaving Bane’s mind in a muddle. Returning to the real world as if emerging from a mist, when trying to discern what had happened, blankness prevented him from analysing the details. Unconcerned, thoughts that anything untoward had taken place were absent, leaving him to settle as if waking from a stupor. The camp’s presence increased, familiarity soothing him. Sounds of his companions sleeping were as if nothing had occurred. Tiredness soon claimed him.

Halting at the forest’s edge, the five stared out across the rolling grassy landscape to where it disappeared at the crest of a hill up ahead. Beyond that point, Tarmon promised there would be a slow descent towards the river and the subsequent High-bridge, which would safeguard their crossing from any monsters now lurking in the river’s depths. Behind and to the left, the forbidding Treman Mountains loomed like giants of another age. Running away in a huge looping arc, distant peaks at the other end of the curved mountain chain sat on the horizon in front, equally immovable. Not yet airborne, the sun still hovered behind sporadic clouds and those far off peaks. Looking forward to an invigorating ride, a delightful change from the endless turns beneath the canopy of trees, it did have its risks. Once out in the open, concerns for *Nyshifters*, even with the *Stone of Tarkon* for protection, was daunting.

Checking ahead for anything that might hint at what had happened to the dead Tardocians, Tarmon half hoped to see the enemy close by to explain their undignified disposal. Conflicting emotions meant it was the last thing they actually needed. Satisfied when nothing moved, he urged them on. Conceding they could reach Tardoc by the end of the turn, taking at least another three to reach Manter, that *force* at the Five Passes however was enough to deter them from going.

Pulling up when reaching the top of the hill, a most resplendent sight swept away in a vision of rare beauty. Standing as if on a mountaintop, the land bumped and swelled like a cascading flood of earth beneath them. Vast in scope, their range of view penetrated the very depths of The Freelands. Different colours and shades merged and tumbled. Greens and Browns fused with patches of reds, purples and yellows, painting the plants and wildlife into a collective whole. A thin dark line of the Rapone River was in the near distance like a dividing line between two nations. The Tardanian and Kifter had seen it before, but it never failed to lift down-beaten hearts. Only the distant elongated patch of Darbin Forest stretching away to their right was an explicit landmark. With The Freedan Way running along its northern edge all the way to Manter, the city of

men was too far away to see. Having to cross the High-bridge even though there were smaller crossings populating the river, recent activities at Boverns Crossing meant they could not take any chances. Guards at the bridge would know what patrol had left recently, Tarmon not looking forward to breaking the news.

Scanning the terrain, he was glad there were no dark patches blotching the region. Meaning no invading *forces* had arrived in the area, it left them a free ride to Manter. Still out of view, the High-bridge was hidden by a large bulge in the slope. Just one of many that could hide the enemy, everyone stayed alert.

Pressing on, following undulations of the land, the sun soon soared above the mountaintop. The river kept disappearing behind bulges in the landscape only to reappear that much closer. The group savoured the quiet whilst they could.

Exchanging a few words in front, mischievous grins spread across Tarmon and Kifter's lips, concealing a secret the others could only guess at. Uninterested, Hanor and Bane just appreciated each other's company instead. Avoiding questions about recent events, idly talking like times of old, the interplay was precious to both.

Easing up, Tarmon and Kifter examined the ground. Unsure why, the other three waited. Still a considerable distance from the river, no one was in a mood to rush.

"Over there," Kifter said, pointing in front.

Everyone checked to where he indicated.

"What? I cannot see anything," Hallen shot from behind, his extra height not helping.

Staring at him before grinning, Kifter huffed. "Have all those turns spent training you been squandered on too much Sasta?"

Pained by what he was implying, Hallen searched in both directions. A slight depression running down to the river was the only change. Lush, the grass was a rich emerald colour that followed its course, deducing something ran beneath it. "I see now."

"What do you see?" Bane asked, thinking it a game. Feeling better even though tired, memories of the unusual occurrence during the night had gone, the *presence* concealing all traces of itself.

Urging his mount forward, "A stream," Hallen said, stopping at the edge of the deeper shade of grass.

"You have saved me from an embarrassing predicament," Kifter toyed. "I might have been tempted to send you home in shame."

"But this is no ordinary stream," Tarmon said, dismounting and stepping forward.

Populated by small orange flowers intermingling with white stems of hock, the grass appeared lush enough to eat. Without prompting, their Kyboes started munching, their delight evident by occasional grunts of pleasure.

"This looks interesting," Hallen noted, eager to investigate.

"Let us hope so," Hanor said.

The Tard stopped and bent down to search the ground. "Here!" he said, motioning for them to join him. Dipping his hand into the grass, the others were astonished to see his arm disappear up to his elbow. Reaching the appointed spot, he pulled it out, the others watching with interest. Raising a cupped hand to his lips, he drank. Head resting back on his shoulders, a large gratifying smile appeared. "What are you waiting for?" he said, dipping his arm in again. "Even Tarden does not have water like this."

Four eager individuals followed his lead. Running along a small channel, measuring a hand's length across, the water was bitterly cold. Under the beating sun, each lifted and drank, appreciating its coolness.

Sitting back on his heels, Bane grinned, the icy water refreshing. Delightful, a tingle spread through his body, revitalising every portion of his fatigued frame. "This is wonderful," he purred.

"Even Sasta does not beat this," Hallen said, tilting his head, the sun's rays heightening the experience. "What is this..., a potion?"

"You are not far from the truth," Tarmon said, rejuvenated. "This spring is from the Treman Mountains, and is full of their potent power."

"I do not care where it comes from," the Hite said, gulping another mouthful.

"What do you mean... potent power?" Hanor asked, wary of drinking too much. As invigorating as it was, there was more to this than was observable.

Waiting for the next wave of energy to pass, Tarmon answered him. "It is said the Treman Mountains have *powers* within their vast caverns. Our ancestors tried to harness them, but the energies inside are too powerful. Brandor himself is wary of entering."

"I have heard him mention it," Kifter said, supporting the Tardanian's claims. "He said the energies are wild, something to do with the rock the mountains are made of."

"Shame they cannot be used to soften our enemy," Hallen said, feeling blissful.

Convinced his own experiences with such *powers* carried a stiff price, Hanor stayed cautious. "Power in itself is not good or bad," he said, the insights rising from somewhere deep. "It depends upon the purity of the intent wielding it. If the motives are corrupt then the powers will only work towards exaggerating that darkness. All power does is respond to the will of the individual."

As if wisdom had descended on him again, Tarmon was respectful. "I believe your words to be true, and you are sounding evermore like our Masters."

Embarrassed, Hanor shrugged. "I am not sure why I say these things sometimes."

"Because you are a treasure," Hallen declared, clasping his shoulders. "We just have to make sure you do not crumble under your burdens."

About to reach for another handful of energising water, Tarmon noticed Hanor's hesitation. "I see you have only had two mouthfuls, why?"

Pursing his lips, Hanor was uncertain if fear or wisdom was the cause. "There is good in it but... uncontrollable powers do not just disappear."

"A worthy point," Tarmon said, refraining from drinking anymore.

"Shall we not take this with us then?" Kifter asked.

"Are you a fool?" Hallen scoffed. This water could replace his depleting Sasta.

"I am not in a position to say," Hanor said. He was no leader ready to advise, but inner promptings warned of a need for prudence.

"You are in a better position to say than we are," Tarmon said. His views were important.

"It *has* rejuvenated me," Hanor stated. "But any powers this water has could become addictive. I am thankful for this reprieve but... there is a time to move on and leave what is unknown to itself."

"We could say that about the *Stone*," Hallen said, disgruntled to where this was heading.

Reaching up to hold *it* through his overcoat. "*This*... is different," Hanor defended.

“How..., we do not understand *its* powers do we?”

Tarmon sat back, allowing the situation to take its course. Motioning for Bane to stay quiet for now, if something needed saying, then the Hite’s approach could stimulate that.

“You have seen the *Stone* in action,” Hanor said, twitching. “But there is intelligence in the *Stone* or at least working through *it*. The energies here are of a natural sort, with no real purpose other than what it does naturally. It revitalises because... that is part of its function. It is not deciding to do this, it just does it, similar to when you drink Sasta. Sasta makes you feel merry because that is the nature of its content. The Sasta does not think for itself, it just reacts and affects your body like any other substance. The *Stone* is different because the intelligence behind *it* has a will of *its* own. *It* desires to be seen and wants to dispel the *darkness*.”

“Why does it not do so of its own accord then?” Hallen asked, bemused.

“Because it has to happen through us.”

“What do you mean?”

“People ask, why do the *Sacred* not do more to defeat the evil in this World.”

“A question I have asked plenty of times, why indeed?”

“How would you feel if your choice was taken away?”

Not what the Hite expected, “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You want to know why the *Sacred* do not do more, so I am answering you.”

Motioning for him to continue, Hallen was uncertain if he was doing the right thing.

“How many times,” Hanor continued. “Have you been warned about drinking too much Sasta? The choice is yours whether you do or not, but imagine if that choice was taken away. Choosing freely is what makes life worth living.”

Staring straight at him, effects from the water were wearing off, leaving Hallen a little open. “Yes, life can be amazing, even if much of it is spent in an Ale-house, but your response does not explain why the enemy is so evil?”

“The *darkness* we sometimes face is the complacency of our own lives reflecting back at us,” Hanor said. “If we are ignorant and uninspired, and wish to remain so, then we are not much better than animals. Sometimes we invite these things upon us because we do not look forward and progress into a wider experience.”

“So..., are you saying we have brought the evil on ourselves?”

“Does that offend you?”

“Hmm..., I find that hard to believe.”

“*Darkness* loves complacency and ignorance, for people are easier to control that way. Evil will attack us in whatever way it can as long as it ends up dominating everything.”

“Maybe so, but that still does not mean we deserve this.”

“Brandor said the Hisian-set were mostly to blame for this present *darkness*,” Kifter interjected. “They left *Gorl-darl* for dead without seeing *his* body, opting to return to the comforts of the south. Can we say it was the fault of the *Sacred* for their failure? We would not be where we are today if they had chased *him* to the end.”

“Even if they had Kifter, and killed *him*,” Hanor said. “Evil will take on another form, using others to get what it wants.”

“Where does evil come from then?” Hallen still could not accept his point.

Picking a few blades of grass before answering, “From our complacency and ignorance, selfishness and greed. We create it Hallen. We let it grow inside us as individuals and groups. Perhaps if we start rejecting our dark emotions then the evil will lose its power.

The *light* from the *Stone* is perhaps the *Sacred's* way of showing us that there is more to life. This water cannot do that, for it has no will of its own."

"These are deep issues," Tarmon had to interrupt, a serious delay emerging if they did not get a move on. Fascinated by the depth of Hanor's thinking, he was turning out to be quite an enigma. Normally, he would sit here for the rest of the turn, but lives were at stake, and more so if they did not play their part. "If need be..., we will finish this discussion later when we make camp. For now, we must move." Standing to stretch his legs, he went over to his kyboe.

"What about taking some of this?" Kifter asked, stealing the words from the big Hite.

"You do as you see best, but do it at your own risk," the Tard said, mounting. "Hanor's warnings are enough for me. If his words are true, then any unnecessary reactions will result in that person's ejection from this group. Our priority is Hanor and the *Stone*, to get them to Brandor as soon as possible. We have managed this far without the water, I see no need to risk any unforeseen hazards."

Kifter shrugged at Hallen. "It looks like you are on your own," he said, rising.

Hanor and Bane did the same, leaving the big Hite crouching by the channelled spring. Isolated, Hallen groaned, disturbed that it had come to this. "It looks like I am outnumbered," he said, disbelieving it. "Let us hope we do not come to regret this," he said, going to his well fed kyboe. "And I hope you have not eaten too much!"

"That goes for all of them," Tarmon agreed. "Let us get going, and mind you do not step into the channel. Limping to Manter is not recommended."

Chapter 3 : The High-bridge

It was another half short-turn before the High-bridge came into view, the river beneath it wide but calm. Constructed from dark pitted stone, striding across on low-bearing, pillared arches rooted to the riverbed, it was a well-fortified crossing. High walls with four large well-constructed towers jutted skywards, two at each end for protection. Swamped by a cluster of small trees and bushes atop the steep riverbank, it seemed out of place for just a crossing. Shadowy windows filed across on a lower level like watchful eyes searching up river for anything suspicious.

Slowing to a walk, the grassy terrain was now covered by dry patches of mud and wild-weed. Caution in Tarmon's keen gaze suggested all was not as expected. The bridge itself was out of earshot but looked too quiet for his liking, the towers in particular.

"I see no movement," Kifter stated, suspicious.

"Hmm," Tarmon pursed, examining the silent bridge.

"Is it not supposed to be guarded?" Hallen asked.

"It is the gateway to Tardania," Tarmon explained. "It should indeed be occupied, especially in times of trouble." This was not good at all.

"Even the quarters below seem empty." Kifter was monitoring the ten windows on the lower level, the place where the indwelling personnel slept. The place looked deserted. No travellers were about either. Very peculiar.

Starting forward, cautious, this end of the bridge disappeared behind a clump of trees. Something was amiss. Now within shouting distance, they halted, peering through the trees to the entrance. The gateway was now only just visible. Glancing at Kifter, Tarmon asked the silent question.

"I cannot detect anything," the Fife confessed. The light breeze blowing across them took any scent with it.

"What should we do?"

"If there is no one there then..." Kifter shrugged.

"Were those dead Tardanians back there guards from this bridge?" Bane posed.

Aghast by what he was proposing, both Tard and Fife did not want to consider it, surprised they had not thought of it already.

A loud clank from in front alerted them back to the bridge, proving something was there even if only wildlife. Searching for its source, time ticked by, tensions increasing. The Tard was in no mood for surprises.

An unexpected shuffling and pounding of feet suddenly rumbled out from between the bridge's high walls. Howling cries exploded as dark menacing figures appeared, charging out from between the towers. Cutting through and around both tree and bush, some were mounted on kyboes, whilst others ran. Coarse features wielding blades that shimmered in the sunlight were instantly recognisable. Rough, blackened attire reflected the same patterns seen before. What were Dortians doing here?

Eager to catch the five, six riders doubled in number, with twice that on foot. Lacking order, the ambush was a scramble, hindering their intent.

"There are too many," Tarmon shouted, shattering the shock. Turning his kyboe about, "Follow me," he yelled, urging his mount along the high riverbank.

Protective of Hanor, Kifter urged his young charge to go. Bane was close by with Hallen guarding the rear. Grimacing and holding tight, they pushed as hard as their kyboes would allow, battle-cries in hot pursuit.

Hallen scoffed, the Dorts were a rare breed. Those on foot were still running, even though they had no chance of catching them. Counting twelve mounted, harsh and weathered faces grimaced as if desperate to catch them. What was the driving force behind such hate? Yelps continued, thrilled that the hunt was on.

Thirty kyboe strides was all that separated them, fear ravaging the two boys. Clutching the *Stone* through his overcoat, Hanor sensed *its* purpose was not for situations like this, relying instead on brute force and skill of hand. Out of his depth, even Rainer's training would do little against such savage people. Daring to look behind, their hatred was disturbing.

Before, when fleeing through the trees away from that encampment at the Five Passes, the darkness combined with their exhaustion had distorted the reality of it, softening the impact. Now though, those chasing sent terror shuddering through them. Glad they had been rejuvenated at that spring earlier, their kyboes too would have been struggling by now. Keeping to the river's edge, the band of water lay like a barrier preventing their escape. Undisturbed, the open fields on the other side could have been at the other end of the Freelands for what it was worth. How were they to get across?

Riding fast for more than a short-turn, the tree line of the forest appeared up ahead. Swooping down the hillside like an arm of salvation, there was a slim chance of losing them inside. Running down to the water's edge, only a narrow strip of land separated the forest from the river. Surprising the youngsters, Tarmon kept going straight as though their escape was down that narrow corridor.

Holding his reins for dear life, Hanor urged his mount on. Bane appeared just as dogged, the fear in his eyes mirroring his own. They had come a long way from the tranquillity of Freemans Lake.

"Kifter...!" Hallen's call alerted the Fife. With a couple of hand signals, he gestured what he intended to do.

Considering it before agreeing, the Fife dropped behind to cover the boys, the huge Hite veering off to the right, steering his large kyboe up the incline towards the approaching forest. Three Dorts separated from the pursuing group to follow him, Kifter trusting he would not be long. Shooting past the tree line, the Hite disappeared from view followed by the Dortians. Leaving nine to chase after the rest of the group, their enemy seemed just as eager as when first starting out.

Reaching within his coat, the Fife took hold of a throwing barb. With the deftly skill of a master rider, he swivelled in his saddle and flung the pointed dart at the foremost Dort. Striking his shoulder, the pitiful thing lurched in his seat causing his kyboe to falter. Swerving to the left, it stumbled and pulled up, causing two behind to pitch out of its way and hindering another five. Wounded and clinging to its shoulder, the Dort raged in defiance, urging the others on.

Pushing hard along the embankment, Kifter's success opened up a large enough gap to grant a reprieve. The river veered around a bend to the right in the far distance. Taking a lifetime to reach, tensions took their toll.

Catching its foot in a pothole, Bane's kyboe pitched unexpected. Yelping, fearing the chasing numbers would be upon him, Kifter was quick to support him. Getting back up to speed, but their advantage was lost. Seizing the opportunity, their foe narrowed the gap to a handful of strides. Hissing breaths were too close, Bane's resolve about to break. Shrieks of pleasure kept howling, determined to unnerve and demoralise. Muscles straining, where was Hallen? Without the Hite's size and strength, the four could not defeat them on their own.

"Keep going," Kifter yelled to Hanor in front, who had slowed through a sense of loyalty. Approaching the bend, where was their escape?

From nowhere, an enormous scourging cry caught everyone unawares. Behind them, their beloved Hitorian friend crashed into the chasing party, sending the first four sprawling. His size and that of his kyboe upended two and knocked another two into the river. Flashing his blade, he took out one more before regaining his momentum, pressing on after his companions who had eased up to help. A Dortian entered the commotion from the forest, returning from the original group who had chased Hallen.

"Sorry..., I only dealt with two of them," the Hite joked, unfazed, unlike his comrades. This was the kind of enemy he liked, ones he could strike.

Regrouping, the Dorts were not giving up. Infuriated, they came again.

"Only seven to go," Hallen bellowed. "Shall we stop?"

"No..., an old bridge is around this corner," Tarmon promised, the Hite's enthusiasm tempting them to take unnecessary risks.

Reaching the corner, they did not hear the gurgling cries for help from those in the water. Focused only on their escape, when the ancient bridge came into view, mixed feelings rose. Concerns about *Boverns* posed another problem, the setting mirroring that earlier crossing when Nole was taken. Considering the choices, to turn and face the pursuers would risk losing some of them, Hanor especially. A chance Tarmon was not prepared to take, he checked the river for any *Boverns*. Nothing suggested *they* had infiltrated this far north. If they had, this time they would be ready.

Snaking to the right and then back to the left, the river narrowed in their favour. The bridge, situated on the other side of the bend, was similar to the one before. Hugging the waterside, it looked unthreatening as was its intent. Holding the breeze at bay, the alcove of outcropping trees secured a peaceful setting. Deathly still, the water added to the illusion of tranquility. An ancient route once travelled was now lost to the encroaching forest, its history irrelevant to the fleeing group.

Terrified, Hanor and Bane dreaded the prospect of what they were about to do. Last time, the scene had been less frantic and more surreal. With little time to reflect on what to do, pulses raced, increasing the anguish.

Rounding the bend to its harmless entry, Tarmon waited for the others to catch up before urging his kyboe onto the bridge. Sword in hand, creaks and the thumping sounds of his movements echoed around the small enclosed area. To their dismay, the attacking Dortians came charging around the corner, letting out a chilling cry at the prospect of them escaping.

Kifter went next, but a doubtful Hanor reined his mount in, forcing Bane and Hallen to pull up behind.

“Go Hanor,” the big Hite bellowed. Keen to fight, but this was not the time or place.

“Hanor...!” Kifter urged, stopping a short way out onto the bridge. “I am right here with you, we will not let you down this time.”

Bearing down on their position, the Dortians were closing in fast. If Hanor did not move they would have to fight to survive. Checking the silent waters, the river appeared too still, haunting Hanor. Distress increased as if one of those creatures was waiting beneath the surface preparing to strike. Hallen and Bane made their way around, urging him to go. If Bane was willing to cross then why not him? Growling, clasping the *Stone* through his tunic, Hanor pushed out onto the bridge.

Loud clatters of his motion, at first, let nothing else filter through to his sensitive ears. Heart stopping, he then discerned the one sound he had hoped would not come. Grasping tighter the *Stone* through his tunic, initially it did not occur to him to take it out. Reflections on the water leered up, fears turning to terror. Chimes rang like a twisted song of wretchedness, gentle bells beckoning the monsters to come.

“I hear them,” he screamed above the racket of their crossing. Even though Kifter was at his side, sharp images of Nole stole away any comforting presence the Fife intended. Riding high on their mounts granted additional clearance, but would it be enough? The despicable chimes kept ringing to those hidden beneath the surface.

Scarred by the tragedy of losing Nole, the thought of those gaping jaws flustered Hanor. Approaching the centre of the bridge, it was no good, he needed to hold the *Stone*. Reaching inside his tunic, he grappled for the opening to the inner pocket. Fretful about dropping *it*, checking the water, he could tell the foul creatures were on their way. Crisscrossing between his pocket and the looming river, he did not know if the *Stone* would save him, but he did not care. *It* was his only hope.

Rattles at the bridge’s entrance meant the Dortians had arrived, but all Hanor could hear were those hypnotising chimes. Relieved when clasping the *Stone*, on pulling *it* out, the button on his undershirt sleeve got caught, nearly losing *it*. Fumbling, on his arm’s release, a sudden explosion erupted beside him. Sneering eyes rose from the depths, glaring at *its* seated prize. Hideous, the enormous head and gaping mouth glistened in the sunlight, dagger-like teeth sharp and bloodthirsty.

Time slowed, pulsing heartbeats booming to every desperate gulp of air. Cries went unheard about Hanor, transfixed was he by the awful beauty of this killing machine. Callous eyes drew the reflexes into submission, but this time, Hanor was not so quick to move. Desperate to hold the *Stone*, when the Bovern struck, he was powerless to respond.

Kifter, who was beside him, tried reaching out but was caught off balance by the swiftness of the *Bovern’s* attack. Help vanished, Hanor falling limp in his saddle.

That very reaction enabled the White Fires within his heart to rise and burst forth. Without any prompting, Hanor was but a vehicle for the immense Powers to concentrate and then be released into the World. Extending out, the intensity of its glowing flame blazed from the Stone in his hand.

Huge and unblinking, the Bovern’s eyes were without protection, the bright explosion of *light* blinding it. Even in the midst of day, the sun’s glow faded for that

dramatic moment. Heat and power radiated with a dynamic purpose, dazzling all who looked upon *its* brilliance. Shining just as it had when the *Nyshifter* attacked, the repulsive monster felt the same *fires* bite. Scorching the creature's dark green oily skin, twisting and writhing in torment through the air, it lost momentum. Crashing across the bridge, thudding heavily, the river received it again on the other side with a mighty gulp.

Only Kifter's reflexive actions saved Hanor. Pulling his mount forward, the rear of his Kyboe took a thwack from the Bovern's flailing tail. Flashing for just a few heartbeats, the *light* was gone as quickly as *it* had come.

Disorientated, Hanor was too bewildered to notice the Dortians' terrified retreat back off the bridge and along the embankment the way they had come. Body pulsing with a vibrant energy, there was no desire to move or understand the miraculous event. Bedazzled by the swiftness of the *power's* emergence, his mind was vacant, unable to cope with something as trivial as thinking.

Closing his hand instinctively, he barely catalogued the next few short-turns. Palpitating, his heart was all he could hear. A jerking of his kyboe meant little in that altered state. Kifter was pulling him along, but to where did not matter. Unconcerned, the *white fires* had left him enshrouded by a peace beyond understanding. All chattering thoughts dissipated.

Leaving the river, Tarmon lead them on for a couple of short-turns, finally picking a spot to make camp on top of a mound. Clumped together, trees and thick bush granted them adequate cover, with the advantage of seeing the enemy first if they were to approach. Taking an early rest due to Hanor's detached state, it was another couple of short-turns before nightfall. Shocked after the incredible events at the bridge, they had no idea what they were dealing with.

Discussing what route to take to Manter tomorrow, Kifter and Hallen wanted to travel north around Darbin Forest in case Brandor was heading along The Freedan Way, Tarmon however, wanted to head south, the safer route when considering the enemy.

"But it will add another half a turn's ride to our journey," Tarmon reasoned, disliking the idea of getting delayed.

"Brandor does not travel like we do," Kifter said, leaning against the small woodell tree they were nestling under.

"Do you think he is already on his way to Tardoc then?" The Tardanian asked, doubting it. Wanting to know what the *Stone* was and *its* relevance to the future, he was still troubled by those Dorts at the High-bridge. Convinced they were not in the vicinity on their own, it meant Tardoc was now surrounded.

"It is a possibility, that is all I am saying," Kifter said, respecting the Tard's concerns. "We cannot allow Brandor to run into a trap as we did. I do not doubt his abilities, but sometimes even the best of us get caught out."

Checking Hanor, Tarmon sighed at the possibilities. Lying on his mat, eyes wide and staring at the tree above, the boy seemed oblivious to the discussion. Peaceful, Bane on the other hand was attentive, protective of his friend.

Staring out towards the shadowy form on the nearby horizon, Darbin Forest awaited their conclusion. Hugging the hillside, it stretched right across their path. Dismissing the

idea of taking a shortcut through it, he simply did not believe Brandor was nearby to warrant such risks. Trusting the Dai-laman or a Master could use the *Stone*, desires to return to Tardoc were obvious. Sensitive to what affects the *Stone* was having on Hanor, each time he used *it*, he seemed to descend into an altered state of mind. Uncertain about the influences, was he being selfish, just thinking about his own kind and nothing more?

"My friends," he said, finally accepting their views. "We will go the northern way. Let us hope more Dortians are not camped across this side of the river."

"We know their objective is Tardoc," Kifter said, rejecting the idea already. "From here, we see no fires to suggest otherwise."

"I am just clutching at a hope."

"Tardoc will not be abandoned," Hallen said, compassionate. Tarden was in the line of fire too, presuming that was at the back of the Tard's mind as well. "But we must move carefully with this new *tool of power*."

"Indeed we must," Tarmon conceded. "Will not every city want to have that *light* shine from their walls?"

"Yes, they will, but I doubt Hanor is up to it," Hallen said, glancing at Bane. The boy had not said anything since making camp.

"Then let us pray that he is."

Turning towards Bane, Kifter invited the young man into the discussion. "This must be hard for you?" he said, the lad jumping at the unexpected attention.

"Er...", Bane stalled, shifting where he sat. "I... suppose so."

"Hanor is brave," Tarmon said, picking up on Kifter's intentions. "And you have an important role to play too, Bane."

"I... do?" he doubted. Committing himself to Hanor numerous times since they had set out, but his failures to be there when it mattered were far from praiseworthy.

"We cannot give him the closeness you can," Kifter explained. "I have been with him since the beginning of this journey, but even I do not know and love him like you do."

"No..., I suppose not," Bane murmured. His protectiveness, even if weak, stemmed from that. To suggest it was a valued asset lifted him from the sombre mood. Since early that morning, he had felt more involved and needed by his best friend. Even the chase by those Dortians had reinforced his commitment, but it was the supernormal events that threw him, undermining every promise. Observing Hanor so close to death, saved only by those *powers*, how could he compete?

"You have to be strong... for both you and Hanor," Kifter said, leaning forward and softening his tone. "He is strong of heart but... he is a long way from home." Kind words touched the boy. "We need to be there for each other too, so if you need to talk, we have all been through enough to know we can trust one another."

Friendships not accustomed to outside of Hanor and Nole, it did make sense. Respecting the invite, the comments strengthened Bane. "Thank you," he said, the aroma of Kifter's cooking stirring an appetite. "Yes, thank you, Kifter," he repeated, his burden easing. A genuine smile crossed tired features.

"That is what we need," Hallen declared. "Lots of laughter." After releasing frustrations on those Dortians, he felt uplifted, and for once without the aid of strong fluids.

To the others' surprise, the big Hite stood and started dancing, chirping an old Hitorian folk song as he went. Swirling and twisting his giant frame, Kifter winked at Bane. "There are no ladies to impress here, Hallen," the Fife joked, joining him.

Linking arms, they swapped and swerved with a freedom not seen for a long time, Bane rising and dancing too. Declining the offer of a hand, dancing was not for Tarmon, staying seated before he did anything untoward. With the sun descending towards the crown of a nearby hill, the jollities continued. If Dortians ventured onto the scene, they would have been invited to join in as well such was the laughter. Recent struggles had stolen the delight of being here at all. Primitive, the music was the melodies of coarse words and the movements of clumsy feet.

Only when the sun disappeared beyond the horizon did they calm down and return to normality. Hanor's emergence from his trance sobered the group. The cheerfulness had been medicinal whilst it lasted.

Sweeping across the Grovian Flats, Brandor stayed alert, enjoying the sunshine whilst riding. Passing travellers and traders, life seemed to be carrying on as usual for some. Bypassing Holen End last night, the Cropping Village would fall within a single turn if the northern hordes came. Aggrieved, the Freelands had still not awakened to what was at their door.

Racing towards Grovan along the Freedan Way, the main causeway running the full breadth of the Freelands, there had been no major distractions to stall him. Praying there would be enough time to see his vision materialise, the *Wall of Power* already seemed real in his mind. Even though the complexities were staggering, obstacles were falling to the wayside, confident it could be done.

Rising like the sun, the city of Grovan came into view. Columned towers within sturdy walls declared its readiness for war. Constructed in ages past during troubled times, it would grant them but a short reprieve until the *darkness* arrived.

Chapter 4 : Darbin Forest

“Do you want something to eat, Hanor?” Kifter asked, serving up their overcooked meal. Rousing from his cocooned state, the boy looked half dazed.

Needing a moment to regain his bearings, Hanor nodded. Charged with an unknown power, he snapped upright, thoughts returning to the bridge and the *Bovern*. A shiver coursed through him, but so too did the insights. Aware the chimes were the reason they attacked people, declaring who or what was crossing the bridge, without that sound the *Bovern*s would just be ordinary creatures of the water. How the chimes worked and who had linked them to the bridges he did not know, but he had a good idea. Receiving his meal, he was not really hungry.

“Why do you go into that trancelike state after using the *Stone*?” Tarmon asked, seizing the moment whilst he could.

“I do not know,” Hanor said, nibbling on a piece of quaner. Overawed by the dramatic episode, energies continued buzzing inside him. “It is like an altered state of living. I am awake but... I experience life in a different way.”

Respectful of what he had to say, the others could tell it was the new Hanor talking.

“All of this is not really important,” Hanor said, looking around the dusky setting. “In that condition, it is like everything is the same. It seems strange but... natural. Everything beats to the same rhythm, and all are linked to the *One Great Life* we live in.”

“Everything is the same?” Hallen said, confused. “That does not make sense.”

“One Great Life?” Bane seconded, a kind smile hiding his unease with the idea.

“I know.” Hanor shrugged. “It sounds weird.”

“And fascinating,” Tarmon said, trying to imagine it.

“What about the *power*, what does that feel like?” Kifter asked this time. Using *it* as a tool was one thing, but what were they letting themselves in for?

“It is difficult to remember clearly, but the fire surges and reacts to whatever is triggering *it*. The *power* is definitely trying to reveal itself to the world.”

“Reveal itself?” Hallen said, unimpressed by some of the concepts Hanor was sharing of late. “You mentioned that before. Are you saying the *Stone* has a... mind?”

“Not the *Stone*, but the *force* working through *it*.”

“The *Sacred* you mean?” Tarmon offered.

“Yes.”

“And what about now?” The Tardanian asked, longing to return to Tardoc and also Tarden. “Could you use *it* again, and again after that?” It hid nothing of his hopes.

“I do not have control over *it*,” Hanor explained. Doubts about losing himself to *its* fiery flames did not disturb him. “It is not like lighting a fire, calling *it* at will for a need. *It* has a purpose of *its* own.” A thin smile crossed his lips. “I am the real tool here, just like the *Stone*. I would not like to use *it* often.” His openness was sincere. “If faced with a dilemma, I do not know if I can call upon *its* powers even if I wanted to.”

“But... you would be willing to try?” Tarmon posed.

“If the need arose, then yes.”

“But would you travel somewhere purposely to use *it*?”

Sighing at where this was leading, “Maybe, I cannot be sure. I have not come to terms with it yet. If you had asked me earlier, would I use it against a *Bovern* to escape some Dortians, I do not know if I could have. Planning is much easier than doing.”

“Point taken,” Tarmon said, disappointed at what it meant.

“How do you feel now..., physically?” Bane asked beside him.

Finishing a mouthful before replying, Hanor was encouraged by his friend’s involvement. Praying all would be well for Bane, he considered the question. Energies vibrating through his body were peaceful, enough to calm anxieties about what was happening. “I feel a bit tingly but I am fine. The tiredness might be down to shock.”

“We are all in shock,” Hallen chuckled. “Can we have no more surprises please?”

“I will do my best.”

“I want you to go to Manter,” Brandor said, dissolving the beaming grin of Greema, a Grovian friend who was always ready to do his bidding. After securing the agreements of both High-grove Fordain and the Masters here at Grovan concerning his plan, there was only one place left to go. Getting late, he needed to rest.

“Manter!” Greema nearly spat the name out. “I have not been there for a while. Why would you force me to go there?”

“You know I would not *force* you to go anywhere,” Brandor laughed, expecting this. The Grove did not venture far beyond his borders nowadays, but his skill and experience was invaluable. “I have need of your services.”

“My hand is yours, but why Manter?”

“I have mentioned about another way the *Dark One* may be defeated. It is because of this that I ask you to go. Your experience is required to help safeguard something precious.”

“You do not have to soften me,” the short stocky figure said with a grin. Rubbing his pale bald head and scratching the end of a wide bulbous nose, he looked at Brandor through tight eyes. “What is it that is so precious?”

“A *Stone*.”

“Hardly impressive, Brandor.”

“The *Stone*’s purpose is yet to be made known. Even I do not know its full potential. All the same, I need trusted individuals to protect *it*.”

“*It* must be important then?”

“Potentially..., yes.” Detecting movements in the *ethers* recently, Brandor was as excited as he was concerned.

Knowing the Dai-laman well, Greema could tell there was more. “What else is there?”

The risk of Greema’s participation outweighed any potential problems. “There are others involved, including one who may be difficult to get along with.”

“Go on..., you are not one to worry about personalities, Brandor.”

“This fellow is a Hitorian,” the old man said. “A confident one at that.”

Hostilities between Grovia and Hitori had lasted for nearly seventy full seasons, and even though they were more like skirmishes than a direct war, there was enough cause for concern. Fighting over a small islet at their border where the Trino River splits, clashes at Manter were often reported.

“It will not be a problem,” Greema shrugged. “If you judge this cause to be worthy, I will not permit a Hite to deter me.”

“I thought you would see it like that,” Brandor approved. “He is a likeable fellow when you get to know him. I expect both of you to move beyond the obvious grievances.”
“You know me or you would not have asked.” With the matter settled, another thought emerged. “High-grove Fordain will not like me going. His son Orl is preparing to move to protect Holen End, and he was looking at me to support him.”
“I have already cleared it,” Brandor said to the other’s surprise.
“You work fast!”
“One has to be quick in these pressing times.”
“Manter it is then.”

Leaving the small hillock, grey clouds threatened rain as five figures buckled down for another turn on the road. Heading north-east, the edge of the forest on the horizon lay like a dark arm barring their way. Aiming for its outer point, they planned to reach it by midmorning. The atmosphere was positive now their path was clear. No camps had materialised in the area, proving the Dortians’ agenda was Tardoc as presumed. They just hoped no travellers had ventured that way during the night.

Scanning the low-lying hills, Kifter and Tarmon rode as usual at the fore, with Hallen at the rear. The Hite, wanting to extend the previous evening’s antics, started flicking mud balls from the bottom of his boots at Hanor and Bane. Not permitting the grim weather to disrupt the short interlude, the two boys threw their own in return.

Preferring order and discipline, but after the incredible tensions recently, Tarmon did not have the heart to stamp out their high spirits. Concentrating instead on the terrain in front, he made sure Kifter knew of his irritation. The Fife in turn could only throw the odd glare behind when it got too loud or silly. The big oaf did annoy him sometimes.

Approaching the outer tree line, deep shadows within Darbin Forest showed no signs of movement. Wary in case they were about to ride into another ambush, the three frolicking juveniles fell silent, the potential dangers obvious. Rounding the forest’s end, pleased there were no surprises, the enemy was nowhere to be seen.

Unexpected, a group of Illetts sprinted over a nearby hill, only to pull up when spotting them. Sitting back on their two hind legs eating wild-grass, nearly twenty in number, the animals seemed unperturbed by their human counterparts. Short pointy ears above long noses and large round eyes gave them a friendly appeal, but their sharp bite was renowned. A long slim neck meant one could clip the nose off Hallen. Great to hunt, the animals were swift and difficult to catch. It was a pleasant change seeing them.

Reaching the Freedan Way, further along, a cart was heading along towards Tardoc. Peeling away to forewarn them of the threat, Hallen avoided searching questions from the merchants, just explaining what he knew. Stopping another two sets of travellers before the group pulled up to rest, the morning’s ride soon passed. Rain clouds thickened and then poured just as they started out again. Hoods up, the first load was a deluge.

A short time into their ride, Hanor felt drawn towards the woods now running parallel to their position. Shadows between the uprights and pockets of thick bush appeared darker through the rain. Ignoring the unusual feelings, even though it seemed like he was being watched, he laughed it off as an overstretched imagination. A result of recent turbulences, even so, the niggling presence continued into the after-turns.

When the downpour eased, the group was granted a wider view of the terrain. Large outcrops of rock merged into low beds of tree and wild-bush. Picturesque, a lapse in Hanor's thoughts drew his gaze back towards Darbin Forest and what was lurking inside. Strange, the sense of something watching them was getting stronger. The lingering sensations did not make sense considering how far they had travelled. Covering a huge distance since stopping for a break, why was the presence still there? Unable to pinpoint an exact location of the invisible eyes, the whole forest seemed alive. A shudder ran through him, the others riding alongside oblivious to the problem. Reinforcing the idea that it must be him, but by the late after-turns, there was no mistaking it.

"What is in there?" Hanor called when the rain stopped and the clouds dispersed. Examining the forest, Tarmon and Kifter presumed threats this far out had all but gone. "What do you mean?" the Tardanian asked. "I do not detect anything." "Something is in there," Hanor said, the feelings of being watched now profound. The others had no idea what he was talking about. "Where?" Kifter called, worried. Allowing for Hanor's heightened senses of late, this was the sort of reaction he feared, convinced using the *Stone* was the cause. "I do not know..., everywhere." Hanor's tone was changing, fear creeping in. Signifying the whole forest, the *presence* kept getting stronger, *its* life force increasing. Far from pleasant, a chill settled over him, a shudder thrumming his body. "Do you want us to slow down?" Hallen said from behind. "No," he said, dismayed.

Whatever *it* was kept expanding in size and stature at an alarming rate. Distressed, the coldness amplified, assuring Hanor of one thing. *Its* immense power was not good, verging on evil. Panic started distorting ideas of what *it* could be.

"Explain what you see," Kifter urged. "I do not see *it*, I... sense *it*," he cried over the noise of their ride. Eyes straining when looking at the forest, it was getting worse. Dubious, the others shrugged at each other.

Heaving as if adjusting *its* position, Hanor squealed like a petrified animal. Pushing his kyboe faster, quivers of fear unnerved him. Hulking like a figure of mountainous proportions, the *thing* seemed to possess the whole forest. Every tree and bush was possessed by *its* life-force, sustaining *its* presence in this world. Now, he could see in his mind *its* awful power. Captivated by *its* dreadfulness, *it* tried luring him back towards *it*, to merge as one.

How long he rode in that terrified state Hanor did not know or care. Even the cries of his friends could not break through, determined to protect his mind by keeping everything else out. Desperate to escape, to get away from the *entity*, his turn of speed surprised the others. Forcing his kyboe to run beyond its measure, he started leaving the others behind, similar to when charging at the Freeloaver to save Nole and Bane.

The only one keeping up, Hallen rode alongside, alarmed at the turn of events. Hanor's wide eyes meant he had lost his mind. Oblivious to any attempts to calm him, he opted to guide the boy out onto the grassy plane away from the haunting forest. Pinpointing a large outcrop of rock to their left, it was far enough away to stop. Using the extra weight of his kyboe, the big Hite nudged Hanor's mount from the road and out

towards the rock. There was no protest to the change of direction. Riding over the hill and down the other side, they left the forest and headed for the massive outcrop of rock. Checking where the others were, Hallen cursed, they had not even reached the hilltop.

“Hanor!” he yelled, trying to draw him out of the trance. “Hanor!” he repeated when there was no response. Leaning across, Hallen shook him, but the lad just kept staring ahead. Pulling back on the reins to slow them down, but it had little effect, Hanor’s kyboe obeying its master instead. On they rode until the large rock loomed up in front. Without the others, it was down to Hallen to end this.

“Hanor..., can you hear me?” It was a final warning before acting. Still nothing. Trusting the boy’s grip would not release the reins if he tried pulling him from the saddle, there was only one option. Not looking forward to it, with a lunge, the Hite leapt across and seized Hanor in mid-flight, yanking him from his kyboe. Turning as he did, they both fell with a crash, Hallen cushioning the boy’s tumble with his own body, half-winding himself. Rolling across the ground, they finished in two heaps just in front of the rock face. Without their riders, the two kyboes pulled up, panting and exhausted.

Joining them, the other three stopped, afraid for Hanor who was not moving. Lying on his side with legs sprawled wide, he was at least breathing to their relief. Eyes closed but restful, all signs of panic had passed.

Sitting up and rubbing his shoulder after absorbing the brunt of the impact, Hallen grimaced. Not as young as he used to be, wagging a finger, he warned the smirking Fife to keep his tongue.

Wary of making any rash movements that might alarm their young companion, Tarmon knelt beside Hanor. Bane crouched alongside, distressed at his friend’s condition. The Tard tried rousing him. “Hanor!” he said. Sweat streaked Hanor’s face. “Are you all right?” he asked, daring to give him a shake. “Hanor..., can you hear me?”

Without success, Bane tried. “Hanor..., it is me..., Bane. Wake up.” Pulling his friend over onto his back, a loud groan escaped Hanor’s lips.

Tarmon winced, not wanting to move him in case he had been injured from the fall.

Lying still, Hanor opened his eyes. Staring up at the darkening sky, he felt groggy and heavy, his body aching as did his head. Picking out a Fliryn high above, the idea of flying brought a smile to his face. Mind muddled, not until the two familiar faces of Bane and Tarmon leaned forward did he remember who he was. What had happened? Like a flood, terrible recollections of the *entity* inside Darbin Forest shook him. Taking stock of the situation, the *presence* was no longer in the forest or anywhere in The Freelands. A thing of the *Underworlds*, icy memories were cold and cruel.

“Get him a blanket,” Tarmon urged Bane, noting the shiver.

Hanor’s bearings were returning. “No, I am... fine,” he said, wincing when sitting up.

“Here, try this,” Kifter said, handing his water-skin over. Troubled by Hanor’s interactions with the supernormal, he feared what affect this was having on the boy. What had he seen back there? Not dwelling on the point, the Fife turned to make a fire. Overhanging, the rock was suitable if rain was to return. Unpacking, Brandor could not come soon enough.

Coughing, Hanor drank, eyes red and raw. Drained, his mount was still recovering from the ordeal a short way off. Hanor's head hurt.

"Something hot and strong," Tarmon said to Kifter.

"Extra special on its way," the Fife promised, the fire now established.

"How are you now?" Tarmon asked Hanor, who was perking up.

"I am sorry... I reacted as I did," he said, apologising to everyone.

"No need," Tarmon assured him. "We just need to find out what happened."

Noticing the enormous rock leaning over them for the first time, Hanor had no idea how he got here. "I am not sure I know myself."

"Did you not hear us call you?" Bane asked, aggrieved.

"It is just a blur."

"What were you frightened of?" Tarmon's question was blunt.

Recalling *its* coldness, "There was something in the forest."

"But we could not see anything," Bane said, staring back the way they had come. Darbin Forest was out of view.

Settling from the trauma, Hanor shuddered. "*It*... was not of the Freelands."

"Please explain," Tarmon requested.

"*It* was a *presence* that took over the entire forest and was as real as you are now."

"Where is *it* now?" Hallen asked, listening whilst unpacking his things. The last thing they needed were more invisible foes.

"*It* is gone."

"Gone from here?" Tarmon tried.

"Gone from the Freelands."

Under normal circumstances, Tarmon would have doubted its plausibility, but Hanor had already pushed back the barriers of normality. "Let us not worry about it now," the Tard said, checking how Kifter was doing. "We will talk after we have eaten."

Pulling the canopy tight over the fire, granting just enough light to see each other, the huge rock the group were under would glow like a beacon if not careful. A cloudless sky permitted the first moon to cast a silvery sheen across the landscape. Adding further light that could reveal their location, it felt unnerving now they were out in the open.

"Have you thought anymore about what took place earlier?" Tarmon asked Hanor, everyone settling for the evening. Hot and spicy, the meal had replenished them enough to rouse a few yawns, catching Hanor before he nodded off.

Contemplating the incident during his meal, "Nothing that I have not already shared," he said, frustrated.

"You have experienced enormous strains of late," Tarmon said. "And fatigue can do terrible things, including raising our fears."

"It was not all in his mind," Bane protested, disliking what he was suggesting.

"I am not saying it was, but we just need to be sure. Since leaving Tarden, I would be the last person to reject his views."

"Your line of questioning is hardly tactful."

"Bane, he saw something we did not. If using the *Stone* has this affect, then we have to consider that before expecting him to use *it* again."

"That *thing* had nothing to do with the *Stone*," Hanor said, confident *it* was not.

"But has using the *Stone* opened up a gateway into... you called it the *Underworld*?"

“No, the *Stone* has not opened up a rift,” he said, strong impressions promising that it had not. “There are changes happening inside me that I do not understand, as if I am awakening to different aspects of life. The *Stone* is good for us. *It* is not about power and control, but life and freedom, not to mention love. That *thing* has no real life of *its* own, instead, *it* possesses and feeds off others. It used the forest to sustain *its* life in this realm, but *it* does not want to live off trees, *it* wants to live off... us.”

The comment caught their attention. “What do you mean... us?” Hallen asked, alarmed.

“I am not sure,” Hanor said, horrified at the prospect. “My reaction did not help today.”

“Why?” Kifter wanted to know.

“*It* liked my fear.” Not considering it before, it surprised him as much as the others.

“It feeds on our fears?” Tarmon leant forward, recalling the *Souls of Tarkons Tomb*.

“Yes.”

“Are you trying to give us nightmares?” Hallen laughed it off for his own sake.

“Sorry, I should not have said anything,” Hanor said, despondent.

“Always speak your mind,” Kifter assured him. “From the confusion, answers do rise.”

Concurring, but tiredness was catching up on Hanor.

“I apologise,” Tarmon said, guilty of going too far with his enquiries. “You have already been through enough this turn.”

Signifying it was not a problem, Hanor was not quick enough to conceal the yawn, heavy eyes ordering him to rest.

“That is timely,” Tarmon noted, their young friend not up to anymore questions. “We still have a long ride ahead of us tomorrow, so get some rest.”

Uncomfortable with what had been disclosed, Hallen took the first watch.

Chapter 5 : Rider on the Road

Waiting for Manter's vast wooden gates to open, Brandor's final leg of his incredible journey across the Freelands was at last drawing to a close. The largest city in the Freelands, thousands of people from all races lived here. It was never a dull place. Standing inside the long high passage, one set of gates had already closed behind, giving those on the wall ample opportunity to check anyone entering before the next ones opened. A procedure introduced as a precautionary measure in these dark times, he was encouraged to see numbers on the walls had doubled since he was last here. At least some people were listening to his warnings. Waiting alongside one other, a young man riding light, he seemed impatient to get inside. Pounding the huge gates, urging them to get a move on, Brandor wondered at the urgency.

"These are troubled times, their duty is to ensure nothing unsavoury gets inside Manter," he said, leading Tunder to where the lad stood.

"They know I live here," the boy scoffed. "They are doing this on purpose."

"Why do you think that?" Brandor asked, surprised. Such a short-temper in someone so young pained him, lacking respect for these safety measures.

"Because I refused to become a fighter like they did," he snapped, turning towards Brandor. "I am free to choose what I want, they are the foolish ones."

"Perhaps they see a need to play their part against the coming *darkness*."

"Who says it is as bad as they report?"

"What if it is?"

"Pah...", the young man spat on the ground. "People allow fear into their lives, but not me. I am a survivor..., I can take care of myself."

"People do create many of their own ills, but this ill is coming of its own accord. We will not last long if we do not work together. Life is not about survival, but about living. Do you not fear for your family?"

"I have no family, and care for no one."

Saddened, Brandor for once was lost for words.

"Are you one of those mad ones?" the young man said, checking him over.

"Mad ones...?"

"I do not know who they are but... some say they are behind the scare mongering."

"I assure you, what faces the Freelands is no illusion," Brandor exclaimed, disliking what he just heard.

The huge gates in front started opening.

"You *are* one of those madmen," the boy mocked.

Remounting, Brandor had heard enough. Sounds of early morning movements emerged as the gates opened, a sign the city was awake. Disapproving, Brandor ushered Tunder forward.

Suspicious, watching him ride off up the main road into the city, the young man could tell the older fellow was an authority to be wary of. Someone who could rally the people of Manter, the city was still divided about what was happening. Wild stories frequenting the taverns meant it was difficult to discern the truth for most. Contributing to that uncertainty himself, discussions he got involved in usually ended in arguments,

causing the sincere listener to go elsewhere. Provoking them on purpose, to see this place fall was what he hoped. Full of selfish people, it deserved to die.

Cutting back towards the Freedan Way when Darbin Forest veered south, the group had kept their distance for most of the morning, not chancing another encounter with the *entity* Hanor had supposedly seen the previous turn. Warning occasional travellers about the dangers at the High-bridge, they refrained from mentioning the *presence*, deciding ordinary people would not be affected.

Progressing through the turn, a graven realisation eventually dawned. They had not met anyone going in the same direction. Presuming the worst, they only hoped Brandor had not already passed this way and been caught out.

Making camp amongst bush and tree at dusk, the Freedan Way was kept within earshot. Night closed in whilst eating their meal. Sharing a tale, Kifter was interrupted by the sounds of someone riding. Sitting straight to see who it was, everyone went quiet, alerted by the Fife's reactions.

"What is it?" Hallen hissed.

"Someone is coming along the Way, and travelling at speed," he said, rising. Stepping away from the camp, he needed to be sure.

The others waited.

Tarmon agreed. "Yes..., I hear it now."

"Quick, to the road, and keep low!" Kifter ordered, taking the lead.

"I can hardly do that," Hallen objected. Clambering along with the others, his bulky frame would surely be seen under the light of the double moon.

Reaching the Freedan Way, sounds emerged through the darkness, galloping towards their hiding place. Covering the distance quicker than the average traveller, for those who knew, it could only mean one thing.

Approaching, the figure slowed to a walk before stopping adjacent to their hiding place. Kifter leapt up, knowing the old man had already seen them. "Brandor! It is so good to see you." he said, beaming at his arrival.

The others stepped up onto the road, Brandor swift to tease. "I hope you do not intend to creep up on the enemy like that, Hallen! Hites were never meant for tracking."

Feigning pain, "You hurt me! I did well considering I have not long had my fill."

"And everyone else's too, no doubt" Brandor joked, relieved to have found them.

Simmering down, Brandor checked the group, Hanor in particular. Through the half-light, the lad had changed for the better. The detached look from his illness had gone, returning to the young man he had seen at Manson. But there was another look in his eye, more mature and alert. "Did you retrieve the *Stone*?"

"Yes, we did, or should I say Hanor did," Kifter said. "Our tale is most colourful."

"I would like to hear it," the Dai-laman said, peering across at their small camp. "By the way, I smelt your cooking about a short-turn ago," he said, flaring his nostrils. "If I was not so hungry, I would have to decline any offerings you make. But as I am partial to food cooked by the fire, I will risk such a venture."

"And I enjoy your ways of asking," the Fife said, leading them back towards the camp.

Speechless, the Dai-laman was amazed by what they had undergone. Eating whilst listening to Tarmon's tale of their journey, the implications were incredible. Hanor's retrieval of the *Heart of Tarkon* was astonishing, and the fact young Nole had called it a *Stone of Love* was equally fascinating. A tool by which the powers of the *Sacred* could be harnessed, he had already detected movements in the *ethers* when Hanor had used *it*.

"Can I have a look?" he asked, startling the others who sat waiting for a response. Protective, Hanor clasped the *Stone* through his overcoat, stalling before pulling *it* out.

Taking note of the boy's reaction, Brandor knew the dangers. Receiving *it*, he had half-expected to see an elaborate crystal not a plain pebble. Holding the *Stone* out to inspect what lurked inside, he could not see anything. Touching *it* to his cheek, smooth as *it* was cold, *it* seemed just like any other stone.

Pleased, "*It* is remarkable," he said, handing *it* back. The boy's dependency on *it* was obvious. "Be careful what you get attached to Hanor, for even things that hold nothing but goodness can steer us along the wrong path."

"What... do you mean?"

"Your dependency on the *Stone* may undermine decisions you may have to make in the future. *It* is not superior to you, so if you hesitate because of *it*, then ask yourself why."

Still not grasping what he meant, Hanor left it.

"We hoped you could shed some light on what the *Stone* is for," Tarmon invited.

Receiving another of Kifter's hot tasty broths, a few of Brandor's questions had been answered by the young man's experiences. Recalling the potent dream where the glorious *entity* was to be covered by that *shadow*, things were a little clearer now.

"The *power* flowing from the *Stone* is one of the purest energies of the Cosmos," Brandor began, careful not to go too deep. "This energy permeates all life and is called Unity, which is more commonly known as Love." Expecting their confused expressions, the Dai-laman pressed on. "The *Stone* was just like any ordinary one that you might find by a lake, but it was the intent behind it that transformed it into a *Stone of Power*. That intent was Tarkon's love for Shoona.

The *Sacred* exist in this state of love as *they* journey on a never-ending cycle of creation. Building and destroying all forms so that the *Divine Life* of the Universe can be expressed. This *force* is very powerful, and at *its* heart is love. Love seeks to unify everything into a whole, and shines forth as *light*, a living substance that binds all life together. No other light is comparable. Beautiful and terrible from our restricted perspective, but it is a *force* that promises the *Sacred's* plans unfold. The *Stone* is a way the *Sacred* can be seen here on the physical plane. Maybe our World is ready to awaken to more *divine* possibilities."

Powerful words, the details were mysterious yet captivating.

"Why a *Stone* though?" Tarmon asked. "How can *it* become pure?"

"The *Stone* was gleaned pure over time by the intensity of Tarkon's love. Just as we see the wind as a force, so too is unity and love, and Tarkon's love was as pure as it comes. He loved his people and life, he loved the *Sacred*, but most of all his love for Shoona, who was of a different race, was of the highest order. He sacrificed everything for her. To him, the separation of race did not mean anything, and neither does it mean anything to love. Love embraces everyone and everything. The beliefs of the Tardanian people were trying to take away his freedom just to preserve a false identity. They were

destroying the freedom of love in which we are supposed to live. It is the same with *Gorl-darl*. He aims to suppress our freedoms to satisfy *his* own desires.”

“I thought love was for weak people,” Hallen said. “I did not see it as so vital.”

“Most people do not know what unconditional love is,” Brandor explained. “When viewing life from a higher perspective, it is amazing to see, both its pains and joys.”

“When that *Nyshifter* attacked Hanor,” Bane asked, this language difficult. “How can love frighten *it* off?”

“You are luring me into deep matters,” the wise figure said, rubbing his chin. “But an answer you deserve. That *light* you saw was of the *Sacred*, and is an energy that has three aspects to it; power, love and intelligence. Life has many layers that vibrate at different speeds, and this World vibrates slowly compared to the *Higher* Worlds. So anything from up high seems very intense and powerful to us.”

“Oh...,” was all Bane said, scratching his head.

Brandor smiled.

“I remember Morn explaining these things in Yarmoria,” Hanor said. “It is how Yarmoria exists on another plane.”

“It is,” Brandor said, encouraged by his response.

“What about using the *Stone* as a weapon?” Tarmon tried.

“I am not sure *it* can be used as such.”

“That is what Hanor said.”

“But how did *it* burn the *Nyshifter* and *Bovern* then?” Kifter asked, confused.

“When the *higher* reaches down to the *lower*, there is a difference in vibration, therefore a difference in heat. Rub your hands together and then do it fast. The faster it gets...”

“The hotter it gets,” Hanor said, understanding his point.

“Correct, due to the friction or vibration between your hands. It may be hard for you to grasp but... our bodies vibrate, and so too do *Nyshifters* and *Bovern*s. Yet, unconditional love embraces all. Those *powers* were not looking to inflict pain, they were trying to unify. Such creatures vibrate at a slow speed, which is why the *light* had that affect.”

“Why did *it* not burn Hanor?” Bane asked.

“For those who are pure in heart, the *Sacred* can manifest *powers* through them. On a subtle level, Hanor’s body clearly vibrates at a rate that can handle those *forces*.”

“I do not see myself as pure in heart,” Hanor said. Nole had touched upon it at the Tomb.

“Because you do not see yourself from a higher perspective.”

“What are we to do with the *Stone* against *Him*?” Tarmon meant *Gorl-darl*.

“I do not know,” Brandor admitted, to the others’ disbelief.

“If you do not know then... who does?” Tarmon’s displeasure reflected everyone’s.

“What would *you* do with *it*?”

Surprised at the question, “I... I would... use *it*.”

“Well..., use *it* then.”

“*It* is not... for me to use..., is *it*?”

“Hanor..., give him the *Stone*,” Brandor ordered.

Alarmed, Hanor clutched *it* tight.

“Remember what I said,” the Dai-laman advised. “Let *it* not rule your life.”

At last comprehending what he meant, Hanor gave the *Stone* to Tarmon.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” the Tard said, aghast. Peering down at the *Stone*, understanding started seeping through. Such *powers* were not for any of them to control

just as Hanor had mentioned before. Disappointed, he gave the *Stone* back. "I seek only to do good."

"I know, but the choice is not yours," Brandor explained.

"You do not intend to direct us back towards Tardoc and Tarden then?"

"Your concerns are understandable, but we have to head back to Manter." Life's paths were sometimes bitter. "There are issues that have to be dealt with."

Tarmon's heart sank.

"You have not said about the *entity* Hanor saw yester-turn?" Hallen was still troubled by the episode.

"That is new to me," Brandor confessed. Its implications however could be enormous. "I mentioned about vibrations, perhaps Hanor tuned into *it* on *its* own lower plane?"

"It is bad enough coping with Dortians, what is the chance of that thing returning?"

"I cannot say..." the Dai-laman conceded.

"That is hardly reassuring," the Hite said.

"If you had spent more time studying the Mysteries instead of losing yourself in Ale Houses, then you might have the answers yourself."

An end of subject comment, Hallen grumbled but kept quiet on the matter.

The pace set by Brandor the following morning was steady compared to what they were accustomed to. Without a sense of urgency, the ride to Manter was light-hearted, humour passing between them. A far cry from the *darkness* descending on these lands, the peace was exquisite. Crossing a couple of traders heading for Tardoc, Hallen took it upon himself to stop and warn them of the perils.

Slowing at mid-morning to give their mounts a rest, Brandor was thankful the enemy witnessed at Mandurin was nowhere to be seen. Not ready to disclose the grim details, the group had already experienced enough. Looking up, the sun caressing the Dai-laman's face, he smiled as they walked. "At least we will not be troubled by *Nyshifters* on a turn like this."

The silence held court before Bane asked some questions plaguing him. "What are *Nyshifters*, and where do *they* come from? And who is this *Dark One* people keep talking about?" Kifter had shared a few details when he and Nole had first joined the group, but he was missing an overall picture.

Respectful of the history, Brandor sighed. "Young Bane, you do not realise how close to my heart your questions have gone, and how many painful associations do they bear."

"I am sorry..., I did not..."

"No..., no my young friend, I did not mean it like that," the man of power said. "I mean how poignant your questions are. It is only right that I should address them." Revealing a few details about *Gorl-darl* would help dissolve ignorance.

"Long ago..., life in the Freelands was a time of adventure. Natural forces were active yet unpredictable, causing great mischief. Most people just wanted to live ordinary lives without the supernormal influences. Despite the disturbances, some people learnt to harness the energies, doing miraculous things. A time of wonder, some used the energies for good, learning about what these powers could do. Others however, used them for their own gain, manipulating those who were less able.

The ancient city of Mandurin was no different. During that early period, a group of five young men gained considerable control over these forces, and used them to satisfy selfish desires. Meeting to experiment and lay their plans, they eventually overran the city, and Mandurin became a place of fear and affliction.

At that time, there also lived an inquisitive young man of a similar age to you Bane, named *Gorl-darl*. Curious by nature, quite by accident, *he* stumbled upon the five's secret location. Spending most of *his* time there, listening and learning, each time the five left, *he* would read and practice the Arts, gaining much power. *He* had a natural talent for it, soon surpassing the five.

Confronting them, *he* seized everything the five had gained. The people of Mandurin were amazed that someone so young could harness such powers. Hopeful, they thought their city was to be freed. Instead, to their dismay, *he* turned out to be worse than the five. Creating an invisible barrier of energy around the city to ensure nobody escaped, no one could enter either. The plight of the people was dreadful.

Then one morning, a group of men who were learners of the Mysteries, gathered on a hilltop close to the city. Twelve in all, they had detected *Gorl-darl's* abusive behaviour in the *ethers*, which is the natural force field underpinning this physical world. Uniting, the twelve dissolved the wall of energy that kept those inside imprisoned, and went for *Gorl-darl*. Forming a ring of power around the building housing *him*, they started to wear *him* down. Confident of victory, they did not foresee the decoy he set in place. Channelling *his* power into a large crystal, it left *him* undetectable. Closing their ring around what the twelve thought was *him*, *he* slipped by as if an ordinary boy. Without a flicker of power in *him* to register, not until the twelve entered the room where the crystal was did the realisation dawn. But by then, *he* had already fled north.

Pursuing *him*, on numerous occasions they nearly caught *him*, but *he* always managed to slip away. Up into the rocky northern lands they journeyed, suffering blistering snowstorms and terrible conditions. Against their better judgement, they concluded the harsh conditions would eventually finish *him* off.

Upon their return south, *Gorl-darl* started the long process of healing. Whilst the twelve lavished themselves on the rich offerings from the people of Mandurin, *he* started a long recovery, regaining *his* power and influence.

For hundreds of full seasons *he* has lived in the northern realms, planning *his* return. Training Fliryngs to keep an eye on what was happening in the Freelands, *he* endowed *them* with intelligence, and *they* began to mutate under his insufferable influence. Prolonging *their* life by unnatural means, *Nyshifters* are a terror few will question."

Captivated by the tale, it seemed strange that the cause of all this turmoil started out in such a simple manner.

"You seem quite knowledgeable about this," Hallen said, thinking it strange. Enjoying the rays of the sun whilst riding, the Dai-laman answered him. "If a person has the right character, they can be granted access to a place not commonly known here in the Freelands. It is a place where you can retrieve details of events that happened long ago. Some details are firsthand knowledge of course."

"Where is this place to access our history?" Tarmon asked, startled at the idea.

"Everyone's thoughts and actions are recorded in the *Halls of Remembrance*."

“You are not serious?” the big Hite exclaimed, horrified. To suggest some of his darkest secrets could be made known was every bit as awful as those dreaded *Nyshifters*.

“Yes, I am.”

“You mean you can look at anyone’s life?” Kifter asked, astounded.

“It is not as simple as that, so your fears can be put to rest,” Brandor said, grinning. “A person’s life is private to the average roaming eye. However, I must say they are not as private as you would like to think. I dare not add anything else or you will have nothing to do with me.” Laughing, he continued. “No, this was not me looking at *Gorl-darl’s* life to be inquisitive, this happened in a dreamlike state. Choices were given, and this was one insight I chose to look at.”

“Very intriguing,” Tarmon was most impressed.

“So these *Nyshifters* were once Fliryns?” Hanor posed. After his close encounter, it seemed too incredible to believe.

“They were.”

“You mentioned *they* do not like the sun?” Bane asked, peering skywards.

“That is correct.”

“And this you gleaned from your dream?” Hallen said.

“No..., this I know from experience,” the Dai-laman said. “But that is part of another terrible tale.”

“Will you tell us?” Bane asked, needing something more dramatic than just their ride. Finding it difficult to savour these quiet moments, even after the loss of Nole and the emotional upheaval that entailed, it was his nature to want action.

Details of the dramatic episode would generate more fear than desired, even if the knowledge could help in the future. But with others joining this group, Brandor wanted them all to hear it. “When we reach Manter, I will share the awful particulars.”

Disappointed, Bane held his tongue.

Setting off, the short break had been pleasant but Hanor started longing for an end to this. Tired of the endless travelling, there was no time for him to do the things he enjoyed. Selfish, but incessant demands were taking their toll. Missing Nole, he thought about his parents and what they might be doing. Would they blame him for his brother’s death? Dismissing the worry, he had enough pressures to contend with. Committed to this cause, the newfound attention he sometimes felt in careful glances from the others felt awkward. He was nothing special, could they not see that? Talking like he sometimes did, it was not as if the old Hanor was saying it. Just a piece of wood used to poke a fire, how much choice did he really have? Spotting a wagon ahead, he just wanted to find a big hole and fall in it.

“Hello there,” a bellowing cry came from the burly bearded figure sitting on the wagon. Standing, sharp keen eyes, half-hidden amongst the black facial hair peered out. Odd to see such a mix of individuals, Billor was even more surprised to see that old fellow Bran at its head. Disappointed when they raced by, only a big Hitorian pulled up.

“My friend..., what is all the rush?” Billor asked, feigning innocence, his two black kyboes growling. “Quiet!” he barked.

“It is best you turn around,” Hallen said, wary of the two unpleasant animals. “The High-bridge has been taken. If you value your life, I would return to Manter.” Without waiting for a reply, Hallen left, doing as Brandor ordered. “*Do not say more than you have to.*”

“Do you not have a name?” Billor boomed when the Hite disappeared down the side of his wagon. “A weary traveller only seeks a friendly word,” he tried, but to no avail, the Hitorian returning to his companions. “It looks like we had better do as he says,” Billor said to his two kyboes. This was a most curious thing. “We would not want to miss anything now.” Growling, the two proceeded to turn in a large arc. “Yes, my beauties, let us see what this is about.”

Chapter 6 : Manter

“What a sight,” Hanor exclaimed, gazing between two roadside trees at the formidable outline of Manter. Stretching across their vision, its huge walls stood proud on the horizon. “I have been here before, but I have always come up from the south.”

Passing between pockets of tree, bush and large boulders of rock, the Freedan Way snaked towards the main gate, a narrow thread compared to that at its end.

“This place might be the difference between life and death for the Freelands if all other options fail,” Brandor said, sighing.

“I cannot imagine Manter falling,” Hallen said, spending many turns of leisure there.

“It would be a travesty,” the Dai-laman granted. Keeping silent about Mandurin’s fate, how soon that *force* would arrive Brandor could only speculate. As large as Manter was, if nobody was prepared to fight then only a mass of victims awaited the slaughter. That young man with the negative attitude earlier sprung to mind. Like a disease, if he were to see him again, he might eject him from the city himself.

Pushing on, the main gates of the city were located centrally along the wall, now closing behind a number of wagons up ahead.

“I wonder if they were the last ones to have crossed the High-bridge.” Kifter said, everyone agreeing.

Passing a crossroad, another track ran to the north and south for those preferring to reach other parts of the City without going through the hubbub within. Pulling up in front of the vast wooden gates, a low din was evidence of a thriving community inside. From the ramparts, a group of uniformed figures were trying to decide if they were friend or foe. No one seemed eager to make a decision whether to let them in. Eventually someone recognised Brandor and an order was issued to open the gate.

“I was beginning to wonder if they had forgotten who you are,” Kifter joked.

“There are many new faces on the walls,” the Dai-laman said, tolerating the nuisance.

Checking on Bane, Hanor warmed to his friend’s glazed look. In awe, this was his first visit. His parents had never been the travelling type.

“Incredible,” was all Bane said.

Following the others inside, the long high-walled corridor closed about them, the gates behind shutting before the ones in front opened. Bane’s stomach gurgled with anticipation.

Riding out into the city, two and three storey stone and wooden buildings lined the main route running straight ahead. Decorative arches and crossbeams spanned below angled and flat roofs. Tall spires were the pinnacles of proud structures of rare design. Bright colours caught the eye, displacing the odd drab looking building worn by time and neglect. Ambling between stalls and open wagons, hundreds of people were busy at the marketplace buying their goods. Alehouses, meat stalls and bakers lined the way.

Bane looked behind and up at the people manning the walls. Some guards were still watching them, expecting mischief. Wearing black capes scratched by two thin diagonal streaks of silver, he was surprised to see women present as well. Absorbing what he could, large stone buildings at the base of the main outer wall were in the process of conversion, preparing for an attack. Stairs inside led up to the higher level to where a

score of guards were stationed. Stretching in both directions, it would take an enormous amount of people to protect the walls of this place.

Turning back to where Brandor was leading, there were strange looking faces everywhere. Many were from different parts of the Freelands, one race in particular catching his attention. Trying not to stare, stern grey faces with large flattened noses appeared regal as if superior to those bustling about them. Short and stocky in stature, tight eyes beneath a hairless head stared as the small group passed. Dressed in elegant styles of padded armoury, deep greys, blues and reds, Bane could not imagine them fighting a war for fear of staining their fine attire. Picking out a number of tall Hites, there were a few Fifanian's too. Dazzled, Bane had not seen any Tardanians, noticing most of the interest was directed at Tarmon. Shouts merged with pockets of laughter and the odd burst of anger from an unhappy customer. Similar to Manson in many ways, but the scale far surpassed his home city.

Working their way through the throngs of people, another wall appeared in front. Heading for it, Bane marvelled at the dimensions of this place. No one was on guard this far in. When passing through the second wall, its gates fastened back, the reason became obvious. Men were erecting another wall inside to reinforce the outer one. Steps leading up to the yet to be built upper level appeared hastily constructed, and more men seemed to be sitting than working. A wooden contraption used to unload the wagon loaded with large rocks seemed poorly made. Bane did not envy them at all.

Numbers thinned inside this new sector. Increasing their speed, this was the main living area, with countless rows of petite houses in every direction. Different colours and designs, the people of Manter clearly took pride in their homes. Groups of small children ran between the houses, playing chase just as Bane had when he was young. Sharing the same thoughts as Hanor, this was the nearest they had come to home for a long time.

A labyrinth of roadways led to the left and right beneath looping trees and coloured bushes. Fewer people ventured here, some veering off to their homes whilst others joined and headed down to the outer square. Up ahead, another wall emerged. Smaller than the outer two, decorative, it too was busy. Figures were scurrying about at its base, reinforcing it where necessary. Carved figurines lined its upper edges, some friendly but others bestial. Prestigious, Bane supposed this was the High-house of Manter.

Four burly fellows dressed in rusty brown trousers and tunic were standing on guard. Lined with patterned streams of fine gold and woven lace, their capes and swords were no less elegant.

"It is good to see you, Brandor," one guard called, a clean-shaven and well kept man of mature seasons.

"I must have missed you yester-turn," Brandor replied. "How are you, Soss?"

"Busy," he said, stepping forward. Reaching up to clasp Brandor by the forearm, "Much preparation is underway."

"And what about volunteers?" Brandor's question verged on hesitancy, as if wary of hearing the answer.

"They are growing but... not as many as we hoped."

"What will people do when that hideousness comes belching over that hill?" Brandor's frustrations were understandable.

“High-man Lorvanon has been out this very turn to drum up more support. But you have just passed through the city, and life carries on as if nothing is about to happen.”

“They will not act until it is too late.”

“It is a shame there are not more like you, Brandor.”

“I cannot live their lives for them,” he responded, bitter. “But I do wonder what kind of world these people live in.”

“I agree, but alas, you cannot beat them into it.”

“Such will be their doom.”

“Can you not do something to shake them?” Soss tried.

“A better warrior is he who fights for his freedoms rather than one who is forced to.”

“But such wisdom does not get people into uniforms,” the guard said, regretful. “Our people are still at the *poke them in the back* stage. Not enough loyalty and respect.”

“Somewhat like the Freelands as a whole,” Brandor said, discouraged. Pointless getting annoyed, he changed the subject, returning to why they were here, “Is Lorvanon inside?”

“He is,” Soss said, standing aside. “You will find him in the Reading Chamber. He has been searching for something.”

“Good,” Brandor said, turning to look at his companions. “These are my friends, Soss. Please remember their names and faces.”

Entering the High-grounds, the High-house itself was extensive but homely, all built at ground level. Deep brown cobbled stones lined with thick climbing plants gave it a natural appearance, so too the tall narrow windows. Hanor did like it here.

More uniformed people on errands crossed the splendid courtyard. Beyond a low wall to their right were fine gardens with trimmed hedges and lawns. Some guards were strolling along one of numerous winding paths within. Aware of how attuned to the people of Manter High-man Lorvanon was, Hanor remembered him to be a caring, humble man. The few times they had met, he had been courteous, not just to him but to anyone who served here. Nervous at meeting him for a different reason, High-man Lorvanon knew his father well. A step closer to his parents finding out about Nole, he was not looking forward to it.

Leading them to the large enclosure, Brandor was a popular character here, another man receiving him with kind words. Not dawdling, the Dai-laman said his pleasantries before entering the High-house. Two guards opened the large doors, with two more inside. Following the older man, narrow corridors with fine paintings were lit by wall lamps, imbuing a flowered odour. Other passageways veered off, but Brandor kept going without a care for protocol.

Turning right at the end, a short corridor lead to a closed door of ornate design. Not hesitating, with two brisk knocks, the Dai-laman entered.

Oceans of light filled the dim corridor, eyes having to adjust to the brightness. The sizeable room had many windows lining three of the walls, dusty rays of sunlight setting the whole place aglow. Adorned with cushioned seats and low tables, the long chamber was a place to relax, the silence noticeable. Against the near wall were rows of books and scrolls to the ceiling. Other columns of knowledge were set between each windowpane.

From behind a large high-backed chair at the other end, a bearded figure with large auburn eyes seemed pleased to meet them. Standing, the lone figure was holding a book.

“Brandor, back so soon? I thought you were going to Tardoc?” High-man Lorvanon said, surprised.

“There have been new developments,” the Dai-laman said, accepting the High-man’s offering of a seat.

“Please..., all of you, sit,” Lorvanon urged, turning his own around before getting started. Introduced to everyone, the High-man greeted Hanor in particular. “Yes..., I remember you young man, and your brother, is he not with you?”

Not believing what he had just been asked, of all the questions, a lump formed in Hanor’s throat. Compassionate, Brandor came to his aid.

“His brother is fine, although there is a story to tell.”

Concurring, the High-man did not pry.

Brandor indicated the book Lorvanon was reading, “Anything interesting?”

“What you shared yester-turn has fired my imagination into new realms. I know not the depths of it but... I am at least trying to grasp the basics.”

“You are a credit to your people,” Brandor approved, the High-man talking about the *Wall of Power* they were looking to create.

Putting the book on a low table next to him, Lorvanon scanned each member of the group before turning to the Dai-laman. “I see a hearty tale before me.”

“Do you have refreshments whilst we talk?” Brandor asked, sensitive to the harsh realities of life on the road.

Pulling on a rope by the wall, a firm looking man entered. “Rosa-Tor, could you arrange some food for our weary guests, and come join us.”

Surprised by the strange faces, pinpointing Brandor, Rosa-Tor nodded and left, only to return a short while later. “The food will be here shortly,” he promised, taking a seat.

“This is Rosa-Tor..., my second aid,” Lorvanon introduced him to the five. Brandor already knew him. “Without whom... I would be at a loss.”

“He speaks truly,” Rosa joked. Dealing with the lesser issues of running a city, it freed Lorvanon to contend with more urgent matters.

Inviting Kifter to start the tale from Manson, and for Tarmon to share the details since leaving Tarden, “To hear it from those involved will have a greater impact,” Brandor said, just as the refreshments were brought in.

Sitting back in his chair, Lorvanon stared at the book on the table. What a tale! Stunned by what Hanor in particular had undergone, the young man seemed somewhat self-conscious yet undaunted by it all. His father would be most proud. Even though the events surrounding his brother Nole were grim, it opened up a whole new section for his thinking. Talking about Great White Freeoavers, *Boverns* and dreaded *Nyshifters*, he felt humbled. “I do not know... what to say.”

“If I had not heard it from the source, I would have not believed it,” Rosa-Tor seconded.

“It is quite a story,” Brandor agreed, “And we have much to be grateful for.”

“And where is this *Stone*?” Lorvanon queried, intrigued.

“Hanor...!” Brandor prompted, pulling the lad from his lull. Motioning for him to show the High-man, “Would you mind?”

Recalling the Dai-laman’s advice about not getting attached, Hanor reached into his inside pocket and pulled the black *Stone* out. Not hesitating this time, he passed *it* over.

Holding and rubbing *its* glossy surface, Lorvanon half-hoped *it* would blaze into life. Disappointed when nothing happened, he held *it* up to look inside. “*It* is just like any other stone,” he said, handing it to Rosa-Tor. “Very exciting though.”

“Much of the future remains hidden,” Brandor admitted, detecting Lorvanon’s hopes mirrored Tarmon’s desires to go back to Tardania.

Rosa-Tor gave the *Stone* to Hanor.

“Others are supposed to be joining us, are they here yet?” Brandor was keen to know.

“Raldama and Hayla will be here later,” Rosa-Tor said, aware of the situation. “Your friend Greema arrived earlier but is resting. I will wake him if necessary.”

“Not yet,” Brandor said. The Grovian enjoyed his respite.

“There is another who has turned up asking after you, Brandor,” Rosa-Tor continued, catching the Dai-laman by surprise.

“Really..., who?”

“He said his name is Balkorn - a Baltian from Rolda in Baltiar.”

Delighted, “Well, well..., that is a wonderful surprise,” Brandor said, rising. “And where might our distinguished guest be?”

“He too is resting.”

“Then may I suggest, if High-man Lorvanon is willing, that we get cleaned up and rest before meeting again at sundown. I am sure everyone would like a hot soak and a room if you have some spare?”

“Yes, in the enclosure,” Lorvanon tease.

“We have had enough of sleeping with our kyboes,” Bane grinned.

Waiting for the others to leave, the Dai-Laman stretched his legs, expecting a barrage of questions from the High-man.

Picking up the book, “There is one thing I am having trouble with,” Lorvanon said, turning its pages. Fascinated by what Brandor had originally disclosed, the two sat down, the High-man explaining his confusion about the Dai-laman’s vision.

Sitting bolt upright, Hanor had no idea how long he had been asleep. Dark outside, he was late for the meeting. Leaping out of bed, the white tunic and matt black trousers he had been given were loose fitting, but would do. With little choice if he wanted his clothes cleaned, he checked the *Stone* was safe in his pocket before exiting the room.

Entering the Reading Chamber, oil lamps on the walls and numerous tabletops radiated a soft orange glow. The smell of old books was familiar. Quiet murmurings from those within spoke as if not wanting to disturb the peace. Kifter was sitting near to where he had earlier, whilst Tarmon was to one side talking to Rosa-Tor. Acknowledging Hallen who stood by one of the tall slender windows, Hanor was about to step forward but stopped, startled by the two newcomers seated in front. One was a Grovian fellow, who had small eyes in large cupped sockets. Dressed in Grovian fashion, deep grey and blue shades of padded clothing were lined with trails of golden design. Stylish chest and shoulder plates suggested he was ready for war. Elegant even if stern, it was the other person that struck Hanor. Difficult not to stare, sitting holding a long thin staff, the figure’s huge frame was even larger than Hallen’s. Dressed in a sleeveless, dusty brown vest with a dirty green waist-wrap to the knees, his fur-lined boots were huge. A thick

patch of hair on the very top of his head tempted Hanor to laugh. He refrained when two enormous eyes the size of clenched fists looked at him.

Receiving a tame nod, Hanor concurred in return. Extensive, the fellow's mouth stretched from cheek to cheek as if happy, but beaming eyes told another story. Apprehensive as if beyond his boundaries, even for someone so powerfully built, Hanor supposed he was not used to the company of strangers.

Moving to where Kifter sat, there was no sign of Brandor or High-man Lorvanon, which meant he was not late. Bane was missing but not for long. Timely, the door opened and his nervous friend entered. Signalling to come over, Bane's insensitivities made Hanor laugh, his friend staring rudely at the two newcomers. Not looking where he was going, he tripped and caught the big fellow's feet. Apologising, Bane scurried over and sat next to Hanor. Upbeat and clean, his curly dark hair appeared respectable for once.

"Who are they?" Bane whispered, glancing across.

Shrugging, Hanor looked to Kifter for an answer, but the Fife just put a finger to his mouth implying patience.

Two more people entered. A dark haired man with a thin beard was clothed like those on the High-house gate. Alongside was a fair-haired woman of natural beauty. Dressed in a similar uniform, albeit blue rather than rusty brown, she looked as stylish as she was confident. Courteous, they stood at the rear of the room talking.

Feeling a poke in his side "Is she joining us?" Bane wanted to know.

Not getting drawn to old habits, Hanor just looked away. The last thing he wanted was the attention of more people.

"It is good to see you all here," Brandor said, making no apologies for keeping them waiting. Arriving with High-man Lorvanon, the Dai-laman reached across to pat the strange looking giant on the shoulder, pleased to see him.

"Firstly, it is only civil to introduce you all to each other," the man of power said, standing in front of a table adorned with plates of food. Brandor suspected this expanded group could be the start of something very special. "This large and cultured individual before me is... Balkorn," he began, enthusiasms running high. "Some of you heard Rosa-Tor mention him earlier, and saw my joy at knowing he was here. Well, he will be joining this group, so too will the others here. Our Baltian friend is quiet and polite, but dependable. He thinks deeply, so be careful not to climb above yourselves." Unfazed by the praise, Brandor turned to the fellow seated next to him. "This fine and honourable person is my dear Grovian friend, Greema of Rune. Reliable, I hope you will all make him welcome."

The stout Grovian raised a hand but said nothing.

"At the rear there we have Raldama, a distinguished figure here at Manter. He is of high rank, which is to be expected considering his towering capabilities."

"You are too kind, Brandor," Raldama replied, light-hearted.

"And standing next to him is Hayla, also from Manter."

Hallen growled, approving of her inclusion.

"Who I might add," the Dai-laman cut him short. "Is of equal standing to Raldama, and not one to be pushed around. She will soon snip any loose tongues that flap disrespectfully."

Holding his tongue, "Point taken," Hallen gurgled.

“And this is Hallen, a renowned Hite of considerable talent who sometimes lacks head sense.”

“What a terrible thing to say.”

“And beside him is my dear old Fifanian friend Kifter, a Fife with extraordinary gifts. He knows how to empty your pockets of its valuables with amazing trickery, so be warned. Do not challenge him to a game.”

“Thank you, Brandor,” Kifter said. “How else is a Fife to make an honest living?”

The Dai-laman pressed on through the laughter. “Over here we have our good natured Tardanian, Tarmon.”

“Are not the rest of my people good natured?” Tarmon protested with good cheer.

“And this curly haired young man is Bane,” Brandor continued, enjoying this. “He has been with the group from near the beginning, albeit uninvited. His commitment has proven his worth. Temperamental, do not get into an argument with him.”

Not seeing himself as an important part to all this, listening to Brandor say those things encouraged Bane, presuming Kifter must have said something favourable.

“And last but not least, we have our young indestructible friend, Hanor of Manson. Highly regarded by those who have come to know him, his persistence has proven to be quite extraordinary.” Respecting Hanor’s modesty, Brandor finished off. “Of course, you are all familiar with High-man Lorvanon, and his second aid, Rosa-Tor.”

Impressed by those gathered here, Brandor was confident they would meet any challenge heading their way. “The main purpose of this meeting was to introduce you to each other. I know not the future, but I expect it will have something to do with the *Stone of Tarkon*.” Indicating the table of food, “Eat what you will, and get to know one another. For those of you who have not heard the tale of the original group’s journey, I am sure Kifter and Tarmon will not mind sharing the details. If you have any questions, I can spare a short-turn here, but no more. Enjoy yourselves.”

By the time questions ceased and appetites were satisfied, an atmosphere of companionship was set. No sniping had emerged between Hallen and Greema, an encouraging sign for the Dai-laman. The fact Balkorn was here added to his hopes. Leaving the chamber, Brandor uttered a quiet prayer for guidance on what was expected of the newly formed group. Heading for the Masters’ quarters situated in a building outside the High-grounds, he needed to see how the *Wall of Power* was coming along.

Chapter 7 : The Pillars of Life

Working its way down into the earth, the small creature scurried through the darkness, blind but hopeful. Muffled sounds above faded the further it descended. Others were following close behind, trailing as if waiting for something significant to happen. Down they went into the cold depths, so tight and enclosing. Obeying the impressions to keep moving, it did not know what it was looking for. Other tunnels appeared, a maze without end. Halting, an obscure otherworldly light caught its attention. Confused for nothing was visible, it started to get hotter, the atmosphere suffocating. To the side, the wall began melting like ice under a naked flame, revealing a small dark space.

Waking with a start, Brandor sat up, the shadows of night about him. Discerning what the dream meant, he pulled on a robe and left his room. He was about to annoy a lot of people.

Disregarding the moans of discontent, Brandor, followed by the rest of the group, including the newcomers, entered the hidden tunnel. Descending a short flight of stairs, the panel behind closed when everyone was inside. Dark and chilly, no one could believe they were up at such an unruly short-turn of the night. Hallen and Greema protested the loudest; the Grove still aching from his ride, and the big Hite finding it difficult to move in the passageway. At the rear, the mighty Balkorn just got on with it, respectful of Brandor's intensions.

Leading them on, Brandor seemed convinced they had to do this. Raldama and Hayla joked, enjoying the mystery. High-man Lorvanon had resisted initially. If these tunnels beneath the High-house were discovered, it could weaken the city's defences. Giving into the Dai-laman's urgent persistence, the fact he knew about them had confirmed the seriousness of the revelation. Entering one of four concealed entrances behind a row of bookshelves in the Reading Chamber, Rosa-Tor was now keeping guard outside ready for their return. This was madness.

Assertive, Brandor held the fire torch, lighting up the shadowy tunnel in front. Sloping, the passageway was long and seemed without end. Not stopping until they reached a crossroad, shining the light in all directions, he ignored the side tunnels and proceeded forward. Arching over, the tunnel was dry and the atmosphere musty. A vast network of passageways, the angle of descent steepened, the risk of slipping increasing.

Ordered to stay right behind the Dai-laman, Hanor felt awkward at the demand. Tired like the rest of them, he jumped when the Dai-laman stopped and spoke.

"This is important Hanor, warn me of anything unusual, anything at all."
Doing as asked, even though the old man's frame impeded much of his view, he was hardly qualified to be a lookout. Listening for noises that Brandor might miss, only the occasional groans from behind were audible. Down they went. This did seem absurd.

"Is it getting warmer?" Raldama queried from behind, the temperature rising. Everyone agreed, pleased that the tunnel *was* warming up and levelling out.

Feeling the heat Raldama spoke of, sensations in Hanor's chest altered as if responding to the change. Beating faster, albeit to a smoother rhythm, his heart sprang to life, tempted to believe the *Stone* was rousing. Expecting a hideous creature to pounce, but nothing did.

Mumbling in front when passing another passage, Brandor's discontent drew Hanor back from fearful possibilities. Doubting the importance of what he was feeling, he put it down to tight conditions and the lack of fresh air. Nevertheless, the sensations kept purring, the warmth growing. A few paces more proved something *was* happening. The *Stone* was active, but to what?

Countering the doubts, thoughts about monsters soon dissipated when replaced by an otherworldly peace. Comforting like when at the Tomb with Nole, he held his chest at the rising intensity. Unsure if it was the *Stone* or not, he did not care.

"My chest... feels like it is on fire," Hanor said, clasping the front of his tunic. Whirling, an expectant Brandor checked his sincerity. As if understanding the cause, he took a sharp object from a concealed pocket and scored a thick line on the wall. It was now soft, pliable like wet clay.

"Let us move carefully," Brandor said. "Tell me if anything changes."

The fiery pain was tremendous but not unbearable for Hanor. When a hand touched his shoulder, Tarmon's assurances were kind but distant. Following the Dai-laman, the pace edged along, unhurried. Difficult to focus on what or who was about him, the raging internal *fires* kept dominating Hanor's senses. As word was sent back along the line, the mutterings barely registered, a quiet joy now thrumming his body. How was it possible? Echoing that experience with Brandor by the lake, but this was far greater in depth and power. Moving forward, it started simmering.

"It is easing off," he said, closing his eyes to make sure.

"You are certain of this?" Brandor asked, scoring another mark on the wall.

"Yes."

"Then let us make our way back," the old man ordered, as if verging on something profound. "Tell me when it reaches its peak."

Agreeing, talking did not distract Hanor from the incredible pulsations. Tarmon's call for the others to go back meant nothing to him, and neither did their moans of protest. Hanor's heart and mind were now aglow with a pure *white light*, the intensity delightful. The *Stone*, he guessed, was fully active, but where was the evil triggering *it*? When holding the *Stone* out before, *it* had exploded towards the *Nyshifter* and *Bovern* from his hand, but this time, there seemed to be no need to move *it* from his pocket as though this was supposed to be.

Reaching the most intense point, he stopped, the others doing the same. No thoughts invaded the moment, and no worries either, the inner *fires* burning them away. Without having to do anything, just permitting the *light* do its work, in his mind, the *powers* started streaming forth like a white river from his heart. Disappearing into the tunnel wall, sounds of his companions faded altogether. Concentrating on the streams of flowing energy, something spectacular was behind the wall, but what? Unending, the *white fires* began transforming the tunnel's structure.

"The wall is melting!" Tarmon called, alarmed as much as he was amazed.

Relying on torchlight, the tunnel wall started running like a liquid. Unable to see the same active forces that Hanor could, the boy had returned to the heightened state of before, not reacting to any promptings. Others along the tunnel started yelling.

“What is happening?” Tarmon shouted to Brandor above the rising commotion. The Dai-laman just stood back, a wry smile creasing an expectant face.

“Brandor...!” High-man Lorvanon shouted, concerned for his city above this point. Shocked the wall was liquefying, the tunnel would cave in if this continued.

“Brandor, what is the meaning of this?”

Raising a hand, the man of power signalled for calm. The phenomenon was surreal, dribbles of mud running down the tunnel wall. Collecting in large puddles on the floor, large lumps occasionally gave way, alerting everyone to the dangers. Heat increasing, the atmosphere intensified.

“Why are we staying here?” Hallen’s cry bellowed down the passage. Echoes agreed with him, frightened by the spectacle.

“Stay where you are,” Brandor’s thunderous voice stunned everyone. “What will be, will be,” he said. Presuming the boy was the cause of it, how momentous was this to be?

Larger lumps dropped to the floor, mud oozing around their feet and down the passage. A sizable chunk of the tunnel wall had now gone.

“I would have brought shovels if I had known,” Lorvanon said, lifting one foot clear of the creeping mud. Reacting to the incredible scenario, using his hands even though dressed in his bedroom attire, the High-man pushed the mud along the floor. Following his lead, the others helped to disperse the liquefied soil.

Busy like workers digging for precious metals, grunts huffed and sweat poured. Joining her male compatriots, Hayla matched their efforts with a scoop or push. Forgetting Hanor, they could not risk getting trapped. Sweaty brows and muddied gowns were a sight to lift sombre hearts.

Responding to the ridiculous conditions, a fit of hearty laughter broke out. Turning, a crouched Hallen was laughing at Bane. Through the madness, the poor lad had copped a large dollop of mud on the back of his head from the Hite. Reacting to the inconceivable situation, the others laughed. Lifted, the enormous Hitorian could not resist, throwing another lump at Kifter.

“Hallen!” the Fife barked, not happy. “This is not the time or place.” Behind, Brandor’s torch lit up the still bedazzled Hanor. “This is serious.”

Simmering down, the big Hite helped Bane with the clammy lump. Taking it in good stead, but Bane’s concerns were for his friend. Half-scooping whilst watching Hanor, what was going on? In that rigid state again, he yearned for them to be left alone.

Continuing with the task of clearing the mud and rock after the brief moment of hilarity, Brandor bellowed, pointing in front. “Look!”

Stopping their muddy work, three strides in front, the melting tunnel wall was flickering as if countless tiny lights were on the other side.

“What is it?” Raldama spoke for everyone.

The last layer of dirt slid to the floor, everyone gasping. Exposing a small hole, dark and mysterious, no one moved. Tiny sparkles of light seemed to appear inside before disappearing, flashing into life but for a moment. Unable to escape as if an invisible seal

prevented the sparks from reaching them, the sight was spellbinding. Countless streaks were streaming forth from somewhere further in. What was the cause?

“Is that a round shape?” Hayla broke the silence, indicating the profile of the wall surrounding the hole.

In the dim light, it was hard to tell, but when another piece of mud slid down, it curved as if around a huge invisible ball.

“It looks like... glass,” Lorvanon said, fascinated.

Another lump followed the same contour.

“It must be,” Hayla said, convinced.

“It is a spherical energy field,” Brandor said, regaining a degree of control. He had never seen anything like it.

“Move along!” Greema’s gruff voice called. Standing in an untouched part of the tunnel, his view, along with Balkorn’s, was limited by eager bodies refusing to shift. Shuffling nearer, nobody wanted to get too close to Hanor, the boy oblivious to all.

“I feel like I am being pulled towards the hole,” Raldama said, holding his chest. “Urging me to unite with whatever is inside.”

“Yes, I feel it too,” the Dai-Laman acknowledged, considering it.

“It pulls you here,” Lorvanon added, placing a hand on his heart.

Everyone felt it.

“What is it though?” Hallen asked, surprised the sensations were uplifting.

Mud continued sliding down and around the invisible force field, the hole getting larger. More of the shooting particles of light were now visible. Streaming forth in their thousands, they flashed through the dark misty atmosphere before disappearing.

“From the trajectory of those sparks, their *source* is up above,” Brandor said, crouching to look. Covering over half of the mystifying *Sphere*, the Dai-laman urged more of the mud wall to fall.

Keeping an eye on Hanor, the tugs on Brandor’s heart were getting stronger. Staying his ground, he signalled for the others to do the same. Cautious, *Powers* of the *Sacred* were not to be dealt with lightly. Scooping away the slippery dirt up to Hanor’s knees, Tarmon helped him.

When a huge lump slid to the floor, to their amazement, the *Source* of the countless sparks came into view. Suspended above ground, a small ball of concentrated white *light* hovered at the centre of the *Sphere of Power*. Vibrant and compelling, the *Orb* kept resonating, beckoning them in. Illuminating, *its* power was enthralling. More lumps fell leaving a gaping hole, stalling the bravest amongst them.

Staring into a timeless space, immense forces kept pulling at Hanor, drawing him in to merge and be at one with *it*. Unaware of anything but the *Sphere’s* central *Point*, his heart was ablaze with acceptance. In his mind’s eye, the *white fires* were rushing from his chest towards that central *Power*, the concentrated pain verging on bliss. Losing himself to *its* lure, he somehow knew life on this world started right here.

Hypnotic, the squelching of mud at his feet was not enough to stall him as he made his way forward. Slopping from one spot to the next, he reached the edge of the *Sphere* and stopped. Energising, a low din thrummed inside, pulsing life into existence.

Extending his hand, he touched the *force field*, a shield that had protected the *Source* since life in the Freelands was first initiated. Insights arose of their own accord as if familiar. Passing his hand through the invisible outer membrane, inside felt like a fiery liquid. No skin blistered, and no pain scarred his senses.

Stepping inside, his body started pulsing in harmony to the humming vibrations. Hot yet gaseous, the liquid like substance felt smooth on his skin. Merging the *inner fires* with the outer, he felt electrified as if on fire. Countless shooting particles passed right through him from that central *point*, disappearing before hitting the outer *shield*. Radiating before his young eyes was the *Source* of Creation, the jets of *light* the substance of *Spirit*. Insights flooded his awareness, enlightening his awakening mind.

“Do not touch the *energy field*,” Brandor warned, edging forward with the others.

Liquefied, the whole wall was now gone, enabling them to see everything inside the *Sphere of Power*. Mystified as to why their young friend was standing motionless just below that central *Point*, what was he doing? Measuring over fifteen hand-spans across, the *Orb* continued radiating as it had done for countless generations, undisturbed by the fact a boy was standing at its core. As if at a window watching a light show, the onlookers stood or crouched, transfixed. How so much energy could pour forth nobody knew. Resisting the constant pulling, yearnings in their hearts were urging them to follow Hanor’s lead and step inside. Too dangerous, they held each other for support.

Captivating, Hanor stared at the *Point* just above, countless streams of light rushing in every direction. The infinite and eternal uniting before him, life started and ended right here. Ever-present and beyond normal limitations, Hanor raised his right hand, inner *fires* fanning a desire to merge and end the illusion of separation. Acting as though this was meant to be, streams of *light* passed through his fingers, leaving no trace of their passing. Cupping a hand around the central *Point*, the intense heat did not blister.

“*You are about to embrace eternity*,” a small *Voice* said in the privacy of his mind. Unsure if it was his own, it did not matter. He closed his hand.

Shocked when the *Sphere of Power* disappeared, the onlookers jumped when plunged into near darkness. Saved only by fire-torch, where had it gone? Pulsing vibrantly a moment before, but as soon as Hanor’s had clenched that *Point*, it had vanished. Leaving their companion just visible slumped on the ground, but he was not moving.

“Hanor!” Bane cried out, about to rush in to help.

“Wait!” Brandor hollered from behind, regaining his footing in the soft mud. Staggering back from the tremendous energies released, he had not expected that.

“Are you all right?” Tarmon asked, confused why it had affected the Dai-laman like that.

“For now, yes,” Brandor said, straightening himself. Searching to where Hanor lay, what had happened here?

Bane froze, stunned by the power of the Dai-laman’s voice. Caught between desires, his best friend was still not moving.

Checking for the *force field*, detecting nothing of its presence, Brandor could not afford anymore mishaps. The lad’s hand had acted like a trigger, feeling the explosive release of that dynamic energy. Nothing was left except the contours in the earth where it had been. Destabilising the area, time was short.

Extending a hand, Brandor had to be sure no residual energies remained that might give a nasty sting. Bane and the others waited. Hanor was still not moving. Once clear of the original outline, Brandor headed for the boy but with care. The ground was soft, sinking enough to be wary. "Stay there," he ordered Bane and the others. "The ground is unstable." Reaching the figure crumpled on the floor of the hollow, the boy was still breathing. "He is alive," he said over his shoulder to their relief. Bane just wanted to hug his friend, to take away the pain.

"This place is falling apart," Lorvanon declared, a clump of mud falling behind. "We have to get out of here!"

Careful as he rolled the unconscious Hanor over, the Dai-laman examined him for obvious injuries. Difficult to tell in the half-light, his right hand showed no signs of burning, amazed it was without blemish.

Thanking the *Sacred*, Brandor lifted the boy and started back through the squelching mud. Difficult, the extra weight demanding more than he could give, Balkorn was quick to help. Carrying the unconscious victim as though Hanor was a child, the big Baltian took him, and to the group's surprise, headed back along the tunnel. Paying no attention to any protests, Bane's especially, the huge fellow seemed to have his own agenda.

Disregarding their qualms, another large lump of melted rock fell to the floor, "Out of here!" Brandor ordered, indicating they follow Balkorn. "For I suspect this place will not be here in the morning."

Cautious, uncertain of the implications the burst of energy would have on his plans, Gorl-darl considered what it meant. Connected to the Source of his power, he felt encouraged when possibilities finally filtered in to ease the doubts. After securing a presence in the group whose destiny was to bring about the downfall of the Freelands, only now could he see why his guide had led him to them.

Cackles of crude laughter echoed. Turning back to his Virile Hunter, Gorl-darl's horned beast would soon be ready. Creating it for one reason only, the destruction of the Hisian-set, the remaining members were soon to suffer the pain they inflicted on him long ago. His revenge would be sweet and deserving

Perched high above on a circular ledge of rock, twelve Nyshifters hissed, sharing in his delight.

Leaving Hanor's room shortly before dawn, Brandor was exhausted. Gaining only a measure of sleep before his insightful dream last night, after experiencing the intense energies beneath this city, it was time to rest. Leaving Tarmon to watch over Hanor, the Dai-laman had not wanted to go, but the Tardanian's wisdom along with inner promptings of an active conscience forewarned illness would ensue if he did not. The fact Balkorn was on guard outside the boy's room had been enough to convince him.

Heading along the silent, dark corridor, regretting the frailties of his body, the immense *powers* released by that *Orb* still tingled his senses. Lifting his commitment to new heights, but what had they experienced down there? Did this have anything to do with the *Stone of Tarkon*? Entering his room, this raised more questions than answers.

Chapter 8 : Surviving the Miraculous

Bane woke, not knowing how long he had been dozing. Sitting in the chair beside Hanor's bed, his best friend was still oblivious to the world. Crying a few times already, last night's experience taking its toll, witnessing his beloved companion endure what he had was too much. How could they keep going like this? Thinking their relationship was getting back on track, but this setback would have a long-lasting affect. Touching upon something way beyond anything he himself could grasp, the gap between them had returned as deep as ever. Could they ever be just friends again?

Rubbing his eyes, still tired from the trauma, he had not wanted to leave Hanor earlier, but Brandor's insistence had ushered him to his room. Returning as soon as he had awoken, swapping places with an exhausted Tarmon, he had been here ever since. The fact an oversized Baltian was guarding Hanor's room added further concerns. Not leaving his position since arriving, Balkorn was no doubt still there now. Odd to see a complete stranger react as he had, protests had been discarded by the big fellow, taking Hanor from the tunnel without explanation. Who did he think he was? Shrugging off the tension, at least he had shown affection towards his friend, which was better than some.

Looking around the room, thick curtains kept most of the light out, casting shadows in every corner. A tall ornate cupboard lined one wall and a mirror sat between two scenic paintings of a mountain and a river on another. Simple but comfortable like his own room, an urge to return home climbed through the grey mood.

Shifting when Hanor muttered in his sleep, Bane waited, hoping his friend was about to awaken. Sighing when his friend's breathing returned to the blissful state of before, he longed for such tranquillity.

Standing, Bane started pacing back and forth, mumbling. Annoyed things were not as he wanted, "Come on, get on top of this," he rumbled, determined to make a difference. "He needs you..., you halfwit."

"Wh... what... who...?" behind him Hanor stuttered, trying to sit up.

Bane was at his side in a beat. "Everything is fine, lay back down, you need to rest."

Through bleary-eyes, it took a moment for Hanor to focus. "Is... is that... you, Bane?"

"Yes, it is. Just relax."

"Where..., where am I?"

"You are safe at Manter. Do you remember?"

Blinking away the sleep, Hanor took in his surroundings. "Er..., yes."

"Take your time," Bane ordered. Contented just to be here where he belonged, the realisation dismissed the mood.

"That *light*!" Hanor shot, memories returning with a bite. "What happened to *it*?"

Not proficient at being tactful, "*It*... is no longer here."

"What...? Where is *it*?" Hanor was dismayed at the loss.

"I..., I do not know," Bane managed, uncertain if he should get Brandor. "What *is* important... is that you are well."

Hanor rubbed his numb forehead.

"How do you feel?" Bane asked, sitting on the bed beside him.

"Strange but... fine. Where are the others?"

"Everyone is still here worrying about you."

"What happened down there?"

"I do not know." Bane said, his sadness apparent.

"What is it?" Hanor asked, concerned. Answers appeared before him. "Ah Bane..., what have I been putting you through?" Leaning forward, he hugged his best friend, the strain just beneath the surface. "I am so sorry."

"This has been...", Bane could not finish, fighting back the tears. "I always wanted to do this sort of thing, rampaging through the Freelands as a brave warrior. But now here, I am just a fool!"

Putting aside desires to understand it all, Hanor put his friend first, traces from the experience still apparent. "We just have to do the best we can."

"I did not dream it would be like this, you going through what you are."

"I know, but... it is not all bad," he promised.

Talking and reminiscing without too much hurt, memories of last night's events kept swaying in the back of Hanor's mind, but their impact meant nothing if love could not be shared when required. Bane needed his support now, the distance between them already too wide. Even mentioning his parents and Nole did not distract them from the moment. When the door opened and the familiar features of Tarmon peered in, with Balkorn standing behind, it was time to face everyone.

Entering the unfamiliar Eating Hall behind Tarmon, Hanor felt self-conscious after last night's dramatic episode. Walking alongside Bane with the huge Balkorn at the rear, he was still finding their new acquaintance difficult to get used to. Acting as though he had become his self-appointed protectorate, the Baltian's presence felt unnerving. Not one to talk much, just an odd croaking answer, the Balt seemed oblivious to the affect he was having. Unsure about his motives, Hanor seemed to have little choice in the matter.

An appetising aroma of cooked food accompanied low mumblings of conversation once inside the sizeable chamber. Tables lined both walls with one running down the middle. Enough to seat over a hundred people, a handful of men and women sat at the far end. His companions were eating over to the left. Hesitant, those horrible sensations of being the centre of attention whirled in Hanor's stomach. Approaching, only Brandor, High-man Lorvanon and Rosa-Tor were absent. Sensing everyone's caution, careful of what to say, he could hardly blame them. No doubt asking who this strange boy was harnessing such diabolical powers, he wondered that himself. Yet to digest what took place, he was finding circumstances increasingly out of control, the innocent young man of yester-turn fighting for survival. Did he want to give everything up to see this through? Deep down, he sensed it was what could be asked of him.

"Hanor...!" Kifter said, rising at the boy's awkwardness. "Come..., sit here." Nudging Hallen to move along. "How are you?"

Sitting with Bane next to him, Hanor forced a brave smile. Balkorn and Tarmon sat opposite, their protectiveness plain. Good to see them, but he hated the attention. "Fine."

"Seeing you well is our prime concern. Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he said, famished.

"Hallen..., fetch some food," Kifter ordered.

Not happy in case he missed something, the big Hite bounded over to the food table, filling a large tray with all manner of sumptuous edibles. Returning, he placed the tray down. "At your service."

Permitting Hanor time to eat, conversations were light but sensitive. Raldama left to get Brandor only to return a short while later. Finishing his food, Hanor was not in the mood to talk but respected their desires for answers. Strained, the silence was heavy as if it too waited for his words. Gulping, he was about to talk when the door opened and an expectant Dai-laman walked in.

Gliding up to the boy as if the two were the only ones in the room, Brandor crouched to his level. "How are you, Hanor?"

"Well..., considering the circumstances," he answered, more relaxed now the Dai-laman was here.

"Any adverse affects..., oddities since waking?"

"No..., just a bit tired."

"What about your eyesight?"

"Er..., it is fine also."

"And... your heart rate, is that steady?"

The line of questioning raised doubts about what he should be feeling. "It is normal."

"Good..., good indeed," Brandor said, thoughtful. Glancing across at the few seated at the other end of the hall, they were not paying them any attention. "I know not the intensity of what you partook in last night, for I only felt a single emphatic pulse at the moment you touched *it*, but... raw energies have a way of unbalancing the body and its organs." Rubbing his chin, tempted to ask but wary in case it might intrude, the boy's tired eyes warned him not to press for much. "Now Hanor..., there is but one question I would ask..., if you are willing?"

"Yes, but... my memory is still muzzy."

"Hopefully time will return all of it to you," the Dai-laman said, the others hanging on his words too. His tone went serious. "Hanor..., do you know what that *Point of Light* was, and what happened to *it*?"

"That is two questions," Hallen said, his poor humour ill-timed.

"Try to be as descriptive as you can," Brandor continued, disregarding the Hite. "I have to be certain what I believe *it* was."

Unsettled that everyone was staring, Hanor tried to recall all that he could. Visualising that short period prior to its climax, a heartening whisper repeated those profound words. "*You are about to embrace eternity.*" Uniting in mind and body, his individual self had barely stayed intact right up until he had closed his hand. Reliving that blissful heartbeat when life as he knew it ceased, he had become one with everything, he had become life itself. Absurd when thinking about it, how could he share such a ridiculous concept? "I cannot give an answer you would understand."

"Let me be the decider of that," Brandor urged, patient.

Nervous, Hanor obeyed. "That *Point of Light* is like the starting place for life, and is the *Source* of all we see today. I am sorry, I know that does not make sense."

"How can something come from nowhere?" Hallen mocked. He still could not get used to this otherworldly language.

Raising a hand for silence, Brandor warned anyone else with a loose tongue. "I see," was all he said to Hanor, not revealing what he made of it. "And where did *it* go?"

Falling unconscious to his individual self, Hanor had become aware of the wider spectrum to life, where time and space had merged. Refusing to answer, they would think him mad.

"Hanor..., let me be the decider," Brandor repeated, supportive, reading his doubt. "*It* did not go anywhere. *It* is... everywhere."

Nodding, "That is fine," Brandor said, patting his arm. "You have done well for someone who knew so little about the workings of life. Do not be frightened by what you do not understand, mysteries have a tendency to slot together in the end." Checking the young lad a final time, the Dai-laman stood and faced the others. "It is getting late..., and Hanor will need another turn or two before he is ready to move. Take this opportunity to rest, for the road ahead is long. We will talk in the morning about our next step." Getting ready to move, "I am busy working with the Masters here at Manter towards another line of defence, which I have explained to some of you already. Talk about this if you will, it may reinforce your faith in the future."

"Where are we going next?" Greema asked, disliking mysteries.

"Patience was never your strongest trait," Brandor joked. "You will be glad most of all Greema, for we will be heading for Grovan."

"That is a place worthy of such fine folk," Greema approved.

"Ahem..., is that a wise place for our Hitorian friend to go?" Kifter interjected.

"Hallen will be made welcome like the rest of you," Brandor assured them, surprised the Grove and Hite were sitting quite near to each other. "Our enemy is far darker than any Hitorian joke or Grovian mood. The two people in question are strong enough to put aside their differences, and it will be no different when we reach Grovan." Pleased to see the Hite and Grove concur to each other, if either was in trouble, the other would do their utmost to help. As was his custom, Brandor left the Hall as quickly as he had arrived.

Isolated, Hanor's awkwardness increased as quiet discussions began around him. Half-listening to Kifter trying to reassure Hallen of what was to come, Raldama and Hayla started talking at the end of the table, with Tarmon and Greema striking up a respectable friendship. Sitting next to Bane and across from the silent Balkorn, Hanor supposed what he had said to Brandor might be a setback for his best friend. Daring to look, his heart dropped; a thick cloud of heaviness was wreaking havoc on Bane again. Swaying between happiness and gloom, what they had shared earlier in his room was now gone. Unwilling to placate him, he was old enough to look after himself. That was one thing he knew, if Bane was not in the mood then not even the attentions of a nice lady would tempt him from it.

Claustrophobic, Hanor needed time to think. Aware of someone behind, he turned, surprised to see Hayla looking down.

"Would you like to see the gardens?" she asked, indicating the door.

For that moment, Hanor could have lost himself in her deep blue eyes. Up this close, she was even more beautiful. Taken aback by her offer, thoughts about Bane sneaked in, suspecting he was listening. Like a cold wet towel, Hanor was about to decline when an inner prompting stopped him. Split by indecision, when Raldama left the Hall, it highlighted just how much he did need some fresh air. "Yes..., er..., I do need space to clear my head," he said, rising.

“Good..., the gardens at sunset can be very relaxing,” Hayla said, leading the way.

“We have a large variety of fliryngs that are fun to watch.”

“Sounds fun,” Hanor said. Refusing to check on his sulking friend, Bane would have to come to terms with this new world just like he was. Questioning whether he was being selfish, it felt more like survival.

“This is a lovely short-turn of the day,” Hayla said, peering up at the wisps of cloud painting the peachy sky.

Ambling along one of numerous paths snaking amongst the vast array of colours and shrubs, the subtle breeze soothed Hanor’s troubles. Dusk was a short way off, granting them time to reflect and take in the splendour of these gardens. Fliryngs flittered about, oblivious to worldly troubles. Red breasts with silvery blue backs shimmered in the fading light. Long shadows stretched across these High-grounds, the sun hovering above the horizon. Small, trimmed trees grew everywhere, some in clumps whilst others like lone statues of greens, reds and purples. Concealing the outer wall with its countless figurines, these gardens were substantial. Tranquil, she led him through a silver pillared veranda of elegant design, a lone tree in the middle reminding him of his own isolation. Even so, he felt relaxed.

“It is charming,” he said, leaving the open-sided walkway, pleased that he had come.

“High-man Lorvanon allows people of the city to walk here at certain periods of the turn,” Hayla said, concurring to someone she knew as they passed. “But evenings and mornings are left for those who serve here.”

Permitting Hanor to lead the conversation, if he needed to talk or just wanted silence, Hayla was happy with either. After the incredible episode with that *Sphere of Power*, his struggle to explain what he had experienced had strengthened her commitment to be there for him. Sometimes easier to confide in a woman than one’s own best friend, the fact he had lost his brother in such a despicable fashion far exceeded her own suffering. Her brother had died in a freak accident play-fighting with a wooden pole, to lose him as Hanor had was horrific.

Glancing across as he watched a pair of fliryngs above a small tree, he seemed so vulnerable, so out of his depth. Just a young man, yet, there was a quiet maturity that outshone many of those around him. Observing the outline of his face and dark shoulder length hair, she surprised herself at why she was staring so intently. Not one for relationships, unlike her friends, there had only ever been one person whom she thought was good enough, and he lived in Mandurin.

Strange, why were her thoughts straying like this? Respecting how someone so young could manage what he had, Tarmon’s and Kifter’s awe was obvious with their tale telling. Moved each time she had seen or heard Hanor speak, it was the same now. Shrugging off the fluttering sensations, she just wanted to be there for him and nothing more. Determined, her emotions still would not settle. Laughing, disbelieving it, she had to stop herself from guessing how old he was and how many seasons were between them. Not her usual self, her heart felt light and was beating fast. This was most odd. Trying to concentrate on something else, she was a warrior, not some love-struck youth with nothing better to do.

“What are you smiling at?” Hanor asked, surprised when turning around.

"I was... thinking that was all," she stuttered, looking away from his large brown eyes. Amazed as to why she was wrestling with the situation in the first place, "Are you enjoying this?" she asked, deviating from her disorderly emotions.

"I could stay here forever," he replied a little too quickly, embarrassed when looking at her. "I mean..., these gardens and... the peace and quiet."

"I will not be offended if the company is not to your liking," she teased, his youthful innocence burning red. Guessing he was ten cycles of the seasons younger, she chided herself for thinking that. Why could she not control her feelings?

"No..., no of course not," Hanor apologised. "I could not ask for better company," he said, checking how that might be received.

Staring at each other, both hearts jumped, a rush of energy stalling them. In that split moment, something deep resonated across the empty space between them. Wholesome, when it simmered, awkwardness swept in, neither believing what had just happened.

Turning away, Hayla tried to regain control. What were these feelings? She had only invited him out for some fresh air. "I am... sorry, Hanor. I... er..., I must have eaten too much, my mind is in a muddle."

"Oh..., I see," he said. Certain something had just happened, similar to that magical encounter with Coreema, he presumed it was him and laughed it off. "I am glad it is the food and not me."

"I am sorry, Hanor, that was a ridiculous thing for me to say," Hayla said. This was getting out of hand. *He is much too young, and the timing is far from appropriate.* Getting cross, where did that thought come from?

Turning, she took hold of his hand. Expecting the wrenching in her stomach to soar and force her to repel him, her individuality coming to the rescue, but no rejections surfaced. What was she getting into? The charge flowing between them did not ease, her heart racing again. Cupping his hand between hers, what did she look like? Forcing herself to look at him, his confusion mirrored her own.

"Hanor," she said, showing the strain. "This is not real is it? I barely know you, but I have become fond of you because some of your hardships mirror my own."

Shocked by this, after everything he had undergone, this was the last thing Hanor expected. "I am not sure what is real anymore," he said, drawn to her. "I am going through incredible changes, and am not as strong as you may think."

"Your strength is not where you deem it to be," she explained, praying she was going to wake up. Examining his reactions, wild fluctuations in heart began to simmer, rationality returning. "I like you but... this is not the time or place. Do you agree?"

"Er..., yes," he said, bewildered.

Giggling, mixed feelings refused to let her go. Reaching up, she touched his cheek. "If we survive what is to come, perhaps we can get to know each other properly."

"I would like that," he agreed, disbelieving this. A knowing grin spread into his cheeks.

"What is that look for?" she said, detecting an edge to his gaze.

"Your hand feels nice."

"And your cheek does too," she said, holding it before pulling away. "We had better not get too close," she said, more at ease. "Come on, let us watch the sunset together," she urged, pulling him after her. "There are seats on a mound just beyond that tree line."

'That was strange,' Hanor thought, relieved, running with her. His life seemed to be getting stranger by the turn.

Leaving the High-house, a scornful Bane glanced across the gardens to his left. Catching a glimpse of Hanor and Hayla disappearing behind a line of trees, he was angry at his best friend for leaving when he so much needed to talk. Disgruntled, he did not like how Balkorn had followed Hanor either. Now sitting against the High-house wall with his staff laying at his feet, at least the Balt's intrusive behaviour had some decency to it. Threatened by the Baltian's conduct, having failed Hanor miserably on countless occasions, for someone so powerful to replace him hurt. Moody again, a far cry from what he had shared with Hanor earlier, why could he not stay like that? Convinced the gloom had a life of its own, he seemed doomed to its grim presence.

Heading for the main gate, he had to get out of here. Nodding to the guards when passing, more uniformed people were about as if word had spread about Hanor and that *Orb* thing. Confused by what his friend had said earlier to Brandor, their relationship seemed to be a constant battle between the normal and supernormal. Refusing to accept Hanor now had a purpose to his life, he knew it would not get better until he did. Hampered by wild emotions, he could not see beyond his own selfish needs.

Venturing down the beaten road the same way they had arrived, painted homes and neat gardens were lying about the serenity of The Freelands. Scenic, the sun verging on exiting this turn of day, if only his life could be that easy. Reaching the next wall, the outer square of the city was still thriving, hundreds lining the main road and side streets as if they had no home to go to. Feeling like that too, he growled to motivate himself into doing something positive for a change.

Strolling beneath the jutting balcony of an elegant two-story building, arched crossbeams atop ornate stone pillars and silvery patterned walls went unnoticed by the temperamental boy. Staring at his feet, he did not see the large fellow coming the other way, bumping into him.

"Hey there young fellow," bellowed a brusque voice, disturbing him from his mood. Looking up, Bane caught his breath. Recognising the large black beard and rounded features, a vague memory warned of caution. "I..., I am... sorry," he stuttered, trying to place him.

"Ahh, Billor never forgets a face," the huge man balked. "Are we in a rush... or being chased by a scoundrel?" The man feigned concern, searching for such enemies.

"Err... no," Bane managed, checking about to make sure he was not on his own. People nearby seemed uninterested, going about their business without concern.

"So where have we met before boy?" the man boomed.

"I..., I do not... know," he said.

Disturbed when the enormous man's cold stare pinned him where he stood, it only softened when recognising who he was. The man let out a raucous laugh.

"Yes..., yes," Billor called. "Now we see," he said, bending down, taking hold of Bane's jaw. Tone lowering, "What are we up to then?"

Gazing into Bane's eyes as if searching his Soul, when trying to pull away, Billor held him fast, only letting go when satisfied. Erupting into another roar of laughter, Bane stood rooted. What had he seen?

"It is well for you this turn of day," Billor said, delighted. "For in your eyes I have seen *him* at work. Now that I have placed you..., it is fitting for you that *he* is. Your work is precious young man, now go and stray not in these lower regions of the city. There are far worse than I who would steal you away this night."

Running like a skittering child, Bane raced back the way he had come, scared in case the man came after him. Darting between people, he had to tell Brandor. Recalling where he had seen the man, he was the one Hallen had spoken to prior to reaching Manter. Cautioned by Brandor to not say anything, he could now see why. He was a spy!

Bolting through the main gates to the High-house, he did not stop until he got to his room. Shutting the door and pulling the cupboard in front, he checked the window was fastened before closing the curtains. Leaping onto his bed, light-headed, Billor's penetrating eyes still haunted him. '*What should I do?*' he thought, needing a drink. He had to tell someone, but with each passing breath, that desire faded as other anxieties rushed forward. Questions as to why he was there in the first place heckled him. Hallen and Kifter would no doubt laugh, fears and lies mixing to pollute any sensible response.

Rubbing dry eyes and yawning, exhausted from the grim strains of late, he did not want to face Brandor yet, or even worse, Hanor. Shameful, unable to approach his best friend anymore, Balkorn would probably be nearby like a shadow to spoil it. Massaging tender temples, his breathing returned to normal. A sorry mess, as each heartbeat passed, talking to the others lost its urgency. Looking for excuses, it was not long before he found one. "I should rest, and tell them later," he said, his nerve giving in to the easier path.

Half-asleep, the room now dark, Bane had no idea how long he had been resting. Legs numb, not sure if he was dozing, the *Shadow* descended, filling his mind.

"*Our work will soon begin,*" the voice said, catching his attention.

"Will it?" Bane questioned, undisturbed by the returning presence.

"*Much depends on you to see this through.*"

"I do not follow."

"*You will see in time, you must be patient and trust me.*"

"I do not even know you."

"*You will when you see me,*"

"But what must I do?"

"*Do you wish to see your destiny fulfilled?*"

"What is my destiny?"

"*More glorious than you can imagine.*"

"But I do not deserve such glory."

"*Your place in history is assured.*"

"But I am... not worthy."

"*You are perfect just the way you are.*"

"Really?"

"*I promise.*"

A misty mind cleared, leaving Bane feeling peculiar as if intoxicated. Still the middle of the night, something was different, not knowing what. Too tired to worry, whatever it was, passed. Drifting, he was soon asleep again.

Chapter 9 : Yarmorian Treachery

“Come in, Hanor,” a cheerful Brandor invited, the young man from Manson entering the Leisure Chamber behind Kifter.

Sheepish, Hanor felt unnerved by the oversized figure of Balkorn behind him. Baffled by what the Baltian was doing and why, a couple of times he had tried striking up a conversation, but had barely received a grunt. Trusting a quiet word with Brandor would settle the matter, it could not carry on as it was.

Most of the others were present, sitting on comfortable chairs amongst intricate tables lined with refreshments. Hallen stood happily munching by the window, helping himself to a handful of nuts. Two walls lined with windows permitted the morning light to filter in. A low ceiling added a homely feel, with green drapes falling to the polished wooden floor. Splendid artwork populated the walls opposite, adding to the finery.

Picking out Hayla, he smiled, amazed at their interactions the previous evening. Holding her hand at sundown, they had walked and talked before returning to their rooms. Strange but nice, both had agreed to leave it until all this was over. Not bothered by the age gap, she seemed just as naive about it as he was. Disbelieving it had happened, but now it had, it was quite exciting, something to look forward to amongst all the demands.

“Sit over here young man,” High-man Lorvanon said, indicating the seat beside him. “Thank you,” he said, searching for Bane who was missing. Forcing down his normal reactionary self, he ignored the worries and did as asked. Balkorn stood nearby.

“How are you this turn of day?” The High-man probed.

“Fine,” Hanor said, acknowledging Brandor. Sleeping well, burdens of yester-turn were not as strong.

“That is fitting,” Lorvanon said, looking at him for an inquisitive moment.

Leaning forward so no one else could hear, “Your parents will be very proud of you.” A lump formed in Hanor’s throat. His parents had become a blur of late. “I hope so.”

“Right..., is that everyone?” Lorvanon asked, turning to the others, his neatly trimmed beard jutting forward.

“Bane is missing,” Hallen said. “Do you want me to get him?”

“What I have to say is for all of you,” Brandor said, in no hurry to repeat himself.

Heading for the door, Hallen reached for the handle, but it opened of its own accord and a round faced man peeked in.

“Does this one belong to you? I found him wondering the corridors.” Opening the door wide, an anxious Bane walked in.

“Ah... Bane, I was just coming to drag you out of your bed,” Hallen teased, clasping him around the shoulders. “You come sit near me.” The big Hite led him towards the window where Kifter sat.

“I... got lost,” Bane apologised. “I slept in..., and got in a tizzy. I should have spoken to you last night but...,” Heart pounding, if he did not say it now, he feared it would not come out at all. “You have spies in the city,” he said to Lorvanon. “I saw one last night.

It was that person we saw on the way to Manter. It was him, the bearded one. I was in the square yester-evening and bumped into him and..."

"Bane..., calm down," Brandor urged, standing.

"No..., this is different..., he looked at me and I could tell..."

"It is all right," the Dai-laman tried assuring him. "High-man Lorvanon has sent patrols to bring in those stirring up trouble. I have already mentioned our dark friend, Billor."

"That was his name," Bane said, agreeing. "Billor...!"

"Everything is taken care of."

"But you do not understand," Bane continued in earnest. "He saw something in me, I do not know what but... he said I had important work to do."

Sitting down, Brandor considered the statement. "I did detect some darkness in Billor," he said, scanning Bane's worried features. "But nothing powerful."

"If he is still here, he will be picked up," Lorvanon promised, checking Bane was happy with this.

Slumping down next to Hallen, Bane felt flushed. Panicking when awakening a short while ago, the only thoughts were of what happened with Billor. A supportive hug from the Hite was not enough to stave off the worry, certain there was more to this.

Standing, Brandor looked around the group, considering each person's part to come. Understanding why Balkorn stood against the wall just behind Hanor, if the others knew the reverence and honour the Baltian felt at being in Hanor's presence, they would not believe it. Sympathetic to the young man, a quiet word with Balkorn would fix it.

"We need to cover some issues before you make an informed decision about whether you wish to proceed," he began, rubbing an itch on his nose. "I mentioned our next destination was Grovan, the first city of the Grovian nation. Why... you may ask." Getting to the point, they were in for a shock. "Grovian... houses another *Pillar of Life*."

"*Pillar... of Life*?" Tarmon questioned. "You mean... another *Sphere of Power*?"

"Yes."

"The same as what we found beneath Manter?" Lorvanon asked above the unsettled murmurs.

"The very same," Brandor assured them.

Greema needed to be sure. "There are no records of it, what makes you so certain?"

"Trust me, one is there," Brandor said, interpreting his vision of the *Columns of Light*.

"Where..., and how...?" Greema was stunned.

"I cannot say," the Dai-laman admitted.

All eyes fell on Hanor, the young man from Manson gulping. Overawed, he wanted to run from all the demands. Another one! Through shadows of fear, another stirring in his heart ignited like a beacon, promising all would be well. Sighing, staring down at his hand which had clasped that *Eternal Point*, without blemish to prove such a miraculous event had even taken place, what did this mean?

"If there *is* another one of these... *Pillars of... Life*," Hallen said, suspecting their journey was about to involve more of the supernatural rather than the fundamentals of a real battle. "What is *their* purpose? What..., and I do not mean it disrespectfully

but... what has the first one actually done? Hanor looks no different. If anything, his intrusion destroyed *it*."

"Reasonable points," Brandor said. "But I suspect it is to do with *higher purposes*."

"Are we doing the *Sacred's* bidding then?" The Hite was unimpressed.

"I know you doubt *their* reality, even though you have seen the miraculous; the *Heart of Tarkon* for one; but to do *their* will is beneficial for us also."

"So you say," Hallen moaned.

"This meeting is for us to decide who wants to go or not," the Dai-laman continued. "I know you will stay with the group anyway Hallen, but your groaning is becoming repetitive. Try keeping an open mind."

"There are two of these *Orbs* or... *Pillars* then?" Raldama probed, inspired to move forward. "Those feelings down there were extraordinary, and I would like to experience them again."

"There maybe more than two," Brandor said, expecting their amazement.

"More...!" they said in unison.

"How many?" Greema demanded to know. What in all the Freelands was going on?

"At least another three."

"Three...! How... and why?" Hayla said, worried for Hanor. If it were true, he would be the one affected. A pang in her heart hurt, he could not go through with it. "Like Hallen said, what is the point?"

"I do not know, but I felt it necessary to share what I could," the Dai-laman said. "The journey will be mentally and emotionally draining, and we also have an enemy to contend with."

"Where are the other two?" Tarmon asked, apprehensive.

"What are the four ancient cities of the Freelands?"

"You mean... Tardoc and Mandurin have one too?" The Tardanian was astonished.

"Yes. Manter, Grovan, Mandurin and Tardoc were the very first civilisations to gather in the Freelands. Encouraged by the energetic powers in the earth, these lands were rich in vegetation and life. Now you can see why."

"Have you forgotten that Tardoc is under attack?" The Tardanian's passionate reminder was agreed by all.

"That is not the least of it," Brandor said. "Mandurin is also under attack."

Shocked by the statement, the room went quiet. Receptive to any outbursts or disagreements, the Dai-laman waited.

"How do you propose we achieve this?" Raldama asked, not so eager to move now.

"There are some here who asked that question concerning a certain Tomb. If I were to ask them would they do it again, what would be their response? Was the *Stone* worthy of such a risk? Are you not prepared to risk torment again to find another way of defeating *Gorl-darl*?"

"What you are asking is not the same," Hallen said, unmoved.

"Is it not? Which part does it differ? Was not the *Pillar* greater than the *Stone*?"

"But we do not know what the *Pillars* are for," Kifter pointed out.

"Did you know what the *Stone* could do?"

"To be fair, we did not know what we were getting into," the Fife countered.

“Tarmon had experience of it, and his reaction warned of the dangers. It is no different here..., only the circumstances have changed.”

“A Valley of *Souls* is not comparative to thousands of Dorts and Gorls,” Raldama contested.

“I would not be so sure,” Hallen corrected, the memory vivid. “It is better to have an enemy you can see than one you cannot.”

Raising a hand, Raldama repealed his comment. “I am sorry, sometimes tales, no matter how good the narrative, can never come close to the real thing. I did not mean to offend.”

The Hite concurred.

“Where do we stand on this issue then?” Brandor called, walking to the window.

“The potential is out of this world, quite literally, or do we fight with what we have?”

The room fell quiet, flickering doubts darting at what was being asked.

“I will go,” Greema declared, breaking the tension. “To Grovan and beyond.” The Grovian sat with large arms folded, undeterred by the doubtful atmosphere.

“I too will go, Brandor,” Raldama seconded, remaining upbeat. “You have done more than enough to deserve such commitment.”

Glancing across at Hanor, Hayla did not respond immediately, disliking the prospect of what he might have to endure. Having been through enough already, but her respect for Brandor and what he was trying to do for the Freelands warranted a greater allegiance. “I will go,” she said, trusting the Dai-laman’s judgement. Locking eyes with Hanor, the exchange reinforced the possibility that there was something between them.

Resounding like a well-timed bell, “Should we not ask what Hanor wants to do?”

Hallen offered, reminding them of the relevance.

Everyone turned his way, Hanor thanking Hallen inwardly for his unwanted observations. Stresses increased, feeling self-conscious and very much alone. Bane seemed detached, and with Brandor peering out the window not wishing to sway his decision, this was another burden heaped onto lagging shoulders. ‘*Another three Pillars of Life*’. Echoing the statements made earlier, what purpose did *they* have? Recalling the astonishing moment when merging with the *Pillar*, it was like giving everything up to gain the whole universe. But could he manage another three?

“It is not fair to expect Hanor to answer that,” the surprising voice of Bane said, catching everyone off guard. “He has done enough.”

Surprised by his support, Hanor appreciated it nonetheless.

“We cannot decide without him... or can we?” Hallen said, sitting next to the feisty young Bane.

“I suggest not,” Brandor disagreed. “I have little understanding about the *Powers* involved, and do not know if anyone else has the strength of heart to cope with the dynamic energies. I suspect the changes Hanor has undergone recently has prepared him for this. There maybe others here with the same qualities, but I cannot be sure. This is not supposed to be a longwinded discussion about the why or why-not issues. There are mysteries beyond even me, yet a decision has to be made.”

“You set a mighty task, Brandor,” Hallen said. “But your witness is true. You are right of course, I will go, no doubt like my little Fifanian friend here.”

“Brandor already knows my decision,” Kifter confessed.

The room went quiet, attentions returning to the still silent Hanor. Reaching across, Lorvanon patted his arm, conscientious. Big choices never came easy, over time you just learnt to make them quicker and with a bit more confidence that was all.

"I do not like the idea of whether we proceed being down to me," Hanor said, confronting the demon before him.

"Everyone has a choice," Brandor intervened before he went on. "The burden is not yours. Even if only the two of us go, there would still be no burden. Everyone is capable of making an informed decision here."

The comments helped even if only a little. "I respect and trust you, Brandor. You said to me once about stretching my boundaries, well..., one thing I have discovered is that fear can erect boundaries right where we stand. I am no warrior, but I will play my part if everyone else is willing."

Surprised by his determination to do what was necessary, the corners of Lorvanon's mouth lifted. "You are a brave young man, like the rest of you who are going."

"Is there anyone who does not wish to go?" Brandor put the rest to the test.

"I have come this far," Tarmon said, steadfast. "I do not intend to turn back now."

Balkorn concurred across the room to the Dai-laman, which only left Bane.

"If you think I am going to entrust Hanor to you lot..., you must be joking," the young man said, to everyone's amusement. Rising, he went across to Hanor, and clamped his friend with a big hug. "I am sorry I am hard work," he whispered into Hanor's ear.

"We are as bad as each other," Hanor said, pulling him close.

"Well, at least that is settled," Brandor said, relieved. There was a good chance they could be on their way in the morning. "Are there any more questions?"

Raldama spoke next. "A *Nyshifter* was spotted crossing one of the moons last night, what do you make of this?"

"I knew the relief would be short-lived," Brandor teased, turning serious. "*Nyshifters* are a terrifying danger to everyone, in and outside of a city. We cannot allow such a risk to deter us. We must be cautious but swift."

"Should we gain confidence that the *Stone* is our protector?" Raldama suggested.

"That is up to *its* carrier to decide," the Dai-laman said, looking at Hanor.

"The power working through the *Stone* wishes to reveal itself," Hanor tried to assure them. "It would be wrong of me not to use those powers should *they* arise."

"Does that answer your question, Raldama?"

"It does, thank you Brandor..., and Hanor. I did not want to presume."

"You mentioned before that *Nyshifters* do not like sunlight," Bane piped up, glad to have avoided another round of gloom. United with Hanor again, they were like lovers unable to live with or without each other. "How do you know?"

Time was getting on, but Brandor *had* promised to share the tale. Not one of his favourites, he sat back and motioned for everyone to do likewise. Only Balkorn remained standing.

"Thirty seven full seasons ago," Brandor said, taking a sip of water. "The Hisian-set had become complacent with their prolonged lives. Living many lifetimes compared to

normal folk, we had grown lapse towards issues of the Freelands, especially concerning dark rumours coming out of the northern regions.”

“What is the Hisian-set again?” Bane asked, recalling Kifter mentioning them before.

“We were the original twelve who rid Mandurin of *Gorl-darl* long ago. We also used to teach people with the *Gift* about the *Hidden Arts*, and how to use them towards the good of the whole. We no longer teach but that may change in the future. Is that adequate?”

Bane nodded.

“Now..., because of our lapse attitudes, as I was saying, our complacency was at an all time high, so too our indulgencies. Our contentment kept our ears covered and the will to do good quite often in the food cupboard. You may smile but... it was a sorry state knowing life holds so much potential to feed hungry minds. Even warnings given to us by the Sages of Baltiar about the emerging darkness was not enough. We argued over the details, but did nothing productive to counter it.

Then one moonlit night, I happened to be up late, and ventured onto my balcony to enjoy the starlit sky. When checking the position of the stars, something caught my eye that sent a shiver through me. Numerous shadows were moving in our direction. Not until *they* dived in for the kill did I realise what *they* were. Sealing protective energies over my room, I shouted to warn the others. Some heard my call, but those on the upper levels of the Sleep did not until it was too late.”

Always difficult reliving the experience, he continued for their sake. “Four *Nyshifters* got inside the rooms of those who were not quick enough to respond. Arriving too late, we watched as each was dragged over their balconies never to be seen again. It was a traumatic awakening to what a complacent life can lead to.”

“What did you do then?” Raldama asked, this tale new to him.

“We went after them. This time though, we listened to whispers coming out of the northern realms, hoping to discover where they may have been taken. For many turns we ventured deep into the mountains, but without success. Failing to find *Gorl-darl* in the distant past, we failed to find our lost brothers: Kale, Hase, Leeme and Masson were their names.

Then one morning just before dawn, we were attacked again by twelve of those dreaded *Nyshifters*.” Memories harsh, how lucky they had been. “We fought with all the power we could muster, burning where we could, but each time we struck, *they* seemed to soak up our fiery powers. We resisted, running and fighting, but were getting desperate. Just when our energies were spent, Sharn..., one of my compatriots, saw a large crack in a nearby rock face. Just wide enough to squeeze into, but too narrow for those monsters to enter, we were granted a most precious reprieve.

Relieved but sickened, we were trapped. Destitute, and running out of ideas, dawn arrived with its yet to be seen blessing. Mountain shadows started lifting, and when hearing a sudden ear-piercing shrill, we checked to see what was happening. Not *their* usual fear-instilling cry, but one of utter pain, we caught sight of *them* swooping along the valley undercover of the shadowy mountains away from our position. One however, was struggling, a smouldering wing visible as if scorched. Wondering if someone had come to our aid, only when another of those dreadful creatures got caught by the sun’s rays did we understand what had happened. For whatever reason, the sun’s rays burn through *their* protective skin. Ironical that something harmless to us means death to *them*.”

"That is an amazing tale," High-man Lorvanon said, astonished. "I have not yet seen a *Nyshifter*, and am in no hurry to do so. We are most thankful for your survival."

"It was a long time ago, but yes..., it was a narrow escape."

"And what of your lost companions?" Greema asked.

"We never did find them," Brandor replied, pursing his lips.

"Sounds awful," Hanor said, dismayed. Escaping those vicious claws and evil eyes himself, *Nyshifters* were terrible beyond measure.

Respectful, the ensuing silence allowed each to ponder the tale and their next move. For the newcomers, it was an insight to what they might soon face, in awe at what the original group had encountered.

An opening of the door by Rosa-Tor broke the spell. "There are two Tardanians who have arrived seeking urgent counsel with you, Brandor."

"Where are they?" Brandor said, rising.

"In the Eating Hall. They are tired and hungry, so I made them comfortable there."

Not wasting a moment, Brandor left.

"I need to hear this," Tarmon said, joining him.

Entering the Eating Hall, counting five small groups of men and women seated at different tables, the two weary looking Tardanians Brandor was seeking were by one of the tall windows eating. Both scrambled to their feet when the Dai-laman and Tarmon approached.

"Sorvan and Paldone, this is a mixed blessing to see you," Tarmon decreed.

"What is it you need to tell us?" Brandor said, getting to the point.

Suspicious of the others in the hall, Sorvan replied barely above a whisper. "We have travelled many turns on behalf of Caldon - Master of Tarden's Forces. Our news... is not good tidings."

"Go on," Brandor urged.

"What we are about to say involves events witnessed by Caldon between High-tard Drola and his Lady Maloree," Paldone said, disturbed by what they were about to disclose. Assessing Tarmon's response, he pressed on. "Caldon was in Drola's private Reading Chamber doing some research, and was looking for a book he needed on the bottom shelf at the rear. Whilst there, High-tard Drola and Maloree entered. About to make himself known from behind the long seating, he stopped when Maloree began questioning whether Caldon was the right person to be Master of Tarden's Forces. Attempting to persuade Drola to remove Caldon for fear of him undermining the decisions Drola had made, Caldon was in a terrible fix. It is not his way to listen in on private discussions."

"But listen he did," Sorvan said, supportive. "To Tarden's advantage."

"Crouching," Paldone continued. "Caldon heard Maloree state that she believed Caldon's main objective was to take Drola's position as High-tard. Drola objected, but she reasoned if victory was gained by going north, Caldon would be seen as a hero. The position of High-tard is not passed down through heirs like other cities, but is based upon the ability to serve. A victory would give Caldon a claim to the position of High-tard. Protesting that Caldon had no interest in Drola's dream about the river of blood, she said Caldon wanted victory no matter how many Tardanians were killed."

"I cannot see Drola accepting something so wild," Tarmon said, disagreeing.

“No..., neither did Caldon, but that is not the end of it.” Paldone checked with Sorvan who motioned for him to proceed. “From his low position, he could see the two, and was distressed because of the awkward situation. When Drola protested, to Caldon’s horror, Maloree waved her hands behind his head as if writing symbols in the air. In mid flow of his defence of Caldon, and this is the hard part Tarmon, Drola stopped talking as if realising a mistake. According to Caldon, Drola then started agreeing with her. No longer needing to defend her point, Drola built upon the lies as if they were his own.” Sorvan spoke before Tarmon did. “When he was relaying this, Caldon was shaking, that is how upset he was. You know how loyal he is, it broke his heart.”

Turning away, Tarmon felt ill, shocked beyond belief. Why would she do it? Knowing Maloree well, they had talked and laughed many times. Intelligent and interesting, it was the reason why Drola and Polon had fallen for her. This was awful. Caldon could not conjure this up either to justify a decision he had to make, it would undo his nature. Sorvan and Paldone were as equally trusting.

“We are devastated,” Sorvan said.

“We searched for reasons why, but nothing could we find,” Paldone went on. “She is one of us, Yarmorian by birth, but still of the Tardanian line. It does not make sense.”

Irritable, the fact his reactions caught the attention of others in the hall did not bother Tarmon, disbelief turning to anger. There was no doubting the source, he knew them as family, it was the treachery that hurt. What could she gain by manipulating Drola? Admittedly, the city had become divided over Drola’s refusal to defend the Northern Gap, and Caldon had many supporters urging him to do it anyway. Was that it? But why? Not uniting with Tardoc left Tardania exposed at its northern borders, did she want Tardania to fall? The idea rattled him.

Brandor said nothing, alarmed by the revelation. This was a thunderclap. What would drive her to do it? Getting over the initial shock, he now had to find a motive. The two messengers waited as if his and Tarmon’s word would finally seal it as genuine.

“How many people know about this?” he asked, wary of the details getting out prematurely.

“Six plus two Masters,” Sorvan replied. “Everyone is upset.”

“No doubt they are,” the Dai-laman said, deep in reflection.

“Her intentions must be to divide Tarden,” Tarmon voiced his beliefs when satisfied it was the only answer.

Aghast, Sorvan and Paldone were startled they had not thought of it themselves.

“Your point may be a good one, but why?” Paldone questioned.

Rubbing tense fingers against his forehead, Brandor scowled at the emerging possibility. “It cannot be...!” he grimaced, interrupting the others.

“What is it?” Tarmon looked up.

“A reason that is equally incredible,” he said, barely believing it. “The Yarmi Folk have an agenda..., and Maloree is still very much a part of that.”

“The Yarmi Folk!” Sorvan said, dubious. “Why would they be involved?”

Scrutinising the likelihood, numerous details did hold firm for the Dai-laman. “I will speak as I think, so let me finish before saying anything.”

“Proceed,” Sorvan invited.

Ensuring all three were in agreement, Brandor explained himself. “Drola won Maloree’s hand originally in a despicable manner that split the two young Tardanians, the first step in securing a permanent disunity between Tarden and Tardoc. I recently invoked the Yarmorians, seeking their counsel about the dangers facing us all. I thought it strange that I received no response. Only when I sought Hanor did they answer, and their reaction, shall we say, was cold enough to warrant suspicion.” Making sure no one was listening behind, he carried on. “Another clue is those Tardocians you found Tarmon at the foot of the Treman Mountains. Bodies cannot appear from nowhere.”

Horried, Tarmon could see the connections. “Brandor, it does make sense.”

“What bodies?” Paldone asked, worried.

Tarmon quickly explained the macabre details.

“That is outrageous,” the messenger said, appalled.

“Awful,” Sorvan agreed.

“A most wretched scene,” Tarmon said, still not over it.

“Do you think the Yarmorians killed them?”

“No, they died by Dortian blades,” Tarmon assured them. “If Brandor is correct, it appears the Yarmi Folk went in to clean up the mess.”

“Arranged into small piles,” Brandor noted. “Highlights a respectful idea about what death entails and how the *Sacred* might look upon such an act. The Yarmi Folk are well versed in the language of the *Sacred*, so may have done it.”

“This paints a different picture altogether,” Paldone said, troubled. “We were taught they were a caring community, and Maloree seemed to reflect that.”

“It is how I remember them too,” the Dai-laman said. “But it has been a long time since I last visited. They *have* changed, at least those I spoke to.”

“This is dreadful.”

“What does it mean?” Tarmon asked.

“Do they desire Tardania for themselves?” Paldone suggested.

“The southern regions of Tardania are dying,” Tarmon said, recalling Kifter’s descriptions. “That is plausible.”

“They would be foolish to believe the *Dark One* will allow such a significant power to remain if that is their intention,” Brandor said, viewing it as unlikely.

“Are you saying their plan might be even wider?” Tarmon was dumbfounded.

“Their way is not like *his*. I cannot see how they would support *him* without their own idea of how it will end.”

“What now then?” Tarmon could not envision a clear way forward.

“Our plans will have to change,” Brandor growled.

“What do you mean?”

“We cannot leave Tarden open to such manipulations.”

“But how can we stop the Yarmorians?” Sorvan posed, discouraged.

Deliberating on what to do, Brandor cursed before replying. “Tarden is not strong enough to withstand an attack from the Yarmorians. They need help from the Hisian-set.”

“To confront the Yarmorians?” Paldone asked, hopeful.

“United with Tarden and its Masters, we would be more than a match.” If they did not protect Tarden, his *Wall of Power* would fail too.

“Sounds promising,” Paldone said, optimistic.

“I am torn between Tarden and the group,” Tarmon admitted. “What will happen to the group you have assembled?”

“I cannot force you to do anything,” Brandor said. “The group must proceed but without me, and I need you to stay at its head.”

“I am committed to its cause,” the Tard assured him. “But this is hard. I suppose I should gain comfort that you and your brethren will be there to help Tarden.”

“If you were to return, what could you do against powers you have little understanding of? Your worth is with the group. Its significance is of the utmost importance.”

“Is your own path the best one then?”

A peaceful impression climbed in support of his decision. “No, I must go. It is time the remaining members of the Hisian-set were roused anyway.”

Chapter 10: Pouch of Wonder

Talking to the rest of the group about his plans for Manter, High-man Lorvanon clipped his head at his forgetfulness. "I knew I had missed something," he said, cutting the discussion short. Fumbling inside his elegant knee length coat with its golden trims lining a deep red silky texture, its inside pockets were deep. "Ah..., here we are," he said, pulling his arm out. Holding a small, rich purple bag just bigger than his hand, it sparkled as if coated by specks of jewels. A thin white chord looping through the top fell loose to his knees. Eloquent by design, he held it up for all to see.

"My friends," Greema spoke, in awe. "In Grovan, we call this a girth pouch."
"Correct," Lorvanon said, impressed. "It was given to me a very long time ago by your previous High-grove, Hislen."

"That was a long time ago," Greema said. "I was a young feisty Grove when he died of old age."

"And I a relatively young man coming of age, not much older than Hanor here," Lorvanon said, reminiscing. "It was a present. He and my father were close."

"Only a few were ever made," Greema said, drawn to the pouch.

"Seven in all," the High-man said, proud.

"I have seen paintings but... never one up close."

"Well..., it has clearly lived up to your expectations."

"It has..., and more."

"Lovely to look at," Hayla said. "But... what is so special about it?"

"It is..., " Lorvanon said, mischievous. "A dream purse."

"Really?" she said, leaning forward. Without the need for such necessities, she had a few friends who did.

Holding it out, Lorvanon squeezed and folded the pouch, crumpling it up before squashing it flat on his lap. Making sure they could see it was empty, this was the only time he felt as powerful as a Master or Dai-laman. With one hand, he opened it and reached in right to his elbow as if there was no bottom. Expecting their bewildered looks, Lorvanon took hold of what he had put in earlier. Lifting it out, cries of wonderment resulted when he held the slender sword up for all to see.

"That is... remarkable," Raldama exclaimed, as surprised as the others.

"That is not possible," Hallen said, wanting to see it again. "What else have you got in there..., your kyboe?"

"How does it work?" Bane enquired.

Lorvanon lowered the sword back inside. "The Hidden Arts have a miraculous way of creating the impossible, and how this works I do not know. Our Masters have tried to unpick its secrets, but such details are locked away in a grave along with its creator. It still never fails to amaze even me, and I have used it often."

"Can I have a go?" Bane asked, his troubles dismissed for now.

"Of course," Lorvanon encouraged, grinning.

Holding the pouch, Bane carefully put his hand inside. "Hey..., there is nothing here," he said. Searching around, he put his whole arm in.

"Careful..., we do not want to lose you," the High-man laughed.

"Where has my arm gone?" Bane queried, looking for it when waving the pouch in front.

“Breathtaking,” Greema said, stepping forward to touch the soft fabric. “I know not how it works either..., but it is a wondrous thing.”

Motioning for Bane to return it, Lorvanon held it up before pulling out his sword again. “See..., there is no trick,” he said. Laying the girth pouch on his leg to smooth it flat, Lorvanon looked at Hanor beside him. “Whatever a person places inside, can only be retrieved by that person and no other. I have used it on many occasions, and it has served its purpose well.” Peering down at the pouch before back at Hanor, “My seasons are running out, and even though my daughter would dearly like to have it, I see a more worthwhile cause ready to make use of it.” Reaching across, he placed it on Hanor’s lap.

Taken aback, “I cannot... take this,” Hanor protested, about to return it.

“No Hanor, I am not easily offended but I mean to do this as a small gesture to aid you with your coming trials. It is a token for what you have accomplished. It would upset me if you did not accept it. You have something precious in your possession, and we do not want any light fingers stealing *it* whilst you sleep.”

‘*I do not deserve this*’ Hanor thought, not wishing to offend. Lorvanon’s expectant gaze waited for him to put the *Stone* inside. Soft and velvety, the pouch did feel as though it held mysteries. Used to the *Stone* being close to his heart, the idea of moving *it* seemed strange. Pressures increased, the onlookers waiting.

“Go on,” Hallen balked from the rear.

A tremendous gift, if he missed the *Stone* in *its* usual place he could always put *it* back later. Hanor took *it* out. A glint of light reflected *its* jet-black shine. The *Stone* represented something extraordinary, even more than the pouch. Inspecting the deep shadow of the bag’s interior, he put his hand inside. Bottomless, it did seem weird.

Coming to the rescue, Lorvanon urged him to trust and let go. “*It* will be fine, Hanor. The *Stone* will stay wherever you put *it*,” he promised.

Awkward, Hanor did not like this. To let go of the *Stone* into a space that had no bottom was terrifying. How could he expect him to do it?

“Do you want me to show you again?” Lorvanon offered, patient.

“Er... no, I can do this..., I hope,” he joked, an edge to his voice proving the strain.

“Where you place *It* will be the exact point to which *it* can be retrieved,” Lorvanon explained. “It is not a vast cavern where you will struggle to find *it*. Decide how far in you want to go, and leave *it* there. Just open your hand, *it* will not move.”

“This is silly...,” Hanor said, embarrassed.

Even so, fears of losing *it* were putting up considerable resistance. Plucking up courage, he finally did as asked. Barely moving his hand away, he was surprised the *Stone* did not fall or roll from his hand as *it* should. Just as promised, when reclaiming *it*, the cold pebble was where he left *it*. Brave enough to move his hand further away, when finding the *Stone* hovering at the appointed place, he marvelled. “This is... amazing,” he said to the others. Feeling bold, he pulled his hand right out before shoving it back in.

“It is good that you are cautious,” Lorvanon said, sympathetic. “Trying new experiences, especially when you risk losing something valuable, is a sign of your character. What you did was difficult, and I commend you for your faith in me.”

Conceding to the High-man, Hanor stared down at the pouch, intrigued. Odd that the *Stone* was not in *its* regular place, insecurity whispered doubts to put it back. Everyone

watching, the pressure eased when the door opened and a troubled looking Tardanian walked in.

Aggrieved by the new developments, Hanor stared out the window of his small room. Pockets of orange light glowing against the night sky proved the city of Manter was not ready to settle down for the night. Cool and soothing, the breeze could not take away the qualms. Disturbed by Tarmon's news regarding the Yarmorians' betrayal, he was still coming to terms with it. His time in Yarmoria gave no credence to the claims stacked against them. When sharing the details, Tarmon's imploring eyes had urged him to find a solution to clear this mess up. Wanting to believe there was an awful mistake every bit as much as he did, but he had found nothing to explain away the evidence.

Recalling the intimate moment when he had shared that otherworldly bond with Coreema, he had seen nothing of their plans, so well hidden from his untrained mind. Nevertheless, subtle movements in his heart at that time had suggested not all was as it seemed, the Yarmorians' calculated manipulations of him supporting that notion. Unnerved, time would tell if Brandor's decision to leave their group was the right one. That factor alone had rattled them. The Dai-laman's insights would be missed, especially if they were to find the other *Pillars of Life*. Disturbed by Brandor's response, saying Hanor would be the key to *their* discovery, that was the last thing he needed to hear.

Reaching down to his new gilth pouch, seeking comfort from what it contained, doubts were already surfacing as to whether he would be able to last without the *Stone* in *its* familiar place. Growling, interactions with supernormal powers demanded an enormous price. Life before this journey was now but a fading light. Sympathetic to Bane's struggles, he wondered how long he could keep this up.

Swift, with no incidents stalling Tarmon and the group, the morning's ride swept into the after-turns of the following day. This was the first of four before reaching Grovan. Enquiring stares from fellow travellers at seeing such a mixed bag of individuals was the only cause for consideration. Questioning Brandor's wisdom on the matter, optimistic attitudes during the early stages were at least something to be hopeful of. Hallen and Greema accepted each other cordially, setting the tone. Only Tarmon felt detached from the surroundings, concerns for Tarden the cause.

Stopping for short periods to rest their mounts and talk, getting to know each other's backgrounds, relationships developed. Pockets of laughter set to stone the foundations of this recently gathered group.

Pressing on, the surrounding scrub shimmering a sparkly gold and emerald sheen in the after-turn sunlight, patches of crystalline rock added depth to the setting. Red flowered Biddel trees lined the way with large mage-bushes at their root. Idyllic and peaceful, the quiet before the storm, it was important to enjoy this whilst they could.

"A *Pillar of Life* at Grovan since the beginning of time is astonishing," Greema tutted, settling back on his mat after their late meal. Still coming to terms with it, he had thought of little else throughout the turn.

Making camp between two biddel trees and a clump of purple mage bush, it was an opportunity to examine what they were trying to achieve.

“Otherworldly powers are enticing,” Raldama had to agree. Hallen was quick to press Hanor on the matter. “What do you make of this?” he asked, still fretting from Hayla’s refusal to be drawn by his charm during their ride. Placing her mat on the opposite side of the fire to make her point, it was her loss.

“Er..., what do you... mean?” Hanor coughed as if waking up.

“These *Pillars*... or whatever *they* are called. Have you worked out what *they* are for?” Yearning for insights himself, Hanor relived the amazing experience briefly, triggering words that came easy. “That *Sphere* was a *creative force* that generates life. *They* stimulate reactions in the earth and the atmosphere, but also act like gateways.”

“Gateways?”

“To the *Higher Worlds*.”

“Huh...?” Hallen regretted asking him.

“If *they* generate life,” Raldama offered his own thoughts. “Is it like planting a seed; it starts off tiny but then grows into a plant or tree?”

“The *Pillar* is not the seed itself but the *force* that lies behind the seed. An idea formulates in the *Higher Worlds*, like the seed, which draws to itself the required substance for it to materialise in this world.”

“Extraordinary,” Raldama said, amazed.

“I understand as I say it, but find it difficult to explain in a way that makes sense.”

Self-conscious, Hanor stared at the fire, hating the silence such words of wisdom always produced. Glancing across at Hayla, her tender eyes held his for a brief moment. Compassionate to his isolation, stirrings in his heart for her were very much alive. Unsure if he should force them down for another time, the episode in the garden still baffled him. Sighing, he was just thankful there was someone sensitive to what he was going through. Looking back at the fire, he wished the flames lapping at the base of the small canopy would lick his reservations clean.

“Why did Brandor stagger when you touched that *point* at the centre of the *Orb*?” Hallen continued the conversation after further consideration, convinced such powers should be used in the coming war.

Hanor shrugged. “I do not know.”

“Surely those *forces* could be channelled?”

“How?” Raldama cut in. “Unless we understand, *they* are beyond us.”

“There must be a way,” Hallen said, looking at Hanor. He would accept the supernatural only if those *powers* could help them. The boy’s replies so far were not good enough.

“I cannot add anymore,” Hanor said, picking up on the Hite’s intentions.

Hallen huffed, displeased.

“His enquiries are sincere,” Kifter said to cool the situation. “But sometimes Hallen lacks sensitivity. We need time to come to terms with this and figure it out.”

“Maybe a long time,” the Hite said, unconvinced.

“We all know how slow Hites can be, needing more time than most,” the Fife teased.

“Careful my tiny Fifanian friend.”

Respecting Hallen’s dissatisfaction, Hanor felt he had to give more, even if they could not grasp it. “You cannot use something that is part of everything,”

“What do you mean?” Raldama was confused.

“The *Pillars* cannot get involved with matters like this. *They* will have nothing to do with wars, good versus evil, or petty struggles, because that is not *their* function. *It* is like the air we breathe, it supports both sides without getting involved in the dispute. The *Pillars* are the same, *they* create and support life, that is all.”

“I understand,” Raldama said, reasoning it through. “Tempting as such *powers* are, there are some forces incapable of doing anything other than what they were designed to do.”

“Yes,” Hanor agreed, pleased someone was grasping the higher wisdom.

“So... all we have is the *Stone*,” the Hite groaned, disappointed at the lack of progress.

“All... we have?” Tarmon said, astounded. “The very thing that sent a *Nyshifter* fleeing?”

“I did not mean it like that,” Hallen retracted. “I was looking for other possibilities.”

“You will have to forgive our clumsy Hitorian friend,” Kifter said to lighten the tone.

Shrugging, “This takes some getting used to,” Hallen confessed.

“We all are, Hallen,” Raldama conceded, supportive.

Sudden like a cracking branch, attentions were diverted to a distant, high-pitched shrill somewhere off in the vastness of night behind. Snapping the canopy down over the flames, Kifter sent the camp into virtual darkness.

“What was that?” Bane yelped.

“A damnable *Nyshifter*,” Raldama scowled, preparing for an attack.

Peering out into the pitch, searching for their foe, but stars glinting were the only signs of life. Perched on the horizon, one of the moons was preparing to make its approach, unwilling yet to shed light on a fearful sky. Hearts in mouths and blades drawn, they waited, desperate to know where *it* was. That original cry had been far off in the distance, but *they* flew swift and light, and could arrive at any moment.

Standing alongside Bane, Hanor did not move, the others forming a protective ring around them. Watchful in the eerie quiet, the young heir reached beneath his overcoat to the gilth pouch tied around his waist. Up until now, he had coped with the *Stone* not in *its* usual place, but panic obscured the earlier wisdom. Reaching inside the pouch, the relief at holding *it* was natural, clasping the *Stone* tight whilst waiting for the strike to come. That *Nyshifter’s* shrill now affirmed how confident the *creatures* were, making *their* presence known. The evil tide was indeed upon the Freelands.

Attuning heightened senses skyward, a cold breeze added to the chill, but still nothing moved. Another shrill came through the dark, but to their relief, it was further away as if heading west in the opposite direction. Another cry afterwards supported that fact, barely reaching them. Sighs unstapled the tension. That was close.

“We had better set two people on each watch,” Tarmon said, checking again to ensure the creature was gone. “That includes the two young ones,” he added, allowing Kifter to edge the fire-canopy up slightly, granting them a trace of light to move.

“Out here, *they* seem much more threatening,” Hayla said, unashamed. Yet to see one, tales back at Manter did not come close to this exposed reality. Shuddering, that piercing cry had breached even her resolve. Making good her mat and cover, the fire now appeared large for what they needed. Daring a peek at how Hanor was coping, having spent most of the turn mulling over what had happened in the High-house gardens, the continuing fluctuations of her heart was what worried her. Looking at him periodically during their ride, but she had not been brave enough to talk for fear of re-igniting those

powerful emotions. Trying to fight them off by thinking about her dream man living at Mandurin, but that distraction had not worked either, leaving her increasingly troubled. Sitting here should be an uncomplicated affair, not a confused emotional state that served no one. Catching her breath when Hanor looked at her before turning away to find his own peace, her heart missed a beat, promising more complications to come. Getting angry at the lack of control, she needed to sleep to clear her head.

“We will have to stay alert,” Tarmon advised, sitting down. Peering through the half-light at his now seated companions, old and new alike, he was pleased at how everyone had reacted.

Chapter 11: Rousing of The Hisian-set

Contemplating the Yarmi Folk's intentions, Brandor still could not see any sense to it. What had happened to them? When visiting in ages past, they had been kind and considerate in all they did. A time before High-yarma Torna and the others, what had gone wrong? Infuriated by Maloree's deceit, many had been drawn into her web, himself included. How damaging her actions would be he did not know, but the potentials were staggering. "Oh Tunder..., what has she done."

Following an ancient track running between Manter and the Sleep, now overgrown with lush wild-grass and weed, the turn's ride passed without disturbance as night drew close. Rarely did anyone travel this way now, a hidden path to an age long forgotten. Travelled by many in the past seeking the *Deeper Mysteries*, eager minds ready to expand their horizons, it had been the height of the Hisian-set's power and influence.

It was Hader, a fellow Dai-laman, who had initiated the idea to teach, resulting in the many Masters alive today. Following the traditions of those early disciples, one regret was that more had not come. A downturn in numbers who had the *Gift* was a contributing factor, ceasing during the latter parts of that glorious age. Anyone partaking of the *mysteries* today had to study hard with sometimes little results until the later stages of their development.

Before any civilisations were established like they are today, active powers from the *Sacred* had flowed dynamically within the very fabric of life, and those with the *Gift* had harnessed them without difficulty. Nevertheless, as cultures developed, those energies began to condense and crystallize, the Freelands' larger populations absorbing those *forces* in other ways. A natural way in which the *Sacred* expanded life, it had restricted the usage of those powers. Members of the Hisian-set had been affected too, losing that spark concerning what was hidden. Any work undertaken often produced poor results, and new discoveries were less frequent. A time of testing, good food and plenty of ale replaced the keenness. Tasty appetites sealed their fate as less people came to learn. Once proud Dai-lamen were often drunk and moody, an echo of former glories. Eventually no one travelled this ancient route, disenchanted by those at its end.

Such looseness was preparing them for that fateful night of torment and loss. Devastating, the consequences of their idleness had thrust like a spear. A vicious dunk into the icy depths of awakening, it had shocked them out of that inert lifestyle. Helpless as vile *Nyshifters* dragged their comrades over stone balconies, it was vital the Hisian-set paid back that ugly debt. Such evil could not be left unchallenged.

Ground heaving, Hanor stood steadfast, holding the white Spear of Light embedded in the earth before him. Swelling like the sea, he rode like a mighty warrior, the ground obeying the promptings of the Spear of Power. Responding to the Freelands' call for aid, challenging the hidden foe, he soared above the waves of blood that had once covered the land. Rising above hopelessness and despair, the sky darkened and thundered in defiance. Infuriated, the waves climbed higher, determined to reclaim the land for good.

Lurching forward, expecting the sea of blood to wash over him, it took a few moments for Hanor to regain himself. Nodding off during his watch, the giant figure of Balkorn sat watchful nearby. Silent and perplexing, a glint flickered when the Balt looked his way.

Thirsty, Hanor sipped from his water-skin. Disturbed by the dream, it had seemed so real. Similar to the previous two, their message stayed concealed within the enigmatic details. Supposing the *Spear of Light* represented the *Stone*, he was too tired to search deeper for answers.

Settling back against the tree, he pondered about his new Baltian friend. Thankful the huge figure had backed off, presuming Brandor had said something, when volunteering for this second watch, Balkorn had still opted for the same. Declining Tarmon's offer to watch with him instead, to have someone so fierce-looking guarding him was reassuring. As soon as that *Nyshifter* had called, Balkorn had stood protectively next to him. Staff ready to fend off the monster, of all his companions, he supposed the Baltian was the strongest and most capable. Even Hallen, who was of a similar height, did not come close to his immense stature.

Unsure how deep into their watch they were, he trusted Balkorn's judgement on when it should finish. Tired, Hanor was hopeful of the future, even with those creatures flying about the Freelands. Returning the *Heart of Tarkon* to its familiar place in his chest pocket, the scare earlier had been too close for his liking. The gilth pouch was a lovely present, but he felt uncomfortable keeping the *Stone* in it. Sprinkling some water on his face to stay awake, falling asleep on his watch was unacceptable.

Cresting the brow of a stony hillock, Brandor peered through shadowed trees and bush at the Sleep, shimmering its glory in the predawn darkness. Lanterns burning on crusted, creamy walls imbued a welcoming golden light. Two cycles of the double moons had passed since he was last here, and glad was he to be home.

Jutting from the ground like a mountainous circular pillar of chalky rock, it rose like an indestructible tower to over two hundred hand-spans high. Narrow on its upper section, a spiralled coned roof at its peak was made of huge interlocking beams of magnificence. Built by folk from Mandurin long ago, a gift for the twelve's efforts in liberating them from *Gorl-darl*, quiet were many of its chambers now.

Tall and resplendent, the lowest section had four upper floors, three of which used to accommodate students and visitors. The fourth level was still used today by some of his colleagues, himself included. Eight circular turrets protruded from its sandy walls, with four more located on the higher section of the ancient building. Twelve turrets for twelve Dai-lamen, four of them now lay empty and unused. Filing in between, scores of rooms used to light up the surrounding area as eager students stayed up all night trying to comprehend what had been taught that turn. Barren now, they reflected the sombre mood of the Sleep over recent times. Everyone keeping to themselves, trying to find something that might undo *Gorl-darl*, Brandor was not expecting much.

Above its tall elegant arched doors, a dusty oil lamp was burning in a turret window. Sharn, his dearest friend, was still working as usual. Proud at the resilience of the younger man, albeit of long season like the rest of them, he was one of the more approachable ones. Forever attempting something new, it was why Sharn had chosen not to accompany him. It was also another way of coming to terms with what had happened to their lost brethren. The same with the others, believing they had to find that elusive power to turn everything around, he was about to find out if it was to any worth.

Approaching the high narrow doors soaring to just below the turreted fourth floor, they bequeathed power and authority, implying the majesty of its occupants. “*Assa anna um*,” Brandor muttered, the huge doors opening inwards.

From within, a cool silvery light shimmered, reflecting the pale silver walls and narrow arched ceilings of the greeting Hall. It was good to be back, even if only for a while. Savouring the peace when entering, two circular stairwells climbed left and right, hugging the outer wall before veering up and around until out of sight. As expected, the upper floors were soundless. At the end of the short hall was the Chasm, the main meeting chamber of the twelve Dai-lamen. Tempted to call them to *Stand*, the official alarm used only in times of crisis, he stayed the idea desiring to speak with Sharn first.

Dismounting, he thanked Tunder as his faithful kyboe made its way along the corridor through to the inner yard where the other kyboes would be resting. Twelve in all, daily they went out into the surrounding fields to feed and exercise, always ready for their Masters’ call. Smirking, that call was now. Turning, he made his way up the stairs.

About to rap on the door, Brandor concurred when it opened automatically. Glad to see Sharn was not too immersed in his work to notice, stepping inside, Brandor shook his head at the sight. “You have not changed,” he said, discarded parchments and scrolls littering the floor. Books and other paperwork were down from Sharn’s large half-empty book rack. Flickering shadows from a lone oil lamp on his desktop could not hide the mess. Large and ornate, the chandelier hanging from the spiralled, coned roof held the dregs of a few candles that had long burnt out. With his back to him, his friend sat scribbling on a dried ooler leaf. Not even acknowledging his entry, Brandor was used to seeing this concentrated state.

“Do I not get a greeting?” he asked, strolling through the rubbish to where Sharn sat. The bed had not been slept in recently, and numerous wooden plates with odd bits of shrivelled food meant his friend had not been eating much either. Standing alongside, the lack of an answer was not uncommon. Following the symbols and lettering to see what he was working on, he could not discern the details. About to interrupt, he did not need to.

“Cursed thing!” Sharn snapped, throwing the ooler leaf to the floor. Sitting back, he still did not acknowledge the new arrival, narrow eyes of a man thinking. Pulling on his chin, a quick rub of the temples did little to help.

“I see your hospitality has improved,” Brandor teased, unsurprised by his aloofness.

About to respond, Sharn stopped, another equation catching him. His quill was soon scoring a fresh piece of ooler. In the past, Brandor would have walked out and tried later, but this could not wait. Reaching over, he snatched the quill.

“Have patience..., please!” Sharn protested, breaking from his stupor. “I cannot afford to stop, Brandor. I am close now to something special!”

Not budging, Brandor stayed his ground. Although older, his younger counterpart was no physical match even when playing. “Your rudeness is not welcome,” he said, heading away from his fretting companion.

“I need only a moment,” Sharn implored, searching his desk to find another one.

“Sharn!” Brandor boomed. “We need to talk without distractions.”

Stalling, Sharn’s tone changed at his friend’s seriousness. “What is it?” he asked, ushering his friend towards the reclining bench. “I know things have been happening in the Freelands, I have felt it!”

"There is much going on," Brandor said, sitting down. Eager to hear of any changes here at the Sleep, he refrained from asking, deciding to use Sharn instead to see what reaction he would get about the Yarmorians and his *Wall of Power*. Tired but coping, careful not to overdo it, to *go over* would not fair well. "Sit back, I have a tale to tell."

"*Pillar of Life* you say?" Sharn said, wide-eyed and thoughtful. Discarding the initial horror of the Yarmi Folk's potential threat, he was drawn towards the supernatural. "I felt the energies released when he obtained *it*, yes..., now it makes sense. How incredible. And there are more? Stupendous. It will allay a few concerns when the others find out. What are *they* for?"

"I do not know," Brandor admitted.

"No visions?" Sharn kidded.

"The *Columns of Light* are the only thing that comes near."

"And that is hardly revealing."

"Not at the moment."

Sharn considered what else was said. "You mentioned a *Wall of Power*?"

"Yes, that is part of why I am here."

"And *it* will give form to a *Higher Being*?"

"Right across the Freelands," Brandor said, expecting his wonder.

"How can it be possible? How or where does such a *Being* exist?"

"In the *Higher Spheres* of reality."

"And by forming the *Wall*, *it* will not only protect the Freelands, but be alive and intelligent like Tarden is?"

"Exactly."

"My friend..., can this be real? Do the *Sacred* really think this can happen?"

"We still marvel at how the Tardanians managed what they did at Tarden. By revelation, their city became a living *entity*, a model to prove it can be done."

"This is... incredible."

"I presume you are in favour of this then?"

"Brandor!" Sharn said, grinning. "Are you mad, who could turn down such an invite?"

"Then you understand the role Tarden has in the *Wall's* creation, and why it needs defending?"

"You are certain this Maloree is up to mischief?"

"The calm within my heart says something needs to be done."

"It does indeed."

Chimes rang out, softly at first, preparing any sleeping inhabitants the chance to stir before its full resonance reverberate through the whole building. Standing at his post, one of twelve curved podiums encircling a large black twelve-pointed star at the centre, Brandor waited alongside Sharn as the chime grew louder. Echoing around the Chasm Chamber, the main hall rising all the way to the spiralled wooden roof at its crown, its elegant structure was higher than it was round. Huge shapely pillars of silvery stone embedded in pale grey walls were like columns of might, the very reason why this building had lasted for so long.

"Is it being ignored?" Sharn asked, listening for those first clapping steps to come along the small arched corridor separating this inner chamber to the outer one.

Raising a finger, indicating silence, Brandor pointed at the entrance. A few heartbeats later, shuffling emerged shortly before the old figure of Hader entered.

"Ah... Brandor, I might have known," he said, pulling at his long white beard hanging at his chest. Dressed in his usual silvery gown with its swirling patterns across the shoulders and around the waist, he looked well considering what short-turn of the morning it was. Staring at them from beneath bushy eyebrows, Hader shook his head, wondering what his old friend was up to. "I hope this is worth it," he sniffed, taking his station across from them.

"It is good to see you too," Brandor said, sincere.

"Smooth as always," Hader returned, used to his charm.

At the tunnelled entrance, Brorn entered, grinning when seeing Brandor.

"Busy as usual I see," he said, taking his place, leaning his staff against the side of his stand. Yawning, "This must be important."

Brandor was not about to start any premature explanations. Turning, Whis followed by Sorlam entered next, the niceties exchanged hardly affectionate. Neither of the two were early risers, happy to let him know. Not apologising for the inconvenience, Brandor waited for the last two, Rinn and Tralle entering, disgruntled.

"I might have known," Rinn snipped, spitting the words out. "Dramatic as always."

No longer using his staff when striding across to his appointed place, Brandor was most surprised. Waiting for everyone to settle, the remaining seven members of the Hisian-set did look old, a long way from their glorious turns of power and plenty. Could he expect them to journey to Tarden? Dismissing the doubts, hidden powers relied on the will of the individual more than physical capabilities. He made a start.

"Thank you for attending this call to *Stand*," he said, in an unassuming manner.

"Forget the pleasantries and get to the point," Rinn snapped, impatient.

"Some of us have work to do to fight the coming war," Tralle added, suspicious of Brandor's intentions. "This had better be quick."

Disregarding their biting comments, they were not the only ones here. Both Tralle and Sorlam were close to Rinn, the latter dominating the two. "I am sure each of us has been striving to help overcome the evil tide upon us," .

"What is the meaning of this then?" Whis said, not fully awake yet.

"Miraculous events have been unfolding whilst you have been *working* here at the Sleep," Brandor began, keeping his nerve. "Beyond anything ever dreamt of."

"You mean that pulse of energy a few turns ago?" Hader asked, spending all his time since analysing what it could have been.

"Yes..., and more."

"Do you know the cause?" Brorn asked, eager to know.

"Yes, if you will permit me to continue," he said, clasping the sides of his stand.

"We are not here for the love of it," Rinn spouted. "Say what you must."

Proceeding just as he had with Sharn, Brandor explained recent events and what the emerging dangers were. Going into depth, it was important to portray the efforts made now the enemy was on the march. Covering the astonishing details surrounding Hanor, and his own efforts to get the *Wall of Power* established in the hearts and minds of the Masters of every city, his audience remained silent but attentive.

Dawn arrived as he talked, light filtering down into the Chasm from windows high above. Drawing his incredible tale to a close, Brandor concluded with the Yarmi Folk's involvement. That factor shocked everyone, disbelieving it.

"You tantalise us with talk of the supernatural," Rinn argued. "And expect us to believe the Yarmi Folk would resort to such crude tactics when they are as committed to the *Sacred* as we are!"

"Committed maybe," Brandor said, feeling the strain of his tale telling. "But illusion can pull down even the hardest of us."

"We know that," Sorlam said to Brandor's left. "But an entire people?"

"It only takes one influential person to steer a group in the wrong direction."

"What you are suggesting is still extreme," Hader reasoned.

"I am convinced the Yarmorians have an agenda, the difficulty is finding their motives," Brandor tried. "Barren has the southern regions of Tardania become, and there is corruption, I have felt it."

"You expect us to leave our work," Tralle spoke this time. "For that is clearly what you want, and yet you have nothing to convince us. We have detected evil in the north, but no such darkness in the west. You need to find something substantial."

"I cannot give you anything other than what I have," Brandor said.

"Your eyes are closed if you cannot see the evidence from what has been explained," Sharn interjected.

"There is enough for me to go," Brorn said, attracted to the idea of venturing forth like times of old. "But if we do, I am interested in what direction would you head? You said the *Boverns* have returned, and the High-bridge is lost, what options are there?"

"Well, at least there are three of us willing," Brandor said. Along with Sharn, he had hoped for five to go. "We will head for Boverns Crossing, those of us brave enough."

"You are mocking us," Sorlam challenged, taking the bait.

"Brandor knows us better than that," Rinn said, a dry grin etching aged features. "He is just frustrated."

"He deserves to be frustrated," Sharn fired, suspicious of the oldest Dai-laman. "He is the one who is trying to muster a defence for our homeland, and is not just sitting here experimenting like the rest of us. You need to remember that."

"I respect Brandor's efforts," Rinn acknowledged. "But through experimentation great mysteries are solved. Now *you* need to remember that."

"Have you discovered anything you want to share then?"

"Have you?"

So close to that all-important discovery, Sharn would be sacrificing a great deal to follow his closest friend, but go he must. "I will work whilst we travel."

"Then so will I."

Sorlam and Tralle looked aghast, frowning at their companion.

"You are willing... to go?" Sorlam asked, disbelieving it. "What about our work?"

It was Rinn's turn to fire a shooting glance at his clumsy companion. With everyone watching, he feigned a weak smile. "Like I have said..., we will work as we travel."

"We...?" Tralle exclaimed, appalled at the prospect of travelling to Tarden.

"Are you not coming then?"

"Well..., eh... I had not... given the idea enough thought."

“We have spent enough time hiding here at the Sleep, do you agree, Brandor?” Rinn said, looking across at him.

Startled, Brandor searched for the mischief his elder was more than capable of. A swift change in direction, he was hardly in a position to argue. “There is a time for study, and a time for action. Shall I count you as the fourth?”

A glint in Rinn’s eye hinted at something hidden, but he gave nothing away. “If you will tolerate an old fool like me. Besides, how can I resist facing a *Bovern* again?”

Approving, even Hader felt a trace excited. “It appears the Hisian-set is to be reborn.”

As the others conceded to going, Rinn remained tight-lipped. Much had he laboured on over recent cycles of the moons. Unbeknown to his two closest aids, Sorlam and Tralle, the potential of what he had discovered was phenomenal. Mastery was yet to be gained, accepting the dangers, it was the potential of it that was astounding. Strengthening his body and mind alike, he felt mentally and physically vibrant. A miraculous turnaround, the *Ileng Power* he had discovered was the future, and travelling west would grant him the chance to try what he had learnt. Testing *it* already on Tralle and Sorlam, satisfied the *Sacred* would approve if the motives were well-founded, he now needed to try the *Ileng Power* on guarded minds like Brandor and Sharn. A challenging prospect, he had no idea how far the *power* would go, hence the caution. Energised, it felt good to be alive again.

“I did not like the look in Rinn’s eye,” Sharn said, heading back towards their quarters with Brandor. Pleased everyone was going, but Rinn was up to something.

“Let us not put obstacles before us,” Brandor said, turning to climb the stairs. The others were already back in their rooms preparing for the journey. Expecting to start out at half-turn of the day, he needed sleep not doubts. Exhausted, his whole body ached. Running the risk of *going over*, to be undone just when things were getting interesting would be just his luck.

“Are you sure you want to ride out in this?” Sharn asked, standing alongside Brandor who was packing his kyboe. Peering out through the Sleep’s magnificent doors, the rain was heavy, grey clouds moving in during the early short-turns of the day.

“A test to encourage our doubts,” Brandor said, well rested after his sleep.

“I have made an ample supply of diva sticks,” his younger companion decreed, securing the bags on his own kyboe.

Hader, Whis and Brorn were preparing their mounts nearby, waiting for Rinn and the other two.

“Where are they?” Brorn hissed, desiring to get on with it.

“Perhaps the rain has dented their commitment,” Whis chuckled.

“We heard that!” Rinn said, descending the curving stairs with Sorlam and Tralle.

“Just testing,” Whis teased.

Wearing a dull green overcoat, Rinn stood out against the pale walls. “You need not doubt us,” he said, dropping his satchels. Whistling, his kyboe came through the swinging doors from the internal paddock, eager like its master.

Tralle and Sorlam beckoned their mounts, but packed in subdued silence. Displeased at what they were about to do, the rain only made it worse.

Climbing into his saddle, Brandor was proud to see everyone here. Optimistic, a nervous but excitable buzz charged the atmosphere. After refusing to join him on recent travels, this was long overdue. Pulling his speckled silvery overcoat about him, not even the weather would dampen the moment. When everyone was ready, he sped out into the drizzly after-turns followed by seven aged figures. No one looked back, fearing the Sleep's lure might change their mind.

Chapter 12: Hallow Marsh

A thick blanket of rain carpeted the surrounding area, cutting Hanor and the group's visibility by half. Dampening spirits, a short rest gave little solace. Passing other travellers huddled in wagons to the side of the road, it left them a clear way ahead, making good progress considering the conditions. Hoods up, searching the greyness, at least their differing nationalities were not so obvious. A trouble free turn of the day, sodden overcoats were hung from a tree when they made camp, Tarmon daring a larger fire to warm fleeting reserves.

Skilfully succeeding where most would fail, the Fife sat back, sprightly orange flames welcoming. Trusting *Nyshifters* would not be in the vicinity yet, urging everyone to dry out as quickly as possible, they took it in turns to huddle around the fire. Generating a few giggles, especially when Hayla and Hanor started warming each other playfully, the light banter from Hallen and Kifter was to be expected.

'If only they knew,' was the silent exchange between Hanor and Hayla. Lifting the atmosphere, they needed it.

Bane did not know how long he had been asleep. Trying to move his legs, they felt deadened and cumbersome. Memories of Hanor and Hayla's interplay earlier was a sharp reminder of the jealousy he should be feeling. Eyes heavy as if falling into slumber, the blackout was upon him.

"She will be yours soon," the Voice promised.

"What do you mean?" The question formed in Bane's mind, not even challenging who the Voice was this time.

"You saw them playing, I can see the jealousy. What you want, you will have if you follow my instructions."

"What would you have me do?" Bane asked, unable to register the impact of what was taking place.

"Do you want her?"

"I have not thought about it."

"Yes you have, I can see it in your past."

Conceding there was some truth in it, "Who would not want someone as pretty as her?"

"If you live up to your purpose, you will get her... and more."

"What purpose? I am here for Hanor."

"Is that what you believe? Then you have not looked hard enough."

"At what?"

"You are here for a greater reason. Until you admit it, we cannot help each other."

"Tell me, what purpose?"

"Are we impatient?"

"No, I just want to know."

"You have to learn to trust my Voice and do as I ask. If you prove you are capable, I will reveal your future to you."

"Learn to trust you?" Bane asked, not fully aware of what was happening.

"I have said Hayla will be yours, observe yourself concerning her, and you will see. Trust has to be established, so watch for what I have said"

Splattering rain on the canopy helped to steady Bane, but his thoughts seemed distant, questioning what was happening to him. Burdened by something unknown, shadowy trees and bush nearby only heightened sensitivities. Tired, what was he missing? A cough across the flameless fire alerted him to Kifter who sat on watch. Needing to talk to someone to find answers, but his voice would carry through the silence, not wishing anyone else to know about his troubles. Surprised Kifter was the one he felt he could open up to, since the Fife had said those kind words at Tarden, he had not found anything wrong with him. Hanor had bigger issues, so it would be unfair to trouble him. Frustrated by the strife, he tried to get back to sleep; his watch was the last one with Hallen.

"We will reach Hallow Marsh after half-turn of the day," Greema declared, the group riding hard through the drizzle.

Raining through the night and into the morning, the Grovian's declaration did not bolster their resilience. The sodden atmosphere dulled any attempts to lift them, their overcoats barely recovering from the previous turn's drenching.

"This weather does not want to shift," Hallen grumbled at the rear. "Do not the *Sacred* realise we have important work to do?"

"I am sure it will ease before the turn ends," Tarmon called, trying to stay upbeat.

The Hite grumped, wiping a dripping nose. "Can you not ask *them* to turn it off?" he shouted to Hanor.

Pulled from his deliberations, Hanor needed a moment to answer. Experiencing so much of the supernormal, he understood why some might think he had a direct link to the *Sacred*, but such was not the case. "It does not work like that, just try to enjoy the peace." "You mock me young man!" the Hite said, unimpressed.

Not responding, Hanor was more concerned about Bane. Riding alongside, his friend had said nothing all morning, trapped in a grim mood. As if tuning into his thoughts, Bane turned and stared at him from beneath a saturated hood. Cold and detached as if a stranger, Hanor was shocked at the look in his eye, shivering with worry. What was the matter with him? Equally disturbing, a smile appeared from nowhere as if Bane remembered who he actually was. Reeling from that original glare, Hanor was saddened that Bane was still struggling. Hoping it had nothing to do with his playful antics with Hayla last night, his unstable friend was getting worse as this journey continued. Talking at Manter had helped, but clearly not enough. Grinning even though concerned, it grew to a wider smile when realising how much they still needed each other. Were they both losing their minds?

Sighing, Hanor checked behind, thankful that Hayla was not riding in front like she had for the past couple of turns. Keeping his distance was difficult. Whenever their eyes met, tender feelings would leap in response. Every intimate glance seemed to draw them closer, praying the others had not noticed. Adorable as she was, as were her sensitivities towards his burdens, it was hard to concentrate on anything else. Threatening his whole purpose if not careful, it was maddening.

Pushing on, wide petalled plants started populating the region, Greema calling them Filly-rushes. The further they travelled, the more widespread they became. Fewer trees

grew here as the grasslands receded under ever-greater patches of water. Boggy, the ground on both sides of the track sank as if washed away by too much rain. Wide-ranging exotic shrubs thrived amongst water hugging reeds and lilies. Finally making its claim upon the land, the encroaching water got deeper and more sinister.

Narrowing to ensure survival, a thinning of the roadway meant they could no longer ride four abreast without tempting an unnecessary soggy accident. If two wagons were to pass each other, it would be a most tricky affair. Occasional wheels or broken axles lay upended to either side, proving the point.

Strains on the kyboes demanded a slower pace, the track softening under the damp conditions. Hallen's oversized mount found the going difficult just like the rest. Only Balkorn's kyboe seemed strong enough to last. Slightly smaller than the Hite's, with a deep reddish hue, but it was broader and more robust. Declaring they would be out of Hallow Marsh before sundown, Greema's promise seemed irrelevant.

Thankful when the rain eased and the clouds peeled back, they were not out of it yet.

"Look," Kifter called, pointing in front.

Further along the way, the road disappeared into a white wall of mist.

"What is it?" Raldama called from near the rear of the line.

Unnatural after such a heavy downpour, it spread to either side as far as they could see.

"I have never seen such a thick fog," Greema said, riding just behind Tarmon and Kifter.

"A freak of nature," the Fife offered, perplexed.

"These marshes can be irregular at times but... this is peculiar," the Grovian added, the group slowing to a walk.

Stopping within a short stone's throw, "What do you recommend, Greema?" Tarmon asked, unfamiliar with the territory.

"I am at a bit of a loss," he admitted, scanning the mist for clues.

"Are there any nasty surprises in these marshes?" Raldama asked, not aware of any tales at Manter.

"Not that I know of."

"Is it safe to pass through then?"

"It can get boggy, but without wagons..., we should pass easily enough."

"Then let us move," Tarmon ordered, refusing to be delayed.

Riding in twos, they entered the white veil. Catching their breath, the temperature plummeted, cold vapours licking at exposed features. Damp anyway, it added to the chill. Unable to see far, a steady trot was their measure to ensure no stumbling into anything unexpected or veering off the beaten track. The road itself was soft but firm underneath, adequate to move on. Eerie sounds of their movements rebounded back as if the enveloping cloud rejected such intrusive noises. On edge, the deeper they went, the colder it got.

"I need to get going just to warm up," Hallen said, slapping his arms.

"At least the ground is hardening," Greema said, less dirt kicking up.

Responding, Tarmon increased the speed, keeping Kifter beside him. Odd splashes out in the marsh added to the tension, the stirrings of hideous monsters perhaps. After surviving the *Boverns*, there was nowhere to go if attacked.

After another loud splash, “Are you sure there is nothing dangerous in these parts?” Bane called, staring to where the water and Filly-rushes disappeared into the mist. “Not that I know of,” Greema assured them.

Confidence increased with each passing stride, certain they would be out of this soon. Without landmarks to judge distances, it was hard to stay focused. Reaching its peak after a short-turn, the near freezing conditions numbed fingers and toes. The pale mist darkened as if determined to keep out the light. Tall filly-rushes stood like sentries watching them ride as if to their doom. Grim and grey, the mood of the group lowered, expecting the worst.

Losing track of time, when the temperature started rising, the road softened with it. Progress slowed as the muddy track churned. Riding for three short-turns, their efforts were taking its toll.

“It cannot be far,” Greema called, responding to the frequent groans.

Reacting to thickening conditions, the roadway became lumpy, too soft to maintain a reasonable speed. Loud squelches and slaps of mud were common, the track straining to keep its shape. On they pushed, fearful of getting trapped in this swamp after nightfall. Without signs of the mist breaking, exhaustion bore into limbs like an invisible weapon. Burning, the going was getting harder.

Tarmon had no choice but to slow. Too sticky, their Kyboes feet were sinking into the mud. Obscure noises were points of grim humour, slurping sounds squelching, the pace barely above walking.

“This is ridiculous,” Hallen protested, his mount’s size the reason for sinking deeper than the others. “Is this normal?”

“It does happen,” the Grovian said. “But rarely.”

A combination of cold dank conditions mixing with rain, but why was it not improving?

“We had better get out of here,” Kifter urged, recognising the dangers.

Dismounting to help their kyboes, boots amassed large clumps of mud that were cumbersome. To their horror, water levels rose, lapping at the sides of the road prompting it to give way.

“How far is it?” Bane called. They were moving, albeit ungracefully, but where was the end?

“Nearly there,” Kifter said, hoping rather than knowing.

Sweaty brows and grimacing features etched every face. Mud spattered and bedraggled, their efforts were bold but fading. Holding up those behind, Hanor and Bane halted often to rest, tired limbs aching.

“This is impossible,” Bane scowled to his equally exhausted friend. Struggling for half a short-turn, it seemed to be getting worse.

“We have to keep going,” Hanor encouraged, standing straight to catch his breath.

“Come on!” Hallen grumped from the rear. “We can talk when we get out of here.”

Sipping some water before offering it to Bane, Hanor stepped to the side to let Raldama, Hallen and Hayla pass. Sympathetic, Hayla appeared as beleaguered as the rest of them. Smiling, Bane caught him off guard with an unexpected statement.

“You like her.”

As if found out, when looking at his friend, Hanor expected to see that cold stare glaring back. But to his surprise, only a caring appeal waited for a response. Unsure what to say, when glancing behind at a waiting Balkorn, the last one in the line, the big fellow seemed uninterested in such minor details. "She is... nice," was all he said. Turning back to the dire situation, "Come on..., let us get out of here."

Considering what he had asked, Bane was startled at how quick the question had appeared. Pleased his friend was happy, a jealous impulse surged from nowhere, enough to stall him. Hinting at something hidden, it spoiled the moment, replacing it with unpleasant desires of his own. Yes, he liked her, but not at the cost of his friendship. Forcing down the ugly emotions, he set off, troubled by the intrusive thoughts.

Dismayed, the road continued softening, each squelching stride evermore strenuous. Grunts and sporadic hollers of anger yelled at the impenetrable mist and its suffocating presence. If anyone stood too long, the ground sunk as if the roadway itself had a twisted agenda. Infuriating, all they could do was battle on.

Pausing, worried about their predicament, Tarmon and Kifter checked on their companions. Approving of the two youngster's determination, they were still lagging.

"Hallen, wait for them," Kifter ordered, even though the huge Hite was having his own problems.

"Easier said than done my dainty Fifanian friend," Hallen grimaced, frustrated that he was sinking deeper than the others.

Doing as ordered, he permitted them time to catch up. Sinking, what could he do anyway? Watching Balkorn behind the two, he looked solid considering the conditions. Taut muscles straining, but his unusual features seemed unperturbed by the demands. Admiring his composure, he could carry the two boys on his own.

Deciding Hanor and Bane were coping, upon reaching him, Hallen turned and made his way again. Forcing his legs to move with a mighty heave, standing for that short period nearly compressed him rigid. Another curse rendering the air, Greema's promises now meant nothing. Directing his fury at the *Sacred* for permitting this, "We cannot keep this up," the Hite bellowed, standing with hands on hips, gasping. Exhausted, his Kyboe was not much better off. Frustrated, the mist closed in, the Tard and Fife disappearing beyond its white veil. This was impossible. Head tilting back, questioning where the energy to continue was to come from, the dual cry of Kifter and Tarmon pulled Hallen from despair.

"We have made it!" they called from somewhere ahead.

As soon as the words dawned, Hallen's heart lifted. Relieved, when the two boys reached him, he picked Hanor up, half-stumbling as he made his way forward, desperate to get out. Balkorn followed, lifting Bane with ease.

Closing even tighter as though the mist could tell their escape was inevitable, when the ground solidified beneath sullen feet, yelps of delight and relief escaped from parched mouths. Mirroring their extraordinary entry, they burst into daylight as if escaping from a misty prison. So bright, it was blinding. Checking the surrounding area, it was bathed in sunlight as if the cloud behind was but the mist of their own fears. Smiles beaming, the final rise was easy. Emerging from the shock, pitiful laughs hid the worries of just how close they had come to not making it.

“We will camp here,” Tarmon said to everyone’s approval, deciding the small wood by the riverbank would grant them adequate cover for the night.

Leaving behind that despicable mist half a short-turn ago, the rest of the main roadway had been unaffected. No one had mounted, giving their kyboes a deserving rest. Walking on hard ground again was appreciated like never before. Only a scattered number of filly-rushes amongst layers of waterlogged reeds had witnessed their final exit from Hallow Marsh. Crossing the Dota River by means of a low stone bridge, they had turned right and eventually found this secluded spot. Tired and filthy, the river appeared cool and inviting, shimmering in the late after-noon sun. Just enough time for a quick splash and rinse, far from shy, Hallen and Kifter leapt naked into the cold water.

Politely moving along the riverbank, Hayla stayed out of sight of wandering eyes and found an adequate spot in which to cleanse herself. Tempted to follow her, Hanor restrained for fear of igniting the relationship. After coming close to falling foul of that mist, it seemed pointless to resist. All the same, he and Hayla had agreed not to. Groaning, he joined the others in the river.

“What do you think caused that phenomenon?” Kifter asked, looking at Greema whilst cooking their meal.

Night setting in, everyone was washed, damp clothes and boots hanging from branches nearby. A time to reflect, yawns warned that any discussions were to be short.

Hungry and exhausted, it was not Greema’s place to answer, but respected why they were looking to him for insights. “This does happen, perhaps it was bad timing.”

“You do not think unnatural forces were at work then?” Raldama posed, staying open to all possibilities during this dark period of their history.

“Unnatural forces, what do you mean?”

“The timing just seems a bit close for my liking. That mist should not have been there if normal weather patterns are to be considered.”

“Brandor mentioned much is in the process of change,” Kifter said. “And not all are good.”

“The prospect of evil eyes set against us already is worrying,” Raldama said. “But... if you say it does happen, then perhaps we can relax knowing this.”

“I would be surprised if that was tampering of another sort,” the Grove reasoned.

“That is fine,” Raldama said, appreciating it. Receiving his hot food from Kifter, “I can now eat my delightful meal in peace.”

“As can we all,” the Grove said, approving. “I am getting quite a taste for your Fifanian cooking, Kifter. I just hope we can do the same when we get to Grovan.”

“You honour me Greema, and I will have to give you larger portions from now on,” Kifter joked, always eager for compliments.

Reflecting on the turn’s events, the struggle earlier brought home to Hayla the hidden dangers they now faced. Half-listening to the conversation, she could not get straying thoughts under control. Earlier, a burning in her heart for Hanor to come with her by the river now left her feeling even more confused. Desperate to focus on the task given to her, at any point when her concentration lapsed, her thoughts drifted towards how it might work with him.

Daring to peek across at his young features through the half-light, his deep brown sensitive eyes intoxicating, the more she resisted, the stronger were the feelings. Heart stopping when he looked back, holding each other's gaze, at least she was not the only one with tender feelings. The corners of his mouth lifted in quiet affection. Wanting to hold him and calm the inner urges, this could not be love surely, not so soon.

In that surreal moment, her heart fluttered, missing a beat. Today's trial had come close to taking them, did she want to die before experiencing the magic of love? Laughing inwardly, she had once thought her friends foolish for caving into such roving desires. Questioning over the last couple of turns why it had happened, it defied logic. Smiling, embarrassed, she could not believe she was encouraging him. Had they not agreed to leave it? Forcing herself to look away, she was losing her edge, that sharpness she had spent so long developing. Was she prepared to throw it all away?

Shaken awake by Raldama, Hanor sat up, yawning. Twilight from the two moons reflected their silvery glow on the river, reminding him of where they were. Surprised it was his watch already, volunteering to take this one at half-turn of the night before he had fallen asleep, joints now burned, aching from the stresses earlier. Far from alert, Raldama returned to his mat through the dimness, wishing he could do the same.

Standing to stretch his legs, he moved away from the camp towards the river to loosen stiff joints. Unsure if he would ever get used to this travelling, the sounds of someone approaching made him jump. Turning, a lump formed in his throat, surprised to see Hayla standing nearby bathed in moonlight. Heart racing, he did not know what to do.

"I am... sorry, I did not mean to startle you," she apologised softly. Not expecting this, opting to take his watch with Tarmon, the Tardanian was nowhere to be seen. Her watch was before his own, supposing she had chosen not to wake the Tardanian yet. "How... are you?" he managed. "Tired but... holding well," she answered, certain he could hear the thumping of her heart. They had not spoken properly since that encounter at Manter. Their playful frolicking when wet had been the closest yet. Energies between them charged the atmosphere. "This is not happening... is it?" Her fear was plain, she was as lost as him. Echoing the same hesitant words uttered at Manter, this problem was not going away without a fight. "I do not know what to think," he said, stalling. "Can I hold you?"

Desiring it so much, but could he turn back if he did? Against better judgement, the urge to commune shattered any resistance. They hugged like newfound lovers. Touching upon cherished dreams, the strains of their disunity were dispelled in that loving clench. Travel-stained, it did nothing to take away the magic. Lifting burdens from weary shoulders, the relief was as strong as when they escaped the clutches of that suffocating mist. Eyes sparkling in moonlight, not caring if anyone was watching, they lost themselves to a blessed kiss, finally crossing the line.

Chapter 13: Terror at Grovan's Gates

Waiting on the brow of a low hill, the Hisian-set stared out to their left, intrigued. A stone's throw in front, the Northern Way stretched from left to right, a permanent marker between east and west. The morning of their third turn of day on the road, eight Dai-lamen were getting used to life outside again. Committed, no disagreements had hindered their progress so far. The two previous turns had seen them collapse on their mats exhausted. Burning muscles from lack of use had been silenced by potions, sleep claiming them without protest. Brandor had kept his tongue, enjoying the fact they were here rather than teasing about their lack of stamina.

Sounds of stomping feet had alerted them to activity, eager to see who was on the march. Screened by a bulge in the hillside, the fact people were on the move lifted Brandor, relieved someone had listened. Through the dank morning, the pounding of the ground was heavy, more like trudging than marching. Expectations increased, especially when heads bobbed over the hill. Walking five across, the numbers soon climbed to hundreds. Clothed in makeshift armour covering a deep red uniform, Manson's troops marched out of step, eldest sons strutting proud alongside fathers and elders. Hardly rousing the passions to know the Freelands were now safe, all the same, it could only be admired. Most were cropping folk and weavers rather than trained fighters.

A group of fifty mounted men with a handful of eager females led the way, passing the eight onlookers. An emblem with two white Fliryns on a red backdrop was lofted high on a pole declaring the arrival of Manson's promise to come out fighting. A considerable number, they continued trudging over the hill like a slithering creature. Many inspected the strangers up on the hill, but no one broke formation.

At the rear was a larger batch of riders. This time, two broke from the pack and rode towards them. The slim bearded features of Manon with one of his aides panged Brandor. Expecting questions about his two sons, the High-man was beaming with pride at what he had achieved. Wary of how sensitive the man could be, the Dai-laman was undecided whether to tell him about Nole.

"It is good to see you again," Manon said, pulling up.

"And I you, Manon of Manson," Brandor replied, cordial. "You have gathered quite a number."

"Over two thousand," the High-man said. "Rainer here has been a rock, training them to a good standard."

"Your work will be appreciated by many," the Dai-laman said, staying upbeat.

"It was not easy," Rainer grinned. "I had to learn patience for my own sake."

"We have received word from Fion," Manon continued. "A similar number is on its way from there."

After countless promptings up and down the Freelands, the news generated its own kind of release for Brandor. Achieving what some had said would not work, those few were sitting adjacent to him now. "It is good to see action. What of Hitori?" Manson shared a close affiliation with their people.

"I tried to convince them of this, just as you did," Manon said. "But... there are Hites of some regard blocking High-hite Nabban's freedom to support it. The ongoing saga over

the Trino River is one reason, but most people know the Grovians have returned to bolster Grovan's defences. We can only hope a response will come soon."

"I was hoping your people would travel together."

"So were we," Rainer said, disappointed. "They will be missed if they do not rise."

"They will rise," Brandor assured him. "But when and with how many?"

"Are you heading for Manter?" Rinn asked from the end of the line.

"We are," Manon replied. This was the first time he had ever seen Brandor's colleagues, sensing great power sitting before him. "Where are such noble men going?"

"Tarden," Rinn said.

"You are welcome to join us instead if you so wish," the High-man invited, not believing they would. Such powerful men would bolster their numbers and dismiss the doubts wriggling amongst the cropping folk especially. Trusting Hanor and Nole were at Tarden, Manon stared at Brandor, concerns for his sons apparent. Discovering Nole's letter too late, he could only hope he had met up with his older brother. When first seeing this group, he had searched for his two boys, sinking when discovering their absence. Putting on a brave face, he thought Brandor was supposed to be teaching Hanor.

"How is... my son?" he asked, drumming up the will to face it.

Steady, Brandor replied. "Hanor is doing very well."

Picking up on the Dai-laman's caution, it warned Manon there was more. "And... what about my other son..., Nole? Is he... with him?" Catching the glint, the Dai-laman did not respond immediately. "What... is it?"

Sensitive eyes implored Brandor to say something encouraging, his hesitancy fuelling the man's anxieties. "Your sons did meet..., and another was with them, namely Bane... also from Manson. They travelled west towards Tarden but... an unseemly event occurred that caught the travellers by surprise. At a bridge called Boverns Crossing, a terrible incident happened. Sadly, it resulted in the taking of Nole."

Heart jumping, Manon sat up as if in denial. "What do you mean... taking? What... by the enemy?" Not needing this, to lead his people to war was burden enough, to know his sons were facing problems doubled his strife.

"No..., not by the enemy," Brandor stated, picking his words carefully. "Boverns Crossing... is so called because of ancient creatures that once thrived along the Rapone River to which the bridge crosses. Thought to be extinct, the *Boverns* have resurfaced. Sadly, Nole's life was taken whilst crossing."

Shock pummelled Manon. Head dropping, hands covering a distraught face, there was no resistance to the truth, his own failures a contributory factor. Searing, a pain through his chest tightened, condemning him. Behind, the marching force passed their position. Manon still did not look up, his grief too much.

Rainer spoke for his High-man. "Are you certain of this?" he asked. Brandor nodded. "And what of Hanor..., where is he...? Does he know?"

"He is on his way to Grovan," Brandor explained, the High-man looking up.

"To... Grovan! Why?" Struggling through tear-filled eyes, the picture of his beloved Lizan at home, distraught at the loss, impeded Manon's efforts to think straight.

"Your eldest son," Brandor began, attempting to lift the man from despair. "Has proven to be a true pillar of strength that would inspire even the most broken of men. He has

opened up a new route by which the Freelands might be saved. He is striving towards that now.”

“I... I do not... understand,” Manon said, holding an aching chest.

“Lorvanon will explain what has happened when you get to Manter,” Brandor said. “Hanor is a tool the *Sacred* are using to challenge the *darkness* threatening us all. He has experienced much and has endured far more than most, but like a warrior of the heart, he has shown resilience against impossible odds.

When I first came to you concerning the potential in him, I knew not how the future would unfold. Nevertheless, even for these wise men here, he has been an inspiration. Lorvanon will add far more than I, for time is short. You need to reflect on what I have said, for many are relying on your leadership. Lives are being lost as we speak, and it is to them and to Nole that we need to see this to the bitter end.” Finishing, the silence thick, everyone waited for the High-man to react.

Hesitating, Manon closed his eyes to regain control of a flagging nerve. Echoes of Lizan’s complaints battered his ears. Urging him to chase after their son and bring Nole home, even in chains if need be, but for once, he had said no. Demanding she let go and leave him to be a man and find his own way, her anger had burnt his heart. Overprotective due to Hanor’s birth, he had rejected her pleas. To capture him like an animal would have driven a chasm between them. Arguments had raged, threatening to go herself, but he had ordered everyone to dismiss her commands. When organising this band of fighters, she had ignored his advances, repelling him to the outer reaches of her love. Only four nights ago had she caved in to the fact that he was leaving, not for Tarden but Manter. Her pain obvious, this news would separate them forever.

Calming down, he looked up at his superiors. “Your words of encouragement are beyond the merit of a shallow man like me. But... you are right, to fail now would be a travesty.” Comforted at what Hanor was doing, his determination heightened. Looking left at the disappearing numbers, he managed a thin smile through the pain. “I am determined to lead them back along this road victorious, with Hanor, singing songs of freedom dedicated to my son Nole and the many others who will lay down their lives for this cause.”

Taking hold of the reins, Manon nodded respectfully at the old Dai-laman and then the others. “Until another time,” he said, breaking away, speeding after his disappearing force with Rainer.

Eight old men stared after the High-man.

“It looks like you just saved him,” Rinn noted, watching Manon go.

“He will be a good leader,” Sharn said.

On the crest of the hill, the High-man raised an arm and spurred his troops onto battle. Cries erupted, sharing their leader’s new lease of life.

“Yes,” Brandor said, a lump forming in his throat. “I think so too.”

“We will reach Grovan by the end of the turn,” Greema promised, the group taking a breather from their ride.

Strolling along, their Kyboes enjoying the freedoms of the open terrain, the mist of yester-turn was put behind them. Keeping to the main roadway, forewarning numerous

travellers of what to expect at the marsh, they could only hope no one had ventured in last night. Enjoying the sunshine, they felt blessed at journeying under present freedoms that were now under threat. This was worth everything they had to give.

Getting familiar with each other, Hallen and Greema remained respectful, the Grovian reassuring the Hite that his connection to this group would safeguard him against any abuse from his brethren. Appreciating the Grove's sensitivities, Hallen was surprised by Greema's sincere attitude. Encounters of the past proved Grovians could be stubborn, arguing just for the sake of not wanting to be wrong. Hoping more were like him at Grovan, needing to tame his own wagging tongue, he did not want to admit it but he was beginning to like the fellow.

Riding alongside Hanor when setting off into the after-turns, Bane could tell there was something going on between his friend and Hayla. A glint in Hanor's eye when the two exchanged brief smiles proved the point. Difficult to believe, but with each passing short-turn, the number of times she glanced behind with a matching gleam meant there was nothing left to disprove it. Initially making him laugh, wanting to congratulate Hanor, but as time clicked by, envy increased, seeing it as another barrier forming between them.

A rush of dark emotion soared, his vision blurring as if intoxicated. Not losing consciousness fully, an inner voice spoke, whispering in his ear.

"He pursues his own desires without a care for yours. I promise, she will be yours if you do as I ask."

Not registering the *Voice* as alien, the bleariness passed. Slender and attractive as Hayla was, to say she might fall in love with him was a powerful idea. Watching her in front, she now seemed different, her beauty even more striking. Pulling on his desires, he could not shake off the wishful thinking. Jealous of Hanor, the grim mood returned. Glancing sideward, his friend appeared so bright and alive, even amongst the demands. Oblivious to Bane's suffering, why did he have all the luck?

A wind picked up, slowing their pace enough to force extra breaks, frustrating Tarmon. The others made the most of it, exchanging light talk, trying to live the life exemplified by Brandor. The Dai-laman had shown the importance of what good cheer was in dire times. Refraining from talking to other travellers, most were heading in the same direction towards the safety of Grovan. Tales of *Nyshifters* were now widespread, believing only high stone walls would protect them.

Descending to the distant horizon behind, shadows from a departing sun stretched across the group's path. Fliryns settled in bushes and treetops, so too the local wildlife. Explaining what the large herd of Nassap-Loe were standing on a nearby hill, Greema said how delicious they were when cooked with the Grovian spice called Pinta. Looking forward to some Grovian hospitality, they pressed on as night descended.

Riding over a final rise, relief merged with cheers at seeing Grovan's well-lit walls. Curving down and around both rock and tree, the roadway snaked towards a low ramp rising to an enormous set of wooden gates buried in the city's fortified walls. Considerable in size, but nothing compared to Manter, towers and grand buildings soared

with elegance. Situated on a low hillside, wide-pillared towers embedded in the outer wall stood firm, guards inside peering out through quaint portals. Others moved along its spiked ramparts, guessing what reaction such a mixed band would receive.

Raising an arm, Kifter eased up, the others doing the same. A few hundred strides from the main gates, peering up and around, keen senses warned of danger, searching for the cause. Nothing was visible against the patchy moonlit clouds, but when their kyboes started whimpering, the Fife knew something was amiss.

“There...!” he cried, alarming everyone to readiness. Pointing skywards, terrible black shapes emerged from the shadows cutting off their route to the city.

“This cannot be,” Tarmon cursed, not enough time to make the short burst to the gates.

Startled cries from the city walls mirrored their own. Glistening in silvery moonlight, three *Nyshifters* rendered the air with hideous wails of evil. Deathly and chill, *they* glided down, beating scorched wings to ease the final descent. Long knotted legs with vicious claws scratched at the ground when landing. Charred filmy wings, pulled tight to *their* backs, added size and menace. Perching halfway between the city and the group, scrawny arms stretched, enormous claws flashing in the torchlight. Testing the measure of resistance, the middle one stood on the road, barring their way. Long narrow heads turned, callous eyes scanning the area.

Monsters this close stalled the group’s ability to act. An eruption of calls spread through the city, the ramparts now bustling with activity. Hurling barbs and knives, but their meagre efforts had little effect. Larger bolts were made ready, but even they did nothing to unsettle the wretched things. Protected as if by an invisible force, *their* hides had been toughened by countless furies of *their* Master. Conceding their efforts were futile, the walls went silent, seeking a new plan instead.

Discussing their options, the small group waited, surprised when the main gates opened. Scores of Grovians filed down the low ramp before fanning into a huge arc. Trees and pockets of bush and stone were a hindrance to any collective strike. Brave hearts edged round, the numbers increasing to a few hundred.

“What shall we do?” Raldama asked from behind.

Searching the night sky for more of the creatures, their position was exposed from another attack. Cautious, Tarmon waited to see what the *Nyshifters* were going to do. The Grovians’ reaction at least gave them hope, but would it be enough? Not making sense, why were the creatures not attacking?

Protecting the younger ones, Hanor especially, the group gained some confidence that he had the *Stone*. Terrifying, how would he cope with three? Calculating, this display suggested high intelligence on *their* part. Far more than just killing beasts, a touch of majesty energised the atmosphere.

Seated just behind Tarmon, Kifter and Greema, Hanor stared out from between the three. The presence of the *Nyshifters* was staggering, feeding on the fear spawned by *their* evil. Part of a twisted game, seeking to generate as much terror as possible, such details seemed obvious. Half-listening to his companions discussing what to do, those dead Tardocians crossed his mind, a timely reminder of what evil could achieve if left to weave its destructive work. Triggering a knot of anger, this was not right.

Holding the *Stone*, retrieving *it* the moment the creatures had descended, he kept rolling *it* over in the palm of his hand. Considering what to do, thoughts of these creatures attacking the Sleep intensified the case against *them*. Saturated by a climbing rage, barely recording the comforting hand of Hayla wrap around his arm, but when moving, he felt the restriction which made him jump. Snapping away, fury pulsed his veins.

Hayla froze, aggrieved by his reaction. As if possessed, Hanor's blank gaze stared right through her, searching her motives. Reacting as though she was a stranger, she gasped, frightened by its implications.

Consumed by anger, Hanor could only think of the horror these foul creatures had wreaked throughout the Freelands. Coming close to death himself, scenes of dead kyboes at Aps Ole and the skeleton of that Great White Freeboaver drew him to the edge of hate. A potent force, the rage increased, losing himself to its dark temptation.

Turning away from Hayla to look at the three wretched creatures, he was parched but did not care. Blood racing, sweat dripping from his brow, he held tight the reins of his kyboe. Wanting to seize the *Nyshifters* by *their* scrawny necks, the desire ravaged him with an ugly madness. Justice for the hundreds and thousands who had died or were soon to, inflated that crude desire to act. Victims were calling for him to strike hard and without mercy.

Gripping the *Stone*, Hanor's mind was made up. Coerced into action by the wrath coursing his veins, he pushed his kyboe through and out between his unsuspecting comrades. Fearless and defiant, his lone cry echoed amongst the murmuring hundreds, raising the *Stone* to release *its* power. Even his short blade stayed in its holdall such was the madness. Rage pulsing, concerned cries from his companions went unheard. Charging without a care, there was just one objective on his mind, to destroy the wretched things. The force of his drive pushed his kyboe beyond its limits. Small amongst so many, he swept across to the *Nyshifters* in a few short heartbeats.

Stone aloft, waiting for *its* power to burst forth and burn *them* with *its* radiant glory, his folly was complete. Awe-inspiring to those who stared on, cries of support at his bravery meant nothing to him. Others ran forward, but it was too late. Matching the coldness of *their* glare, Hanor did not falter, yearning after *their* annihilation.

Fearless, the charging boy was the one that had scolded Shastoc with an unworldly power by the Emor River. Picking him out prior to landing, seeking revenge for recent hurts, but the Master's orders were to only block their path, promising they would discover why. Counting hundreds, the dread was exquisite just as the Master knew it would be. How great was his vision?

Watchful of the approaching figure, so small and insignificant, but the fires at his disposal were enough to trouble even them. Leaping into the air, stretching terrible wings wide, shrieks of ugly delight echoed around the wretched setting.

Hand held high, Hanor expected the *light* to burst forth. Not wanting the hideous *Nyshifters* to escape, willing the *light* to burn *them* from this place, but with every stretch of the hand, nothing happened. Enraged like a blazing furnace, but still the *white fires* would not ignite.

Leaping into the air, three *Nyshifters* heaved upwards out of reach. One dared a snappy bite at Hanor, but *its* long jaws missed. Piercing shrills chilled hearts of all who looked on. Fearful of what was to follow, some Grovians ran back into the city, but most rushed forward to support the lonesome figure sitting at the centre of the ring.

Following a charging Balkorn, the first to react, Tarmon feared the creatures were about to attack now that the *Stone* had failed to shine. But the monsters seemed hesitant, flying in arcs above the throngs as if deliberating what to do. Upon reaching Hanor, the group set a ring to guard the dazed boy, who just stared at the creatures' display of terror above. Sweeping movements arced high and then low with a knowing intent, many cowering with nowhere safe to hide.

Desiring a memorable end, the *Nyshifters* dived, clasping hold of anyone in *their* way. Snatching first one, then two, finally a third person was taken. Wails of terror from hapless victims kept screaming as they disappeared into the distance. A grim shock permeated the onlookers, horrified when the three *Nyshifters* and *their* captives dissolved into the vastness of night. So quick, most were stunned, too shocked that it had happened. Stillness fell across the hundreds gathered, distraught by the episode.

Making sure the creature had gone, Tarmon turned just as Hanor fell from his kyboe. Not quick enough, but Balkorn was. Seizing his arm before he landed, the Baltian lowered Hanor to the ground, urging the others to make room. Leaping down from his mount, the Balt checked him over. Undone by recent events, Hanor was unconscious.

Many Groves drew close, bewildered. Desiring to know who this boy was and what this band of travellers was doing here inviting the attentions of such evil, Tarmon and the others dismounted, encircling their fallen friend. Reassuring his brethren of their purpose, Greema was known throughout Grovan.

Aln, leader of the Night Watch, organised a route for them to enter the city. The throngs talked yet marvelled at the possibilities. Following the diverse group with its brave young hero, what was to come after such a dark night of terror?

Chapter 14: Heightened Expectations

Sickened at the loss of three Grovians, snatched by *Nyshifters*, their despairing calls would not let Hanor rest. Guilt and dismay reinforced self-pity, the burden pinning him to the bed. Wishing the ground would swallow him, what excuse could justify his actions?

Delicate steps of a small fliryn danced on the window ledge. A silky coat of beautiful cascading blues and reds, its movements triggered in him a longing to be free, to fly away and be at peace for once. Why was this happening? Disbelieving he had charged at those creatures, what had gotten into him? Caressed by anger into a brief moment of folly, believing he could make a difference, the most upsetting part was the *Stone*. Betrayed and confused, when the *Stone* had ignited before, had *it* not been against monsters, so why not now? What was wrong with calling the *powers* forth for the many that had died because of *them*? Did not the four lost Dai-lamen deserve retribution? Compassionate towards the countless victims, what was the point if he could not choose when and where to wield the *Stone's* power?

Frustrations shut off that inner place from where the answers came. Let down, to be cut off from doing what was right was unforgivable. Where was the respect for his own judgements? Coming close to killing himself, charging like a fool in front of an entire city, it was not just for his own pride's sake, three lives were now lost because of him. Was there not enough death already?

Covering eyes with trembling hands, he had never felt so far from the *source* behind the *Stone*. Difficult to stay calm knowing he had been denied his destiny, the prospect of only using *it* when the *Sacred* wanted was preposterous, that was if the *Stone* worked anymore. Gasping, a chill shivered through him. What if it did not? What if the encounter with the first *Pillar of Life* had rendered *it* useless? The idea rattled him.

Unexpected, the door clicked open, a cautious Tarmon peering in. Pleased to see Hanor awake, "How are you?" the Tardanian asked, closing the door. Catching a glimpse of Balkorn standing outside before the door shut, that was another issue not yet fully resolved. Shrugging, respecting Tarmon enough not to hide his feelings, "Not good."

"Ah..., I did wonder," Tarmon said, sitting on the bed. "You are a sensitive one."

"Foolish more like," he said in a gruff. To his astonishment, the Tardanian started chuckling, expecting sympathy not humour. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because of your wonderful ways. Am I wrong to say you have been stewing here about what took place last night?"

"And should I not be?"

"That depends upon how you look at it, and whether you believe what you did was a good thing."

"How is it a good thing?" Hanor barked, not believing his usually sensitive friend.

Leaning forward, the seriousness apparent, "You are worried how the people of Grovan will react after what took place, are you not?"

"That does not take much working out."

"Well, my young brave fool," the Tardanian said. "Your name is now held in high regard throughout Grovan. The whole city has been roused by what you did last night. Too incredible for most to believe, only because so many were there is it accepted."

“No... no, that cannot be right,” Hanor said, emotions rising. “Three Grovians are dead, have they forgotten that?”

Saddened by his upset, after a short pause, Hanor calmed down enough for Tarmon to speak. “I understand your concerns, but the people of this city do not see it as three people lost, but many lives saved.”

“Many lives saved?” The words seemed foreign. “No one was saved.”

“In their eyes, and ours..., your friends that is, the death toll could have been in the hundreds. We were helpless against *them*. How do you fight creatures of power?”

“I..., I... cannot see it like that..., how can you expect me to?”

“I do not expect anything from you,” Tarmon answered, sincere. “I am just sharing what is going on outside this room. People are praising you rather than condemning. What you did was remarkable, and will be remembered for a very long time.”

Hanor felt sick. Was this some kind of perverted reaction, a twist of fate the *Sacred* were using to punish him for his defiance. “I cannot believe this!”

“Shall I show you?”

“No.”

Tarmon had not expected Hanor to be this stricken, needing to placate him. “Everyone last night, including me, were paralysed about what to do. What *could* we do? Hundreds of people were just standing there too frightened to do anything. It is in such moments of indecision that great tragedies happen. No one has the courage to act, for nothing is clear as to what can be done. Mistakes occur resulting in the loss of many lives. However, in one incredulous moment, you took all of that indecision away; you decided for everyone. And the only cost of that decision was... three lives, not fifty or a hundred, just three. How many would have been lost trying to find a weakness?” Leaving the issue as to why the *Stone* had not blazed into life, no doubt that was another problem troubling his young companion.

When explained like that, it did appear they got off light Hanor had to concede. Sighing, it was still difficult, three people were no longer here. Burdens easing, he was damned no matter how he reacted. Managing a weak grin, he was helpless against the sensible reasoning of his Tardanian friend. “It looks as if you have come to my rescue.”

“What you did last night deserves praise.”

“I do not like praise much,” Hanor admitted, looking for his clothes.

“Praise is good if accepted in the right context, it is recognition for work well done. If not for yourself then... be happy for those whose hearts you have lifted. Many people have been inspired by your courage.”

“It was not courage..., I was angry.”

Laughing, Tarmon beamed. “And is that not a good thing? If you cannot get angry at a *Nyshifter*..., what can you get angry at?”

Not meaning it like that, sheer fury had overwhelmed him. Catching his breath, Hayla’s attempts to comfort him thumped Hanor’s heart. Rejecting her concerns, what must he have looked like?

“What is it?” Tarmon noted the change.

Hoping he had not frightened her off, Hanor let it go, putting himself through enough already. “Nothing,” he said, needing some fresh air. Refusing to discuss the *Stone*’s failure either, he was hungry. “Can I get something to eat somewhere?”

Sitting on an ornate bench in a secluded part of the High-house gardens, Hanor relaxed, now free from the scrutiny of the local populace. Finding his way here after eating, he was avoiding the others, wanting to be alone until his confidence returned. Unsure which part of the High-house was close by, curved structures were joined by arched walkways to prominent buildings of equal splendour. A decorative tower soared in the near distance, one for sightseeing rather than war. Impressed, there was much to look at here, carved scenes chiselled into the High-house walls equally striking.

Fliryns playing in a nearby treetop reminded him of that first walk with Hayla at Manter. Wondering where she was, he had still not seen her. Their embrace two nights ago had been special, supposing his unsightly reaction last night had ended their relationship. Questioning whether that would be a bad thing, immense pressures of late meant he could do without the distractions. Uncertain what to make of it, he yearned for the peace in his heart to rise, even if only for a while.

Clutching the *Stone* through his overcoat, anger still simmered at why *it* had not worked. Guilty of not using the girth pouch either, he took the *Stone* out, searching for clues to what had quenched *its* power. Appearing exactly as *it* had when leaving Tarkons Tomb, without those *forces* for protection, he was now as vulnerable as anyone else.

"Hanor!" An unexpected call interrupted the period of reflection.

Turning, Greema was leaning out of a window beckoning him over. Pointing to a side door, the Grove closed the window and disappeared. Forewarned by Tarmon that some people wanted to meet him, he was not in the mood but made his way over.

Appreciating Greema's assurances when walking, the Grovian led him along bright corridors, the walls also chiselled into picturesque designs of rare beauty. Illustrating the people and places of Grovan, some had colour to add realism. Concentrating on what was to come, they reached a set of tall carved doors and stopped.

"Are you sure you are up to this?" Greema asked, sensitive to what he had been through.

"Er... yes," Hanor said, taking a deep breath. "If not now..., when?"

"You sound like Brandor," the Grove chuckled.

"I wish I had his nerve."

"You showed nerves of steel last night," Greema said, admiring what he did.

Not responding, Hanor kept any thoughts on it private.

Following Greema, he entered the circular chamber. White curving walls and a high wooden ceiling were clean and elegant. Most of his companions were sitting in comfortable chairs around a low round table of gigantic proportions. The atmosphere seemed relaxed, the murmurs halting upon their entry.

"I found him where any sane person would be in these troubled times," Greema said, heading for the middle. "Perhaps we should have talked outside where he was, basking this turn away in peace."

One similar to Greema stood to greet Hanor, clasping his forearm. "We meet at last, Hanor the brave," he said, cheerful. "I am Fordain, High-grove of Grovan. I have been looking forward to this. Much has been shared by your friends."

A greeting to make him feel even more self-conscious, Hanor's discomfort was obvious. Used to meeting people of high regard due to his parents, that training however

was not helping. Difficult to hold his head high, the fact Grovians were celebrating what he had done rather than mourning the loss, this High-grove appeared no different.

"Come..., sit next to me," he said, ushering another Grove to move along.

Counting out his companions, not holding any eyes for long, Hayla and Bane in particular, the High-grove did not waste time.

"Have you recovered from your encounter last night?"

"Well enough to receive your warm welcome."

"On behalf of our people, I give you thanks for what you did at great risk to yourself."

"I did what I thought I had to."

"Your humility is a credit to you."

Hanor did not argue the matter.

Introducing the four other Grovians present, two were Masters. Barely used to Brandor's intellectual ways, Hanor deduced they were here for the second *Pillar of Life*. A glint in Fordain's eyes proved he was just as keen to tackle the subject.

"Late last night..., I spent a couple of short-turns strolling through the tunnels beneath our beloved city," the High-grove confessed, unashamed. "Our Masters have always wondered why their walls imbued a faint glow, but with your arrival and details of your purpose, we now know why."

"We knew it was due to the crystalline structure of the rock," the Master called Som said, defensive. "But could not decide where the source of energy actually came from."

"During my walk..., " the High-grove continued.

"Search," Greema chuckled, accustomed to his ways.

"I was hoping to find similar circumstances you experienced at Manter, the heat described. Sadly, there was nothing indicating where the second *Pillar* is." Grinning, "I was just trying to save us time."

"Impatient as usual," Falone, the other Master said.

Surprised she was female, soft but mature features seemed less intimidating to Hanor than her male colleagues, whose prominent bone structure were quite menacing to look at. Sensing her eyes on him continually since arriving, he felt like a creature on show.

"Impatience is a Grovian trait," Fordain said, playing down his impulsiveness. "Back to the issue, when faced with the prospect of war, having sacred *powers* beneath this city will inspire our people when the second *Pillar of Life* is found. I intend to move swiftly on this as time is short. We still have preparations to make, so I now invite you, Hanor, to make a start if you are able?"

Astonished at how quick this was going, Hanor just nodded.

Braving the awkward setting considering he was a Hite, Hallen had to be sure of one thing. "Are these tunnels small or... will they cope with an oversized oaf like me?"

Swallowing old hurts, Fordain was polite, respecting Brandor's trust in him that Hallen would be looked after. "You and our friend Balkorn will be fine," he assured him, his tone turning serious. "I will ask for your discretion, and respect our city's defences in relation to the tunnels' location."

"You have my word."

"Is there anything else before we make a start?" Fordain asked.

"The one at Manter melted the rock into a slimy mud," Kifter said, chuckling. "Can we take shovels?"

Imagining it, "A good point, I will send for some."

"And you are happy to have part of your High-house fall down too?" Hallen said, gaining in confidence.

"I will not mind if the whole place falls down."

"And he means it," Som chuckled.

"Shall we go?" Fordain said, anticipating the miraculous.

Descending the stairs, now the group understood what Fordain and Som had meant earlier. The tunnel walls emanated a soft radiant glow to light their way. Spacious as promised, it was larger than the dark gloomy ones at Manter. Entering at an appropriate turn of the day as well, at least now they knew what to expect.

An eager Fordain moved at pace, glancing over his shoulder periodically at Hanor just behind him. Everyone in good spirits, worming their way into the heart of the earth, they levelled off briefly before rising again.

Nervous, Fordain's expectancy added further pressures to an already straining Hanor. Wishing he could do this alone, tensions increased the longer they travelled. Without a sense of direction down here, certain they had journeyed beyond the boundaries of Grovan, trying different directions had little effect either. Urging the sensations in his chest to ignite, Hanor sighed when Fordain stopped to look at him for the seventh time. Shaking his head, the High-grove grumbled.

Wiping sweat from his brow, the heat of everyone's expectations contributed to the unnatural stuffiness Hanor felt. Holding the *Stone* for comfort, that was another reason why he could not enjoy this. What if the *Stone* had lost *its* light? What if his destructive desires when confronting the *Nyshifters* had corrupted *it*? Dreading the potential damage, he refocused on the task just to keep his nerve. Forcing down any ideas about Hayla or Bane, not even acknowledging either since the previous turn of day, they were a complication he did not need.

Another 'no' when Fordain looked at him with imploring eyes, there was nothing to suggest the *Pillar of Life* was anywhere in the vicinity. Apologising more than he wanted, inadequacy plagued Hanor.

After a short-turn, it seemed ridiculous searching this way. Without Brandor, they were fumbling their way through tunnel after tunnel without real direction. Fordain's huffs were frequent, doing battle with his own impatience. Approaching the second short-turn, there was still no sign of the *Pillar*, and still Fordain kept going. Determined that nothing short of success was acceptable, Hanor was convinced they were backtracking through tunnels previously trekked. Each crossroad looked the same. Upon reaching numerous dead-ends, Hanor supposed hidden entrances were concealed close by. A chance to step back into the world outside if Fordain so chose, fearing such knowledge might get into undesired hands, to breathe the fresh air again was tempting enough to discard caution.

Stopping finally at another crossroad, Fordain turned. There was nowhere else to search. "Back that way," he said, pointing to their right. "Is the entrance where we came in. We have covered all areas, some numerous times..., and so I must ask, although I already know the answer, have you not felt anything?"

The entire tunnel went quiet, everyone crowding forward to listen.

Hanor felt sick, dejected at letting them all down. “No, High-grove Fordain..., I have not.” Under pressure, *I do not even know if the Stone works anymore.*

Fordain sighed. Not one to give up easily, the prospect of digging under the whole city was ludicrous, considering just how far he was prepared to go. “We shall try again tomorrow. With a fresh approach, we might find a way.”

“I think so too,” Hanor agreed, disenchanted.

Returning to the bench in the gardens, out here in the sunshine at least Hanor could breathe, and not just from the enclosed atmosphere of the tunnels but also heightened expectations. At times like this, he truly hated the role he had accepted. Closing his eyes, he was tired.

Sighing at the sounds of approaching footsteps, he just wanted to be left alone. Heart stopping when looking to see who it was, Hayla approached, agitated as if intruding. Sitting up, not brave enough to talk first, he waited for what she had to say.

“How... are you?” Hayla managed, regretting the weakness in her voice. Watching him for a while before braving this exchange, she was desperate to cross the gap now separating them. Hoping true love had finally found her, but his reaction prior to the *Nyshifters* incident had unnerved her. Certain evil had been present, the opposite of what she had come to love about him, it left her wrestling with what she should do now. He deserved the chance to defend himself, praying he could put everything right.

“I am... fine, considering the conditions,” he said. If he did not turn away now, he would lose himself to her again.

“I... suppose you are... disappointed about not finding the second *Pillar*,” she said, stating the obvious to get the conversation going. If they could not relax enough to talk out here, what chance did they have?

“I am not... that bothered at the moment.”

Taking that as a good sign, Hayla hoped it was because of her. Daring to sit beside him, “I appreciate how difficult it must have been for you down there..., with everyone waiting for you to respond.”

Inhaling her sweet scent was not helping. Desires to embrace her were strong, but something held Hanor back. Glimpsing the same turmoil in her, did he need this right now? Personal attachments meant commitment, barely maintaining his own stability let alone any additional ones. “All of this is hard.”

Unsure how to react, did he mean their relationship or everything else besides? “I am sorry I have not been to see you,” she said, putting her heart on the table. “It is because... I am... scared I suppose. Scared of us, of you and everything that is going on. Look at me..., I am shaking with this.”

Expecting to feel compassion, a re-emergence of what they had experienced two nights ago, but it was not to be. Stunned at how flat he felt, a detachment ensuring he did not get embroiled in her suffering that mirrored his own, as much as he wanted to hold her close, this was not the right time or place. Taking into account her feelings, was he being fair to either of them if he allowed it to happen? What the future might bring could unhinge his sanity. Closing his eyes, a comforting strength surged up to support his

decision. "This will not work," he said, scorching the atmosphere. "You and me that is." Sitting for a few short heartbeats in silence, even the wildlife seemed to gasp.

Standing, Hayla did not even look at him. Running back to the High-house, hiding her pain as she went, tears poured. Why had she been so foolish to leave herself open to this? She had come out here to see if he deserved another chance, not the other way around. Wanting to make amends and look beyond that horrible moment when evil had shone out from his darkened eyes, how could he treat her like this? How could he just disregard her when she had admitted what she was feeling?

Angry questions accompanied her whilst fleeing back to her room, empty shadows closing in. "I cannot believe I gave him a chance," she chided herself, slamming the door and all intimacies from her life.

Walking around the pleasant gardens, Hanor felt ill with guilt. Failing Hayla, but deep inside he knew he had made the right decision. Attempting to clear his thoughts, he crossed a small footbridge spanning a sharp cut in the terrain. Tinkling sounds of the slow moving stream below were not medicinal as he would have liked. Warm, the late after-noon sun beating away to his right, he had no idea how to get through the pressures.

Stalling when a call from behind arrested him from his musings, Tarmon signalled for him to wait. Leaving the arched throughway and descending a small flight of stairs, the Tardanian headed round to cross the small bridge towards him. Not needing company right now, but there was a slim chance his wisdom could help.

"I have been looking for you," Tarmon said, slowing when reading the anxieties in the young man. "What is it?"

Turning, Hanor continued walking, the Tardanian joining him. Guilty thoughts were imprisoning, deserving it after treating Hayla so heartlessly. Deciding to talk, he explained what had happened between him and Hayla, detailing the unusual events that had jolted them into the short relationship. Desiring to run off and be free together, but immense burdens of their quest and the understandable needs of the Freelands were pinning him to his obligations. Finishing off with the emotional climax earlier, it was why he was meandering without direction.

Surprised he had not noticed any affections between the two, this was a revelation to Tarmon. Avoiding intimacies that had come his own way over the seasons, he could appreciate Hanor's sense of duty. Respecting love could distract people from higher callings, deep within his own heart there was a longing, but he had refused to let them grow. Threatening the group's effectiveness, the unity developed over recent turns was now at risk.

Passing through the High-house gates as they talked, Hanor wanted to explore more of the city before sundown. Braving the odd stare and periodic comment, circular buildings of the Grovian people mirrored the High-house. Carvings etched into the stonework were just as detailed and varied. Ornate windows and coned roofs gave the place a homely feel. Strolling down narrow roads, small alleyways veered off, hid well by tidy trees and bushes of many colours. Passing scores of Grovians, a sense of community similar to Tarden was apparent.

Enjoying the sights, the two newcomers relaxed after their discussion. Joining a main road, the gradual decline followed the line of the low hill on which the city sat. A wide slab of rock bulging out of the ground in front was a favourite place for a small group of Grovian children playing just like Hanor, Nole and Bane used to. Refusing to get sentimental, life had changed all that forever.

Reaching the slab, stopping to watch the interplay, their freedom was heartening. Far from shy, small, friendly eyes peered out from deep-set hollows. Showing no signs of fear, just as it should be, they started running around the two newcomers.

Spanning twenty strides across, Hanor stepped onto the smooth rock. Strolling towards the middle, subtle stirrings in his heart were the last thing he expected. Halting, disbelieving the sensations were true, he tried shutting out the commotion of the children to concentrate. Closing his eyes, he dared a step forward. Faint but real, the movements in his heart were there. Staying calm in case he was mistaken, was the *Stone* active again?

“What is it?” Tarmon asked at his hesitancy.

Not answering, braving yet another step, the nearer Hanor got to the centre of the slab, the more his heart increased in activity. Familiar feelings of oneness were already at the edge of his senses and rising. A smile crossed his lips.

“Hanor..., what is it?” Tarmon repeated. “Are you going to tell...!” The Tardanian cut short, realising the implications. “Is this... what I think it is?”

Tender strokes of Hanor’s heart were constant, proof to what it meant. “Yes.”

“Are you... sure?”

Not wanting to stir up an entire city if wrong, “It is, Tarmon.” Holding his chest as if the sensations were fragile and needed protecting, the effects were enthralling.

“How can this... be?” the Tardanian said, amazed by the discovery.

“You had better go tell the others,” Hanor said, kneeling down. “Now, Tarmon!”

Chapter 15: Grovian Treasure

"About time too," Rinn croaked, pulling up under a large looping tree. "You have pushed us too hard this turn of day," he protested at an already dismounted Brandor. Overcoats were only just starting to dry from the sodden downpour earlier, the lingering chill content to keep them company.

"We travel for as long as necessary," Brandor said, unperturbed.

"You have had a look in your eye for the entire turn," Rinn noted, dismounting.

"And what look would that be?" Brandor asked, not really paying attention. Night was closing in, and he felt strangely hungry. Eager to get a fire going, placing stacking stones into a hollow, he was surprised at Rinn's next comment.

"You look like a person who thinks he might win this battle."

"And why should I not think that?" he said, clumping sticks and dried grass into a pile.

"A positive attitude is necessary," Rinn said, undoing one of his bags whilst stretching his back. "But we have to be realistic about the dangers ahead."

"I am aware of the dangers. Get to your point, Rinn."

"We have not yet discussed the Yarmi Folk's links to *Gorl-darl*."

"That is because everyone has needed to rest at the end of each turn," Brandor said, sitting back when the fire took hold. "If the time is ripe, say what you will."

Laying his mat in front of the tree trunk, Rinn sat down. Groaning as if relieved, it was a tame show for the others and nothing more. He had never felt so alive, not since his early turns so many long seasons ago. Encouraged by the confident attitude of his companion, it was time to test the *Ileng Power*.

Considering how to approach it, Tralle and Sorlam made their bedding next to his. Watchful as Brandor prepared a hot stew, the man's sincerity was unquestionable, and so too were his efforts. Not wishing to tamper too much, even so, he had to ensure his new *Ileng Power* was as powerful but subtle as he hoped.

"Why would such a once loving people side with *Gorl-darl*?" Rinn posed, the question had been touched upon before but without interference.

"People change," Brandor's rash answer surprised the others. Rinn smiled seeing no obvious signs of suspicion from the speaker.

"Do you really mean that?" Hader asked close by, astonished by the answer. Sipping some Craskethe, a pain-relieving potion for his aches, he sat down, puzzled. "How can people change to such a degree?"

Looking up from the pot as if figuring out a problem, "It does seem an odd thing to say," Brandor admitted, eyebrows narrowing at why he had said it. "Well..., people do change but... usually for the better."

"You mean love rarely turns back towards darkness?" Whis suggested.

Everyone knew the Yarmi Folk were once an enchanted people, shedding light and love into peoples lives no matter the person's circumstances. Such kindness was the very reason for the original split at Tardoc long ago, well before Tarden had even been envisioned. It was difficult to accept such a drastic turnaround.

"Of course," Brandor said, stirring the pan. "One generally evolves towards a loving attitude..., not darkness."

"So what else could explain the transformation?" Rinn threw in another question.

“*Gorl-darl* might be a very persuasive person,” Brandor said, the others staring at him.

“You do not believe that either do you?” Hader asked, concerned. Usually sharp, Brandor’s responses were troubling.

“Er... no, not... really,” the Dai-laman said, sitting back.

“Then why say it?” Tralle said, glancing at the others.

“It has been a long turn,” Brandor said as if it was enough to appease them. “Perhaps... I have been pondering a little too much.”

“You mentioned before about their increased powers,” Rinn continued, careful not to overstep the boundaries of decency. Not wanting to fuel too many fears in the others as to Brandor’s state of mind, but this minor inconvenience was necessary for what he had in mind. “How do you think they have managed it?”

“The southern regions of Tardania are now devoid of life,” Brandor explained. “Their search for truth has clearly saturated the area of vital forces, but how I do not know.”

“Much of the work we do involves the manipulation of energies,” Rinn said. “Maybe they have transferred energies from Tardania into Yarmoria, and now need to expand across the Freelands to continue their work.”

“That is a worthy point,” Brandor said, content to stir the pot like a servant.

“Is that their aim?” Brorn posed, the idea plausible. “But why?”

“Increasing one’s knowledge and power usually creates an effect somewhere,” Rinn said, considering another point. “It could also be a matter of survival. If their way of life is threatened, it could have an adverse affect on them.”

“Sounds strange... but reasonable,” Brorn acknowledged. “Similar to when one regularly drinks too much ale, a personality change can happen.”

“Precisely,” Rinn agreed, this fine group of men testament to that. “If they have come to rely on those energies, intoxicated almost, then they will not be acting with a pure heart. Faulty ideas can seep in, to the eventual downfall of a race.”

“Ideas like what?” Hader wanted to know.

“Let us suggest a person plants a seed thought that says the *Sacred*’s objectives are to sustain life more than love it. Picture that seed growing over time until it is accepted by all. We know self-preservation at the expense of others can lead to selfish ambition and a definite move away from love.”

“But we have experienced the *Sacred*’s love,” Whis said. “It is a natural part of *their* nature. To create life without loving it is highly unlikely. I cannot see the Yarmi Folk thinking any different.”

“But, what if the *Sacred* were given a choice between life itself and say... love, what would be *their* preference?”

“These are intriguing concepts,” Brorn said. “Would *they* sacrifice love for life itself? Is it even possible?”

“If it were,” Hader added his own thoughts. “It does suggest a reasonable motive for the Yarmi Folk to behave as they have.”

“But what about the treachery?” Brandor said, referring to Maloree’s manipulations. Preparing to dish up their meal, hunger pains were now cramping his stomach.

“If it meant a child getting food inside them, would you not pretend your cooking tasted good even if it was not much better than marsh-water?” Rinn posed.

“What is wrong with my cooking?” Brandor defended, to his colleagues’ astonishment.

“He is not condemning your cooking,” Whis said, disturbed by the reaction. “He is making an observation. Sometimes we do what is necessary to ensure life goes on.”

“I see what you mean,” Brandor said, unfazed by his own ridiculous replies.

“Are you all right, Brandor?” Sharn asked beside him, anxious. “Are you tired?”

“I am fine.”

Doubtful glances flickered between the others at what this meant. Rinn stayed detached, watching with interest the developments.

“Here... let me do that,” Sharn said, reaching to take the hot pan.

“It is true..., you do not like my cooking,” Brandor said, pulling away.

Sitting back, Sharn knew not what to make of it. “You need to rest,” he urged, permitting his comrade to fill his bowl. “A long rest.”

When Brandor finished serving up, an awkward quiet fell across the group, worried about his unusual behaviour. Eating in silence, his prickly reaction ended the debate, concerns for his welfare replacing the need to clarify the Yarmi Folk’s motives.

Astonished at how tired he felt when lying down, aching limbs were as if this was Brandor’s first time out on the road for an age. Trying to reflect on what was discussed earlier, thoughts were cloudy as if inside a misty glass. Strange, something was not right but he could not tell what.

Impressed with Rinn’s explanations, his ideas about the *Sacred*’s choice between life and love were credible. If Yarmoria was suffering through lack of resources, the notion of returning to live in the Freelands could trigger a drastic reaction. Wise and kind in the past, was it possible that life was more vital than love? But why had they linked up with *Gorl-darl*? Closing his eyes, he was oblivious to the manipulations suffered.

With his back to the fire, Rinn stared out beyond the tree to the darkness beyond. Odd grunts from their resting kyboes sheltering under an adjacent tree were the only sounds audible. A tingle of excitement pulsed his veins at the exchanges. Awkward to see Brandor act in such a manner, the fact he had influenced him without his colleague detecting it was what counted. Suspicion from the others was expected, but irrelevant. Spawning a few doubts, it left room to step in if Brandor failed on his part. Disliking the group’s dependency on him for guidance and motivation, it was partly why he was willing to experiment like this. They had to be strong as individuals before they could unite as a powerful force and be of any use. Since those *Nyshifters* had taken the four, the Hisian-set had not functioned as a group like times past. If confronted by the Yarmi Folk now, they would be swept aside by the sheer numbers involved. Needing passions to be reignited, with a little prompting and a few carefully timed arguments, he was determined to get them going.

Excited about his *Ileng Power*, he could now test the different levels to which it worked. Sending thought forms to Brandor, if *he* could be influenced without detecting it, what else was possible? Chuckling, he had not even tried out its physical possibilities other than a few minor experiments. No words were necessary to unleash the remarkable *Ileng Power*, just a focusing of the will towards a desired target. Working on the very edge of life, touching the boundaries of creativity and power, only one doubt remained. Was he able to control the immense energies without losing himself or his companions to its deathly fire? The prospect was as terrifying as it was enthralling.

Great clunking sounds of the enormous wooden structure pounded the surface of the rock. Watching and waiting, Hanor feared what the huge contraption might do to the concealed *powers* lying beneath the surface. Night arriving, it had taken this long to get everything organised. Placing lanterns around the ring to shed light on the unfolding drama, the suspense was felt by the hundreds looking on.

Sounds of stretched rope merged with pulleys and other winding mechanisms. A huge steel tip, toughened and shaped to a point and weighted by a large stone, kept plunging with a mighty thump. Shaking the ground, shockwaves rippling through the earth foretold of something substantial to come. Splintering large slices of rock, stocky Grovians were quick to clear the loosened debris. Perched on two massive joists spanning wider than the stone slab itself, four bulky swivelling wheels enabled them to move the huge apparatus to chisel at another point. Laborious, irritating impatient onlookers, the High-grove was one of them.

“How do you feel?” Tarmon asked, standing alongside Hanor.
“Fine,” he said, eager for the hole to be dug.

Standing ten strides back from the slab’s rim, forced away to let them work, without the inner movements, Hanor felt exposed as if a vital part was missing. Three times he had walked forward to ensure sensations in his chest re-ignited, and three times he had come away to stand like a bystander when the shimmering in his heart returned. By digging deeper, they hoped to trigger the *white fires* from the *Stone* like at Manter. So far however, nothing had changed.

Told by Fordain that no tunnels ran near this area, Hanor had been carried unconscious by this point when first entering Grovan, the twist of fate safeguarding the *Pillar’s* location until now.

Standing nearby, the rest of the group were thankful for not being subjected to another muddy dousing. Catching sight of Hayla at the rear, refusing to linger on what she might be thinking, Hanor was unsure at what point Bane came and stood behind him in support. Dismissing emotional concerns, he concentrated on issues that mattered, a thump drawing his attention back to the growing hole in front.

Another thud, another splinter of rock, the pile of debris grew, the hole expanding. Labouring into the night, replacing short ladders with longer ones, large sections of rock were pulled out by a second contraption using rope and a sling. Grovians were hard workers. Some controlled the kyboes pulling the apparatus, whilst a group worked the machine itself. Yet another cleared the area to make ready for another strike.

Toiling through the night, sweaty brows and soaked backs affirmed just how much effort was required, and still they kept going. A supporting team relieved the original group, swapping often to ensure maximum efficiency. Without stopping, the rock was not giving up its treasure easily.

Handing refreshments around, when the work drifted into the early short-turns of the morning, many Grovian citizens drifted away, too tired to stay up. Yawns and stretches were contagious. Even Fordain began to wane. Splashing cold water on his face, energies exerted earlier were now catching up on him.

Breaking the lull, a call bellowed from one of the Grovians working on the contraption. "It will go no deeper. That is the depth of our deepest foundations."

Rousing Fordain to action, the High-grove scanned the setting, Hanor and the others joining him. Waiting for the huge device to be pulled away, the pit eventually came into view. The width of the slab of rock, its sides were jagged and steep. Gouged out of the earth, fifteen hand-spans down, its base still looked hard in the half-light.

"What do we do now?" Raldama asked, peering down.

Less than fifty spectators left, the group of workers, numbering twenty, stood on the opposite side, frustrated at not succeeding. Some of the *Watch* from the outer walls were present, sneaking away from their posts to view the developments. Another order from Keyster, the leader of the hard-pressed workers, called for hand tools.

"He will not stop until he drops," Greema said. "Nor will his team."

"Who are they, so hard-working?" Kifter asked, amazed at their extraordinary efforts.

"Structure Bearers. They carry out any construction work here at Grovan."

"Their stamina is astonishing."

Passing tools forward, some of the bearers descended ladders. Determined, no one doubted they would succeed.

Many sat down, too exhausted to stay on aching feet. Only Hanor, Balkorn, Tarmon, and a few Grovians, remained standing.

Hanor mused at what he should do. Chiselling away at the rock below, the Grovians' bold intent was far from adequate. Bludgeoning the rock, splintering only small slithers of debris, the pieces were not big enough. To emulate what the machine had achieved would take a few turns at this rate. Not depreciating their efforts, but Hanor had to act.

Reaching the ladder, Hanor made his way down into the pit, murmurs at what this meant rumbling around the predawn setting. Followed by High-grove Fordain and Balkorn, Hanor relaxed when the familiar *light* in his heart ignited. Strengthening the deeper he went, when reaching the floor of the basin, the sensations increased significantly. Heading towards the centre of the large hollow, the blissful heat in his chest again filled him with unspeakable joy. Extinguishing worries, in his mind the *light* surged, exploding into life from his heart. Unsure if it was the *Stone*, he did not care. The Bearers stopped their work to watch.

Streams of *light* poured forth from Hanor's heart. Invisible to those staring into the half-lit pit, only he could see the effects in his mind's eye. Angling down this time, when kneeling, even that helped. Thankful they had dug this deep, getting closer to the second *Pillar* had made all the difference. Increasing in tempo, the *light* rushed towards the yet to be seen *power* below. Intense, the burning sensations were not like a naked flame but that of a purifying force, purging the debris of his fears. Dissolving the pollution of an ignorant mind, the power of life now coursed his veins. Staying alert and attuned to the surroundings, he had been gently awoken to the enormity of these *powers* at Manter. Maturing so his involvement here was much more inclusive, his ability to handle the dynamic *forces* was increasing too.

Conscious of movements elsewhere in the pit, excited calls cried out. The rock was softening! Rather than picks, shovels were called for, the Bearers digging in front. Lowering buckets to be filled and then hoisted back to the surface for emptying, Fordain joined in the work. Shovelling with renewed vigour, a smaller pit started taking shape. Lanterns hammered into the side of the larger pit shed more light for those digging.

Making his way down with Greema, Kifter and Hallen, Tarmon was uncomfortable with the proceedings. The second hole in front of Hanor was getting deeper, the rock melting as it had done before. The whole area was destabilising. A sudden collapsing of the floor would take them all with it, Hanor included. Kneeling beside the lad, expecting to see a glazed look, but to the Tard's amazement, Hanor smiled before turning back to the action. Following the lad's angled gaze downwards, the boy was looking in the direction of the second *Pillar of Life*. This was incredible.

"I would slow down if I were you," Kifter urged the lead Bearer. Up to his knees in the liquefying rock at the bottom of the second pit, "What should I be fearful of?" he asked, catching his breath. "There is a power down there that might be your undoing, Tork," Greema warned. "This *is* getting sloppy," Tork said, heaving another large bucket clear. "How is your friend doing?" he asked, indicating Hanor, who just sat staring in their direction. "He is fine," Greema said, glancing behind. "You just be careful." "We only go where the ground is soft." The smaller pit was working its way under one side of the basin. Sending for wooden supports to reinforce the area, "I have never seen anything like it," Tork said, filling another bucket. "Rock turning soft like wet mud!" Pursing his lips, this was most unnatural.

Marvelling just as much as the digging Groves, even after experiencing the miraculous at Manter, it took nothing away from present circumstances. Ground still softening, Tarmon and the others reached for shovels to clear loose sections that could cave in on those further down. Just behind, Hanor remained kneeling as if what they were doing was irrelevant to his own experience.

Passing buckets back and forth, the pit got wider and deeper. The Bearers no longer talked. Their speed increased as if what was hidden was urging them to work harder and faster, to come within the depths of the earth to embrace the hidden powers.

"Do you feel that?" Kifter asked, holding his chest. "Yes..., it is very strong," Hallen said at the immense pulling of his heart. "More intense than Manter," Tarmon agreed.

Bearers kept digging, convinced they were close. Fixing wooden supports to reinforce the unstable area, a strange desire to reach the *Unseen* drove them beyond procedures, the struts inadequate in the soft bedding.

"Look," a cry leapt up from the pit, alerting those above. "What do you see?" Tarmon asked, concerned how close the diggers were. Captivated by the sight out of view from those above, the Structure Bearers stared on, transfixed.

"Tork!" Greema bellowed, just as the Grove moved as if towards something.

Saved by a faint call from a distant place, he looked up. “*It is... amazing!*” Tork said, glazy eyes wide. “What... is *it?*” His companions also stood mesmerised by the flickering lights behind the thin film of melting rock.

Jumping back, a layer slid to cover their ankles, exposing an even greater sight. Gasping, the resultant hole revealed the same *light* the group had witnessed at Manter. Shooting up from in front and below, sparkles of light were spellbinding. Stronger tugs on their hearts urged everyone to draw nearer and lose themselves forever.

Staying where he was, Hanor waited for the inevitable. Rushing flames of *white fire* surging from his chest were flowing as if the very sun was shining through the *Stone* from his heart. Energies surpassing the one at Manter, attuning his heart to life itself, strong impressions of oneness accompanied the changes.

Radiating energies right across the Freelands to generate life, the *Pillar of Life* had done so since life was first initiated on this small planet. But now, *its* attractive influences were drawing the very creatures *it* had granted life back to *itself*. An eternal process of expansion and contraction, all were destined to merge in the end.

Shadowy figures scurrying around him hauled the three Grovians at the base of the pit free just as another large rockslide took the wooden supports with it. Helped by Hallen, Greema, Tarmon and others, their escape was a side issue for the young man from Manson.

Standing tall, Hanor made his way down into the unstable pit, intending to unify with that magnificent *power*. In his favour, the rockslide had caused a larger opening to appear, the sparking lights now visible from higher up. Unconcerned by the instability of the area, his objective was to merge. Ignoring his friends’ concerns, Tarmon’s wisdom helped steady the others.

“He is now in the hands of the *Sacred*.”

More alert than last time, Hanor’s descent was steady but assured. Sliding on his rear, embedded in the earth below, the *Pillar of Life* glistened up through the half-light. Hundreds of jetting sparks flashed before disappearing at the edge of the *Sphere*, the presence of the force field now apparent. Lumps of liquefied rock continued sliding down, following the curvature of the energy field.

Stopping a short distance above the opening, the *Point of Light* came into view. Cushioned by a small seat of mud collected when descending, Hanor sat to savour the spectacle. Streams of *light* from his heart gushed without end. Peering down into the sparkly twilight, sensations in his heart, fiery and searing, began swelling. Calling for him to return to the *Source* of all, it was time to end the illusion of separation.

Sliding the last part, Hanor touched the *force field*, unconcerned by the dynamics involved. Hot but not scolding, his body now hummed to the same vibration. Entering, when half inside, he lurched, slipping down to the *Sphere*’s base. Caked in mud, it seemed unfitting for something so spectacular. Flushing his skin, fiery gases felt heavy like liquid.

Standing, he did not need to breathe, the fires in his chest dissolving the immediate need for oxygen. As if in a cocoon, there was no discomfort, only the raging powers of life itself. Underfoot, the ground was moist but firm, the *Sphere* retaining *its* shape. The *Eternal Point* hovered above him, every bit as glorious as the one at Manter.

Above and behind, his companions jostled with ladders and ropes, preparing for what was to come. More conscious of his surroundings, it added to the wonder. Tiny and energetic, the outward-bound *sparks* tingled, *their* life force passing right through him. Each *spark* was the beginning of a new life, born into the world only to be coated by base elements of the physical world. The details were absorbing.

Gazing up at the central *Point*, in his heart the *fires* were still streaming, approaching *their* purpose. Reaching up, the fact his hand was filthy did not matter, the mud soon dripping to the ground from the intense *powers*. A tool for the *forces* within him to rise and dissolve all forms of conscious separation, he felt so alive.

Urges to unite intensified, causing an abrupt closing of his hand. Losing himself to eternity, the physical world disappeared.

“How is he?” Hayla pleaded as they lay Hanor carefully on the grass. Tarmon checked his breathing. It was steady, and there was no damage to his hand. “He is fine, just like before,” the Tardanian said. Knowing what he did about Hayla and Hanor, he did not show it.

Organising ladders and ropes, their experience at Manter forewarned this might happen. Only a few had been close enough to see the boy’s fateful hand clasp that *Point* before the whole spectacle was thrown into darkness. As expected, Hanor had blacked out and slumped to the ground. Risking the unstable conditions to get him out, for now, the hole in the ground held its shape, proof the unexplainable had once pulsed there.

“I will take him,” the sudden hoarse voice of Balkorn said to his side. Looking up, the huge Baltian bent to retrieve Hanor as if this role was his alone. “Of course,” Tarmon said, checking the lad before permitting him to be taken.

Lifting Hanor and holding him close across his chest, the Baltian headed back towards the High-house, cutting through the growing numbers.

Resting up on his elbow in the darkness, remnants of the shimmering pulse of power quivered Brandor’s senses, appreciating its significance. Far stronger than the one at Manter, he was pleased about the group’s success.

“He has found *it* then?” Rinn rasped opposite. The rest of the Hisian-set could feel the movement of the *ethers* too. “He has,” Brandor said, encouraged.

“Your young friend has not faltered yet, Brandor,” the eldest of the Dai-lamen said. “*He* is another issue we need to discuss.”

“I know,” Brandor conceded. Picturing High-grove Fordain beaming at the discovery, every Master right across the Freelands would be awake and wondering just as they were. Sending a silent prayer of gratitude to the *Sacred*, the burden of leaving the group now eased knowing they had enough faith to have found *it*.

Cackles tittered before erupting into a shrill of deep satisfaction. Registering the awesome powers, Gori-darl’s untouchable might would soon surge beyond the incredible. On the verge of completing his latest work, how sweet the end would be. Echoes of twisted laughter rang out around the mountains of Orbaddon, creatures cowering at its possibilities.

Chapter 16: Whispers that Promise

“Have you spoken to him yet?” Hayla asked Bane, finally finding him in a secluded spot of the High-house gardens. Meaning Hanor, she was looking for answers to explain why she still felt grim.

Startling Bane from his own gloomy ponderings, he turned, hesitating. Picking up on her tender tone, there *was* something between her and Hanor. Adding to his grey mood, he sighed, just wanting to be left alone. Trying to be at Hanor’s side earlier, but as soon as his friend had entered that *Sphere of Power*, his loyalties had been whisked away by a bout of jealousy. Sending him into a spin, the burden of failure had been quick to condemn him too. Waking at half turn of the day, he had sat here feeling sorry for himself ever since. What kind of friend was he? “No, I have not,” he replied, glum. “Neither have I,” she said, her upset plain.

Sitting beside Bane, she was still angry at Hanor for rejecting her, but the anger only seemed to increase affections for him. Frustrated at the lack of control, why could she not just accept it? Not since she was a young lady had she felt so torn, when her childhood sweetheart had rejected her advances too. Refusing to draw close to anyone until Hanor, she felt powerless, and was why she needed help, searching out Bane to help resolve the problem.

“You like him a great deal?” Bane pierced the stillness, not daring to look at her. Taken aback, Hayla had hoped he already knew and had talked to Hanor about it. “I... I have grown fond of him,” she managed, the pain testing her. “When first meeting him, he seemed so... overawed by what he was experiencing, and sometimes... we just need someone different to talk to.”

Sighing, Bane swallowed hard before responding. “We used to be close before all of this, talking and laughing, playing and fighting like most friends.” They were now a world away from their past. “There is little chance of us ever getting back what we had.”

“Circumstances can thrust us into new situations,” Hayla said, putting her own hurt aside at seeing his. “Where we have to grow far quicker than we should. Hanor has had to discover that the hard way.”

“I feel as though I hardly know him now,” Bane said, wrapped up in himself.

“It must be difficult. I do not think Hanor really knows what he has gotten himself into.”

“Or how to get out of it.”

“He is far too deep now,” she said, interpreting Hanor’s comments yester-turn.

Placing his obligations before her, but she had not expected anything different, which was the hard part. Calming down after that initial exchange, on reflection she had discovered something equally challenging. She was to blame for it happening in the first place. If she had not stayed up at the end of her watch to be with him prior to reaching Grovan, this would never have developed. Due to her own crumbling will, she had heaped an even larger burden by expecting him to receive her. How could any sane person go through with that? Typically, that argument had dissolved her anger, triggering another bout of affection for him. Vulnerable, she just wanted to say sorry.

“I need someone to talk to..., to trust and laugh with,” Bane said, interrupting her thoughts. “At Manter..., after the first *Pillar* was discovered, we talked just like old times. But it is me who keeps pushing us apart. I panic at what I might lose, and push him away as if on purpose, trying to spite him even.”

"Maybe you expect too much from him and yourself?" Hayla suggested, needing to listen to her own advice.

"Perhaps."

"We should allow him to be free, to come and go as he pleases I mean. Loving him no matter what is one of the hardest things to do."

Turning towards her, Bane could see the maturity to which his friend had fallen for. Striking in so many ways, even though she was having her own problems, "Do you... love him?" he probed, unsure where the question came from. Disbelieving he had asked, when just about to retract it, she answered.

"I care for him enough... to let him be free," she said, surprising herself.

Suspecting her feelings ran deeper than she was prepared to admit, Bane hoped to find someone just as delightful. Unexpected, a *Voice* interrupted his thoughts.

She will be yours in the end.

Uncertain if it was a straying thought or wishful thinking, it was a strong one, arresting Bane's attention enough to startle him.

"What is it?" Hayla asked, picking up on the change.

Embarrassed in case she had heard it, he looked away. "I have been worrying too much," he said, dispelling the original thought.

"We both have."

Pausing, Bane felt better. "I have enjoyed this, talking that is."

"Me too," she admitted. Looking away, ensuring he did not interpret anything other than a sincere friendship, she was thankful her old self-protecting ways were kicking in. Determined to bring those wild emotions under control, it was imperative she rebuild that keenness she had woefully abandoned.

Checking his kyboe as it munched on a nearby bush, Sharn returned to the others, making the most of the half-turn break in their travels. Relieved to see Brandor back to normal, when pressing his companion about the previous evening's debacle earlier, Brandor had dismissed his queries as nonsensical. Leaving it for now, the discovery of the second *Pillar of Life* was more important.

"What is the purpose of these otherworldly *powers*?" he asked, sitting down between Brandor and Hader.

"I do not know," Brandor admitted, marvelling at what must have happened.

"The second pulse was stronger," Whis said to everyone's agreement.

"Powers we work with are but fleeting sparks by comparison," Brandor said, considering the scale of it. "The *Pillars* are creative energies, and Hanor said *they* are like starting points to all we see here today."

"You said the first one disappeared when he touched *it*," Brorn recalled.

"Yes..., his union was a trigger that releases the *power*."

"Did he pollute *it* then?" Hader wondered, fearing any repercussions.

"He said the *powers* were now everywhere, so I suggest not."

"Was evil present?" Rinn asked this time, intrigued.

"I only spoke with Hanor briefly at Manter. My plans were to speak more whilst we travelled to Grovan, but he said nothing of it."

“What about the *Stone of Tarkon* then?” Rinn posed. “We were involved with the sealing of the valley and the Tomb of Tarkon, but none of us anticipated this.” Brandor shared what he could.

“The *Stone* has been purified over countless seasons by the love bestowed upon *it* by Tarkon for his beloved Shoona. Due to those loving energies, *it* began to vibrate at a higher rate and disappeared from our slower, physical reality. Hanor, with the aid of his brother Nole, was able to retrieve *it* due to his purity of heart. This is why the *powers* of the *Sacred* rise up in him and out towards the creatures denying *their* existence. The *Stone* is a tool for love and light to shine into this darkened world.”

“Why gather the *Souls* at the Tomb though?” Rinn asked.

“Because *they* contributed to Tarkon’s death,” Brandor explained.

“Should *they* not have been affected by the *Stone*?”

“No, because *it* was in a *higher realm*.”

Convincing his colleagues hundreds of seasons ago to build a wall of energy around the valley, at first, his proposal had been rejected, arguing the forces involved were of an enticing nature. Contravening beliefs about freedom, but when finding himself in the *Realms of the Sacred* to reaffirm his original vision, the experience had persuaded the others to comply. Disputing whether their actions had been right when hearing about people being frightened from the valley, but as it was the *Sacred’s* will, they had left it to take its natural course. Nevertheless, after Hanor’s encounter, unbeknown to them, the wall of energy was not a trap for the *Souls*, but was supposed to help with *their* release.

“And whilst the *Souls* were imprisoned,” he continued. “At least no one could enter the Tomb and steal the *Stone*.”

“You just said the *Stone* was in a *higher realm*?” Rinn said. “How could it be stolen?”

“Yes, I did say that,” Brandor had to agree, confused.

“Then that last comment does not hold true!”

Brandor had no defence for the blatant mistake.

“Wrong again!” Sorlam said, sarcastic.

“Am I not human?” Brandor said, rising to end the discussion. “It is time to move,” he ordered.

“Perhaps we should continue this later,” Rinn said, joining him.

Shrugging when climbing up onto Tunder, Brandor did not wait for the others, urging Tunder on into the after-turns.

“We are keeping an eye on him, Rinn,” Hader said, disliking Brandor’s irregularities.

Concurring, the oldest Dai-laman showed nothing of his influences.

Holding firm two white Spears of Light embedded into the earth in front, Hanor stood atop the hillside, defiant. Flashes of red lightening and peels of crackling thunder electrified the scene, the storm tempestuous. Dipping sharply before climbing again, the ground moved, surging through the sea of blood beneath its foundations. Seeping between cracks in the earth, the blood collected into one voice of desperation, filling Hanor’s ears. Sharing every heartbeat of their horror, he charged directly at the storm.

Snapping awake, Hanor sat up panting, the vivid images like a window into another world. Terrible impressions on his delicate mind meant thousands had already been slaughtered, many of whom were trapped in the *netherworlds*. Similar to the *Souls* at

Tarkons Tomb, he could feel their fear and loss. Too distressed to see the *light* about them, he wanted the suffering to end.

Opening his eyes when comforting hands rested on his shoulders, soothing words from Kifter and Hallen took a while to steady him. Easing back on to the pillow, the dream faded losing its impact.

“Are we... in Grovan?” he managed, heart still pounding.

“Yes, safe and well,” the Fife said, checking him over.

“You made us jump,” Hallen said, opening the wooden shutters.

“I... er... had a... bad dream.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Kifter offered.

“No..., not now,” Hanor declined. Memories about the second *Pillar of Life* flared as if he had forgotten *its* importance, catching his breath. “The *Pillar!*”

“Yes, Hanor..., you did it,” Kifter said, triumphant.

Attuning to *its* power, his body was being transformed, but into what he did not know.

“How do you feel?” Hallen asked, pleased the boy was improving.

“Strange but... good.”

“And to think there are more of these... *Pillars*, ” the Hite said, not looking forward to finding the others.

“Let us enjoy now,” Kifter interceded. “The future can wait. Are you ready to get up, Hanor?”

“I am.”

Handing him a clean set of clothes retrieved from the lad’s kyboe, a sharp look of concern crossed Hanor’s face when clutching at his chest.

“Where is my *Stone*?”

“Ah, yes,” Kifter said, reaching into his pocket. Taking out the gilth pouch, he reached inside and pulled out the *Stone of Tarkon*. “We nearly had an accident.”

“What do you mean?” Hanor’s relief was obvious when receiving *it*. Unsure how much the *Stone* had played a part in finding the second *Pillar of Life*, he still did not know if *it* worked after failing against those *Nyshifters*.

“When we took your filthy clothes off,” Kifter explained. “We presumed the *Stone* was in your pouch. Not until Greema returned with *it* later did we realise what we had missed. *It* was found by the person cleaning your clothes.”

A shiver ran through Hanor. “I... I never thought it possible.”

“Why was *it* not in the pouch?” the Fife asked, displeased.

Shaken at the prospect of nearly losing *it*, “I... have got used to *it* in my tunic pocket. I tried the pouch for a while, but after those *Nyshifters*, I was relying on *its* security.”

“In the gilth pouch, *it* cannot be lost or stolen,” Hallen said.

“I know.”

“Even if the pouch ends up in enemy hands, at least the *Stone* would be safe,” Kifter said, building on his friend’s point. “Not so by keeping *it* where you did.”

Rubbing the smooth *Stone*, it did make sense. If the person who had found *it* had thrown *it* away, what would he have done? “I had better... start using it then,” Hanor said, opening the pouch. Placing the *Stone* inside, he handed the bag to Kifter. “See if you can find *it*?”

Doing as ordered, the Fife delved in up to his shoulder. “It is as empty as Hallen’s pocket after a night of leisure,” he joked.

Receiving it back, Hanor held the pouch before putting his hand in to double-check. The *Stone* was where he had left *it*. Sighing, “I will use the pouch from now on.”

Chapter 17: Strong Impressions

Stretching the maps out on the wide desk, Tarmon examined the local terrain surrounding Grovan. Left by Greema who had rushed off for an appointment, he was seeking the route they should travel next. The obvious way was to cut through Selmor Forest. Estimating the journey would take four turns of the day to reach Mandurin, it was the best option.

Confident about the route, to his surprise, strange sensations started tingling in his heart as if triggered by that decision. Tender like a comforting hand, they were most odd. Dismissing the obscure feelings, he looked back at the map to check other routes. One parchment showed a dotted line heading north around the forest with a bridge crossing the Dota River at its northern tip. A trade route perhaps, it was longer than the only other alternative - back through Hallows Marsh prior to turning north. Not worth considering for obvious reasons, he looked again at the outline of Selmor. Considerable in size, but no longer than half a turn's ride at its narrowest point, an older map showed a line heading that way with another bridge crossing.

Deciding the forest was the best route, the subtle stirrings in his heart returned. Disturbed, hoping it was not the beginnings of an illness, as if responding to those reservations, a soothing motion ensued, simmering now that contact had been established. Peering down at the map again, at Selmor Forest in particular, what was this?

Alerted by a call from outside the room, cutting off the intimate impression, he shrugged it away, focusing instead on the meeting to follow. Tired after staying up most of the night, he hoped it would not be a long one. Leaving the maps, he vacated the room.

Entering the chamber behind Kifter and Hallen, its circular shape and high pointed ceiling mirrored most halls Hanor had seen so far. Beyond his seated companions at the centre, and other Grovians of notable worth, a row of floor to roof windows lined the far wall, remnants of the late after-noon sun shining in. Tranquil gardens invited him to stray outside rather than subject himself to more scrutiny. Concurring to Greema who stood lighting wall lamps in preparation for the approaching evening, they headed for some empty seats alongside the others. A careful nod to Bane and Hayla was all Hanor managed, concerned about the onslaught of questions to come rather than emotional attachments.

Beaming wide, Fordain entered the Leisure Chamber full of life, followed by Som and Falone - the two Masters Hanor had met before. Marvelling eyes suggested the High-grove was prepared to talk into the early short-turns if he could. Ensuring Hanor was well, Fordain sat back, daring to approach the unbelievable.

"You have turned our home upside down, Hanor," he declared, rubbing his square jaw, pursing tight lips in wonder. "Even our Masters are amazed."

"Brandor never warned us of this," Som said, straightening his legs beneath a full-length pale green and yellow over-gown. "We felt the original pulse from Manter, but not until your arrival did we understand. The energies released here at Grovan were even greater."

"Our work prevented us from being there, for that work is too valuable to wait while a hole is dug," Falone said, her disappointment clear. "We asked to be notified when the *Pillar* was found, but events moved too quickly and our chance was missed. We will have to settle with our imaginations."

“There was not enough time to wait,” Tarmon cut in. Grovan’s Masters had reached the pit just as Hanor was hoisted out, and it was not their place to add burdens on the vulnerable young man.

“I followed what was in my heart,” Hanor said, respecting their dissatisfaction.

“And no one here would expect you to go against that,” Fordain assured him. “You must forgive my companions, they have experienced enough of the *Sacred* to last a lifetime, so be not concerned.” Glaring at them before looking back at Hanor, “Our people however, will want to erect something to commemorate the event.”

Groaning inwardly, Hanor kept quiet.

“May I ask you a question, Hanor?” Falone prompted, earlier rumblings forgotten. Hanor signalled for her to do so.

Detecting an innocence and purity of heart in him, the humility was touching. “Please describe the moment when touching that *Sacred Point*.”

Echoing Brador’s intrigue, Hanor sighed even though half-expecting it. “My heart and mind merge where I become everything and nothing at the same time. I was everywhere and yet nowhere, if you can grasp what that means.”

“Please continue..., if you will,” Som urged, reverent.

“Life here in the Freelands is like an illusion.”

“An illusion?” Fordain was bemused.

“Reality as we see it... is not really as it is. When a string is twanged there appears to be more than one string, but we know there is not.” Appreciating what Morn, the Yarmorian had said, it was still difficult to explain. “We are all that one string, but are vibrating at different frequencies.”

His companions were painfully silent, some looking away. Hayla was supportive of Bane, patting his knee. As if he was looking at that reality through an inner window, an inner world of which stretched beyond physical boundaries, Hanor wanted to shut up and speak nothing more of it.

Assuring him he was not mad, the Master Falone agreed. “What you are describing supports much our own work,” she said, fascinated. “It is how the *Netherworlds* hold their form without us perceiving them. More important to me though is what you experienced at that point of unity. You are describing a place beyond space and time.”

“It is close to what that *Point* is,” he said, satisfied at her efforts to understand. “But our language is not enough to give that experience the justice it deserves.”

“Because our perception cannot see it as possible,” Som said.

“That is why I do not talk about it much with my friends.”

“I sense your loneliness on this,” Falone said, compassionate. “This walk with the *Unseen* can be lonely, for much of it is perceived by the inner eye looking through the heart. But do not lose faith, and be tolerant of your companions.”

“I could speak to you all night,” Hanor said, encouraged.

“But you would never see life in the Freelands again,” High-grove Fordain laughed. Enjoying the exchange, even though much of it was beyond him, his own accounts had already been scrutinised by his intellectual brethren.

“And our path steers us away from Grovan as soon as we... or should I say, Hanor... is ready,” Tarmon said. Suspecting these Masters were similar to those at Tarden, always ambitious for knowledge, they could be worse than starving animals sometimes.

“And if it were not for our present work,” Som admitted. “I would join your quest.”

“All Masters would,” Falone had to agree. “To both Mandurin and Tardoc.”

“Mandurin! Ah... yes,” Fordain continued, pensive. “Even though I do not see how the *Pillars of Power* can help us against our foe, if anyone is in need of help it is Mandurin.”

“We have had it quite easy so far,” Kifter said, expecting greater troubles ahead. “And you have given us much support at the expense of your own preparations, of which we are grateful. But Mandurin will be a different challenge altogether.”

“It has not delayed us much when considering how inspiring it has been,” Fordain said, thankful. “There is only so much preparation we can do, and the same for my son Orl who is reinforcing the defences of Holen End.” Praying the work done would be enough, the High-grove turned to the immediate future. “What way will you go to Mandurin?”

“I have been looking at some maps Greema gave me,” Tarmon began. “A direct route through Selmor Forest seems the best option.”

Receiving a few splutters of disapproval from those Grovians present, Fordain kindly warned their Tardanian friend of the dangers. “It would be unwise to go through there, for it is a place of great evil, Tarmon. It used to be a common route between our Cities, but not anymore. People who go in..., do not come out!”

Taken aback, Tarmon felt a lump jump in his heart. Drawn towards the large forest earlier, “Are you certain...? The other routes do not look promising.”

“True enough,” Fordain acknowledged. “But when our own Masters refuse to go in..., it should warn us lesser mortals to listen.”

Confused, the Tardanian was unconvinced. “What is in there?”

“A will powerful enough to repel even us,” Som said, Falone agreeing with him.

Caught off guard, was he to go against their sound advice or his own heart? Alluring sensations when looking at the map earlier had urged him to go, so what had he missed? Uncomfortable at the prospect of turning away, the harder he searched, the more certain he became. “I feel... it is the way we should go. I do not understand why but... I sense it to be correct.”

Inviting more protests, Fordain took charge. “Tarmon, let me give you some background to this place..., then you will see why it is imperative you do not enter.”

“Please do,” the Tard requested, needing to understand this.

“Hundreds of full-seasons ago,” the High-grove began. “Our ancient forebears here at Grovan received reports about people not returning from their travels. Details were recorded, and a pattern emerged. Those who had disappeared had entered Selmor to go to Mandurin or the Cropping Village of Muelly. Fewer visitors arrived here as well, so suspicions heightened.

A group of Grovians, thirty in number, investigated the problem by entering Selmor. The people of Grovan expected to hear news within a few turns but nothing came, proving a terrible danger did lurk in the woods. This was at a time before we had Masters at Grovan, so they sent a greater number, one hundred in all, to destroy the cause behind the disappearances. Trained and equipped, but they too were never seen again.” Staring at

Tarmon, this was no fantasy tale. "What I have said is true, and is known by all Grovians. We do not know what is in there but... the results speak for themselves. I trust another way will now be chosen."

Even with everyone's gaze on him, Tarmon could not shake the inner feelings pressing him to enter. Respecting the tale, there was no logic to argue the point, leaving him confused.

"You look unconvinced, Tarmon," Falone said, as if the sincerity of their word was at stake.

Frowning, "I understand your concerns but..."

"I find it difficult to believe there is a...*but*," Greema snorted, unimpressed. Without reason until now to question his authority, the Tard's hesitation was disturbing. "You are not still considering we should enter... are you?"

"This is... strange," Tarmon said, confounded. "I hear what you have said... but I... I sense we should go."

"Following one's instincts is fine, but we are talking about something different here," Greema said, his sharp mood not changing. "We are talking about powers beyond even those of our Masters. Does that not bother you?"

Tarmon glanced at Hanor, hoping he would understand. Unfair to ask for the boy's aid, this was his problem alone, the lad had enough to cope with. As leader of their group, his choice could be outweighed by a collective decision. Analysing the heartfelt urges again, the sensations still wanted them to enter. "I promise you Greema..., this troubles me. I made my decision based on what I felt was the right way to go. After hearing your tale, who would not opt for a wiser path, but... what is this?" Punching his chest, his argument did not persuade anyone. "The urge to go... is getting stronger."

"Maybe the forest is trying a new way to lure people in," Som suggested.

"I do not sense evil to it."

"Evil comes in many guises," Falone cautioned.

"If I do not follow this... then it is pointless me leading this group." Wishing to avoid that point, but he had no choice. "I can only follow that which I sense to be right."

Dissatisfied looks crossed back and forth, but support was still lacking.

"Why are you certain those feelings are correct?" Kifter asked, remaining neutral.

"Because without this..., I do not know who or where I am."

"Now you sound like Hanor," Hallen said, disliking the atmosphere.

Peering across again at the young heir of Manson, but the lad gave nothing away as to what he was thinking. As terrible as this looked, Tarmon could not change his mind.

"What other ways are there?" Hallen asked, not committing himself until all facts were known.

"The normal route is back through Hallow Marsh," Greema answered, riled. "But as we know, it has access problems at the moment. The only other way is north around the tip of Selmor Forest. It will add a few turns, but no more."

An unforeseen problem, this was their first major disagreement as a group.

"I am aware of Grovian concerns about Selmor," Raldama said, needing to clarify his position. "For it has been registered in the logs at Manter. It is supposed to be a place of mystery and power, therefore a place to avoid. I suggest we go around the northern tip of Selmor."

“But that will take us closer to the northern Hordes!” Kifter warned.
“We do not know if such a force is heading this way,” Fordain said. “It is just expected.”
“Then our journey must be swift,” Greema said, warming to the prospect.
“A couple of turns on the road is preferable to the unknown of Selmor,” Hallen stated.
“It does make sense,” Hayla agreed.
“The ancient bridge along the old route Tarmon is referring to is dilapidated and unsafe to cross,” Falone said, conjuring another reason not to go.

Disappointed as each member of their group opted for the long way around, the pain in Tarmon’s heart was dreadful. They were missing something important. Waiting for Hanor to decide last of all, his decision might coerce the others to change their minds.

“As much as I have come to know and trust Tarmon,” Hanor began, sombre eyes apologising to the Tardanian. “The language he speaks rings true with me; to follow one’s heart is important and should not be ignored lightly. But we have heard the testament of Som, a Master of Grovan. Entering will be too dangerous when there are alternatives.” Pausing, it felt like letting the Tardanian down. “An extra couple of turns on the road will be hard, for time is one thing we do not have, but I would prefer to get to Mandurin late rather than not at all.”

A final blow to his hopes, Tarmon felt empty inside. A pulse of sadness touched him as though he had failed. Opting to go north, the intimate sadness in his heart began fading as if its final hopes had perished.

Meandering through the Grovian High-house gardens, Tarmon peered up just as a small cloud covered the first rising moon. Reflecting on what he had experienced earlier, the sense of failure kept lingering, refusing to let go. None of it made sense. How could the evil of Selmor feel so tender and wanting? Yearning for someone to have the strength to challenge that *darkness*, he supposed it was pinning its hopes on Hanor using the *Stone*. Without additional insights, he could not expect his companions to risk their lives on an urge. Barely astir, the original impulse was purring as if in mourning. How strange.

Sounds of footsteps behind forced him to turn, surprised to see Raldama coming along the way. Liking the fellow, even though the man’s arrival earlier had sealed their fate, it would do no good to apportion blame. Waiting for him to catch up, neatly trimmed bushes to either side of the path were their only witnesses.

“I have been meaning to talk to you,” Raldama said, falling in beside him.
“How can I help?” the Tard invited, discarding any animosity.
“First of all..., I want to apologise for how it ended earlier.”
“The group chose with care..., and I respect that.”
“But... what was decided is not set in stone,” Raldama exclaimed.
“What do you mean?”
“I have some interest in the *Unseen*, and what you spoke of earlier reminded me of something that may be important to you.”
“You have my attention.”
“It is true what I said about the reports in Manter concerning Selmor but... some of the reports are conflicting.”
“Go on.”
“A few speak of a Lady, eloquently dressed, gliding about the woods like an apparition.”

“Who is this lady?”

Raldama shrugged. “It is not known. People who see her are usually frightened off.”

“Why did you not speak of this before?” Tarmon asked, mulling over its connection to what he felt.

“Grován is sensitive about the forest, and for us to decide here would provoke much resentment. Some of the sightings were long ago, but others have been in our lifetime.”

“Is it possible someone so enchanted could be evil like they say?”

“That is not my place to say,” Raldama declined the point.

“By telling me this..., what did you hope to achieve?”

“I felt it necessary for you to have all the details, and at an appropriate time, share your thoughts with the others. Not here in Grován.”

“Do you think this might sway them?” Tarmon tried to stay calm. Subtle sensations in his heart had ignited again, hope returning.

“How the others will react, I do not know, but expect Greema to disapprove. Heading north is sensible, for there is a sturdy bridge to cross the Dota River. Nevertheless, there is nothing to say we cannot double back if you are determined to enter.”

“I see your point,” Tarmon said, uplifted.

“I must remind you..., the others still may not be persuaded.”

“I know,” he said. “But thank you, Raldama, thank you indeed.”

Chapter 18: Going Over

Impressed by the sight of Manter ahead, High-man Manon signalled to Rainer, his number two, to pull alongside. "This is where it all starts," he said, sadness in his voice. "At least the *Darkness* will be faced by an iron will to succeed," Rainer said, peering over his shoulder at the line of chattering faces behind. "Bravery is not about what you do with your hands... but what you do in your heart."

"You are a fine Commander," Manon approved.

"And you... a fine High-man."

Friends since they were young, similar to Hanor, Nole and Bane, a lump formed in Manon's throat. Coming to terms with the loss of Nole for now, he had to for the sake of his troops. "All must play their part, no matter the cost."

"That they must."

Eager to get going, packed and mounted, farewells were never easy. Sleeping in, Tarmon and the group were rested, their kyboes just as keen to be riding again.

"Greema knows the way north," Fordain said, reaching up and clasping Hanor by the forearm, his strength evident when the lad winced. "I am sorry, Hanor, I am still excited by what has happened. I wish to go with you but we have preparations to take care of."

"Your aid has been invaluable," Kifter acknowledged close by.

"The honour has been ours," Fordain insisted. "There is a vibrancy around here now, and for a leader, that is a blessing."

Enjoying his stay, "I hope you will have us visit again," Hanor said, basking in the half-day sun. Fears for the future were replaced by a charge to achieve the highest possible.

"If you do not come..., I will seek you out and drag you here," Fordain laughed.

"Thank you for everything."

Reaching the Shallow River by the mid after-turns, Greema promised nothing should impede them before making camp later. Prominent trees and bush scattered across thick beds of wild-grass added colour and shape to the region. Patches of cloud and a light breeze set ideal conditions for riding.

Crossing the bridge unhindered, the Grove explained this route was no longer used, even before recent turbulences. Unlikely to meet anyone, spies were less likely too. Nervous when the sun waned, concerns for *Nyshifters* grew, the impending darkness edging forward with a cold sneer. Travelling had never been so perilous.

Making camp a short-turn before nightfall under four hefty Dageera trees, there was little room to relax. Putting the flames out when night closed in, the group sat in ponderous silence, thinking about what was to come. Kyboes stayed together beneath an adjacent tree, out of sight from evil eyes above.

Mulling over what Raldama had disclosed the previous evening, promptings in Tarmon's heart had not eased since. Soothing, convinced they were unthreatening, it was time to state his intentions. "May I speak before we settle for the night?"

"Talk as you will," Hallen said, motioning through the twilight for him to proceed.

Hard to comprehend how the sweet tingling was affectionate, placing a great deal of hope in him, Tarmon got straight to the point. "My commitment to this group remains true, but

Brandor warned us that if anyone was to become a hindrance, then they should leave.” Rumbles of dissatisfaction at where this was heading were expected. “As I sit here, I am torn, and the lack of clarity is affecting my leadership. On the turn after next, I intend to deviate and head for Selmor.”

“You are not serious!” Hayla’s disbelief echoed everyone’s.

“Not that again,” Greema grunted through the chorus of mutterings.

“Why are you determined to do this?” Hallen was baffled.

“Can we keep the noise down!” Kifter hissed, wary of what could be passing in the night.

“It sounds absurd...,” Tarmon tried, but was cut off by the Grove.

“Did you not hear Som and Fordain, how they tremble at the evil inside?”

“I heard the warnings, Greema..., but this is about me... not you.”

“Oh..., really?” He was quick to disagree. “You play on our hearts, tempting us not to abandon you.”

“This is not trickery,” Tarmon refuted. “I will rejoin the group on the other side of Selmor, and insist no others join me.”

“That is if you come out the other side,” Hallen posed, agreeing with the Grove.

“I must follow what rises within me.”

“Back to that again,” the Hite huffed, his huge silhouette sitting up in the dark. “It is bad enough listening to Hanor talk like that.”

Refusing to bite, Tarmon stayed calm. “I feel it in my heart that I must go.”

“People *feel* many things.” Greema was having none of it. “Our Masters have told us that a discerning mind is needed to understand deeper issues. I do not express knowledge of such matters, but to enter where they will not is throwing your life away.”

“Sometimes we have to go against the flow. This is not open for persuasion.”

“Then you are a fool, and my respect for you has diminished.”

“Is that final?” Raldama enquired, his comments last night causing this. “Does it mean more to you than this quest?”

“Not all of what resides in Selmor is evil,” Tarmon said, sincere. “A light in there is depending on me to free it.”

“Do you mean the Lady of the Forest?”

“I do not know, Raldama..., but something is urging me to go.”

“What Lady?” Greema queried, hearing it for the first time.

Explaining the details he had shared with Tarmon, Raldama knew he would not be persuaded. “She has been recorded is all I am saying.”

“That is ridiculous,” Greema said, denying it. “A Lady capable of repelling our Masters, I think not. It is a monstrous power residing in there.”

“She was seen, nothing more.”

“The fact you are *feeling* this Tarmon means the forest has discovered another way to catch people,” Greema countered. “No one comes this way, it is doing this to survive.”

“I disagree.”

“If you must go, it is well you lead only yourself in and not the rest of us.”

“We had better sleep on this,” Hayla said, loathing the tension. “This is too sensitive, and we do not want to alert our enemies to our position. Let us calm down and deal with it when the shock has passed.”

“You speak wisely, Hayla,” Tarmon said. “This is my fault for believing it could be dealt with in a composed manner.”

“But something you had to get off your chest,” Kifter said, disturbed by his decision. “Be it now or tomorrow, it had to be done.”

Eight Dai-lamen were eager to rest. The second turn since Hanor’s discovery of the second *Pillar of Life*, concern for Brandor’s state of mind remained. After a few obscure replies yester-turn as well as a weak explanation that morning about threats from *Nyshifters* this far south, doubts about his health amplified into the after-turns.

Subdued, Brandor did not know why. Corrected again by Rinn, he was not himself, guilty of many errors. The fact Rinn was on top of every situation did not help either. Spending a great deal of time on his own recently, to have alert minds examining everything he did and said was hard.

Focusing on what was in front whilst riding, the inner turbulence would not shift. Joys of Hanor’s success could not be savoured either. Dull throbs on his temples hurt, and numerous exercises to soothe the pain did not work. Even gnawing on a diva stick had little effect. Spreading, the pounding of his temples crawled to the top of his head. Summoning powers to eradicate the pressures, they were not strong enough. Reaching into a bag for a bottle of Piskethe, but it was too late. A sudden shooting pain ran up his spine before exploding into the base of his head. Blanking out, slumping forward before rolling to the side, he fell from his kyboe like a sodden sack.

“Brandor!” Hader yelled, their companion falling to the floor with a thud. Pulling up, he dismounted, rushing to Brandor who lay in a heap. Checking him over, “He is breathing,” he said to the others, relieved. Feeling for broken bones, he eased Brandor over onto his back. Without a grunt to say he had felt anything, lifting eyelids, the glazy stare proved his worst fears. “He has *gone over*.”

Travelling extensively for many turns, it was a fear they all had if adequate rest was not taken. Using too many potions, complete collapse was the result for anyone who overdid it.

“I should have seen it,” Sharn cursed, too absorbed by his own ponderings.

“We all should,” Whis said to his side.

“We did..., but did not act,” Brorn said, Brandor’s unusual behaviour proving the point.

“We need to make camp,” Hader ordered.

“Out in the open?” Tralle was aghast. “Have we forgotten about *Nyshifters*?”

“There is a large bush near a small looping tree over there,” Rinn said, pointing to a small hillock some way off. “It will do.”

“I will carry him,” Sharn said, straining when trying to pick Brandor up.

“None of you are strong enough,” Rinn said, seizing the initiative.

To everyone’s astonishment, he hoisted Brandor over his shoulder and moved in the proposed direction.

“You *are* full of surprises,” Brorn said, leading their kyboes after him.

Raising doubts about what they intended to do and the chances of success, if Brandor, who was the most able of them all was struggling, what prospects did the rest of them have? Encircling the bush and tree to the other side, Rinn settled their fallen companion into a suitable position against the trunk.

“Get his things,” he ordered Sorlam.

Hader took three bottles from his bag and began mixing a potion.

"What are you making?" Rinn asked, cautious.

"A combination of Craskethe, Drassalthe and Pisketh," Hader said, confident it would do. Ensuring the potion would not interrupt his own agenda, Rinn motioned for him to proceed. "Not too much."

"I know what I am doing," Hader said, disregarding the comment.

Tilting Brandor's head back, he poured the potion slowly, allowing the dark green liquid to trickle down the unconscious man's throat without affecting his breathing.

"This should keep him stable," Hader said, satisfied. Taking a final look at the restful patient, he turned to prepare his own bedding.

Checking again Brandor's eyes and breathing, the last thing Rinn wanted was for his noble companion to depart the Freelands prematurely. Influencing him earlier just enough to cause this, it would force the others to stand on their own feet rather than following blindly their sleeping compatriot. Harsh and manipulative as it appeared, it was for their higher good. Self-reliance was what he intended for them, as well as testing the subtle but immensity of his *Ileng Power*.

Camp was set with a small fire going to fight off the rising chill. The sun, now below distant hills, left a band of gold on the horizon. Merging into a deep ocean of blue above, stars were already out. Kyboes strolled nearby, conversations turning to recent events as Whis started cooking.

"We are to blame for this," Sharn said, wallowing in guilt.

"Why?" Tralle could see no reason for it.

"He has been raising the Freelands' awareness about the dangers," Sharn said, riled by the situation. "Whilst the rest of us have been cooped up in the comfort of the Sleep. We should be ashamed."

"This has been covered before," Sorlam said, disagreeing. "All have been seeking answers to fight the approaching *Darkness*."

"We should have done more."

"Only time will tell if it was worth the sacrifice," Sorlam fired back.

Tralle glared at him, warning not to reveal anything.

"It is pointless arguing the rights and wrongs," Rinn said, taking neither side. "It is a matter of what we do now."

"What *do* we do?" Brorn asked, apprehensive.

"That depends on Brandor," Rinn said, stating the obvious. "We cannot enter Tardania with him like this. If the Yarmi Folk were to confront us, his condition will be of little use. We would be better off leaving him somewhere and return for him later."

"You do not mean that?" Sharn was outraged.

"I am just being cautious."

"But without him, what chance do we have?" Whis said.

"With so little faith Whis, you may as well not enter either," Rinn warned.

"You seem confident," Hader noted, scrutinising his elder.

"Are we entering to embrace our deaths? I am not even considering failure."

"Being realistic is not a bad thing," Brorn advised.

"But if fear of failure is a heartbeat away, it will not take much to tip the balance."

"Entering without concern for what could happen is foolish," Hader said.

"The state of mind in which we live affects our surroundings, you must know it influences outcomes too?"

"Not when facing an entire race who intend to stop us reaching Tarden," Brorn disagreed.

"Why have we come on this journey then?" Rinn contested. "Has it taken this to alert you to the dangers?"

"Brandor's enthusiasm was a strong motivator. Seeing him like this has brought home a few truths," Sharn said, glancing behind to where his friend lay undisturbed.

"But I see this as an opportunity," Rinn said, surprising them.

"How?" Hader wanted to know.

"Shall we loll our heads as though we are doomed, or should we seize the initiative and declare that nothing can stop us, not even the Yarmorians? The power of the mind is capable of doing miraculous things, you already know that."

"Focused intent does work," Hader conceded. "But not against forces on that scale."

"Permit me to explain," Rinn said, calm. "What is the sun?" The question threw them.

"I do not follow," Whis said, stirring the stew.

"What does it consist of?"

After numerous doubting glances, Brorn answered. "Energy."

"Heat and light," Sharn added, suspicious of where he was going with it.

"Can you look at the sun?"

"It is too bright," Whis said.

Tralle and Sorlam seemed to gain a twisted pleasure at Rinn talking like this.

"But what happens when you put a dark filter over your eyes?"

"You can see it," Sharn said, unmoved.

"What if you put a mirror square on from it?"

"The light is deflected," Hader responded, gaining a trace of understanding.

"So what is your point?" Sharn prompted. This was irrelevant.

"It means we do not always have to yield to a greater power. Approaching issues intelligently and with confidence, we can turn situations around to our advantage. Whether we shield ourselves or deflect powers hurled at us, a way can be found."

"Sounds pretty, but I do not see how we can achieve it," Hader doubted it.

"What have we been missing for many seasons?" Rinn asked.

No one answered.

"Let us go back to a time when a certain individual, who has now grown in power to unrivalled levels, worked *his* evil to overpower the people of Mandurin. To free them, we did not rush in firing off energies at *him*, what did we do?"

"We spent three turns of the day drawing our minds into alignment," Hader said, recalling the details with affection.

"And did this heighten our power?"

"It did."

"Why?"

"Higher Laws encourage that kind of unity," Sharn said, at last respecting his reasoning.

"What can we deduce from this?"

"If unified, greater will be our power."

"We already know this."

Everyone agreed.

"You make it sound obvious, Rinn," Whis said, endorsing his argument.

“Isolation permits fears to rise, undermining the powers at our disposal,” Tralle said, admiration for Rinn increasing every time he spoke.

“Precisely. I have been meaning to approach this issue, but I was waiting for an opportunity. Now was as good a time as any.”

“You surprise me,” Hader admitted. “You are not like your old self.”

“Grumpy... you mean?” Rinn said, unoffended. Wanting the Hisian-set to reach new heights, it was part of why he had come on this venture. As daunting as the Yarmi Folk were, without testing, concepts had little influence, and it was no different for them or his *Ileng Power*.

“Shall we do some exercises to bring us into alignment?” Tralle invited, keen to experience that unity again.

Brandor’s eyes half opened. Sedated by Hader’s potion, shadows were all about. Propped up, silhouettes of his companions were sitting around the dying fire nearby. Composed and holding purposeful positions, focusing on the inner world of mind control, a low hum charged the atmosphere. Conscious long enough to discern what they were doing, “Unity is the only way,” he muttered, supportive. Heavy eyes closed.

Chapter 19: Stark Warnings

Subdued during the morning meal, Tarmon had not waited long before calling them to move. Now riding hard with the rush of cool wind against them, a couple of times one of the others tried re-igniting the topic from the previous evening. Remaining tight-lipped, the Tard was more concerned by other issues. Since declaring he was to enter Selmor, the chimes in his heart had altered for the worst. Declaring he was not to enter on his own, it meant one of two things: he was being deceived, of which he doubted, or Hanor and the *Stone* were an integral part of the cure. Either way, the prospect was grim. With nothing to indicate who or what the source was, if no further assurances came by the end of the turn, he could not afford to enter.

Patches of broken rock surfaced as they rode through the morning, blotches to spoil the scenic landscape. A herd of Nassap-Loe on a nearby hillock gave them something to look at through the uncertainty. Keen eyes behind upturned snouts stared their way, oblivious to the dangers soon to come. A large area of purple flowers at the base of the same hill, Greema explained through his grumblings, were pinta, a popular spice to which Grovan was renowned.

Stopping at half-turn of day, backs and legs ached. Warming to the sun when it shone through lifting clouds, it did little to lift the atmosphere, odd pockets of humour straining. Hanor especially found it awkward. Not giving Bane or Hayla much thought, the situation only got worse. Daring a careful smile at Hayla, he sighed when she shrugged and turned away, hiding what feelings she had.

About to resume their ride, Kifter stopped, alerting them to movement ahead. "We have guests."

Across the undulating plane of bush and tree amid outcropping rocks, two tiny dots could just be seen on the horizon.

"Should we mount?" Bane asked, not wishing to get caught flatfooted.

"Who are they?" Hallen asked. Even from his great height, he could not tell. "Are they friend... or foe?"

"Whoever they are, they are in a hurry," Kifter said.

The two distant figures passed periodically from view only to reappear closer. As if crossing the Freelands to get here, still no one mounted to Bane's surprise.

"They are Grovians," Kifter concluded to their relief.

"Travelling that fast," Greema said, watchful. "They are Seekers from the outer regions, lookouts to warn of approaching danger."

Coming over the rise, the two Grovians were hard-pressed, passing the final jutting rock. Easing up, Greema greeted them.

"Listern and Ram," he hailed, raising a hand.

Panting, the two Groves slowed to a walk before stopping.

"Greema..., it is good to see you, albeit in grievous times," the stockier one said, catching his breath.

"And I you, but to see you like this fairs not well. Is it grave news?"

The slender of the two called Listern spoke. "It is not good tidings."

"We have come from an area west of Polins Point. A dreadful scene it is," Ram said, reaching for his water skin.

"Why?" Greema was wary of hearing this.

"Thousands of creatures are heading this way," Ram said. "All kinds of monsters."

"Hideous," Listern added. "Sizes and shapes that defy regular breeding."

"Some taller than your friends here, yet... others barely above your knee. They are misshapen but... move as one."

"The scrawny ones are the worst," Listern continued. "Nasty, disliking anyone, even their own kind."

"Where are they from?" Greema was horrified that Grovan *was* to be invaded after all.

"The Great Barrier Mountains. A *Nyshifter* came last night to breathe life into their numbers, ordering them south," Listern said.

"How do you know they are coming here?"

"They were heading for the old bridge."

"That is where we are going," Greema said, fearing their pathway was to be cut off.

"You cannot now. We set it alight at dawn," Listern apologised. "We had no choice. Those Gorls will reach it before you anyway."

Greema cursed at the implications.

Ram looked at the others as if for the first time. "Why do you travel there?"

Greema apologised, introducing his companions. "Our purpose takes us to Mandurin," he explained, not going into details. "There is something valuable there."

"It must be of worth to be journeying in these times," Listern said.

"When you get to Grovan, many will share a remarkable tale. I will not say now for it is lengthy."

Respecting his judgement, "What will your course now be?" Listern asked. "Why have you not gone through Hallow Marsh?"

"The Marsh carries its own dangers," Kifter cut in when Greema paused.

"Dangers?"

"We encountered a strange mist, and the road gave way."

"I have heard of such conditions, although never seen it," Ram said, unsurprised.

"Fortunately, it is rare," Listern seconded. "Can you not wait until it passes?"

"Not if it can be helped, time is short."

Greema looked ill. The prospect of delays would work to the advantage of a certain Tardanian.

"You cannot go through Selmor Forest," Ram said, as if it was worse than going to the bridge.

"Not everyone is convinced," Greema said, glancing frostily at Tarmon. "Some seek to lose their lives."

Even though everyone's gaze was on him, Tarmon could barely contain the leap dancing in his heart. Chiming like a song of hope, those inner impressions he had been looking for had reappeared at these new developments. Praying they would head for Selmor, the presence was in a merry spin. "We need to look at this again."

"We do not have to pass through Selmor," Greema growled, his two brethren agreeing.

"There is always the southern edge..., between the forest and the marsh."

Ram corrected him. "No Greema..., that too is unwise. The marsh enters the forest for a thousand strides. I know not of anyone who has taken that route. There is no bridge that way either. You would have to cross the ancient one west of here and follow the river bank. I would not recommend it."

As a Seeker, Ram was familiar with the countryside, most of his training involving life outside. Learning the ways of the land, his opinion had to be adhered to.

"This is impossible," Greema snapped, stomping away to get a grip on this.

Ram looked at Tarmon. "Selmor is not the place you want to go. I have experienced enough to know nothing good dwells there."

"I respect your counsel," the Tard said. "But not all things that are black on the outside... are so inside."

Both Groves were taken aback. "And some things are," Listern finished, shrugging. There was to be no lengthy discussion over it.

"How long will it take to go back through the Marsh and around to Mandurin?" Greema asked, furious, cutting back towards the group.

"Six to seven turns of the day," Ram answered.

"And what about going through Selmor... if that were possible?" Showing his willingness to look at the options, Greema knew the Tardanian had a greater sway on the others than he did, but trusted good sense would prevail.

"Three turns. You will be delayed by four turns of the day, that is all."

"Four turns could be the difference between life and death for many people," Tarmon defended. "You are not aware of the *tools* we have at our disposal, Ram, or what *light* is ready to shine into the darkest places of the Freelands."

"No light is strong enough to penetrate that *evil*," Listern said, disbelieving the Tardanian was still looking to enter.

"When you get back to Grovan," Tarmon said. Not wishing to volunteer Hanor into anything he was unwilling to do, but if he did not press this now the situation could be lost to doubt. "You will hear that three *Nyshifters* were frightened off by a courageous young man that has great power at his call. It is by this same courage and power that we need to face up to the *evil* of Selmor. I can tell you, there is a light trapped in there." The statement surprised everyone.

"What *light*?" Greema scoffed. The Tard's weak attempts to make this into a rescue trip was laughable. "Are you talking about that woman again?"

"I state what I feel to be right."

"Feelings can be wrong."

"That is easy to say, but we all use our feelings, more than we care to admit."

"But I am not willing to die because of your feelings!" Greema barked.

"Good leadership follows those deeper feelings, intuition you might call it."

"So do fools."

"Calm down, Greema," Hallen spoke from the rear, annoyed it was getting personal.

"Bind your tongue, Hite!" Greema spat.

Stepping forward, having tolerated the Grove moaning for much of the morning, but his ranting was tearing at the Hite's patience. At last, he was witnessing what he knew to be a Grovian trait.

Cutting in, Kifter stood in his way, indicating the two mounted Groves who had unclipped their thumpers. Fastened to their forearms, the weapons could make a mess. Developed to engage oversized Hitorians in their skirmishes to the south, the hardened bone attached to a flexible vine could kill a Hite if hit in the right place. Deadly within a certain span, even though useless up close, if Hallen were to make any rash movements, their reaction could be devastating.

Catching his Fifanian friend's warning, Hallen glanced up at both Seekers who were watching him. The deadliest of their kind, taught to respond on a knife-edge, he was up against it here. Stopping just short of Greema, whom he had come to see as a friend, he rested a hand on the hilt of his sword just in case. "I am on your side, but we will not resolve it by biting each other."

Turning, Greema strained his neck when looking up at the Hite. "See..., even a fearless Hitorian will not go in there."

"I never said that," Hallen defended. "Not when there are other options."

"Our friend Hallen sees sense like me. To go back along the Freedan Way through the Marsh is the only route."

"What if the mist has not gone?" Kifter reminded them.

"Then we should wait until it clears," Greema said, content to do so.

"We could argue this for the whole turn," Raldama said. "A decision needs to be made."

"We cannot linger here much longer either," Listern said, agitated. Delayed already, Fordain needed to be told of the *Dark One's* activities. Even so, the Hite generated reservations about how this could end. Greema was known for fighting his corner, and had a natural way of antagonising people. They just needed to be sure of his safety.

"What does Hanor have to say about this?" Greema tried. If the lad refused to enter Selmor, then the argument was over. If Tarmon still wanted to go, then he could lead the group to Mandurin. Facing the young man, his initial reaction was one of confusion.

Groaning inwardly, Hanor assumed they would seek his views eventually. Hoping someone else would make the decision, he did not want people's lives being his responsibility. A coward's way, but the potential of getting it wrong was horrifying.

"There is potential for disaster on both paths," he said, uneasy. "But what is the most important issue here? Time maybe, I do not know." Wanting to avoid the Marsh at any cost, but why was Tarmon adamant there was goodness inside Selmor when all warnings said otherwise? Pausing, he tried tapping into that space in his heart for guidance. Shutting out external distractions, the wise words of Falone, the female Master at Grovan, emerged. Describing that one had to learn to see through the heart and follow its promptings, looking at Tarmon, he could tell the Tardanian was trying to live by that standard. Would it be right to suppress the very thing he himself had come to trust? Considering it, he knew what to do. "Even though I respect the warnings, I am happy to go through Selmor Forest."

"This is not happening!" Greema snapped, storming off again. "I should have known you would side with him."

"Why are you so obsessed with entering that place of evil?" Ram asked, drawing this meeting to a close.

Trusting the Tardanian's judgement, Hanor only hoped it was the right thing to do. "This is not about obsession, this is about taking the high road instead of the low."

Making their way around the group, the two Grovian Seekers prepared to leave. “Our journey beckons us to resume at all cost,” Ram said. “Greema!” he called to his brethren. “You must decide on this matter. Even with thousands of creatures heading this way, do you seek to return to Grovan with us?”

Too angry to say anything, Greema had tried everything to avoid Selmor. The invite to go back to Grovan was tempting, but he had promised Brandor to stay with the group, even with a Hite on board. But who could condemn him knowing death would follow because of a whim and a naive lad supporting it? Crossed between loyalties, the idea of thousands attacking his home hurt. If he was to die in Selmor, then surely his services could be better used there?

“Greema...!” Listern called this time.

Striding back to Hanor, a furious Greema had to be sure of one thing. “Do you intend to use that *Stone* in Selmor? If I remember correctly, *it* did not shine against those *Nyshifters* outside Grovan? Are you certain *it* works?”

Penetrating questions sliced Hanor in two, expecting them to have discerned that already. Not understanding why the *Stone* had not flamed into life, doubts flickered across his face, wanting to say yes. Unsure if the *Stone* had triggered the discovery of the second *Pillar of Life* either, the truth was, he did not know.

“I cannot say if the *Stone* will work, but if there is a need, I am willing to try.” Only fair they should know his doubts, horror crossed his companions.

Weighing the lad’s sincerity, Greema searched for deceit. To know the boy was prepared to enter, even without the *Stone* working, showed immense courage to be admired or recklessness to be avoided. If that stemmed from experiences with the *Holy Ones*, then it was a strong reason to have faith in.

“It is by what I see before me that I will honour my commitment to Brandor. If there is one person I am prepared to follow..., it is you, Hanor.” Talking to his two comrades awaiting his decision, “I will stay with the group and go where they will,” he said, anger subsiding. “Good speed to you both.”

Surprised, both Grovians concurred. “We will see you in better times,” Ram decreed, the two bidding him good luck and farewell.

Watching them go, Greema refused to question the wisdom of his decision. Without delay, he went to his kyboe. “If we press hard..., we will reach Selmor’s border just after nightfall. In the morning, we will have to cross the ancient bridge..., if it still stands that is.” Mounting, he did not wait. Heading west towards the old bridge, the rest of the group were left stunned by his abrupt change of direction.

“No one has to do this,” Hanor said, climbing up into his saddle. Now that he had committed himself, there was no room for doubts, following the Grove.

Tarmon and Balkorn joined him.

“I do not like this,” Hallen grunted, preparing to leave.

“Do we have a choice?” Kifter said, setting off.

“Can you not do something about your friend, Bane?” the Hite protested.

“He is his own person now,” Bane said. “In the past, I may have dissuaded him, but... he is not himself lately.”

“He is maturing,” Kifter said from in front.

Hayla and Raldama brought up the rear, dissatisfaction set for the remainder of the turn.

Tarmon and Hanor rode a short way back from Greema for obvious reasons, just as the others were keeping their distance from them. Praying a fatal mistake was not in the making, impressions in the Tard's heart bubbled with anticipation. Sharing in that good cheer, he had no idea how, why or with whom. How could something *evil* be so tender?

Slowing when reaching the brow of a hill, Selmor lay across the horizon like a dark band of mystery. Imaginations soared to what menace lurked inside. Huge curving bumps of the terrain ran away from their position. A long channel of water crossed their path, populated by tree and bush around its edges. By-passing a huge column of mountainous rock, even it seemed wary of getting too close to the wood.

Sighing to shed the doubts, Hanor tried savouring the view.

"How are you?" Tarmon asked beside him.

"This is all so... wild."

"I know," was all he could say

Timely and inspirational, grey clouds pulled back permitting glorious angled rays of sunshine to light up the sky above the horizon. A stunning show of power to what the *Sacred* could do at a moment's notice to lift sullen hearts, even those behind commented on the beautiful setting. In that light, Selmor looked just like any other wood.

The touch of a cool hand woke Brandor with a start. Forgetting his place, reassuring words tried to calm his racing mind.

"Everything is fine," Sharn promised, resting a hand on his shoulder. "It is Sharn, be at peace."

Heart thumping, it took a while before Brandor could focus on his companion. "What... happened?" he asked, rubbing his forehead. It felt numb as if deadened by a blow. Peering around, Hader, Whis and Brorn were seated nearby, concerned.

"How do you feel?" Sharn asked, pleased to see him awake.

Sitting up, taking a moment before answering, the air was warm, estimating it to be late morning. "Well enough," Brandor said, feeling stiff. "Where... are we?"

"We stopped... after you had your fall," Sharn said, mentioning it to see if he would remember.

"Fall...? What do you... mean?"

"You... *went over*, you passed out."

Shocked, "That cannot be right." Stressful thoughts were the last thing he could recall. No late meal or conversations to what lay ahead, maybe he had, but why? Getting plenty of rest since setting out from the Sleep, far more than when crossing from Tarden to Rovot and back again, it did not make sense.

Sympathetic, distress was the last thing Brandor needed. "Allow the answers to come when they are ready," Sharn urged, reaching for the man's water skin. "Drink this," he said, offering the mouthpiece. "Can you eat anything?"

"Not at the moment," Brandor declined. His shoulder was sore, massaging it.

"It was a heavy fall," Sharn said, when his friend winced.

Stretching, Brandor got up. Composed, he ducked out from beneath the looping tree. "It is good to see you are well," Hader said, relieved. "My potion worked then?"

“What short-turn of the day is it?” Brandor asked, bemused. Tunder, his kyboe, was with the others munching on wild-grass a short way out.

“Just before half-turn of the day,” Whis said. “Care for a hot drink?”

Trying to get to grips with this, “No. Where is Rinn and...?” Before Brandor could finish, the old Dai-laman came round the large bush with Tralle and Sorlam.

“You gave us a scare,” Rinn said, sitting down with the others.

“Something is amiss but... I will be well once we are off again,” Brandor said, the purpose of why they were here clarifying.

“Not until you are fit to travel,” Rinn said, poking the remains of the fire.

“He is right,” Sharn said, beside him. “It is not good for you to exert yourself so soon.”

Checking their location, the fine weather was fortunate, but desires to press on hounded Brandor. Bowing to their wisdom, he sat down. Intending to reach Boverns Crossing tomorrow, those monsters would relish a weak person to cross. Reluctant, he gave into their demands. A suspicious cloud clung to the edge of his awareness, suggesting he was missing something significant. “It seems... I have been foolish.”

“We are partly to blame,” Hader said, easing its relevance. “As Sharn said last night, we should have done more to spread the message about the coming *Darkness*.”

“It is not as simple as that,” Brandor said, trying to isolate the reason.

“What do you mean?” Whis asked, surprised by the comment.

“I am not sure,” Brandor said, searching his companions. Finally resting on Rinn, he shrugged, not having the answer. “We shall see,” he said, leaving it. A flashing image of them sitting around the fire pierced a fuzzy mind. “Did I see you all merging last night, like times of old?”

“We did merge minds,” Brorn said, thrilled that they had.

“We have Rinn to thank for that,” Sorlam said, giving credit where due.

“He reminded us about the value of unity,” Hader agreed.

Experiencing it at Tarden with its Masters and the *One Tree*, Brandor knew the benefits.

“And tonight, we shall harmonise ourselves again,” Rinn said, pleased how everything had turned out. “There is room for improvement, dusty minds take a while to control.”

Everyone agreed.

Not until after their half-day meal did the Hisian-set get underway. Convincing the others of his good health and stable mind, Brandor concluded enough time had been squandered by the unfortunate incident. Pockets of good cheer whilst riding helped, even the once rickety old Rinn joining in. More hills sprang up, far-reaching views granting wondrous panoramas of the entire area. Making up ground where possible, at one point, Rinn scooped up a small rasser in mid-stride for a meal that evening. Not everyone marvelled at his new lease of life.

Pulling up on the crest of a hill, the sun waning to their left, in the far distance a thick belt of trees stretched north to south. The southern regions of the great Tardanian Forest were immense.

A hush fell across the group, viewing the once glorious sight with restraint. What were once rich emerald hills and lush colourful pastures, a gradual change in the terrain proved beyond doubt the land was suffering. Turning from a dull green below to a dusty brown near that distant woodland, nothing but a barren wasteland was in-between. Few

trees or bushes had survived the expanding drabness. Eight appalled Dai-lamen could not believe how bad it was.

“Are the Yarmi Folk really the cause of this?” Sharn broke the sombre silence. “I hope not,” Brandor replied, not holding his breath. “But look at the evidence.” “As bad as this is, I still feel confident,” Whis said, excited about the mind-merge. “We have Boverns Crossing to deal with first,” Rinn warned, reminding them of the danger. “It will be a good test.” “Like times of old,” Hader agreed, doing battle with the repugnant monsters on numerous occasions. Never losing, but the creatures were not to be taken for granted. “Maybe *their* return has contributed to the land dying,” Brorn wondered. “I wish it was as simple as that,” Brandor said, not believing it. “This barrenness spreads right across the southern regions of Tardania. A greater power is at work here.” Murmurs of disquiet agreed with him.

“Shall we go?” Rinn said, clicking his kyboe on. “We have a delicacy to cook!” Receiving hearty comments, the others followed their oldest counterpart, heading for the small clump of trees at the base of the hill.

The last to move, Brandor could tell something was not right, an underlying issue present in their group. Disbelieving he had *gone over*, he could not get to grips with what was happening. Watching his companions file down the hillside, the fact Rinn was so involved created its own suspicion. How he had snatched that Rasser earlier was like someone in his prime, not one holed up in his room for the past thirty full seasons. If Rinn had discovered something beneficial, why had he not told them about it? Shaking off the doubts, to see his colleagues laughing and purposeful was more than he could have hoped. Setting off down the hill, they had the mind-merge to look forward to.

Closing his eyes, Brandor felt confident. Darkness closing in, an eerie reddish hue from the canopied fire coated their determined but patient features. Sitting erect, slow breathing exercises eased beating hearts down to a murmur. Relaxed but attentive, minds steadied. Sounds inside the small wooded area were ignored until finally, for the eight concentrating Dai-lamen, they faded altogether.

Mentally focusing on the space above the simmering fire, gradually they became aware of each other in that empty space. As if approaching out of the dark into a central arena, eight men of power drew close, familiar vibrations reaffirming their presence. Standing as if side by side, they were one mind sharing one purpose.

Savouring the experience, the closeness was uplifting. Holding that position, their physical bodies were like baggage at the perimeter of their awareness. In that state, they were virtually all mind. The power was tremendous, recreating the same conditions they had fostered when dealing with *Gorl-darl* long ago. Missing the lost four, their absence a telling difference, but this was adequate for what they intended.

Unexpected, the tempo started increasing. As if the very air was encouraging them to merge, to reach new heights of being, they had no idea where the additional thrust of energy came from. Without time to adjust to the change, the power kept rising, getting hotter like an invisible fire. A low humming sound purred like a wild animal brought to heel. The area in front started vibrating with ever-increasing rapidity. Rhythmic beats of their concentrated wills soared to a new level of experience. On the vibrating continued, the eight men moving mentally towards a point at the centre. Closing in, each mind

overlapped like pools of liquid merging. Identities started dissolving. Convinced an outside force was adding power to their efforts, the magma of energy was electrifying, filling their consciousness. Reaching its climax, transcending the weakness of separation, time stood still.

Chapter 20: Selmor Forest

Pulling up beside Greema, the group cautious, the thick black wall of trees loomed through the darkness. A short-turn since the sun had set, snorting kyboes were the only sounds of life. The Grove's determination to face up to this would have kept him going if not for the river barring their way. The creepy atmosphere leered as if unseen eyes were watching and daring them to enter.

"The Dota River is half a stone's throw from here," Greema explained, surveying the gloomy shadows in front. The others waited, respectful, the Grove relaying grim reservations. "And beyond that is... Selmor. I make no apologies, my dissatisfaction at what you propose to do has not changed. I see no way for us to reach the other side, even though I am prepared to stay and confront this. If the *Heart of Tarkon* can be used to defend us, then so be it, but the fears in my heart suggest this forest represents a force of a different kind. Do not expect miracles at dawn of the morrow." Dismounting, he stomped over to a large tree to make camp.

Mild wafts of Kifter's cooking were the only appetising part of the evening. Eating in silence, the shadowy outline of the bridge looked solid enough through the dimness. The idea of Selmor's evil creeping across whilst they slept kept everyone on edge. Attitudes were sharp, traces of anger in every word.

Displeased with the imposing circumstances, Hallen had a point to make. "I thought this group worked together," he said, resentful. "Are the rest of us to follow like puppets the decisions of just one or two?" Facing more nameless powers was aggravating enough, but an important issue had to be addressed. "Is our point of view irrelevant?" "Sometimes... it is better for a decision to be made for us," Raldama said across from him. "As much as I would prefer to bypass this place..., the other options are equally unpleasant. Hanor was right to avoid Hallow Marsh. Facing new challenges is sometimes more beneficial than repeating old ones."

Scarred by the lost *Souls* from Tarkons Tomb, the big Hite hated powers that were beyond him. An old argument, Brandor had once said knowledge helped empower a person. Rejecting the wisdom to his peril, his ignorance was now projecting onto the few brave enough to fight the *darkness*. "Why do the *Sacred* allow these powers to exist?" "Most powers are just forces that are part of life," Hanor said, insights rising. Not wishing to antagonise Hallen, but the group needed to shake off the sombreness if they were to survive Selmor tomorrow. "It is we who choose how they are used. No point blaming anyone, the *Sacred* included. We have to learn to use those powers wisely." Passions increased as he talked. "This evil is to do with complacency as much as any wrongdoing or malicious intent. Complacency is an evil disguised as comfort. When people live without a care for others, this *darkness* is inevitable. It is as if *higher powers* are balancing out the selfishness. That includes me I might add," he said, his grim past proof enough. Looking around at those gathered, they not only needed to believe in themselves but life itself. "I have come to realise just how important everyone is. Men and women out on the planes, Groves and Tards, Hites, Fifes and Baltians too. Selmor may contain a terrible evil, so shall we just leave it for later generations to deal with? Do you leave the door open where evil dwells just so you can rest and have fun? Let us face up to this evil and see an end to it once and for all."

An awkward silence ensued, the words penetrating. Unsure how to respond, an unexpected laugh surprised everyone. Looking at the culprit, all were startled by Greema's reaction. Erupting into another round of cheer, it seemed untimely.

Regaining control, still chuckling, "I have never heard anything like it," Greema said, wiping his brow. "Young Hanor, with words like that you could move the entire Freelands to action." Sighing, he smiled through the reddish light. "And I have been grumping all through the after-turns because of your lack of wisdom. Yet, with one stroke, you have released my suspicions, giving even me a belief that we just might succeed tomorrow."

Bewildered, how could he say that after barracking them for their lack of faith? Self-conscious, Hanor reached for his water skin. At least the laughter had taken the edge off the atmosphere.

"What Hanor has said is moving and true," Raldama agreed, to the young man's discomfort. "So I am taking this opportunity to praise our good friend Brandor as well, who has spent a great deal of time committed to the same ends."

"So too the Masters," Tarmon added.

"Of course..., that is especially true."

"Doubts about Selmor will serve no one," Hayla said, trying to boost her own confidence as much as everyone else's. "We have to do this together." Touched by Hanor's words, she refused to let tender feelings rise. Forcing them down like she used to, she braved a curt nod to Hanor through the half-light. Heart jumping when staring into his brown eyes, she looked away, fearful of falling into them again. Emotionally drained, if she did not rid herself of these feelings now she never would.

"It seems the courage of the group has returned," Kifter said, better for it.

"So you say," Hallen grumped, angry how everything had been turned around. Doubting the fine words would last, Hanor could be as annoying as he was amazing.

Tarmon agreed with the Fife. "I hope to repay all of you for your commitment to Hanor and this quest," he said, careful not to re-ignite the argument.

Shuffling people awake, Hayla and Bane whispered for quiet through the dark. The last watch before dawn, their companions sat up to investigate the disturbance. Back towards the Grovian Flats, a faint orangey hue like the fire of a lighted city lit the predawn sky just above the horizon. No sounds yet reached them, but they knew the cause. Forewarned by Ram and Listern, the creatures of Orbaddon were crossing the river and making their way south towards Grovan. Staying undercover for fear of being spotted by *Nyshifters*, the glow condensed before spreading across the horizon.

"They are moving fast," Kifter said, reading the signs.

"Are any coming this way?" Hallen asked, wanting to take out a few Gorls.

The Fife had to be sure before replying. "No, they are heading for Grovan."

Torn between loyalties, a painful reminder for Greema, this was his last chance to see sense and return home to defend his people. "This is sickening."

Standing at his side, Hayla patted his shoulder. "Your people are brave and spirited, they will repel this attack."

"It is hard to stay knowing what is to follow."

Hayla agreed. Mandurin was already under attack, how long before her parents and friends would face the same fate?

Faint rumblings of thousands could now be heard, a distant drumbeat, the march of evil. Nine silhouettes stood vigilant, the eeriness of Selmor losing its bite. Where did they all come from? Dawn arrived. It was well they had met the two Seekers.

Holding head in muddied hands, Grasdon's pain was severe, enduring much on this darkest of red dawns. How were they to survive? Distraught, the tragic fall of his beloved brother was too much to bear. Unable to move through the battle quick enough to save Hasdam, that worthless animal had not lived long to savour its victory. Taking the noblest of Groves, what would his father say?

Lying at his feet, dark blood soaking through a weathered overcoat proved just how much damage had been done. Covering Hasdam's face to conceal the extent of his injuries, many had suffered the same. Not looking forward to dawn, sunrise revealing the carnage, for five turns they had been fighting with little rest. Once deemed neighbours, the Perns were acting like monsters. Desiring the riches of Grovia, he could not believe the change.

If he did not return to the fighting soon he would die here, grief-stricken. Refusing to allow his brother to die in vain, he left the tent. Returning with a fire-torch, "Farewell my brother." Festering with rage, he lit the canopied tomb. "Not a drop more of your blood will be touched."

A firm arm reached around his shoulders as the flames grew higher. Grasdon did not need to look, the reassuring presence of Mowca firing his will to succeed.

Clouds above were thick and grey, threatening rain to weigh down the group's keenness when the full light of morning arrived. The atmosphere was quiet, preparing for the unknown. Selmor stood tall and uncompromising across the river, heckling them to enter. Unlike the enormous trees of Tardania with foliage only at their peaks, trees here were lower and crooked. Strolling over earlier to inspect the unstable bridge, they had come away querying its safety, some using it as an excuse to question their intentions. A horrid time, the quiet before the doom, exhalations were frequent.

Motioning for them to proceed, Tarmon expected the tentative mood, advancing to the bridge on foot. Kyboes sensed their reluctance. A whistling breeze swirled like teasing imps, a creaking bridge affected by its subtle passing.

Stopping at its entrance, memories of the original group's encounters at both Boverns Crossings ruffled doubts. This crossing was higher and less inviting to any monsters lurking in the muddy waters. Chunky legs were solid, but the planks on which they had to walk were decayed and warped. Parts of a protective barrier were on the far side of the bridge with few isolated posts on this side. No railings at all were in the middle. Running beneath its fragile form, the smooth river was ready to sweep anyone unlucky enough to fall in south.

"This is ridiculous," Hallen groaned. The chances of him getting dunked by a collapsing section was high. Checking on Balkorn, the Baltian seemed unfazed by anything demanded of him. This was not good.

"I will go first," Kifter volunteered. "Do you get Boverns here?"

"No, only buzzies when hot," Greema assured him.

His kyboe was too heavy to cross, so Kifter carried his bags whilst holding fast a rope fastened to its saddle. Waiting until his Kyboe was in the water, the Fife made a start, the bridge creaking even under his light weight. About a third of the way out, his kyboe lurched, kicking hard as the ground beneath it disappeared. Confident swimmers, but the strong current drew it away from the bridge. Aiding it with a tug on the rope, louder creaks from the ancient bridge were not so obliging for the Fife.

From the riverbank, the unpredictable setting distracted them from worrying about what was looming on the other side. Catching their breath, Kifter stumbled, a plank twisting when readjusting the rope for his kyboe's sake. If *he* was having trouble, what chance did the rest have?

Encouraging his mount, the animal kicked hard and pulled with its short arms, snorting. Covering eyes and rubbing sorry chins, the others could hardly watch knowing their turn was to follow. Noting the Fife's technique when passing the halfway stage, his deft movements made the crossing look easier than it was. Holding tight the rope, the animal drifted but Kifter allowed for it. When his kyboe stepped back onto the riverbed, its master reached the other side and leapt off the bridge, congratulating the animal.

"I am still dry," he called, dumping his bags, giving them a cheeky wave. Unfastening the rope from his mount, tying it into a bundle, he threw it back across the river. "This side is stronger than over there," he promised, stamping his foot on the bridge.

"Stop it!" Hallen barked, dreading the repercussions.

"I will go next," Hayla declared, taking the rope. "I am not one for waiting."

Following the route the Fife took, she struggled whilst holding onto her kyboe. Groans and shudders of her footsteps fired yelps of anguish.

"Let the rope out a little," Kifter advised from the other side. "It will be fine..., your kyboe is strong enough to keep going. You are only supporting so it does not drift downriver too quickly."

Following his advice, this was unnerving. Carrying her bags, hoisting them up repeatedly, creaks beneath her feet were louder than Kifter's. Passing the halfway stage, the decking boards ahead looked solid, calming her. "Get back!" she ordered, horrified when the Fife edged out onto the bridge to meet her.

"You have done the hard part," he assured her.

A sharp bell declaring otherwise, Hayla's foot shot through a weakened board. Gasping when recovering, the bridge was teasing her she was sure. Retrieving her foot, avoiding splinters, she proceeded towards the smirking Fife. "I could throw you in," she said, clutching his hand just as her kyboe found ground underfoot.

"I am but a helping hand," he said, grinning. "Now..., who is next?"

One by one, the others crossed. Copping moments of fear at a potential dousing, they endured the creaks tormenting their efforts. The two lads made it across followed by Greema and Raldama. Tarmon went next leaving the large Hite and Balt. Jeers beckoned them over, the odds stacked against them making it.

Not taking a chance, Hallen undressed. Cold as it was, he packed his things into saddlebags leaving only a woolly pair of under-shorts. Stepping back, he ran and tossed the bags across the river, landing with a mighty thump on the far side.

"I hope your sasta skin is not damaged," Kifter laughed.

"Just keep your toes off this bridge," Hallen warned, not in a playful mood. The water veering south looked cold. Clouds ensured the chill remained. Daring to step out, the creak of the bridge cut him short.

"You may as well swim across," his Fifanian friend cheered, enjoying this.

The fact they were about to enter Selmor was astonishing, but the mirth flowed, the enormous Hite edging across. Stopping regularly, the wood groaning more than he would like, after surviving countless seasons, was the bridge about to meet its end?

Reaching the centre, Hallen gained in confidence. "Wherever you go... I go too," he sang, getting used to the creaks beneath him. His large kyboe found the going easy, reaching the other side long before its master. Thankful the wood was better preserved over this side, Hallen braved larger strides to get it over with. Certain he had made it, a short leap from the riverbank, the wood splintered, sending him down into the icy depths.

"I do not believe this!" he cried from beneath its arch, the chilly waters nipping at his sides. Slipping and falling forwards, he was up to his waist and not happy. Cursing, he climbed out with the help of his amused companions. "This is not happening," he scowled, his feet wet and muddied. "Yes, Kifter, it is cold," he shivered, going to his bags for a blanket. Wrapping himself up, he turned to watch Balkorn, who was already halfway across. Half hoping he would fall, it seemed petty but such was his displeasure.

Keeping to the edge of the bridge, the Balt's weight was supported by the main rafters beneath his feet. Keeping away from unsupported planks meant a quick and confident crossing. If he were to go then the whole bridge would go with him. Keeping hold of his burly kyboe, his balance was impressive. Creaks were as loud as Hallen's but Balkorn's fluency outdid the Hitorian. Reaching the other side, dry and beaming his grisly smile, the others congratulated him.

"Perhaps you can show Hallen how to do it if we ever come back this way,"

Kifter joked, reloading his kyboe.

"You are looking for a soaking," Hallen warned, glaring at the Fife.

"We have more important things to think about," Kifter said, knowing what the Hite was capable of when the butt of everyone else's humour.

Those words brought crashing home what they had originally crossed for. Ending the jollities, each turned towards the imminent forest looming before them. A short walk across the thin strip of wild-grass, shadows within appeared menacing. The dry atmosphere was strange as if the place soaked up any straying moisture.

Repacking their belongings, no one was in a rush to mount and get going. Daunting, the fact Masters from Grovan had stood here and would not enter was alarming. Neither could the horrid tale of Grovians not coming out. A testing time, hearts pounded.

Respecting the caution, Tarmon got ready to move. The tender feelings in his heart had gone, trusting there was a reason for it. Needing to be strong knowing the others were watching him, he was the one who had to lead and face this *darkness* first.

"Dare we turn back?" Greema questioned, checking left and right. The line of trees disappeared in both directions. Not expecting them to deviate, he growled to perk up.

"We all need a good growl," Raldama exhaled.

Faint sounds of the northern hordes moving south behind were forgotten.

Riding slow, they reached the perimeter of the forest, the pungent smell of rotten wood upsetting the senses. Shivers ran down wary spines. Succumbing to rotting whilst the forest still lived, no wildlife moved amongst clumps of moss and other damp-fuelled plants. No fliryns played in the treetops either. Lifeless on many levels, the forest smelt ancient amidst its decay, the dryness outside replaced by a sodden dankness once they passed within the outer limits of its reach.

Bare knotted branches, twisted like agonised limbs, were disfigured, a shadow of their former glory. Spindly branches climbed into the eerie gloom above, the light fading as they rode deeper into its mysterious depths. Twilight emerged, the upper reaches cutting out most of the light to this dreary place. The ground was soggy but firm, small hollows amidst bumping mounds of earth.

Scanning the shadows for activity, wondering what could kill a hundred Grovians and more, the chances of getting lost were high. Trees far enough apart permitted easy movement. Huge looping branches arched over, interlocking with leafless trees opposite. Roots jutting from the ground ran amongst abandoned rocks and small curving hillocks covered in dark slime and other putrefying organisms. Their kyboes trod carefully as if wary of inviting any trouble.

Now they were here, alertness replaced trepidation, inspecting every shadow and open space. Proceeding into Selmor's murky depths, they hoped the undetected power had gone or was in a state of slumber. Attentive, the forest floor became cluttered, restricting their speed. Risking a trip or nasty gash if moving any quicker, but travelling at this rate meant they would be lucky to reach the other side before nightfall.

The first short-turn passed, the strain showing in every careful glance or quiet whimper. Without a path to follow, holding their direction tested even Kifter. Time slowed as if in collusion with the forest, the stillness chilling.

Riding at the rear with Raldama, Hallen kept checking over his shoulder to what might be behind. Heightened senses played havoc. The fact he was larger than most did little to help. Invisible powers just did not agree with him.

Following the gradual rise and fall of the ground, the second short-turn crawled by without incident or indication that anything lived in these woods. Dark grey oily trees seemed untouchable by wind or rain. Difficult to believe anything had ever lived here, the creeping was taking its toll, but warnings from Grovan demanded respect. Knotted tree limbs stayed crude and jutting, irregular as when first entering. Burrowing into a world devoid of life, if trees ever had a place of torment to die in, this was it. Comments whispered, their pace agonising. Surprised that nothing had happened, expectancies grew.

"What do you suggest?" Tarmon asked Kifter. With nothing in his heart signifying what to do, they were on their own.

"I cannot detect anything," the Fife said, checking every direction. "This strenuous pace will be the end of us if nothing else, so too the cold."

"I agree," Tarmon said, checking on the others. Shifty eyes through the dimness were restless.

Greema, who was riding alongside Bane behind them, shared his thoughts. "We cannot keep this up. I would rather die fighting than be subjected to this tortuous sneaking."

Sympathetic, everyone appeared dazed as if in a stupor. Was this what drove intruders mad? Raising an arm, indicating a new approach, Tarmon pointed in front. "Let us get out of here."

Increasing to a steady pace, the terrain manageable, rotten branches were crunched underfoot and any stray boulders avoided by their watchful kyboes. Passing between distorted uprights, hope grew now they were on the move. Soft and spongy, sporadic dips or sharp rises gave need for caution. Fears were abandoned, replaced by a drive to be free from this rotting tomb. The twilight no longer seemed so threatening, the invisible shackle of apprehension losing its grip.

Confident of success, unbeknown to them, they were riding towards the very heart of Selmor. Avoiding hazards and pitfalls, they were brave enough to increase the pace again. Prospects of meeting that enchanted Lady were unlikely. No one could live here, and who would want to?

Putting the rise in temperature down to their pace and determination, but that changed, the heat becoming thick like an invisible wall. Reminding Kifter of the glade prior to entering Tarden with its fiery wall of invisible power, this was not good.

"Is something happening here?" the Fife asked.

"It is getting warm," Tarmon said, wiping his brow.

Pressing on, the ground squelched as if every drop of water accumulated by the forest had found its way here. Wounded by recent events at Hallow Marsh, it was getting harder to manoeuvre at such a loping speed. Trees closed in as if to keep the heat in. Deep shadows seemed hostile as if watching their futile attempts to escape.

Conceding to the tight conditions, Tarmon decelerated. Waiting for that inner impression to return and reassure him all was well, there was no sign of that persuasive chime that had won him over. Had Greema been right? Was it a deceptive lure of the forest? Rejecting the possibility, their lives depended on it he was certain.

Parched mouths gasped for clean air and cool water. Slowing again, loose branches began whipping across faces like blades. Hallen's hair got tugged cruelly by scrawny twigs dangling. Curses and frustrations gained ground. The dim view ahead shortened, so too their chance of a quick escape. Cracks and snaps were everywhere, forcing their way through narrowing gaps between the trees.

Kyboes were getting caught as much as their masters, hairline slashes accruing every few strides. Prickly branches were almost invisible amongst the amassing limbs and tree trunks shutting off their flight. Slowing again, they could not keep it up, the heat stifling like a hazy liquid.

Unsheathing their blades, cutting at the wiry shadows, Tarmon ordered everyone to do the same. Slashing their way through, but more wooded tails appeared as if the trees were trying to seize them. Thrashes of steel whipped back and forth, fending off this diabolical enemy. But the more they slashed, the more the spindly branches surged from the darkness now enveloping them.

"We have to get out of here!" Greema cried, the route disappearing in front.

"Where to?" Hallen bellowed, their escape cut off behind. Without a trail showing where they had come, only trees and countless lines were visible. "We are trapped!"

Shocked, roots and vines moved of their own accord, thrusting out of the darkness, grabbing hold of limbs where possible. Wrapping around like chords, their grip was astonishing.

“This forest is alive!” Raldama yelled, hacking away tentacles around his leg. “How will we get out?” Hayla screamed, pushed to the hilt by this abnormal foe. More cuts and slashes, but the branches kept coming, clawing. Thrusting scores of scrawny limbs their way, they could hardly see each other.

Reaching down to his gilth pouch to retrieve the *Stone*, but each time Hanor tried, a vine seized his hand as if knowing his intentions. Severing them each time, but they came again and again. A fiery sensation in his chest supported the fact that evil was at hand. Dismissing why his heart was astir without the *Stone* in its usual place, he just needed *it* so the *powers* could save them.

Shrieking at a sudden twisting pain around his waist, pinning the gilth pouch tight, it cut off any chance of Hanor opening it. About to cut the branch, another took hold of his wrist and knife, putting an end to his struggles. Bane was in trouble close by, tails of wood stalling any resistance.

“Hanor...! Do something,” Hallen cried from behind. Skinny branches bound themselves around the Hite’s head, lashing in all directions to escape. “Help!” Greema cried, a whole nest of vines swamping him. Lifting him into the air, his kyboe was hoisted up alongside. Hundreds of strands lurched forward, putting an end to any whimpers.

A cunning diversion to distract the others, the forest seized the rest, hundreds of chords whipping and tossing individuals into the air. Even Hallen and Balkorn were winched up. Believing they could pass through Selmor, the warnings meant nothing now.

Branches and vines pulled back, carrying their hapless quarry with them. Where the group had fought was now empty, muffled cries silenced by the callous tightening of a vine around a throat. Suspended with limbs stretched wide, the quiet was haunting, the forest returning to its quiet slumber. Not a rustle could be heard. Just a web of vines, even the gift of sight was no more. All was still.

Chapter 21: Strange Garden

"I am thankful to be on this journey," Sharn said, still buzzing with excitement. Walking for a short period to rest their kyboes, it was midmorning, the Hisian-set vibrant from last night's merging of minds.

"We all are," Whis agreed.

Stunned by the depth and breadth of it, Brandor however, remained suspicious, convinced there was more to this. They had never gone so deep, even when the Hisian-set had numbered twelve. An additional surge of power had triggered an ascension into *Higher Realms*, which was now bothering him. Many times he had drawn close to the *Sacred*, and one thing he was certain, there was always a trace left behind. Subtle energies with unique vibrations always proved the experience was from the correct source. But no trace could be felt now, no indication to say the *Sacred* had inspired the concentrated merging. Forced by an impure motive as if seeking the *Higher Mysteries* without comprehending the basics of love and service, with Rinn's new lease of life, he could only suspect.

"I feel half my age," Brorn said, marvelling at the potential. "Is it possible to feel like this after such a long time in the wilderness?"

"I would have insisted everyone mind-merge if I had known," Whis added, enthused.

"There is hope for us all," Tralle approved, riding alongside. Experiencing similar episodes with Rinn and Sorlam back at the Sleep, but last night's merging reached heights never encountered before. Rinn's promise of wonders was coming to pass. Warning them to be discrete, he had said it was new territory that had to be worked with great diligence. With their elder as the focus point of those incredible *forces*, proving his sincerity about what he wanted to achieve, there was no doubting it now.

"I do not remember the merges being so profound," Hader said, suspicious like Brandor, not giving in to the miraculous.

"It can only work for the good," Sorlam said, from the rear of the line.

"I am not questioning the impact... but the motives behind it."

"Are you suggesting the mind-merges should not be welcomed?" Sorlam was shocked that someone would want to dispute it.

"But where did the *power* come from that kicked us to the outer limits of consciousness?"

"Our motives for this journey are pure," Tralle said. "Are not the *Sacred* favourable to those who strive towards the good?"

"Was it the *Sacred* though?" Hader asked, unconvinced.

"Who else can lift us to such incredible heights?" Whis defended.

"I detect no evil but... I am not persuaded," Hader said, not giving way.

"How do you feel right now?" Tralle asked, undeterred by the scepticism.

Pausing for honest reflection, "Energised... like a condensed block of power."

"Is that not a strong enough answer? Such *forces* do not flow unless a *higher will* is behind them."

"Who said anything about a higher will?" Hader contested. "Life holds many secrets, and to embrace any *force* that comes along is unwise."

"You are too cautious for your own good," Sorlam laughed at his sensitivities.

"Is there something offhand here then?" Sharn asked, not detecting anything.

"I just need clarification... that is all."

"May I offer a suggestion?" Rinn asked, waiting for the right moment.

"Of course," Hader gestured.

"You say you feel good, does that mean everyone does?"

They nodded, Brandor included.

"And what is it we will face in a short-turn?"

"Bovens Crossing," they said in unison.

"Would you prefer to cross as you were yester-turn... or as you are now?" An obvious answer, he did not wait for a reply. "It is important to grasp the meanings of what we do, but sometimes there is not enough time. We are not at the Sleep, where patient experimentation would eventually reveal the answers we seek. Let us use the tools we have until a more suitable time of study will permit us closer inspection."

A fine argument to the awaiting ears, Rinn's *Ileng Power* subtly altered their receptiveness to his reasoning. Convinced it was to their benefit, no one doubted him.

"You have become very persuasive, Rinn," Brandor said, not detecting his counterpart's manipulations.

"Good sense speaks for itself," the older man said. "Shall we go?"

Time slowed, leaving the suspended prisoners of Selmor Forest distraught at what was to befall them. Kept apart, they had no idea who was alive.

Struggling to move, Tarmon groaned, the iron grip around his throat uncompromising. Vines clamped about his head shut off his view and sealed his mouth, leaving just enough room to breathe. The fact his ears were plugged was alarming, proving this forest understood how the body functioned. Aggrieved that he had been lured here, how could he have fallen for this? The warm impressions in his heart had gone, the betrayal mocking him.

Pungent, the wood reeked of unnatural qualities. Tightening its grip around his neck before easing off, it ensured he knew of its potent power. Muscles burned from the strain. Powerless, the darkness added to the terror. Concerns for his trapped comrades exacerbated the problem. Leading them here to their deaths, that was the hardest part. Refusing to listen to their grim warnings, but that tenderness had felt so touching. Frustrated, he had to believe it came from here somewhere.

Suffering another squeeze, Hanor's heart was still burning from that otherworldly *power*. Requiring the *Stone* to yield *it*, but that was impossible strung up as he was. Missing details to explain what was happening inside him, what good was it to have *power* if *it* could not be harnessed at will? Why had *they* not ignited earlier, allowing him enough time to get the *Stone* from his girth pouch?

Appreciating now how a hundred Grovians had fallen to Selmor's power, it hurt when thinking of his friends, Bane especially. What was the forest going to do with them? A horrendous idea stalled him. Did it intend to eat them?

Triggering another bout of resistance, the vine lifted his head again to stop his feeble efforts. Shooting pains forced him to simmer down in case his head left his shoulders. Mouth clamped shut and eyes covered, arms and legs sprawled wide, how were they to escape? Intelligent just like Tarden, but this was the opposite of that beautiful place.

Oppressive, the heat was overbearing. Thirsty and disorientated, he tried concentrating on the *fires* in his heart. Hoping for a reprieve, but it was an external

change that caught his attention. Increasing in temperature as if suspended above a roasting fire, the atmosphere soared, believing he was about to be cooked alive. Scorching, a blinding white flame enveloped him, diffusing everything from his pitiful life. The turmoil ceased.

Tingling, Hanor's body pulsed from an unknown energy. Eyes closed, the darkness had gone, a strange ambient glow replacing it. Lying on his back, sensations in his heart felt comforting, recent events blurry and distant. Savouring the blissful state, the coolness of the stone on which he lay tempted him to drift off. Responsibilities however, warned to stay alert. Certain he had not died, where was he? Bright like a glorious turn of day, what had happened? Recollections of Yarmoria sprang to mind. Intruding on his peace, being suspended by those trees alerted him to the dangers. Jerking up, he blinked, straining from the whiteness filling his vision.

Situated on a circular slab of white chalky rock at the end of an enchanted garden, but this was no ordinary place. Bathed in white, even the pale sky seemed unnatural. A narrow path ran away from his seated position to an enormous tiered fountain that stood in the middle of the garden. Cascading milky waters over its rounded edges into a circular pool at its base, domed layers narrowed as it climbed. A simple design, Hanor looked for who it might belong to, but no one was present. The garden's boundaries were lined with a small white hedge and fruit trees, with just a white space of emptiness beyond. No dwelling was anywhere.

Checking for the gilth pouch, it was tied about his waist, tempted to take the *Stone* out for protection. Annoyed that *it* was not a weapon, he grimaced when standing to get a better view of this mysterious setting. Suspicious, the fact they had been captured meant he could not accept this loveliness for what it was. Aching from overstretched limbs, he turned full circle, astonished it was real. The hedge seemed to be a barrier keeping out the white void beyond. Everywhere looked the same, the whiteness dazzling the senses. Layers of thick grass were no different to the white trunks of delicate looking trees. No reds, blues or greens, its unnaturalness reflected those hideous trees that had snatched them originally. A subtle impression of falseness was present, confident this place was not as it should be. Just grateful the vice-like grip no longer bound him, was this a dream? Pinching his hand, was this the result of madness?

Heading for the fountain, no trickles or splashing sounds were audible. Striking yet sad, as if its creator desired a return to something less complicated, it mirrored his initial impression about these gardens. Something was not right, affecting its natural enchantment. At the fountain's base, the circular pool set in the floor lay like a white sheen of the finest glass. Cascading layers of creamy water disappeared into it without a ripple. Powers were at work here.

Still no one came to explain what had happened. No sign of everyday living suggested what this place was for. Unnerved, to be lifted from his imprisonment to this he could not regret, but by whom or what? Suspecting his friends were still in the clutches of that despicable forest, like a betrayer, he could not enjoy this.

Curious, strolling around the fountain, when he looked up from the milky pool, his heart skipped. Standing across from him was a picture of rare beauty. Tall and elegant,

radiating gentle affections, a woman stood staring. A cautious grin was hiding something, sad eyes giving her away. Clothed in a white unadorned gown, even her long hair and complexion imbued that same shimmering whiteness. Slender, holding a thin white staff, where had she come from?

“Who... are you?” he managed, fending off intimidation, his companions needing help. “What has happened to me... and my friends?” Solemn but watchful, she seemed to understand his hurt but said nothing. Clearly the creator of these strange gardens, but why the sorrow? “Will you not answer me?”

Standing as if the whole world was on her shoulders, she was holding something back. A test maybe, analysing his reactions, how could someone so lovely create the evil in these woods? Not brave enough to demand their freedom, the *Stone* sprung to mind, reaching for his gilth pouch. Observing his hand, is that what she wanted? “Why have you imprisoned us?”

Before she could reply, her face contorted, a hideous shrieking laugh escaping through grimacing lips. Shocked at the change, her sad eyes pleaded for help, but why? Face twisting, her head lurched back as if possessed, another bout of shrills echoing around the gardens. Appalled, the repugnant cry proved she was responsible for Selmor. But why the sad look? A tear ran down her cheek just as her body pitched as if something inside was struggling to get out. Her features began mutating, so too her body and clothing. Liquefying, she started shrinking as her face aged. Long, white hair turned to a knotted, blackish grey mass. Clothes went ragged and coarse, a patchy olive grey overdress covering weathered, tatty boots. Wrinkled skin was like her dress, oily green. Hanor felt nauseous.

Using the beautiful lady as a distraction, the dainty pole of her staff turned into a crooked stick, charred as if used to poke many fires. Dark cunning eyes behind a large bulbous nose stared at him when the transformation ended. Whilst the beautiful lady had stood there, he had felt confident she could be reasoned with. But now, the whole atmosphere had changed. Evil just like Selmor, sensations in his heart had increased upon her emergence. Dreading the outcome, her cackles dying down, the intensity of her cold stare was frightening. Rubbing a wispy chin, she coughed, turned and spat into the fountain.

To his horror, the spot where it landed turned pitch black. Dipping her staff into the water where it landed, the stain expanded, oozing out to pollute the rest of the fountain. Black liquid funnelled from the hole at the fountain’s peak. Spewing down the curving bumps, the rest of the milky substance turned to its evil shade. Staining this garden of light in one splattering moment, it was as shocking as she was.

“You cannot do that,” he cried, appalled.

“Why not...?” the wretched woman crowed, raising an eyebrow. “Is it not mine?”

“It does not matter,” he protested, the dark inky water poisoning the fountain. “What do you want with me and my friends?” He repeated the question, surprised at his aggression. The woman grinned at her handiwork before answering. “You came to Selmor, what do *you* want?” Lifting her stick from the pool, she tapped it on the ground causing dark blotches to appear on the stone where it landed.

“We were just passing through,” he braved, revolted by this calculated display.

“Pass through?” she said, rapping her stick on the floor again. With each steady stroke, a larger patch of black spread. “Why so many?” She coughed again, spitting on the grass. A dark patch appeared.

Infuriated, Hanor was tempted to push her into the fountain just to stop her. Not disclosing specifics about their plans, “We are going to... Mandurin.”

Cackling as if enjoying this exchange, “Then... you go to your deaths,” she said, dipping her stick into the fountain again.

Forming in the darkened waters, horrific pictures of a place under siege formed. Death and destruction were tearing the city apart. Fires raged, so too the torment. Hundreds were running and hiding from Gorgs, creatures of terrible shape. Men and women were fighting, but their cause seemed futile.

Dismayed, “Stop it,” he cried, more death piercing his heart. Brandor had said Mandurin was under attack, but the impact was nothing compared to the real thing. Relishing his reaction, the fact it was genuine made it all the more pleasing for the old lady. “Just tell me what you want!” he stormed, thankful when the images faded.

“Why... Mandurin?”

“That evil needs to be stopped,” he said, hiding their true purpose.

“Your friends from different nations, very unusual,” she said, wiping her nose.

“This war affects everyone.”

“Not everyone.”

“Because evil goes hand in hand,” Hanor blurted before he had time to think.

Shrieking again, “You think I am evil?”

“Trapping and killing people is wicked.”

“Wicked! Ermm..., interesting, but depends on your view.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you wipe tears when you eat meat?” she asked, watching him.

“No..., but what has that got to do with anything?”

“Why should Selmor wipe a tear when eating meat?”

Turning on her heel, she ambled around the fountain, running her stick through its blackened waters.

“People are different,” Hanor countered.

“Who says?”

Respecting her grim reasoning, but it did not feel right to acknowledge it. “Is it good to eat people then?” he asked, unnerved by this discussion, deducing his friends were still in the trees’ clutches.

“Meat is meat, yes?” she said. Walking around the other side of the fountain, the vile old woman stepped out of view.

Leaving stains wherever she went, he could not allow her to succeed. Approaching it from another angle, he was surprised at his own composure. “Why have you brought me here? Why not just gorge on me if that is your intention?”

“Gorge...? Ermm... interesting,” she teased, stepping back into view. “Yes..., you do look tasty,” she mocked, licking her lips. Halting just short of his position, she looked up, deliberating on what to do.

Catching his breath from her heady stench and intentions, “Tell me what you want,” he demanded, standing his ground. The fact she was prepared to talk gave hope that all was

not lost. Unsurprised when she looked down to where his gilth pouch lay hid under his overcoat, it echoed what the pretty lady had done earlier.

Cackling, a revolting smirk stretched across haggard features. "I see power in power," she hissed, seizing his arm. Her vicelike grip hurt. "Power is attracted to power," she said, letting go. Tapping her stick on the ground again, "My power is small and bound to Selmor, but yours is different and walks the Freelands. I want to know how and why." A ray of light, it was a possible bargaining point to secure their freedom. "Let my friends go..., and I will share what I know."

"People are tricky," she said, leaning on her stick. "Show me secrets..., then let you go." Rejecting her offer, "I do not trust you," he said, brazen. "You would take my power and then feed on us." Not perceiving the *Stone* as his, nor the *powers* in his heart, but she was not in a position to know that.

"Can I take it from you?" she leaned forward, leering.

"Do you want me to show you?" he warned, reaching down to the gilth pouch.

Acting fierce, what else could he do?

Guarded, she had no idea what he meant. Referring to the power inside him and not the hidden pouch, "What is in the bag?"

"That is for me to know, unless you wish to find out the hard way." Threatening to use the *Stone* was risky, especially as the *power* was not based on hostility but love.

Even so, they did generate respect, and was probably why he was here and not dangling from those trees.

Before he could say or do anything, she stretched out a hand and his gilth pouch ripped loose from around his waist and flew to her from under his overcoat.

"No...!" he cried, rushing forward.

With a nonchalant flick of her hand, a force gripped him tight as if turning to stone, stopping him short.

"Give it to me!" he bellowed. He had already nearly lost *it* once, not again. Try as he did, he could not move.

Rejecting his plea, she grinned, holding it out. Working knobbly fingers at the chord, she enjoyed his concern, and was why she would keep him and his companions alive for as long as possible. But it was the *power* inside the boy that she wanted not the bag. Opening the pouch, she thrust her arm in, disappointment mirroring her confusion.

To Hanor's relief, its magic worked. "You will not find anything in there, which is a good thing, for the *powers* would burn you to death!" Not expecting it to happen, it was more of an angry release that she had not found the *Stone* than anything. But why had the inner fires not prompted him to get *it* out when she first appeared? Was she not evil enough? Why were the *powers* just purring inside him? Furious when rushing at the three *Nyshifters* at Grovan, he kept forgetting *it* was not a weapon. Worried that she would not give the pouch back, this was infuriating.

Fascinated by the way the gilth pouch worked, "Clever," she said, drooling over it. "I have never seen one. What is inside that could harm me? I can tell something is there."

Throat dry and skin clammy, Hanor needed to be careful. Here in her own realm, she had abilities just as the Yarmorians did. "*Light*," he said, her bushy eyebrows rising in surprise. "A blazing *light* will shine if I take out what is inside."

“Why should I worry about your *light*? This garden is full of light.” Drawn to his power, the more they talked the more she wanted *it* for herself.

“It is the *light* of the *Sacred*,” he said, unsure if he was doing himself any favours.

“Like the *power* inside you?” she said, pointing her crooked staff at his chest.

Subtle as the *powers* in his heart were, he was amazed how sensitive she was. “Maybe..., maybe not.”

“You play with me,” she said. “You have confidence or... lack of knowledge. Either makes you dangerous.”

“If you confront this *power*..., *it* will burn you.” Bolstering his defence, he relaxed when the invisible force holding him eased.

Coughing and spitting into the blackened water, a knowing gaze warning of trouble, she tossed the pouch into the fountain without a care for its contents.

Lurching after it, Hanor was aghast, the pouch disappearing into the darkened depths. Reaching into the cold water, it was icy, numbing his arm in a heartbeat. Swishing about, his stomach knotting at the prospect of losing it, the chill forced his arm out. “You are the foulest thing,” he scorned, caught between attacking her and finding his girth pouch. “What are you anyway?” As the rage burned, he stopped, suspicious. “What are you grinning at?” When she did not reply, he dipped his arm in again. This time, it was twice as cold, snapping his hand out after a short breath.

About to pour more contempt, this time he refrained. To his horror, the delicate burning of his heart was disappearing. Holding his chest, he felt exposed, caught up in the mystery. Glancing at the old woman, she too registered the change. “What is happening?” he gasped, terrified by what it meant. Leaping back when she stepped towards him, her power gripped him again where he stood.

“Have you lost *it*?” she purred. Less threatened now the *powers* inside the boy were diminishing, she finally accepted *they* were too potent for her to control. Intrigued by him, but she could not afford to let him stay. If the *powers* were to return, she might not survive, not even Selmor. How would *it* react if she were to kill him now? Would those *forces* return to devour her? Holding him rigid, gleeful, “What am I to do with you?”

Managing to calm down, had he blown their chance of freedom? A pulse of sadness seized the pitiful circumstances, more for the others than himself. Tearful, he could smell her approach, frustrated that he could not move. Defeated, he wanted that inner *light* to shine, to burst forth and save him, but nothing did. Abandoning him just as the *Stone* had outside Grovan, what a despicable wretch he was. What a fool he was for thinking he could succeed on this impossible quest. Failing Brandor, he was failing the people of the Freelands too. Daring to look at the woman, she reacted just as expected.

“You upset?” she asked, prodding him now that no sacred *fires* were burning in his heart. “What shall I do with you?” Spinning around her walking stick, she came back to face him. Considering it, there was only one way to be free from those *powers* without unleashing *them*. “Four friends go with you, but others stay.”

Disbelieving what he just heard, was she letting some of them free? “What... do you mean? Is this another trick of your twisted mind?” Strength rose at this unexpected turn.

“You not trust me?” His surprise troubled her. He had no idea how strong those *powers* were. Unable to see any strength in such naiveté, yet it was a curious thing.

“Anything is possible with you,” he snorted, riled. She was relishing this.

“Four go, but others stay. Not a fair trade?”

Hanor’s heart leapt at the possibility, but it was short-lived. To leave some behind was horrifying. Rejecting the idea that they could return to save them, the trees too strong, who could he choose if she was telling the truth? Condemning them to a tortuous death, he could not do it. “I do not know if they are alive.”

Dipping her stick into the fountain, images of his companions bound by those monstrous trees formed. One by one, vines unwrapped from their heads revealing distraught but recognisable faces. Helpless, how could he leave any of them here? But then, why render them all to such a fate? Another idea stalled him. Why was she prepared to do it in the first place? Was she frightened of something?

Encouraged, he tested the idea. “All must go free,” he said, taking her by surprise. “You not so simple,” she said, as if facing a new challenge. Tapping her stick on the ground, “Intruders not go free without price. Too much energy lost.”

“You cannot expect me to leave any of my friends here,” he rejected. Even if she was frightened of the *powers* in him earlier, he was not in much of a position to demand anything. Protecting his thoughts, she was reading him on subtle levels.

“Doubts in you,” she noted. “You decide what price.”

“I cannot agree a price.”

Running her stick around in the pool, “You lost pouch,” she reminded him. “Much energy spent, Selmor needs to be fed.”

“I will not leave anyone here for you to feed on.” Hanor was appalled.

“I not eat them. Be wise, many ways one can feed.”

“What do you mean?”

“This exchange, good food it is for me. I not carve up bodies, I feed through trees.”

“Hence why the trees trapped us?” Images of his friends in the pool were gone.

“I am bound to trees, but feed we must or die we will.”

“How will you feed?”

“In time, when dead..., then feed.”

Her reasoning was unconvincing but seemed plausible. He still could not choose. “We have to fight our enemies, I cannot condemn anyone to stay.”

“Stuck we are,” she said, dipping her stick into the pool again. Images returned, the roots covering his companions’ terrified features.

“Stop that!” he cried, rushing to the fountain’s edge.

“Make decision,” she cackled, spitting into the pool. “You not know what potential is in you, so not a threat,” she explained, thinking aloud. “But *powers* could rise up. I could keep all, but not want to take chance. I want to exchange but you falter. I need one to stay to pay for intrusion.”

Relieved that he had secured the release of all but one, her reasoning was still harsh.

“What if we had not come this way?”

“Energies not spent.”

Another acceptable point, “Is there not another way?”

“Not think so.”

Slumping to the floor, Hanor could not believe this. Bartering for someone’s life was the most disgusting thing he had ever done. “Can I not stay?”

"You are reason we here," the woman said, spinning her stick whilst gorging on his suffering. "Everyone stay where they are otherwise."

"How do you live with yourself?" he snapped.

Unconcerned by his reaction, when angry, he could do nothing against her. His anger was preventing the *powers* from surging.

Vines around his friends eased enough to aid Hanor's decision, each face forming in the fountain. Tearful and frustrated, he pleaded with the *Sacred*, but those prayers went unheard. Powerless, after considerable reflection, a grim answer emerged. Consoling himself that something had to be done, for his friends' suffering was there in the darkened waters, he wiped another tear, ashamed. "I have made a decision," he said, sombre for what he had to do. Refusing to look at her, this was dreadful.

"Who you choose?" Fed by his misery, she did not want it to end.

Stuck here with no way out, what choice did he have? Picking the one person who had convinced them to enter, it seemed only fair the rest should be spared. Checking the pool again, some of his friends were calling out, only to be silenced by vines. Finishing on the one he had to choose, the Tardanian looked tired but steady in the half-light. Out of all his struggles, this one weighed the heaviest. A nudge of the shameless woman's stick prompted him to act. Focusing on the Tard's face before uttering his sorry name, "I choose... Tarmon," he said, indicating his companion.

Cackling, she hovered before him, tormenting. Savouring every drop of anguish, she dipped her stick into the polluted water and waited.

Sagging in despair, an incredible heat behind meant his Tardanian friend was in the process of joining them. Not wanting to look at the circular slab on which he too had arrived, Hanor froze, mortified by what he had done.

"What... what is... this?" Tarmon's familiar voice said.

Daring to peer over his shoulder, the Tard was sitting facing the other way. Wanting to run, to hide from what he had done, but there was nowhere for Hanor to go. Staring into his sorry hands, the old woman's sudden shrill was the last thing he expected. Confused, she started jolting, struggling like the pretty lady had earlier. Shuffling back for safety, Hanor was stunned at the horror written across her grim features. Fighting with something he could not see, dread for once coated her darkened gaze. Rising to his feet, what was going on? Tarmon now stood on the stone slab staring at the old woman as if nobody else existed, not even acknowledging Hanor was there. Heading towards them as if spellbound, the old lady was aggrieved by the Tard's arrival, but why? Lurching and buckling, inside pressures were building, grimacing as if scolded by a hot flame.

"Tarmon!" Hanor called, cautious, making his way over. Panged at calling him here, he wanted to say sorry for failing him and the others. But his friend was not listening, caught in a trance. Walking half dazed, the Tardanian did not respond to the appeal. "Tarmon!" Hanor tried again, slowing when his friend neared. "What... are you doing?" Dismayed when the other walked right by him, he caught hold of his arm, the Tard's gaze fixed on the old lady. "It is me..., Hanor!" Half-glancing down at the inconvenience, the mesmerised Tardanian plucked Hanor's hand and continued towards the struggling woman as if nothing else mattered.

Needing to be quick, Hanor stepped in front this time, determined to break him from the spell. Ignoring the hysterics behind, this was unbearable. "Tarmon..., you have to listen to me!" he implored, but the Tard brushed by him again. Nearing the fountain area, the old woman's magic had corrupted his friend. Is this what she intended, so he would stay without a fight? "You do not understand, she has put you under a spell."

Halting, the young man's pleas finally registering, Tarmon spared a glance down at his young friend. "No Hanor, it is you who lacks understanding." Staring back at the old woman, he restarted the short journey to where she stood struggling in frightful agony.

Sick from guilt and betrayal, Hanor tried holding him back but to no avail. Ignoring the strange gurgling sounds coming from the ragged lady, he blocked Tarmon's way again, pushing this time to stall him.

Deflecting the boy's efforts, causing him to stumble to the ground, the resultant sobs from Hanor meant nothing to the Tard. Reaching the still babbling old lady, Tarmon smiled like never before. At last, he had found his one true love. A deep sense of knowing had kept him for this moment, his heart pouring out its unconditional love, breaking through the illusions saturating this place. Seeing himself as one-half of a larger whole, he stood in front of her, kind eyes showing affection. "Your longing has been answered," he said, bending down to the struggling old woman.

Disgusted, Hanor wanted to hit his friend, to wake him up from the trance. He was being tricked by the wretched thing, and it was his fault for bringing him here. Horrified when the Tardanian bent and kissed her, he sank to the ground. What had he done?

Peering up when another explosion of loud shrills erupted from the old lady, she was shaking in front of his Tardanian friend. High-pitched, she kept buckling and writhing, crowing as if her life was fading. Jerky movements shocked the young witness, her limbs snapping rigid and eyes gawping wide at the pain.

"How can this be?" the bemused lad muttered, cupping a hand over his mouth.

Far from the calculated creature of before, she was fighting against something, a twisted laugh the last defiant cry before her features altered. Mirroring earlier, her body started remoulding itself into another form. Gasps of pain screeched when she elongated and narrowed, her ragged shape disappearing. A knotted face smoothed and stretched, ironing out the wrinkles. Matted hair and bushy eyebrows were replaced by streams of flowing white strands. Subtle energies recreated her anew, so too the clothes and staff. Returning to the slim rod he had seen when first arriving, everything was changing for the better. Returning to its milky white, the fountain's waters cleared. Hanor sat speechless at the drama. When the disintegration of the putrefying woman finished, he could not believe it. The enchanted lady he had seen earlier stood tall and elegant, having no idea how or why.

Exhausted, Hanor's head lolled to his chest, too tired to care. Experiencing so much turmoil, he had nothing left to give.

Chapter 22: Familiar Chimes

Comments of approval blended with anticipation for eight aged Dai-lamen. Peering across and down at Boverns Crossing, enthusiasms were high with a passion to succeed. Low-lying, the bridge spanning the Rapone River triggered memories of old. Dusty and grey, swirling clouds above permitted odd rays of sunlight to break through their dominance, lighting up the huge woodell trees on the opposite bank. Rustling in the breeze, the wooded giants stayed detached from the drama soon to unfold.

Not lingering for long, the eight raced down towards the bridge just as Hanor and the others had many turns ago. Wonder permeated the group, high hopes to what would happen most irregular. Underlying their cause, the *Ileng Power* ensured any misgivings were swamped by *its* insidious presence.

Pulling up at the bridge's entrance, assessing the area, courage heightened. Rinn's preparations tightened too, no one feeling his calculated influences. The manipulations were risky but justifiable to Rinn. It was for everyone's own good. Such tactics could create a vicious sting; if he failed to maintain high ideals, he would tumble into the abyss just as *Gorl-darl* had done long ago.

"It looks weathered... but sturdy," Sharn said, checking the structure's stability. Its length appeared longer than he could recall.

"And... rather quiet," Whis said, searching the river in both directions. No thrashes in the water indicated any Boverns were nearby.

"Not much different to when Kifter and Hanor crossed no doubt," Brandor said, dismounting and walking over to the two uprights signifying its beginning. Respecting the dramatic scenario that had unfolded here, the loss of Nole must have been dreadful. The other seven joined him, imagining the horrors of that incident.

"It looks safe enough to cross," Sharn decreed. "I suppose running would be unwise."

"Running will play into their hands," Brandor said, peering up river. "Composure and a keen eye are all we need."

The current was strong, tiny swirls stirring the water. Not yet ready to step onto the bridge, the setting demanded great caution. Visualising this was nothing like doing it, the softness of imagination guilty of leaving out the pounding of an expectant heart. The Boverns were a terror the Freelands could well do without.

Rinn broke the stillness. "When you are ready..., we should make a move," he prompted, moving to the water's edge.

"Do you care to go first?" Sharn invited.

"Of course," Rinn smirked, strolling over to the entrance with his kyboe. Placing a hand on one of the small uprights, familiar chimes rang as expected. "It is active," he said, walking onto the bridge.

Creaks blended with the faint sounds chiming to those below the murky waters. For a short time, the others just watched him go, hypnotised that he was doing it.

"Are you coming?" Rinn said when looking back.

"Of course," Brandor said, following his elder. Confirming Rinn's observations, the subtle chimes were what he remembered. "The sound has not changed," he said, its

illusionary gentleness sickening. Reassuring any unwitting traveller into a false sense of security, just as it had with Hanor, they would not make the same mistake.

Wooden boards underfoot groaned but held their weight. Without rails for support, its openness was the perfect killing trap. Granting the Boverns a clear attack, Brandor searched both sides for movement. Tunder was nervous, staying close for protection. Sharn went next with Hader, Whis and Bronn behind. Tralle and finally Sorlam brought up the rear, the soothing chimes adding to the drama.

Checking the river, self-encouraging mumbles were a tool to sharpen their readiness. The chimes continued, Rinn reaching the halfway stage undisturbed. Tuning into any fractures of disturbance, their ancient foes were cunning, biding their time. An unexpected trip or lapse of concentration was all it would take. Tensions soared with senses labouring. Even the enormous woodell trees simmered.

As expected, to Rinn's right, an explosion of noise rumbled as an agile Bovern propelled itself out of the water at the eldest of the Dai-lamen. Huge callous eyes glared at its prey, success stretching across *its* gaping mouth. Thick dark green lines slashed across its slimy skin. Two breathing holes twitched, sniffing its quarry. A long muscular tail trailed behind as it headed for Rinn.

Just as he remembered, Rinn allowed enough time for the creature to approach before reacting. Lifting his hands, "*Ismen nos*," he said, releasing crackling white and green energies from his hands and out towards the hideous beast. Enshrouding the Bovern with crinkly fingers of lightening, its monstrous face twisted, contorting at the searing pain. Noxious, the reek of burning flesh singed the air. Helpless and exposed, a pitching squeal pierced the atmosphere. Guiding the energies, the power seized the creature like a giant hand, lifting it over Rinn to crash into the depths on the other side.

Pleased at the results, but it did not last long, another eruption coming from behind. This time, a Bovern went for Hader, its glazed repulsive stare intent on succeeding where the other had failed. Leering, the creature arced towards the awaiting Dai-lamen.

Just as Rinn had done, Hader, with the spoken word, ignited powers into life. Wrapping around its slippery frame, tentacles of red and white power were fierce. Using its momentum, he lifted it over and back into the river with a heaving splash. Swirling waters, like a hot spring, bubbled and churned.

A short reprieve followed, the monsters seeking another way to undo the men of fiery power. Satisfied by their quick response, the eight Dai-lamen proceeded, edging their way across the bridge. With no room for complacency, it was not long before another explosion came, one from either side of the bridge. Whis and Sorlam were the targets. A double strike proving the intelligence of the cunning creatures, but just as before, scorching energies ripped the atmosphere. Seizing the creatures, the two were thrown into the murky abyss beyond.

Discharged energies buzzed the senses, shining in the eyes of the successful Dai-lamen. Eight men stood defiant on the bridge, waiting for another strike. Heightened powers shed doubts about their abilities. Holed up in the Sleep had softened their edge, but no more. Returning to their vital selves, they had passed the test.

"Let us go," Rinn ordered, not wishing to dally in the open. Glad at their success, but the Boverns were more than capable of catching them out.

Reaching the riverbank, Rinn stepped to the side as the others made their way from the bridge. A foul odour punctured the air. It had gone well.

"I feel... fantastic," Sorlam laughed at the rear of the line, holding his hands up as if loaded with a lethal force.

Whis agreed. "It is good to be alive again."

"I could stand and fight them for the rest of the turn," Sorlam laughed, hovering a little too long on the bridge.

"Just get off there!" Rinn barked, annoyed at his companion's complacency.

Sudden and unexpected, the noise to Sorlam's right caught everyone off guard. Surging up from near the bridge itself, there was no time to react, the vicious Bovern already on Sorlam's unprotected position. In a flash, the creature's swift movements stunned the group. Sorlam's pitiful yelp was lost in that life-threatening moment. Arms rising for protection, but he was not quick enough to summon any powers. Victorious eyes gleamed with delight, closing his eyes as it was about to snap the life from him. Heart-stopping, but to Sorlam's astonishment, the creature froze in midair as if held by an invisible hand. Suspended by an unknown power, its massive head twisted to see what held it tight. A sizzling green light started forming around it, hissing and cackling a sickening sound. No source was apparent as if appearing from nowhere. Coursing energies stabbed tiny hooks of light into its writhing body. Buckling from the scorching pain shooting to its deepest parts, the Bovern shrielled. Electrifying lines of power clawed at its slithery frame. Hapless, the despicable monster shook, the setting building up to an incredible finale. Muscles constricting, its tail went rigid.

Grimacing, a crunching sound preceded the final act of destruction. Torn to pieces, torrents of power pulled every morsel of the wretched creature apart. Lumps of rancid flesh splattered Sorlam as internals fell in huge chunks onto the bridge and into the river. Oily globules covered the stunned Dai-laman, the others staring aghast from the sidelines.

Starting a carnivorous feeding frenzy, the waters churned where the largest pieces had fallen. Feasting on the dismembered Bovern, the others were quick to seize the opportunity of an easy meal. Long glossy backs and pointed tails arched above the water, so too slimy heads and keen eyes. Ignoring the Dai-lamen above the waterline, explosive splashes split the staggered silence.

"Get off there!" Rinn ordered Sorlam for a second time.

Repulsed by the mess splattered all over him, the astonished Dai-laman was in shock. His kyboe however, did not require any prompting. Scared of the writhing mass of bodies fighting for scraps in the water, it ran past its Master, nearly knocking him into the river. Numb, Sorlam followed, disbelieving he was still alive.

"Get changed," Rinn commanded, furious at the man's folly.

Doing as ordered, Sorlam replaced his soiled overcoat and clothing.

"What... was that green field of power?" Whis asked, astounded by its ferocity.

The creatures were still fighting for meat, one Bovern heaving up onto the bridge to retrieve a large piece near the edge. A sickening sight, the hideous monster bit the lump and slipped back beneath the surface to feed. Gulping, that could have been them.

“Let us leave this place,” Rinn said, angry at having to react as he had. Striving for them to be alert and responsive, but Sorlam had let him down. Now expecting sticky questions, answers would not be easy. Considering his own sharp response when mounting his kyboe, surprised at the effectiveness of his own will, a mere thought had ripped that Bovern apart. A disturbing but inspiring prospect, marvelling at just how powerful the *Ileng Magic* was, he sped off into the Tardanian Forest. Stunned, the others watched after him, confounded by the episode.

“This has been a most grievous turn,” Brandor exclaimed, the waters behind settling. “What monster do we have in our midst?” The others mounted. “Your arrogance nearly got you killed,” Brandor said to Sorlam. “But we have had a glimpse of something terrible here.” Urging Tunder on, a dishevelled Sorlam followed the others.

Chapter 23: Enchanted Lady

Slender and kind, a dainty hand rested on Hanor's arm. Too dismayed and wrought with guilt to respond to the woman, tears filed down his cheeks, refusing to accept what had just happened. Sobbing, his heart was full, pouring out its pain. Unable to look at his Tardanian friend waiting alongside her, how could he after sacrificing him to free the others? What took place here defied comprehension. Where had that horrid woman gone?

Questions flowed like his tears, and still he could not bring himself to look at them. Was this the final illusion conjured up by the old woman to persuade him to leave? Traumatized, even though in his heart he knew the despicable woman had gone, he was denying it for pity's sake. Something special had taken place here, but he was too upset to care.

Kneeling beside him, Tarmon was patient. "My young, wonderful friend," the Tard said, trying to reach below Hanor's grief. "These tears you no longer have to shed, for you have given life again." Sitting with eyes closed, Tarmon could understand the lad's shock through his own awakened state, wanting to embrace the amazing young fellow at the joy he was feeling. Holding hands with the lady of this garden, the Tardanian smiled at her before trying again. "Listen Hanor, there is much to explain. Please do not lose yourself to this grief."

Sick with guilt, Hanor barely had the strength to talk but managed a question. Keeping his eyes shut, too frightened in case this *was* an illusion, "Is... this real?" Sensitive, Tarmon kissed him on the head. "Yes..., this is very real. There is no evil here to trick you, I promise."

"Hanor...!" the lady beseeched him. "Please look at us. While you keep your eyes closed, you are holding onto the darkness that no longer exists."

Her softness was a far cry from that evil woman, but why was he so afraid? Wanting to curl up and die, it was difficult to know what was genuine. Daring to look, her beseeching gaze was trying to assure him that all was well.

At last, the darkness of doubt dropped like an abandoned stone kicked over the edge of his fears. Not brave enough to manage a smile, "What has happened?"

The fine lady held out her hand. "Come Hanor..., let us steady ourselves for the momentous tale I wish to share."

Mesmerised in her presence, he wanted to believe his misery might be over.

Leading them across to a fruit tree, she picked a small oval shaped berry. Offering it to him, "Eat," she encouraged. "After what you have suffered, it will give you strength."

"You know what I have been through?" he asked, perplexed.

"More than you will ever know," she said, enjoying the fresh breeze whistling over the hedgerow. "You have done a wondrous thing for me, and I will never be able to repay you." A tear flashed down her cheek before composure returned.

"I did not... do anything," Hanor said, uncomfortable. Wondering if the berry was safe to eat, wanting to trust her, he popped it into his mouth, a full-flavour tingling. "Why do you... owe me something? I failed everyone."

“Your humility is a light to any would-be hero,” she said, holding Tarmon’s hand, Hanor picking up on the Tard’s contentment. “Without you..., I would never have been freed from this prison.”

“I do not understand.”

“Because I have yet to disclose the details,” she said, motioning for them to head back to the fountain.

Following her, the three stopped at the fountain’s edge. Its purified water was now free from pollution, Hanor recalling the grim images the old woman had showed him. Concerns about their companions demanded answers. “Where are the others?”

With the tip of her staff, she touched the water just as the old woman had. Similar in many ways, images formed in the milky waters at their feet.

“It was one of the first things I took care of after my liberation,” she promised.

Images of seven trusted friends with their kyboes took shape, now lying on the ground asleep. No signs of those cruel trees were anywhere, only dark stains on the ground proving they had once lurked there. “They have also been under immense strain, so I have granted them a short respite from their turmoil.”

“Are they hurt?” he asked, the strangulating grip of those vines all too real.

“Not that I know of,” the lady said, regret evident.

Comforted by their peaceful state, Hanor’s confidence increased. Staring up at her, she was another head higher than he was. “Who... are you?”

“My name is Shanene... of Selmor. I have lived here for a very long time.”

“Who was that other woman, the one who was you and then... was not?” Transforming like that was most unnatural, unable to get his misty mind around it.

Reflecting on what the question meant and its powerful relationship to her whole life, she was still coming to terms with her freedom. At last her sorry story could be told. “Let us sit,” she said, indicating the grass nearby.

“How... are you..., Tarmon?” Hanor asked as they sat down, unused to the Tardanian so quiet.

Beaming as if energised, “I am basking in this new awakening. Words fail to describe the completeness of how I feel.”

Ensuring there was no delusion, Hanor could tell how happy he was. “We will have to talk more about this.”

“There is plenty of time for that,” Tarmon said, sitting next to his lady.

Comfortable, they listened as Shanene began her incredible tale.

“Long ago..., in distant times,” she began, reaching with mixed feelings into her history. “I lived in what is now called Mandurin with my parents, two brothers and two sisters. The youngest of five, I was the last to leave home. My brethren had families, of which I had little interest. The Freelands at that time was a mysterious place, magical, a time of power and great opportunity. Those powers had a strong influence on me, urging me to seek the workings of life. I used to venture out here to enjoy Selmor. It may surprise you but life was abundant here.” Tinged by sadness at that disappearing haven, she pressed on, enjoying the freedom of her thoughts for the first time in an age.

“Spending more time here, the forest buzzed with hidden powers, advancing my development. My creativity and ability to control my surroundings grew at an incredible rate. As the seasons passed, I was not aging as others were. Captivated by Selmor’s powers, desires to mix with people diminished, no longer interacting with those who travelled through Selmor. Eventually, I no longer journeyed to Mandurin at all, for my parents had died and my brothers and sisters seemed like strangers. They did not enquire after my new life and I was not interested in theirs. A wonderful period of exploration, for every new season brought incredible discoveries, I became attached to the forest, sharing my energies with its own powerful ones. In due course, I began to merge with its life force, exchanging my individuality for a greater bond with Selmor itself. Colours and fragrance’s of the forest were like a paradise, and I used to delight when people marvelled at our work.”

Cutting off, the difficult part to come, the tender touch of Tarmon encouraged her to continue. “After many long seasons on my own with my beloved Selmor, a stirring inside of a different sort surfaced. Desires to interact with people grew. I tried resisting but... the attraction got stronger, reminding me that I was human and not a forest. So, I began to pay attention to people passing this way. Rather than just listening for their approval, I became interested in *them*.”

After a time, I promised to talk to the next people who entered. Not knowing what state the outer world was like, unbeknown to me, the Freelands were going through a rebellious period, evil people prizing the riches of others. When two men camped on the edge of Selmor, I asked to join them. They seemed kind, granting me the taste of their wares, which you call *ale*. In my heightened mental state, the drink had a tremendous affect on me. We watched the sunset...!” Pausing, she had never shared this with anyone. “Strange, how the past can still bind you tight,” she said, forcing a smile. Recomposing herself, she carried on.

“After sundown..., they became too friendly, hugging and trying to kiss me. Mildly intoxicated, I was not interested so I proceeded to say goodbye and leave.” She paused again but only for a moment. “When I turned..., they jumped on me and pinned me to the ground, shouting and hitting me. I could not believe it. Tearing at my clothes, I realised what they were trying to do. Not in control..., I struggled to gain my bearings. When a knife was held under my chin, I decided to act.

Invoking a nearby tree, it seized the two of them!” She cut off again, this the beginning of a horrendous story. “And at my command... took their lives. To my error, it was the start of my imprisonment, for the tree I invoked died, the trauma unbalancing its nature. Granting it a brief glimpse of a more evolved and emotional way of living shattered its life as a tree. Forcing it to act so grievous was devastating. Planting a seed of evil, if only I had known what was to come. But... so appalled by what happened, rather than leave it as an isolated incident, the experience festered inside me.”

Sighing, she did not stop. “I decided to create another part of me that would contend with those ugly feelings whilst I continued to live a peaceful life as I had. The old woman became a reflection of that terrible part of myself that I did not wish to face. At first, the transformations happened only at my beckoning. I was in control as she did my bidding, sheltering me from those destructive feelings. I thought I had found the perfect solution... but I soon discovered the grim reality.

More people came, Groves and men alike. Travelling through Selmor, they cut down trees and uprooted bushes and flowers for their own gain. Linked to Selmor as I was, it hurt. This forest no longer lived as individual trees, but had merged into a larger life with me. Every chopped tree affected me, giving the old lady a reason to defend Selmor any way she pleased.

Sheltered from her behaviour, I deemed it reasonable because Selmor was being protected. What I did not foresee was her power growing, which eventually matched my own. Her knowledge through me expanded also. Soaking up the fear from those who did harm to Selmor, I did not realise those energies could rise to such proportions. She began attacking anyone who strayed into Selmor, whether they harmed it or not. My trees responded to her commands, and by the time I resisted, it was too late.”

Rubbing her hands, it was to be the last remnants of freedom for an age. “I... had to wrestle with her just to be like I am now. My joy of Selmor evaporated. Less flowers bloomed and bushes wilted. Any wildlife died or left.

As a defence, I created these gardens to protect myself and the innocence of the forest that still existed. Spending much of my time here, for her will was stronger amongst my once beloved trees, this became my prison. Her brutal conduct caught the attention of Grovan who sent people to investigate. To my dismay, she seized every one of them. Sealing my fate, the power she gained took her beyond what I could challenge.

What started as an innocent step towards getting to know people... ended with many lives lost and the creation of a monster. I could not see a way out. She was a part of me, even though created, but living as though she was the real me. The only place I was safe was in my dreams. She began teasing my sobbing ways. Yearning with all my heart to be free of her, I started envying what my sisters and brothers had long ago. She would laugh if I left my mind open for her to see what my heart longed for.

Yearn I did for countless seasons, beseeching the *Higher Lives* to grant me this wish, promising to undo all that I had made. Seasons passed and I kept a faint hope within the grief. I had no choice, what else did I have to live for? Then one night, I had a special dream that stirred my Soul. Approaching from the west..., a *light of love* was shining bright. Travelling right across the Freelands to Selmor, it entered. Challenging the evil of Selmor, it defeated the darkness, resulting in a new dawn and a new life.

You can imagine the dream was hard to hide from her scrupulous attention, always eager to know what the other part of herself was thinking. Twisted, she vowed never to let anyone near me. So, I waited, searching the fountain for that *light*. Seasons drifted, and still I waited. Careful not to expose the details, I watched the evil in the Freelands grow and move south. Worried that it might prevent my eventual release, but then I saw the *light* appear in the far west, leaping for joy that my freedom was near.

Cautious not to reveal my hopes, I sealed myself into the protective areas of my mind to shield those details. She presumed I was giving up, letting her have total freedom as she nearly had anyway. And when the *light* flared again nearer to Selmor, I knew my dream was real. Following the *light*, when it lit up at Grovan, more radiant than I could imagine, I knew I had to do something.

Determined, I searched out the source of this *light* through the fountain. Discovering your group and what you were attempting to do, I took a great risk by sharing some of the details with her, knowing she would be drawn to the *powers* involved. Desiring *them* for

herself, but she knew nothing of the loving aspect of that *light*. Through the fountain, I saw Tarmon, the very person I had so longed for all of these agonising ages. I could see his purity of heart. But what plan could I devise to ensure everything would work out? I sensed both of you were part of her undoing, but how?

I impressed upon Tarmon my own pure heart, the part that had remained untainted for all these long seasons. Allowing him to feel my sincerity and fragility, its beauty and longing to be united to him, my *Soul* embraced his heart as though it were my own. I had to be careful though, she was always ready to undo any chance of freedom. The impressions had to be strong enough to register, but subtle not to give anything away.

I watched your journey, but not too close to cause doubt amongst my lesser part. Drawn as she was towards your inner *light* Hanor, a *light* that we could sense through the heightened sensitivities of Selmor, for you must remember... I and Selmor have become as one, the possibilities were immense for both of us. Thankfully, I was in a position to know what the true risks were to her."

Even though difficult, she carried on. "One of the hardest things was to give Tarmon the freedom to decide what he felt was the right thing to do. I could not force him to come, he had to be willing for his own sake. Listening to the conflicts within your group, he was not the only one on the edge of his nerve. You were the important part of this, Hanor. If you had not entered, she would have had no reason to invite Tarmon into my and Selmor's heart to bring about her demise. If Tarmon had entered Selmor on his own, she would have kept him on the outside where you were trapped. Feeding like she has always done on his life force through fear, he would have died a horrible lasting death. The act of her calling him here sealed her fate. She called to herself the very love that saw beyond the veil of her existence, which was always an illusion.

Tarmon saw the truth behind her illusionary life with me imprisoned inside. No illusion of the mind, no matter how powerful, can withstand the indestructible powers of a *Soul* uniting with another, which is what happened when he arrived. Our human *Souls* connected, and have now merged into one *Soul*, if you can comprehend the concept."

Both looked at Hanor, full of gratitude. Sharing so much, dispelling any flints of doubt about this being over, her tale bordered on the unimaginable. Revealing her whole life in one intimate story, she had not missed much. His own troubles failed by comparison to her torment. Incredible that someone so charming could conjure up such a monster, but the entire travesty surrounding Selmor was down to her. A dark history due to misplaced judgements long ago, questions seemed disrespectful. Much of it he understood, but some parts were misty. Peaceful, this tender moment was necessary, the magnificent fountain witnessing much of the tale. Mentally and emotionally exhausted, the white berry's affects had gone, leaving him to his fatigue.

"The depth of Shanene's struggle," Tarmon said, in awe of what had been disclosed. "Reveals the importance of what has been achieved here, and the priceless part in which you have played in her freedom and the unity we now share."

"It is not as substantial as you say," Hanor groaned, torn by what had taken place.

"The tale speaks for itself," Tarmon said, not accepting it. "A great evil has been purged from the Freelands..., and we are a step closer to gaining a lasting peace for our homeland. Shanene and I have found our peace..., and that will never be forgotten. We cannot thank you enough."

"It will be etched into the living wood of every tree in Selmor," Shanene agreed. "For this forest will rise to its former glory, full of wildlife and flower, laughter and cheer. Beauty will soar from this darkened ash of misery."

Tarmon continued, "The unity we have does not normally happen, not at Tarden, not anywhere. Our love is the very essence of the *Sacred*. I can now relate to some of the things we have discussed about the *Stone* and the *Pillars of Life*. Words do not do it justice." Loathing the acclaim, he smiled at Hanor's humility. "Most of all, you need to understand that we have to do this. As strong as our praise is, it is the only way of sharing the fullness of what we are experiencing. If you had not supported me, nobody else would have. Shanene here would have remained a prisoner, and I would have stayed oblivious to this harmony."

A touch embarrassed, Hanor felt it inappropriate to resist their views. Clearly delighted, it was hardly the setting to start an argument, not that they would. There were a few questions that needed clarifying.

"How did you create her in the first place?" he asked, returning to her incredible story. Her transformation had been scary.

Willing to approach the hardest of subjects, he deserved to have all his questions answered. "When one understands the forces of nature, one can work with subtler lives like animals and plants, even minerals like rock. After the attack, I was determined to rid myself of what I had done. I went into denial. Dismissing what my heart was telling me, I used my extensive knowledge to create her. First of all mentally. Then I drew her down to the physical world. She was real physically but had no Soul like we do."

"I do not follow," Hanor said, amazed at the idea.

"There is an invisible *light* within each of us, impressing things upon our minds to help guide us. That *light* comes from the *Source* of life itself. That *light* permeates all life to a degree, but without a *Soul*, creations like her are just thought forms that are not real."

Astounded by her wisdom, "Why did she not know what the *light* was?"

"Without a *Soul*, she cannot understand something that is from above. She just wanted the power even though *it* was beyond her comprehension. Tarmon's arrival heralded her undoing because his sight altered as soon as he was brought here. His vision was replaced by the sight of his *Soul*, denying her existence."

"It seems incredible," Hanor said, chuckling at the prospect of Hallen listening to this.

"And your understanding of the physical world enabled you to change your appearance?"

She laughed at his inquisitiveness. "Yes..., the physical world can be affected by the mental world, meaning our thoughts. But alas..., it was my determination to keep Selmor's heart pure that she materialised as she did." Sighing again, she looked around the garden. "I was able to keep everything white so my hopes would endure. I had to believe goodness would prevail."

"I am beginning to appreciate the miracle that has happened," Hanor said.

"Good," Tarmon commended. "And may we never forget it in the coming trials."

Dousing the fire of their affection, the looming problem of Mandurin soured the setting. Vivid images shown by the old woman meant the city was fighting for its life. "Surviving Selmor..., we have to enter Mandurin."

Tarmon spoke of what Brandor had once said. "We must rest in the quiet times to gain strength for the future."

"Easier said than done," Hanor said, guessing the source.

"But are you willing to do it?"

"I feel I am betraying those people who are dying if I were to rest here."

"It is not a matter of betrayal," Shanene intervened. "Your mind and body needs it. If you do not rest after such strains, you will weaken yourself and diminish the good you can do when you get there. Exhausted minds are a blunt tool. It is healthy to rest, and dare I say it..., laugh as well. We have just been talking about the inner *light*. Life is never as bad as it may appear, no matter how dark it gets."

Not having much of a response, she was right. "That sounds good to hear."

"It is a ray of light like you must be for others who may also fall into despair over the coming turns," she added. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Sometimes, when the peace rises in my heart, nothing bothers me. No circumstance is beyond our limitations."

"Your worries, a lot of the time... are your limitations."

"If ever there was someone to set an example of how to keep hope..., it is you Shanene."

"One turn of day..., people may look upon you in the same way."

Doubting it, the madness of it all still shook him. Gasping for another reason, "My gilth pouch! She threw it in the fountain."

"I know she did."

"Where is it?" he said, scurrying across to the pool.

Rising with Tarmon, they walked to where he waited, impatient. Dipping her staff into the milky waters, nowhere near where the old lady had thrown it, he was about to mention it when her rotating actions brought to the surface first a white chord then his purple pouch. Amazed, he needed no prompting to retrieve it. Catching hold, he pulled it out, expecting it to be soggy. Surprised, it was cold but not wet.

"The fountain's waters are not like drinking water," she explained. "It is the lifeblood of Selmor, and is precious to me and the forest's survival. Until these life-giving fluids can be returned to their rightful place, Selmor will remain sick."

Pulling the *Stone* from the bag, Hanor hoped she could shed light on it. "How does this work?"

"I now share Tarmon's memories," she said, drawn to the black *Stone*. "The loving qualities endowed upon *it* at the time of giving is the reason behind why the *Stone* is not like an ordinary one. Love purifies, and not just in the human sense. It works on the fabric of life too, including this *Stone*."

Knowing the *Sacred's* love bound life together in some remarkable way, the world would have little meaning without it. "Is *it* still active, I mean, can the powers run through *it*?"

Bestowed with so much potential, he was more of a marvel to her than the *Stone*. "Love never dies," was all she said.

"The fact *it* did not work outside Grovan does not mean *it* has served *its* purpose then?"

“Search your heart at what I just said.” Aware of the young man’s confrontation with *Nyshifters* through Tarmon, he was stronger than he realised.

“I hope *it* does work.”

“That will depend on you. The higher energies work through pure hearts and minds, so be guarded against what you think about.”

Far from pure, especially when rushing at those *Nyshifters*, he had presumed it was the *Sacred* rather than having anything to do with his own input. “What happens now?” he asked Tarmon, not wanting to get too comfortable.

“That depends on what *you* want to do,” Tarmon replied. “You seem to have recovered from your experience here in Selmor, when do you want to make a start?”

“Would *never* be too soon?” he kidded, tempted to lay on the lush grass. “I would like to see the others.”

“Me too,” the Tardanian agreed.

“Will you be joining our group?” Hanor asked Shanene, fond of the idea.

“You have not fully grasped my explanations,” she said, squeezing Tarmon’s hand. “I did say that I and Selmor are one.”

“I thought you were talking about a unity of... consciousness.”

“You are correct..., but you are missing other factors. As much as my physical body and Selmor’s are separate, there are subtle energies between us that are not. It would be the separation of these finer energies that would end my life.”

“You are imprisoned to Selmor still?” Hanor was aghast.

“It is not captivity, but merely who I am now.”

“And what about Tarmon?”

“I am free to come with you,” the Tard answered.

“But I thought... you had joined *Souls*, whatever that means.”

“We have merged on a *Soul* level, not on a physical or any other subtler body level.”

“What do you mean... subtler body level?”

“You have more than one body,” Shanene said, respecting his anxiety. “You desire things... do you not? And you think things and have emotions? These are all types of a complex system that enable you to function as you do, much of which is invisible. These are invisible *bodies*, if we may call them that. Mine are tied to Selmor. I cannot remove them, to do so would be like removing my Soul from my body. Do you know what happens when that takes place?”

“You die,” he said, saddened that she was not coming. “But you two have only just met... or merged or whatever you call it. You cannot part already!”

“We will never be apart,” Tarmon promised. “I will be conscious of Shanene whilst we travel, and our love will flow no matter what obstacles come our way.”

“Sounds like you are settling for half a relationship.”

“We no longer rely on the physical to be in one’s company,” Tarmon explained. “Just thinking about each other brings us closer than you and I are sitting here now.”

“That is close!” he said, conceding the two knew what was best. Bane and Hayla sprung to mind, wanting to hug them both. “When can we see the others? I do not want to spend the night in that dark part of the forest where we were caught. Can we stay here?”

“That is not possible,” she apologised. “Selmor has to start recovering, which begins in these gardens. The northern hordes could turn to Selmor and wreak havoc at anytime. After hundreds of seasons under the spell of evil, it is in a fragile state. It must be rebuilt with the powers contained within these gardens that rise up through the earth.

I cannot afford to delay its regeneration. Without healing powers that I will invoke, Selmor will die a lingering death.”

“And that would mean you too!”

“You learn quickly.”

“We had best get moving then,” Hanor said. “Will you stay with us until we leave?”

“It is the least I can do,” she said. “Stand on the stone,” she instructed, indicating the white slab where they had first arrived.

Joining them, Shanene’s gaze was full of tender appreciation. She did not have to say anything, kind eyes revealing what Hanor meant to her. Concentrating on what she had to do, the atmosphere around them grew hot as if the air was blistering. Transforming the setting, the whiteness faded and was replaced by trees. Catching his breath, they were standing at the forest’s edge and looking across the landscape that swept down and away from their high vantage point. Swells of coloured hilltops were enchanting, especially after the paleness of Shanene’s garden. Perched above the distant horizon, the departing sun warned this unbelievable turn was about to end. It seemed a world away from the troubles this world was facing.

“What about our friends?” Hanor cried. They were still asleep at Selmor’s centre.

“Do you think I would forget them too?” Shanene smirked, indicating the slumbering figures further back in the woods.

About to check they were safe, Hanor stopped, sensing something different. Amazed, the trees felt less ominous. “The forest is healing,” he said, perceiving the change.

“It is, and I must return shortly to focus those energies into the most needy areas of Selmor.”

Pulsed by sorrow, Hanor stalled. White features and a flowing gown stood out against the shadows of this once dying forest. She needed to heal too. “I am... going to miss you,” he said, giving her a hug. “It does not seem right to end like this.”

“End Hanor..., who said anything about an end? We have just begun!”

“Do you not want to meet the others?”

“Would they settle for just a couple of questions?” she posed, touching his cheek. “It was not easy sharing what I did with you.”

His friends would not let her leave until every doubt had been soothed. They had suffered because of her, and some might demand justice, Greema especially. Delaying her if she stayed, he was being selfish. “This is happening too quickly,” he said, staring out across the planes. Most odd, this felt more painful than when he had left his parents.

“We will meet again soon,” she promised, turning to Tarmon.

Strolling hand in hand, Hanor left them to walk in the fading sunlight. A picture of contentment, no words were exchanged, they were at one on a higher level and basking in that unity. Going to where the others lay sleeping, foreseeing their questions and accusations once they awoke, he had no idea how to deal with it.

Glancing up, Tarmon was making his way over. Behind him, Shanene stood for a moment gazing his way. Feeling her deep gratitude, Hanor nodded to show he understood. Silent, the air about her shimmered and she disappeared into the light.

Chapter 24: Birth of a Monster

"We need to talk about what happened at the bridge," Brandor said, the Hisian-set making camp on a low hillock. Ensuring adequate views of the local terrain in case danger approached, he left Tunder to chew on needle-seeds whilst setting up his bedding. Watchful of Rinn, those lightening forces that had killed the Bovern worried him.

Following the route the quest had taken after Nole's end, dusk was a short way off, the atmosphere sharp. Tralle's hot broth did little to steady anxieties for those sitting around the fire.

"Will you explain what we witnessed earlier?" a shocked Hader invited, gazing across at the silent Rinn.

Sipping his hot drink, the slim figure looked up from his deliberations. Permitting them to do the chasing, the issue was sensitive for all. "What do you want to know?"

"Come on Rinn! What was that *power*, and where did *it* come from?" Brorn challenged.

Expecting this, if they were to move forward as a unit, Rinn had to give them something. In awe of what happened, the potential was staggering. "I have made a discovery."

"Discovery?" Brandor sat straight. "One does not *discover* such things out of thin air. That reaction was not ordinary by any standards."

"As quick as a single thought," Whis agreed with him.

"No summoning or chanting!" Brandor's distaste echoed in every word. "No drawing energies from the *Unseen*! It was instant Rinn, and we need to know how. What have you unearthed?"

"You should be more respectful," Tralle shot, defensive.

"I will answer for myself," Rinn snipped, motioning for quiet. "I respect your doubts, but let us not forget the outcome."

"We are not disputing the results," Hader said. "It is the powers you used that concerns us. You do not deny it was you then?"

"I have no reason to avoid the truth. I merely wish for us to consider all implications."

"What manner of *power* was *it* then?" Brorn asked, troubled.

"In good time..., I will explain."

"Just get to the point," Hader said, accustomed to his delaying tactics.

"Without background, much will be missed," Rinn tried, but they were not having it.

"You are tampering with *powers* beyond your limits," Brandor warned.

Rinn could hardly disagree. "Is not our enemy beyond our limitations?"

"We already have one monster at our door, we do not need another."

"What makes you think *it* is a monster?" Tralle said, avoiding Rinn's glare. "*It* did away with a monster, or have you forgotten that?"

"The worst kind of monster," Sharn fired. "Is the one you cannot see."

"And one you do not understand," Brorn added.

"In ages past," Rinn seized the moment. They would just end up arguing the issue otherwise. "People were once frightened of the powers we now possess. If it had not been for people like us investigating such mysteries, ignorance would be just as frightening as any monster." Tempted to use the *Ileng Power*, he refrained, suspecting they would register *it* now that they had felt *its* energies. "When a new door is opened, it is natural to fear what dangers might lurk beyond. But what about the spirit of discovery, especially in

troubled times? We do not have time to analyse every new discovery, but does that mean we should shy away from the potential benefits they may bring? Do you not all feel invigorated, so why not chance it for once and ask questions later?"

"Fine words," Brandor said, tolerant. "But you are forgetting how many influences are attempting to lure us away from our cause. Your desires are for the good, but the *power* you have at your disposal is not necessarily for our benefit."

"Darkness is descending on our world," Sorlam cut in, gaining confidence now it was out in the open. "It is too big an opportunity to turn down."

"If there were no other options then perhaps, but that is not the case," Brandor said, the workings of his heart pressing upon him the graveness of the situation.

"Are you talking about the boy... or your *Wall of Power*?" Tralle scoffed.

"You have felt the two pulses of *power*, suggesting the *Sacred* are at work."

"*We move with the tools we have...*, is that not one of your favourite sayings?" Rinn spoke this time. "I do not propose to know all but this could be a time of testing. The results we have seen, we just have to maintain control."

"So how did you discover the *power*?" Sharn asked.

Stalling as if an intimate question, Rinn answered. "A doorway."

"What do you mean?" A warning light flashed for Brandor. "By whom... or what?"

"Who possesses such dynamic *powers*?"

A dream Brandor had shortly before their four comrades were taken by *Nyshifters* prompted him to retell it. "*Dark Forces* from the *Lower Realms* are trying to destroy our way of life, Rinn. I once had a dream where I was walking through a wood, and came before two doors embedded in the side of a large tree. They were gateways, one door was red, the other green. I had to choose. Entering the red meant untold effort and struggle, but if successful in my appointed tasks the rewards at the end would be worth it. Behind the green door was a great ocean of power beyond my wildest dreams. Forces surpassing my comprehension would open my eyes to a whole new world. The temptation was strong." Staring at Rinn, "Unlimited power through one door or untold effort only rewarded at the end through the other. They were powerful but opposing choices. In the dream state, my core values were put to the test."

Night moving in, to his left, Hader spoke.

"I had a similar dream," he said, staring into the fire as if viewing the details between its flickering flames. "But my one was through two caves. A large inviting cave alongside a small irrelevant one. The impressions were the same."

"You clearly chose the same as I," Brandor said, both men turning to Rinn.

"Mine... was not a dream," the oldest Dai-laman admitted. "But a vision, the sort you often describe, Brandor." Swimming across a small lake compared to an ocean had given Rinn the same option. The long hard route across the ocean had signalled the struggle mentioned, the shorter, easier way represented the rush towards the *Ileng Power* he now possessed. "Normally..., I would have chosen as you but... our predicament warranted otherwise. Can you blame me for opting for the *power*?"

"But whose *power* is it?" Hader asked, respecting his companion's openness. "The fact you have shared this means a great deal, and suggests you are still on top of *it*, but for how long? Take the other evening when Brandor's answers were nonsense, did that have anything to do with you?"

Guilty, the glory of saving the Freelands was dissolving right before him. Manipulations of Brandor were now seen for what they were, and his folly with it.

“What... nonsense?” Brandor asked, innocent.

Hader signalled for quiet.

“Are you saying this *Ileng Power* should not be used?” Rinn replied, defensive.

“But we do not know what the *power* is.”

“You have not asked me,” the older man said, to their surprise.

“Do you know?” Whis asked to his right.

“To a degree.”

“Enlighten us,” Hader requested, suspicious but respectful.

Refusing to accept the idea of not using the *power*, Rinn was not about to be undermined by fear. “It is the force that... *manifests*.”

“What do you mean... manifests?” Brandor asked.

“When you want something to manifest,” he said, keeping it simple. “Be it a plan, a building or anything you desire, ingredients are necessary to make it real. If you want a home, you need to find a solid place to build it. You will need materials and labour as well as an overall plan of what it will look like. These are basic details, but there is also a force that works with us trying to manifest our desires.”

“Interesting,” Hader had to admit. “Go on.”

“This force is a natural power that even the *Sacred* use to help manifest *their* plans.”

“And this force is what you have tapped into?” Brandor questioned.

“The *Ileng Power* is exactly that. It is not something to be feared but understood.”

A barrage of comments considered the possibilities. Brandor however, kept watch of his elder. Understanding the potential of what he had rejected, such *powers* were surely for the wise and not men dabbling on a hope. Astounded they had been granted this explosive potential, it made no sense why the *Sacred* would permit anyone to possess *it*.

“What other things can you do?” Brorn asked, lured in as Tralle and Sorlam were.

“Not much.” Rinn’s answer was unexpected, but he carried on. “Three cycles of the moons ago, I had the vision.” The night had wrapped itself about them, adding to their intrigue. “I am not the purest of hearts, and this I accept is the danger. I cannot afford to get complacent or arrogant, and doing good is at the forefront of my purpose. Nevertheless, *it* had to be tested, just as we have always done. The bovern was instinctive, but controlled I assure you. I have questions that reflect your own, perhaps this has come to light so that we can work on *it* as a group. It is too late to cast *it* aside with so much rampant evil, but your thoughts I am ready to receive.” His sincerity was not in question, but doubts remained.

“However this has happened,” Brandor began after a short pause. “I only see the frailties of man, and I mean that respectfully. We are incapable of using *forces* without corrupting the potential benefits they may have.”

“Why would the *Sacred* permit this then?” The idea troubled Whis.

“I am not certain *they* did,” Brandor said, guarded.

“I doubt any malignant being in the *unseen worlds* would have the power to permit this,” Rinn defended.

“I cannot say.”

“I see it as a blessing,” Rinn declared, believing it to be true.
 “If we are not mature enough to use the *power*, why allow us to use them?”
 “You have seen the Yarmi Folk’s powers.” Rinn needed them on his side. “Should I not use *it* if they confront us?”
 “I have no call over what you do, but we are dealing with *forces* beyond us.”
 “When using the *power*,” Hader spoke, trying a different direction. “Would you wipe clean the Freelands of this present *darkness* if you could?”
 “Who would not?” Sorlam said, interrupting.
 Hader waited for Rinn to speak for himself.
 “That depends on the circumstances,” the older Dai-laman said. “There are Higher Laws; to do so would cause rifts in the *Realms of the Unseen*.”
 “The forces unleashed would return to you demanding retribution,” Brandor said.
 “And I could become a monster myself.”
 “There is much to consider,” Brandor warned.
 “There is, that I know.”

Crackling in the early evening light, the canopied fire’s orange glow was the focal point for many startled eyes. Camped at the edge of Selmor forest, Tarmon and Hanor’s remarkable tale astounded all. Demanding answers as soon as they had awoken, the others had not expected that. Sensing the change in Selmor, supporting what was explained, it just seemed too incredulous to believe.

“Where is this woman now?” Greema split the silence, finding it difficult to accept. A woman killing a hundred Grovian’s and frightening even the Masters was unthinkable. “She has much to do if Selmor is to heal,” Tarmon said, conscious of her love whilst explaining his side of the tale.

“I can feel the difference,” Raldama said, peering into the shadows behind.

“What happened to those trees that attacked us?” Hallen asked, horrified by their strength. His neck still had the grip marks of their calculated hold.

“They will die and be replaced,” the Tard said, tuning into Shanene thoughts as though they were his own. “Selmor cannot survive knowing such horrors. Trees exist in a peaceful state and are not supposed to experience dark emotions.”

“Why did it get so bad?” Hayla asked. Avoiding eye contact with Hanor, after what he had been through, feelings for him were pulling again.

“Shanene’s motives were impaired by what she experienced. For a person of power, that can be disastrous.”

“I cannot forgive her for what she has done,” Greema snipped, dissatisfied with the glazed attitude of the Tard. “She killed people.”

“I do not condone what has happened,” Tarmon defended. “The more knowledge and power one has, the greater is the potential for destruction. She has had to learn that the hard way.”

“Easy to say when it is not your ancestors who perished,” the Grove snorted.

Reacting as though they were family, Grovians were renowned for holding onto the past. Tarmon respected that. “I am just glad her misery is over.”

“Thankful we are,” Kifter agreed.

“I am not insensitive,” the Grove said. “But we cannot abandon the atrocities of yesterturn.”

"No one is abandoning anything," Raldama said. "Only the foolish do not learn from mistakes. But this should be a time of celebration not condemnation."

"A time for renewed hope," Kifter said, poking the fire.

"I see I am on my own again," Greema protested, leaning back on his elbow. "Have you all got something against Groves?"

"No need to sulk," Hallen cautioned. Up until that comment, he agreed with the Grove.

"I am not sulking!" Greema spat the words out.

"Are we not all on the same side?" Hayla intervened, Hallen glaring at the Grove.

"He is showing his colours now," the Hite teased, looking away.

"The mirror reflects," Greema growled, furious.

"I do not believe I am hearing this," Tarmon interceded, disgusted at the two. "We have just escaped death, and you two start when the enemy is at our door."

"Old habits die hard," Kifter said, giving his friend a nudge. "Will you behave!"

"You know me..., happy as the next person. It just depends who that is." Without looking up, he could feel the burning stare of the Grove on him.

"We should leave this," Tarmon said, disappointed by the mood. "Let us concentrate on real issues."

"They both need a cold dousing," Kifter added, displeased.

"I need a drink," Hallen said, reaching for his Sasta skin. Gulping a mouthful, the release was enough to settle him. "Do you want some?" Offering it to the Grove, aware they rarely drank, he could not help himself.

"Keep your poison!" Greema rejected.

Shrugging, Hallen cast the Fife a '*I did try*' sort of look.

Warning him, Kifter took the Sasta. "This is a time to celebrate," he said, handing the skin to Bane beside him.

"Hey..., that is precious stuff," Hallen protested, playful. "Do not spill any young Bane."

"After what we have been through," Bane said, receiving the drink. "I doubt there will be any left by the morning." Taking a sip, he spluttered to everyone's amusement.

Humour was all the drink Hanor needed. "Let us be merry this night and leave questions for tomorrow. And Greema!" he warned. "Life is too short."

The mood remained upbeat, clapping hands at the odd song or listening to the occasional light tale helped ease the atmosphere. For now, the darkness of that turn and what was to come were forgotten.

Enjoying the setting through Tarmon, Shanene tuned into the group's antics, marvelling at what it was like to be akin to people again. At one point, the Tardanian fell silent when she cried tears of joy at being free. Although his companions did not know her, she knew them by her unity with Tarmon. Through that bond, the importance of fellowship was finally attained. Time stood still in that pocket of the Freelands.

Stretching wide, Hanor sat up. At what point he had drifted off last night he did not know. The jollities had kept going, and they could now look forward with optimism.

"Where is Tarmon?" he asked Kifter. Hallen, Bane and Hayla were still sleeping. Raldama was leaning against a tree looking out at the splendid view. A short way behind him sat the huge Balkorn as silent and impenetrable as ever.

"Tarmon has gone to see his lady friend," the Fife said.

“What time is it?”

“Midmorning,” Kifter said, waiting for the water to boil in the pan. “You all needed a good rest.”

“We did,” Hanor said, yawning. “Where is Greema?”

“Gone for a walk out on the planes.”

Rising together, Bane and Hayla sat up, leaving only the big Hite to slumber.

“Ouch!” Bane winced, holding his head.

“Sasta claims another victim,” Kifter chuckled. Adding spices and lumps of meat to the simmering pot, “Are you hungry?”

“I am,” Hayla said, tying her fair hair behind her head. “I have not laughed that much for a long time,” she said, giving Hanor a polite but detached nod.

“You and Bane made a lovely couple last night,” Kifter teased, casting the young lad a knowing look.

“To dance is to be happy. Just do what you do best,” she advised, warning him.

“I enjoyed it too,” Bane said, stalling when caught by a slash of guilt. Turning to Hanor, unsure what his friend would think about his closeness to Hayla the previous evening, the fact their mats were next to each other did not help. “How... are you?”

Appreciating why Bane felt guilty, dancing as they had, Hanor was just pleased to see him happy. If Hayla was the reason, then good, hoping it would last. “I am well.”

An urge to hug them moved Hanor to action. Stepping over, he reached around the two and gave them an affectionate squeeze. Shrugging off embarrassment, “Sometimes, we need to do that,” he said, poking Kifter who was smirking.

Taken aback, “What a strange bunch we are,” Hayla laughed, snapping Hallen from his slumber.

“What... what is... happening?” the big Hite called, grappling for his sword. “Is... someone attacking?” he said, getting ready. Amused companions sobered him up. “Oh, I... was having... a dream.”

“Reacting like that, even rassers would be safe,” Kifter joked.

Hallen gave his friend a curt shove. “Just in time for something hot I see!” he said when composed. “Where are the kyboes?”

“Out on the planes along with your adversary,” Kifter said, shaking his head. “We expected it sooner or later.”

“Do not blame me,” Hallen defended. “I did offer him my Sasta.”

“Just be respectful for once!”

Behind the Hite, Tarmon was heading for their camp from deep inside the wood.

A wry grin crossed Hallen’s lips. “Here comes love itself in Tardanian garb.”

“You have lived a sheltered life,” Kifter chided. “I look forward to when you get bitten.”

From the other direction, Greema was returning from the fields.

“And in they come... one by one,” Hallen teased winking at Hanor and Bane.

“Enough!” the Fife warned, disliking the Hite’s satirical mood.

“How is everyone?” Tarmon asked.

Affirming how well they were, even Greema was polite, refreshed from his walk.

“Will we be off soon?” Hallen pressed.

“When everyone is ready,” the Tard said, sitting down. “That smells good, Kifter.”

“Do you want your female friend to join us, Tarmon?” Raldama asked, intrigued by the enigmatic lady.

“She would like to meet you all but... going by our initial reactions yester-turn, it would be too much of a distraction and burden.”

“Can she not decide that for herself?” Hayla said, interested.

“She knows everything you are saying, just as I know what she is thinking and feeling.”

“Weird!” Hallen said. Sharing his thoughts with someone would be scary.

“You should try it first before rejecting it,” Tarmon advised.

“And this is what you call love?”

“Love at its fullest.”

“What about when we leave?” Hayla asked, irritated by her own failed love. Careful not to look at Hanor, she was angry at falling for this love bug. Getting close to Bane last night just to be free from those feelings, they were like two spurned lovers coping with betrayal. Making it clear to Bane that she just wanted to be friends, both had benefited when offloading their problems. What did not help was Hanor’s unexpected hug a short while ago. Why was she so hung up on him? Unable to be free until she could look him in the eye and not flutter, it was not impossible, she just had to work at it.

“She will be with me... wherever I go,” Tarmon said, answering her question.

“Everywhere?” Hallen said. “Even when you...?”

“Hallen!” Kifter cut him short, aware of his direction. “Can we keep this above your Hitorian level?”

“It is a valid point,” the Hite stayed his ground. “He says he is so in love, let him speak. I have got used to Hanor’s language, I am sure I will find him equally irritating. I would prefer to listen to a Grovian warmonger than a bedazzled fool.”

“You are right to speak your mind,” Tarmon said, sensitive to his point. “I apologise now for my lofty ways, it will not hamper the group.”

“Just as I will not hamper anyone,” Hallen said, sarcastic. Greema’s returning gaze was sharp. Sighing, the Hite just wanted to finish his meal and get going.

A twisted heart shrieked, satisfied at the outcome. Other cries accompanied the first, hysterical. Known only to those reeking of its cold, calculating nature, the chilling laughs reverberated throughout the harsh mountains of the north. Despicable sounds evermore frequent and disturbing, ignorant heads turned at what it meant. Some hid, postponing their scrounging whilst the terrible sounds lasted. Others knew exactly whence the laughter came and shuddered.

The snow-capped peaks of Orbaddon sparsely witnessed any sanity these days, just a blind lust for destruction. Grav-end stood forbidding amongst its smaller rocky allies, jutting from the earth like a great mountainous hand reaching up to the heavens. Determined to seize that which was sacred, dark energies oozed from the rocks, mirroring the dark chasm of Gorg-darl’s heart. Those succumbing to his mighty hand knew not why his need for retribution was so final, scars from a distant past unhealed. Relieved to ensure the pain was not forgotten, motivating him to ensure the new world he envisioned would be made real, mad some would call him. Light had to break through the darkness to shine, and what needed doing was a price he was willing to pay.

Peering down from the cavern’s roof at the Master working below, twelve Nyshifters were perched high on a ledge of rock like a ring of death. His fire, so energising and

unifying, fed them like a fountain of life. Sharing in his pains and every pleasure, when he was angry, they would cower like the fragile fliryns they had once been. Dreading the wrath aimed their way, but the Master needed to release frustrations, for his work was strenuous. Fitting they should be the focus of such fury, at times only one would be singled out, but more often than not all were targeted, scolded by the intensity of his power. Flames of energy had grilled their flesh to the blackened charred armour it now was. Re-shaping their minds and bodies, when pleased, he would call one of them down to be rewarded like a faithful servant. Ripples of pleasure from his intimate touch left them hanging at the edge of a perverted bliss, dismissing the lucky one back to its delirium above. Always thirsting for more, the addictive manipulations of the Master bound them to him forever.

Now, with the Master in a good mood, one would soon feel his precious touch. Labouring for countless turns on a new project, the twelve had been neglected. Carrying out his duties abroad the Freelands, they had been condemned to silence. The new Servant below had another task to do. Sensing it through the Master's will, the beast below would not replace them as his most treasured. Contributing to the unfolding of his immense plan, how grand he was.

Admiring the magnificent beast standing before him, Gorg-darl's genius was now undeniable. Using all his power to build the formidable creature, a mighty undertaking had it been, its massive hulk dwarfing most that went before. Towering nearly twice that of a man with a girth to match, deep grey flesh glistened in the half-light. Dark and unstinting, bloodshot eyes peered up and around, taking stock of its birth into this world. Crowned upon its enormous rock of a head was Gorg-darl's prized asset. Once what was white, now jutting black and contemptible, the magic horn of the Great White Freeloaver flashed in the golden light of many firesides. Its power a beacon of destruction to befall those opposing him, he needed the horn to guide this beast, its crystalline structure an ideal receiver for his power. Revenge would be his.

Looking down at itself and then around the golden half-lit hall of splendour, it threw back its head and a glorious roar echoed around the cavern of pillared columns and archways of stone. Many heard and fell silent. Those of the Watch, Gorg-darl's elite guard, dared not question what was to follow. Hurrying back to their tasks, much had to be done for the next wave to move south.

Touching the beast's forearm, running scrawny white fingers along the sensitive tissue, to see it ready after so much work was gratifying. "My... virile hunter," he said, checking the monster over. Holding one of its giant hands in his own, one of four large clawed fingers filled the cup of his skinny hand. Digging into its flesh, feeling its pain by way of the horn, the creature did not flinch. Retracting his fingers, Gorg-darl touched the wound, a searing red light sealing it. Again, pain could be sensed, but it did not trouble him. Ensuring his mental connection to it was sensitive enough to suffer the torment this monster was to inflict, great was the Plan he had devised.

Mulling over the reason for its creation, twelve men of power had encircled him intent on his destruction. Their scorching fire had nearly killed him. Directing his will and power into a crystal, it had been enough to distract them and ensure escape. Hunting him down like an animal, this was justice, the beast biting back.

Manipulating the four Dai-lamen snatched from the Sleep thirty full-seasons ago to help create his monstrous horde, he had used their body tissue to create this beast of power. Now dead, what he intended for the surviving members of the Hisian-set had been written into the very fabric of its creation. Nothing but death could stop it now.

Searching the shadows above for the twelve nyshifters, silhouettes against the rock face, keen was hunter's vision given by the Master. Raising a clenched fist, veins pulsed, a rush of mixed blood energising its will to move. Restrained by the Master through the horn, haunting eyes awaited release.

"Was it not worth the wait?" Gorg-darl cackled to the twelve, releasing a wave of lust to embrace them. Their delight reinforced his own. Pointing at the cavernous doors, "Seek and find," he ordered, letting it go.

Thrusting the huge blackened horn back and forth, the hunter's first step was careful, unsure what to do. Followed by another, movements were jerky before breaking into a disjointed run. Fluency was gained by the time it reached the large arcing exit. Heading down the long passageway of shadows, without tiring or needing sleep, the driving power behind the horn promised an unlimited supply of energy. Long was the road ahead.

Two enormous stone doors swung outwards, the hunter pressing on, breaking out into sunshine for the first time in its short life. Unaffected by sunlight, its skin hardened under the warm temperate light. Traversing the wide gravel track snaking down the mountainside of Grav-end, it was just after half-turn of the day with little movement below or ahead. Dust whipped up by the wind was the only sign of life, no bush or tree growing in such harsh conditions.

Tramping along the dusty way, the hunter ran with long arms cocked at its side. Powerful legs coped with undulations in the track. Unfaltering when stepping on spiky rocks or in divots, sharp stabbing pains were sensed only by its watchful Master. A running machine, driven without care for itself, it pounded the ground with bare feet and pronged toes.

A sheer drop to the side gave no cause for alarm, following the centre in the road as if guided. Weather-torn, a sharp rock face rose to its left to snow-capped peaks. Gradual, the slope in the road headed for a loop below which double backed, zigzagging down the mountainside. Finally levelling out, the main way went south, the silent mountains to either side groaning at the workings of men. Meandering through the gorge, the road had been cut here by fierce winds blasting south and the tread of cumbersome feet. Shadows stretched across the gap, the hunter running without disturbance.

Reaching a fork in the road, both routes headed up and away, running along the mountainsides adjacent to each other. A deep ravine in front was the cause, cutting into the earth like an entrenched dividing line to keep the opposing mountains apart. The lone traveller headed left. The incline was gradual, the beast true and straight. Signs of large numbers passing this way were evident, but it meant nothing to the monstrous creature. Noises rumbled or squealed, echoing around this long corridor. Continuing their lazy climb up towards the mountaintops, darkening shadows invited its inhabitants to break cover at sundown if they dared. A myriad of tunnels lining this route were infested with gorgs and other creatures that thrived in the choky depths of this region. Dry and barren

above ground, a tide of life beneath thrummed in the dimness. Warm rocks and hot underground springs kept the conditions soggy, ideal to feed on fungus and other dark-loving plants thriving there. Sustaining small foul wretches, they were then fed on by the Dark One's expanding horde. Such details meant nothing to the horned beast running above in the late after-noon sun.

Delighted by his abominable work, Gori-darl lay on top of his ornate stone bench to catch up on other routes by which he was working.

Chapter 25: A Baltian Friend

Even with the threat of rain, riding brought its own miraculous healing as Kifter and the others made good progress. Intending to make camp early that evening, *Nyshifters* and other foul creatures were likely to be crossed sooner rather than later. Scanning the horizon for movements, Tarmon explained they would reach the Cropping Village of Muelly the following turn. A place deserted when Mandurin was first attacked, it would take over a turn after that to reach the doomed city.

Unnerving to think their group was being watched by Tarmon's new love, Shanene, using the fountain to ensure they did not run into trouble, even Hallen had to concede her involvement had its merits. Shrugging it off with a casual "*Whatever you are happy with*", he could not get his mind around it.

Falling midway through the after-turns, a fine drizzle dampened spirits. Pulling hoods up, Hallen cursed the *Sacred* for hounding him just because he did not embrace *their* ways. Tolerating the Hite, Hanor and Tarmon shrugged; *The Hidden Mysteries* to life were exactly that, hidden. People like Hallen were too preoccupied with the outer world to look within during quiet moments to where *they* might be discovered. Enough had already been said on the matter, both refusing to comment.

Meandering through rocky outcrops, a fluctuating landscape kept attentions focused. A spy was all it would take to give them away, dreaded *Nyshifters* the result when night fell. Not expecting anyone this far out, they could ill afford to lapse. Reservations about what they were to do at Mandurin filtered through the greyness, the details shown to Hanor by the old lady haunting everyone. Dusk could not come soon enough.

Unsavory impressions within would not shift, Brandor detecting destruction on the horizon if Rinn was not stopped now. As sincere as his companion was, desires to find the miraculous had now blinded him to the dangers involved. Without higher guidance, the risks were inconceivable. Rinn's reasons were inadequate, sounding like a youth who had stumbled across a magical weapon. Frustrated, he needed to focus on the real threat, the Yarmi Folk, suspecting they had already been alerted to their arrival by the episode.

Scanning the drab landscape, its brown shades might have been rotten for what life-giving qualities it had. Low thuds of their passing dulled the senses. Stopping for short periods throughout the turn, the atmosphere did not lighten, a heated discussion just an untidy word away.

By nightfall, a sharpness underlined every glance or passing comment. The fact Sorlam was still with them was not enough to sway Hader or Brandor. Too much was at stake to embrace the unknown. Covering the same issues mentioned the previous evening whilst eating, the food seemed as bland as the answers given.

By the time they settled for the night, Rinn was determined to proceed with his new found power. Causing enough unrest to warrant an early night, the marvels of melding minds two nights ago was lost.

Skittering away from a chasing Gorgon, the small Mox scurried through a narrow hole and out onto the main track. Pushing open the disguised door, the pursuing Gorgon was too focused on the creature to see the newcomer bounding towards it. Turning too late, the enormous foot crashed down on its head, its pitiable life draining away. Purple

blood stained the stony ground.

Peeking from over the side of the rim, the tiny Mox stared at the carcass. Looking to where the giant horned figure continued down the road, it ducked when a larger Gorl came out of the tunnel to investigate. Picking up the lifeless form, it too stared after the beast. Growling, it turned and entered the passage, slamming the rocky door behind. The small dead Gorl would suffice.

Scurrying to another small entrance away from its larger predators, it was not good for the Mox to be out in the open. Entering the concealed hole behind the boulder, its freedom was short-lived, a crunching bite putting an end to its meagre life.

Camp was made at the base of a large outcrop of rock. Jutting proud, Tarmon decreed it would keep them dry for the night. A short-turn before nightfall, smoke from the fire got saturated the moment it escaped their shelter. Probably their last hot meal for a while, they were fortunate to find this place.

“What will we do when we get to Mandurin?” Raldama asked, moving the topic towards their daunting future. Eating their meal, the light drizzle was not letting up. Directing the question to Tarmon, his insights were a source of intrigue as much as confusion. “We have heard Hanor’s account of what he saw in the fountain, how are we to find the third *Pillar of Life*?”

There was little Tarmon could say to steady their woes. “We have faced trials before, sometimes against overwhelming odds, and yet... we have prevailed. We need to have faith that a way can be found.”

Warmth in his heart comforted him, Shanene compassionate to their plight. Sharing the morning together in her garden, it had been more for Tarmon than her. Desiring nothing more than to spend eternity with her, she had been the strong one, highlighting the necessity for him to uphold his commitment to their cause. Without their connection, he doubted he would have left. Fears of the Northern Hordes invading Selmor had also worried him, using its trees for ramps and instruments of war. Even so, she had softened his troubles, assuring him that Selmor had to be reborn to rid itself of its humanly stained limbs to grow new ones. Sighing at her composure, he missed her already.

Bane sat listening to the discussion, uninterested in the details. Only when Kifter began one of his eventful tales did he take notice. Letting Hanor know across the fire that he was fine, he felt good, no moods hounding him during their ride. Thankful, Hayla had lifted him, talking as friends should. Longings for her had passed, so too the guilt concerning Hanor’s feelings.

As the Fife continued his narrative, Bane felt numb sensations on his temples. Rubbing them, the *Voice* alarmed him.

“She will be yours one turn of the day,” the *Voice* said as if it was already set.

Glancing over his shoulder, certain someone was behind, only the curving rock meeting the ground was visible. Rejecting the strange voice as a figment of a tired mind, he tuned into what Kifter was saying again.

“Do you feel it in your heart?” the *Voice* said, like a whispering aid.

Looking around, Hayla and Hallen were sitting either side but seemed oblivious to the *Voice*, as did everyone else. Staring out into the fading night, only the dim grey sky glared back. Daring not to speak for fear of the others laughing, he ignored the tale to monitor his thoughts instead.

"About time too, Bane," the *Voice* said, like a waiting friend. Enduring immense strains of late, had he reached the edge of sanity? Rubbing the sides of his head, Bane could tell something was different.

"I told you before that she would be yours," the *Voice* said, unconcerned by the affect it was having.

Unsure why, the *presence* seemed familiar.

"Yes..., we have spoken before," the *Voice* said, responding to his thoughts.

"This is not real," Bane thought, daring not to move. "How is it possible?" The fact he detected a vague association stopped him from leaping in fright.

"I told you before that she would be yours," the *Voice* repeated its earlier statement.

"Are you talking to me?" he asked, thinking the words, not daring to say them.

"Of course I am, Bane."

"Who... are you?" he asked, now lost to the Fife's tale.

"I told you that I am your guide, and have come to reveal your destiny."

"What... destiny?" Bane braved. The *Voice* sounded like his own thoughts, yet felt different as if of their own making. Was he going mad?

"I explained before that you had to learn to trust me."

"What do you mean before? I do not recall anything like this?" he said, worried.

"I came to you when you were half-asleep, for the shock would have frightened you."

"So... do I know you?"

"Do you want to know your destiny?" The question deviated from his enquiry. *"I have told you Hayla will be yours..., is that not coming to pass?"*

Looking at her, she sat listening to Kifter's tale, eyes glistening in the fading light. Tempted to consider it, could she be his?

"Is it not coming to pass?" the question repeated.

"She said she just wants to be friends."

"How many relationships start as just friends?"

His mother and father had grown up together and married, and a few others had done so too. "You asked if I wanted to know my destiny..., is it with her?"

"It is... but much more besides," the *Voice* said, drawing him further in.

"Like what?" Bane said, not realising he was getting comfortable.

"You have a large part to play in the scheme of things."

"You have the wrong person, it is Hanor you want... not me."

"I have the right person, Bane. I will speak to you concerning your destiny in the future," the *Voice* said, preparing to finish. *"But first, I want you to see how your relationship with Hayla develops, just as I promised."*

Unnerved, "I do not like this dialogue," he said, with no idea how it was possible or with whom. "You have not told me who you are."

"In due course, we will meet," the *Voice* replied, not giving anything away.

"That is not good enough," Bane said, suspicious. "If you cannot tell me who you are... then I see no reason to trust you."

"You have trusted me up until this point. She will be yours, and you know I am speaking the truth. Am I not right?"

A gnawing appeared to register it as true even though he could not verify it. "That does not count."

"Do you deny that I can influence the future as well as read it?"

"I doubt that very much," Bane said, in the not so private areas of his mind.

"Then I withdraw my support for you..., and likewise your closeness to Hayla will end. Without trust..., we are of little use to each other."

"You cannot do it anyway," Bane said, unconvinced.

"Without your commitment, you will fail us both! Only if you plead will I come again."

Pressures on his temples lifted when the *presence* left. Peculiar, a chill shivered down Bane's spine. Kifter's tale returned, but found the delightful lady sitting beside him more important. Hayla's friendship had seemed enough, but now the intrusion ignited wilder emotions. Was it possible that she might want to be intimate with him? Relegating the notion as a fanciful dream, his heart leapt when her hand patted his knee. Flashing a sweet smile before listening to the story again, the prospect of missing out churned his stomach. What if the *Voice* was telling the truth and could influence her enough to change her mind about him?

Lying down on his mat, Hayla eased back on her elbows beside him, still listening to the Fifanian. Sharing his problems with her, she knew he was fragile and needed supporting. As if responding to that thought, her hand reached across to hold his for a moment, startling him. What had the *Voice* done?

Night arrived, creeping up like a veil of mischief. Abilities yet to be tested, Gorf-darl's attention to detail would not be proven until the Hunter confronted a worthy opponent. Its size was formidable, but a mighty blade could soon undo his work.

Approaching the minor camp, an alcove cut in the rock to protect the Watch from anyone coming up from the south, the Hunter moved with deathly speed. Confident chatter spoke above the small fireside, not expecting trouble. Not until the Hunter was on them did they react.

Six Gorls, two as big as the Hunter, had not even stood before the menacing beast attacked. Fluent movements throttled two smaller ones with a crunching grip. Jabbing one of the larger ones with its huge horn when it came to their aid, another fell to a blow to the head whilst the other big Gorl lunged forward but was not quick enough. Sidestepping, the creature's momentum bowled it over, the Hunter leaping up and down onto its vulnerable neck. The sixth Gorl started running, but the mighty animal caught it by the scruff of the neck, and with one sweeping arm, sent it over the side of the road and down into the abyss.

Without stopping to catch breath, the Hunter continued on its way. Unconcerned by what had taken place, stillness returning to that shadowed valley, only the steady sounds of crunching steps scratched the silence.

Taking the second watch with Balkorn, Hanor decided it was time they got to know each other better. Getting used to the Balt's large bulbous eyes watching him, he was like a living shadow. Not one to question or put forward ideas, he seemed happy just to be

part of the group. Carrying his long thin staff wherever he went, Balkorn's skinned sleeveless top and jaded skirt to the knees seemed unsuitable for the cold. Standing out most amongst all of them, palm sized eyes rarely blinked but held deep wisdom that ordered respect. Glinting in the dark, he was not the type to start a conversation.

Sitting next to a large bush perched on a small mound a short distance from the main camp, it gave them excellent views across the bumping terrain. The big Baltian sat composed and watchful.

"You do not say much," Hanor began, keeping his voice low. Uncertain what reaction he was to get, silence lingered before the Baltian responded.

"Words should be used wisely," he said, voice coarse and throaty.

Surprising Hanor, for him to say a whole sentence was encouraging. "Why have you come on this ridiculous quest?"

"Ridiculous...?"

"Is it not then?"

"To touch the *Sacred* is a most holy thing. I admire what you have done."

For someone so mighty to praise him seemed strange. "I did not have much choice."

"We all have a choice."

"You would do the same if in my position."

After another brief pause, the large Baltian replied. "We all like to think we are capable of great tasks, imagining we could deal with any challenge set before us, but most fail due to fear. You have not."

"I have not done anything extraordinary," Hanor defended, not expecting this. "The *powers* involved are amazing, not me."

"Yes they are, but there are not many who could handle them as you have."

"I disagree," Hanor said, peering out into the darkness, getting a better picture as to why the Balt had taken up the protective role that he had. "I am a tool the *powers* use."

"Why were the *Nightwings* frightened off by you?"

"It was not me," Hanor said, trusting he meant *Nyshifters*. "But the *powers* in the *Stone*."

"Why do those *forces* not flow of *their* own accord then?" Balkorn asked. "The *powers* need you, therefore sealing your worth."

Not considering it before, "Why did *they* not ignite outside Grovan? I was willing, so maybe I am not as valuable as you say."

"Something stopped *them*."

"What did?"

"You!"

Suspecting it already, his fury the reason, to have it confirmed by the Baltian made it all the more troubling. Originally blaming the *Sacred* for letting him down, Shanene's advice about guarding his thoughts reinforced the Balt's point. "I am not so sure."

"The tool, as you have called yourself, needs to be pure for the *powers* to rise."

Warming to his advice like he had the Lady of Selmor, trusting they were on the right track, the *light* was exactly that, pure. Brandor had also mentioned about being pure of heart. "I am far from pure."

"To weigh the heart is not done by judging the outer, but by judging the inner. It is to do with motives."

Surprised by the depth of his companion, "I do not see my motives as pure either."

“How much time do you spend observing your motives?”

“Rarely!”

“Question why you do what you do, and you will see how true your motives are.”

“Perhaps I will,” Hanor said, feeling good about this dialogue. “Why do you not talk more? You are very perceptive.”

“Words are precious... like life,” the Balt said after another pause.

“But you could save us making grave errors.”

“I have not seen any errors since joining this group.”

“You could have saved us from some tricky situations though.”

“Your decisions have been commendable,” he said, disagreeing. “Few would have dealt with situations as you have.”

“I am not very good with praise..., especially when I do not deserve it.”

“Humility is a cherished thing..., but you are not judging yourself correctly. You use the eyes of your past and attach false ideas about who you are. Be true to yourself, and you will see just how pure you are.”

Getting late, Hanor was in no mood to debate the possibilities, giving up on Balkorn’s reasoning. “Will you tell me about your people?” Suspecting the big fellow was paying as much attention to the surrounding area as he was their exchange, he needed to hear him talk just to stay awake.

Gazing up at the starlit sky, Balkorn savoured the cold, appreciating its ability to keep one alert when tired. “My people are proud and noble,” he began, enjoying cherished memories. “We are quiet by nature and humble.” Pausing as was his custom, Hanor was certain Balkorn put his whole heart into everything he said. “Strong traditions and values bind our lives, and love for the common good is important.” Slow, rhythmic breathing drew his listener closer like primitive music. Hanor felt honoured as the Balt continued whilst searching the stillness. “Freedom is also of prime importance, hence why our people will answer Brandor’s call against this coming storm. Brandor and the Hisian-set are highly esteemed by my people. Honouring them from ancient times, our Sages say their work is of the highest order, as with all Masters across the Freelands. More people should listen to their wisdom.”

The occasional periods of silence were a clear sign of maturity and patience, not hurrying anything. “For many long ages..., our people have known about this *Darkness*. Our Sages warned the Hisian-set about it. Respect was given but no preparation made. So, our Sages prepared our people for what would come. Foretelling of a *light* that would come, they said we were to prepare someone to support that *light* on behalf of our nation.” Balkorn proceeded as if relaying a guarded secret. “Every full season, our Sages lay down tests, severe trials to draw the best from our people. Seeking the strongest and most courageous, one is always chosen, a privileged one. Assessing strengths in battle, endurance and sense of duty to the cause, many step forward hoping to be the bravest and noblest of our kind. To be honoured even above the Sages... and granted the task of protectorate and load-bearer for the sacred *light* to come. It is a blessing for those who are chosen.” Thoughtful, the achievement had been worth every pain.

Stunned by the details, Hanor was alarmed that a whole nation could be so absorbed by such a concept. Shaking for a time, Balkorn was talking about him being that *light*. Enduring trials for this so-called honour, Balkorn had won this season’s contest and was

considered the mightiest of his people. Serving him like a High-man, he could now appreciate the Baltian's irregular behaviour since meeting.

"When Brandor arrived declaring the impending doom had come, our Sages told us to prepare.

*Four and one at the Vale
Light or Darkness will prevail
Heaven and Earth join as one
Slavery or Freedom must be won.*

This prophecy has commanded us to do the *Sacred's* bidding at any cost. To live up to our responsibilities at the end of this Age."

Finishing, Hanor sensed it had not been easy for the Baltian to be so intimate. Not realising how profound their present undertaking was, so many were relying on them to succeed. Why had *he* been chosen and not someone as cultured as his large companion here? Inadequacy stole away any self-worth from being in such an honoured position. Just a boy with no real desires to be anything significant, even as heir to a High-house did not really hold any importance. Wanting to live life without titles, there was little he could add to Balkorn's revelations.

Closing his eyes, hoping the darkness might steal him away, "What is Baltiar like?" he asked, needing to keep his sanity as well as awake.

Obedying the request, Balkorn spoke with care like a father to a young son. "Baltiar's southern borders gaze out onto the great ocean of the deep. It is harsh and inhospitable, but its northern side is richer..., green fields and trees in abundance. Our populace is small but the unity strong. We strive towards the betterment of everyone, and teach our young about the *Sacred* and the wonders of *their* ways. We enjoy singing, especially our children, for in a song is great wonder, and the *Soul* delights in such blessings."

Ending, thoughts about Balkorn's beloved at home arose. Expecting their firstborn, tinged with sadness by what he knew, his line would continue at least, which was important for any Baltian. His child would be told of the great sacrifice its father had made for their people. Insights shown by the holy Sages meant he would never see it grow up. Saddened, it was a price he was willing to pay.

A soft whistling sound caught Balkorn's attention. Hanor had fallen asleep on his elbows. Tender like a doting father, he eased his arms out and lay him down. Sighing, Balkorn could see strength in the boy but so much fragility. The *Sacred* worked in mysterious ways.

Flying above the Hunter, four Nyshifters arced through the silence of night. Watching the beast deal with those sloppy Gorls, impressive, their Master had spawned a monstrous fighting animal. Swooping down and around the beast, the creature was unfazed by their attention. Shrilling into the darkness, heralding the arrival of the Master's prized Hunter, its ultimate objective lay far to the south. Receiving their reward from the Master earlier, it was good to be the focus of his affections again.

“Stop!” the Gorln growled at the Hunter through the twilight. As Leader of thirty Gorls guarding the Great Path, no one moved without its permission. A beast never seen before, even newcomers from Grav-end needed its approval. Scrutinising the formidable figure, the massive horn catching the eye, “Did you not hear my command?” The animal was not slowing. Holding an enormous blade ready, the Gorln had a reputation to keep. One only climbed the ranks if willing to strike first. Ensuring it was seen by all, the fact many of its throng were here would give its authority a boost. To rule by the hand of steel meant success and the Master’s attentions. A ruthless ability to dominate any situation, it thrived on these challenges. Not much bigger than itself, the oncoming beast was a worthy rival.

Gorls nearby stepped back, expecting a fight. The newcomer seemed unperturbed by their numbers to its peril. Growls of encouragement enflamed the confrontation, a battle of the giants. Blocking the Hunter’s way, the Gorln grinned. With a belching howl, it swept its enormous blade into the air ready for the fatal blow.

Studying the aggressive challenger, when the Gorln lifted the blade high, with unmatchable speed, the Hunter lunged at the hostile figure. Too fast for the Gorln, the thumping impact caught it off guard. Not using its horn, the Hunter reached up and around the Gorln’s neck. Linking underneath its upraised arm and around its back, with a firm clasping action, it pulled tight. Unbalancing its foe, its momentum knocking it backwards, the crunching sounds of broken bones and displaced ligaments rendered the air quiet. Landing on its own spiked back gripping the now limp form, the Hunter gave another sharp wrench to finish the Gorln off.

So quick and effective, Gorls nearby recognised power when they saw it. Respect of supremacy was the governing principle by which they lived. Stunned to silence that their leader was now lying limp on the ground, when the newcomer leapt to its feet, a corridor appeared to let it through. Pressing on as if nothing had happened, staring as it passed, a vacuum for leadership triggered a bay of calls. Staking their claim as Gorln, more slaughter was in the making, the Hunter leaving them to it.

“Is not my work beautiful?” Gori-darl shrieked, sharing the delight with his twelve Nyshifters. Receiving his tidings whilst in the throes of their work, he had created an arresting beast of many talents. Yet, the best part was to come.

Chapter 26: Muelly

The sound of voices woke Hanor. Propping himself up, it was already morning, surprised at being back on his mat. Looking around for the noble figure of Balkorn, the Balt sat impassive to one side, concurring when their eyes locked. Realising he must have fallen asleep, embarrassed, Hanor looked away. Tarmon, Kifter and Raldama stood talking nearby, pointing towards Mandurin. Rising, he stretched and made his way over.

“Are you well, Hanor?” Raldama asked, the young lad joining them.

Behind, Hallen had taken the kyboes for a walk, leaving Hayla, Bane and Greema sleeping by the dead campfire. Balkorn sat alongside, watchful. Managing a slim smile to the Balt, appreciating what he had disclosed last night, more burdens to add to the others, he respected it anyway. Chilly and crisp, the sun was not yet above the horizon.

“Much better after that sleep,” he said, rubbing his neck. “Is there a problem?”

“Tarmon went for a walk a short time ago,” Raldama said, looking in the direction of Mandurin. “And saw two sets of lights in the distance. We are not sure what they are. He is waiting for Shanene to shed light on the situation.”

“The lights suggest fire,” Kifter added, waiting for Tarmon to clarify.

“I hope it is not Muelly,” Hanor said, fond of the Cropping People of Missel Hoe.

“The second light was too far south,” Kifter said, allaying his fears. “Besides, we know there is no one at Muelly.”

Signalling for silence, Tarmon spoke with confidence. “Mandurin is still under attack... but part of the invading force is moving south.”

“Are there any people alive?” Hanor asked, praying Mandurin was not destroyed.

“Against impossible odds, there are people defending the city to the last. But... it will not be long before they too will be overrun. Wake the others, we had better get going.”

Refraining from attacking other Gorls crossing its path, the Hunter held nothing but the Master's purpose before it. A barren scene went by unnoticed. Peaks high above were cloaked by patchy clouds, a world away from the sickness below. The corridor of rock meandered south, sometimes drawing close to the road on the other mountainside, whilst at times, the neighbouring route could barely be distinguished. Occasional Gorls stood watching the Hunter. Robust and unresponsive, power charged every bounding step.

Progress was steady, the turn clicking by before night arrived along with six Nyshifters. Here to see the Master's splendid work in action, piercing shrills split the silence. Separating into three groups of two, a couple went east, another two west leaving the remaining two to continue south. Graceful in bitter darkness, flying between sparkly mountainsides, their dominance was absolute.

“Clouds are moving up from the south,” Greema cautioned, noticing the change over the past short-turn. Now past half-turn of the day, granting their kyboes rest as they walked, this was their first break today.

“What is so bad about clouds?” Bane asked.

“Have you forgotten about *Nyshifters*?”

“I see what you mean,” Bane gulped at the disturbing prospect.

Just in front with Balkorn, Hanor looked back, signalling for Bane to stay calm. “Keep your eyes peeled.”

“No signs of the Cropping Village yet?” the Grove enquired from the rear of the group.
 “You sound impatient to get there,” Raldama said, riding alongside.
 “It is the hanging around that frustrates.”
 “Then... this is the last place you should be,” Hallen called from near the front.
 “Is he trying to annoy me?” Greema grumbled to no one in particular.
 “Like your mumblings annoy us you mean?” the Hite teased.
 “When this is over Hite, I will challenge you to a contest,” Greema snorted. “Even if I have to save your pitiful life over the coming turns, a challenge it will be.”
 Laughing, “I have never met a Grove with humour.”
 “And I have never met a Hite with respect,” Greema said, unoffended by the short interplay. “After your behaviour at Grovan, I thought you had broken the mould.”
 “We can only return to those pleasantries if you promise to stop your griping.”
 “A wrestle it will be, Hite!” Greema growled, playful.
 “More like a tickle.”
 “Brandor was courageous putting us together. He is the only one I know whose humour can out twist a Hite’s.”
 “Or be as stubborn as a Grove.”
 “Let us go,” Tarmon ordered from the front. “Whilst the language is tame.”
 Shanene’s inner prompt meant she was shaking her head. *“It is no good being tired when you get there.”*
 The words formed in his mind, raising a smile. “You are a living conscience.”

Riding between fields not yet harvested, the Cropping Village of Muelly was close. Late in the after-turns, caution set in. Tools and cropping machines were left by the roadside or out in the fields, their owners abandoning them. Tracks between each field replaced soft wild-grass and flower. Hats and scarves were strewn about, dropped in the rush to leave. Taking all livestock, they were not expecting to find much other than pockets of the enemy. Disquieting when rooftops came into view, the hushed stillness was eerie.

Easing up, Tarmon checked for signs of life. Expecting northern invaders to be holed up, with no breeze, they had to rely on sight and sound instead. Keeping to one side of the track, a field of tall muelly - the tasty crop by which this place took its name, gave them meagre shelter from suspicious eyes waiting in thickening shadows. Substantial clouds earlier had drifted west, thinning enough to keep the sun in view. *Nyshifters* could be hiding somewhere close. Silent as if deserted, its life slashed away by a swipe of fear, no one could blame them for leaving.

Edging forward, the group rode in single file with Tarmon at its head. Only crumples underfoot gave clues to their passing, penetrating eyes scanning every window and building, every tree and clump of bush. Heady work, nerves dangling when the first few houses drifted by, gardens were overgrown, unkempt unlike those at Grovan and Manter. The owners settling for a wilder look, houses were not well maintained either. Soiled, creamy walls and broken roof caps were widespread, the silence adding to its barrenness.

Joining a main road angling across in front, sloping into a narrow but shallow gorge, this was a common feature to most Cropping Villages. Ensuring any long dry spells were not too severe on their reserves, water a commodity not taken for granted, they arrived at the expected long, narrow pool at the centre. The hub of this community, that too was a

part of any cropping site. Shaded by a large oval ring of trees, it looked abandoned, its cool, clear depths untouched of late by man or creature. Only faint trickles of underground streams topping it up were audible. The wide band of grass encircling it showed no signs of recent activity either, no marks to prove children had been playing there. A score of shadowy houses and trading places lined this side, empty shells with no spark inside. Across the treetops, huge storage buildings showed no signs of life either. A chilling reminder of what darkness could create, it was difficult to believe the enemy had not been here. Anticipation crept along, the sneaking taking its toll. Stopping at any unfamiliar sound, but nothing suggested anyone was here.

“I do not like it,” Hallen whispered, the stillness affecting him. “Will we pass through or are we going to stop here for the night?”

Signalling for patience, Kifter was undecided. Dusk approaching and time running out, they could stay in any of the few hundred buildings populating Muelly.

Riding the length of the dark pool, the way started climbing. Halting at a road to their left joining the main one, they checked for movement and anywhere to shelter in.

“We should stay here tonight,” Tarmon whispered. “But not near the centre.”

“I agree,” Kifter said, the others drawing near. “Somewhere on the outer rim, so we can see anyone heading this way.”

“I am surprised it looks exactly as they left it,” Raldama said, perplexed.

“Disturbing,” Greema rumbled from the rear.

Tarmon ushered his mount on.

Tensions returned. This was once a thriving place, but long gone were the days of plenty. Leaving the pool, buildings accompanied their exit.

Picking out a large house with three large trees at its rear, open fields behind meant a quick escape if need be. Checking the upper level, Kifter confirmed it had substantial views of the surrounding area, most of the distant hills discernable through the trees. To their right was blocked, but that was not the direction the enemy would come.

“We cannot expect to find another like this now,” Kifter said, deciding it would do.

“Very well,” Tarmon accepted. “We will make camp here this night, but no fire. We are too close for such luxuries.”

“Kyboes can feed and rest in the house next door,” Hallen said, dismounting. “Are there beds inside?” he asked, cheekily.

“None that will fit you,” Kifter teased. “You Hites should not eat so much.”

Finishing their meal of roots, quaner and slithers of cold meat, sitting on other people’s furniture seemed strange as if intruding. Whoever had lived here had not worried about taking anything when leaving. Probably not expecting to return such was the madness descending on their world, it was no less comforting.

Keeping watch upstairs from the outset, Kifter knew they would have little time to get out if the enemy were to come. Surprised when Hanor entered the small bedroom, they had not talked much since those early turns when first setting out.

“Anything on the move?” Hanor asked, suspecting nothing had.

“Not yet,” Kifter replied, peering outside.

“We have come a long way.”

"We have," Kifter said, thoughtful. The sun was shedding its fading light for the last time, dropping beneath the carpet of cloud on the horizon to his left. A final threat to keep *Nyshifters* at bay, it had served them well this turn. "You have grown much."

"If it were not for you and the others," Hanor said, pulling up a stool beside him. "I would not have made it this far."

"You are a courageous young man," he commended. "Even Bane has done well."

"It looks like he has survived his turmoil," Hanor said. Hayla had a large part to play in that, but he had no reason to grumble. If she was to link up with Bane after this was all over, he could not wish it for a more loyal friend.

"Yes, he has had his inner wars," Kifter said. "I have tried offering a sympathetic ear, but... he is very much his own person."

"Like the rest of us," Hanor said, struggles with the supernatural testing his nerve.

"Are you all right with what we are trying to achieve?" the Fife asked, looking at him.

"Are we trying to achieve something then?" Hanor said, laughing at the folly.

"You know what I mean, young teaser," Kifter said, nudging him.

"I try not to think about it," Hanor said. "Keeping quiet on the subject means not alienating the rest of you. I accept the unexplainable is exactly that... unexplainable. Tarmon's experience has helped me cope better."

"He puzzles me," Kifter said, pleased his Tardanian friend was happy. "I have known him for many seasons, but never like this. Did you notice how assertive he was today?"

"Is that not a good thing?"

"I am saying how alive he seems, right on the edge, as if every moment matters."

Grinning, Hanor knew why. "It is what the *Sacred* are like. When *they* feel close in here," he said, placing a hand on his heart. "Life becomes thrilling!"

"Are you thrilled now?"

Shaking his head at first, feeling the beatings of his heart, he prayed for the sensations to stir. He was not disappointed. As if responding to the conversation, a subtle pulse started purring. "I feel it now," he said, amazed to see his fears wash away. "It seems to happen when you relax, a peace that one cannot find when worried." His state of mind had to do with where his attention was more than anything.

"Really?" Kifter said, used to the language with Brandor.

"Before you asked the question," Hanor tried to explain. "I was too wrapped up in my own thoughts to even consider the deeper side to life. But when I put my attention on my heart just now and let go of my worries, the peace arose. It is from this that life seems so thrilling."

"Then you are fortunate to experience it," Kifter said, glancing out the window.

"The *Pillars of Life* do generate unusual feelings; hope, power, light..., proof to say there are *Higher Powers* involved in this, but I cannot say I have felt anything else."

"I only wish all of you could share in it."

"Perhaps we are not ready," the Fife said, unfazed that it was not to be. "My openness to the *mysteries* has certainly taken a step in the right direction."

"That can only be a good thing."

"*With every breath, there is a chance for growth*, Brandor said to me once."

"I would like to know more about Brandor."

"There are many tales I could tell that would make your toes curl," the Fife chuckled, fond of the old man.

"I am all for curling toes," Hanor laughed, the bed against the wall catching his eye. "Who gets that tonight?"

"I cannot see anyone having the heart to toss you out once you are asleep, except Hallen of course."

"I will only laze for a while," Hanor said, moving across to lay down. Daring to stretch out, he only shut his eyes once.

High-pitched and chilling, a resounding shrill just after dark snapped wagging tongues shut. That now familiar call of a *Nyshifter* shook each of them where they sat or lay. Somewhere out on the other side of the Cropping Village, the noise of *it* moving alarmed everyone, the flapping of wings discernable. Another heart-splitting screech pierced the silence, the creature encircling the village to see what moved. Sweeping hisses of *its* movements drew close to where they hid, praying their kyboes were out of sight. Satisfied that nothing was untoward, they heard *it* flap away from the village to rampage elsewhere. No one uttered a word for a long time, fearful of *its* sneaking return.

Those upstairs came creeping down, dreading a single creek might give them away. Gathering in the largest room, mumbles whispered at what this meant. Amazed how close they had come to stumbling on the monster, fortune was theirs this turn.

"That is why Muelly remains undisturbed," Raldama spoke first, the answer obvious. Faint and slim, light through the window was just enough to see each other.

"What if we had picked the wrong house?" Hayla exclaimed, her stomach churning.

"Or the wrong side," Greema agreed. "How did *it* miss us?"

"That ring of trees probably hid us," Kifter said, disbelieving how close they had come.

"I doubt *it* was in a house," Raldama said. "*It* is far too big."

"Those storehouses more like," Bane said, anxious.

"Indeed Bane," Kifter agreed.

"I need to get rid of these trembling limbs," Hallen joked, but no one laughed.

"It appears Muelly is probably the safest place to be this night," Tarmon said. Hardly comforting, it was a long time before they settled again.

Large droplets of rain fell from the canopy of leaves above, the Hisian-set shielded from the full force of the downpour when pushing out at dawn. Patting hoods, the turn clicked by slowly but without incident. Difficult to focus, steamy hides and snorting snouts were a constant reminder of the grey mood hanging over them. Not until the dreary turn ended did the lashings above cease.

Requiring stacking stones to get a fire going, damp twigs were soon ablaze with a fiery persuasion from Hader. Erecting the canopy to shelter from drips, a light meal was consumed and the forced talk stilled. They knew what they were missing.

"We need to regroup," Brorn said, echoing the thoughts of his companions. "It would be foolish to proceed with this shadow over us."

"I agree," Whis said, the light fading. "We will be undone if we do not mind-merge."

"I feel no animosity towards anyone," Rinn said to no one in particular.

"Conflicts of this nature will not be resolved by reasoning alone," Brorn said. "It is a matter of opinion, and wisdom has to be seen by both parties. Until that is done, it should be left."

"Let us mind-merge," Sorlam said, wanting to return to that blissful mental state.

Sighing at the prospect, Brandor found it difficult to put aside the dispute. Brorn was right, but that did not ease his concerns. "It is... what we should do," he conceded. Resisting the temptation to look at Rinn, frustrations would follow if he did.

Eight Dai-Lamen sat straight, slowing their breathing. Concentrated wills tuned in to the space in front above the fire, holding it steady in their mind's eye. Discerning each other in that mental space, proceeding towards the final merging, the heightened rush of before did not come. No *Ileng Power* interfered with the conditions, achieving what was required on their own. Lacking the intensity of their original meeting, it was still potent enough to make a difference.

Hallen's pounding feet upstairs shook everyone from their dreams. Bounding down the stairs with a few clumsy steps through the dark, "There is movement on the hilltop!" he hissed, causing a stir. "Not the friendly type either." Leaving Bane upstairs to wake Hanor and the others, it was a short time before dawn.

"In what direction?" Kifter asked, making for the stairs.

"West," the Hite said, heading out to check the kyboes.

Reaching the top window, the Fife searched the direction indicated. Aided by moonlight, a sizeable group was running along the beaten track towards them. Counting twenty, all of varying size, they did not seem to be in a hurry. Deducing they were here for other reasons and not by order of the *Nyshifter*, if *it* knew they were here, *it* would have had the roof down. Malformed, two were larger than Hallen. Trudging along, this was not good.

"What shall we do?" Hanor asked, joining him.

Bane was there with Tarmon close behind.

"Too late to get out now," the Fife said. Getting organised in the dark would be risky. "It might be safer to stay where we are. There is no telling they are here for us."

"That crossed my mind too," Tarmon agreed. "If we stay quiet, they may pass this place."

"We could cope if we have to fight," Kifter proclaimed, confident.

"But not if that *Nyshifter* returns."

Staring back towards the lumbering figures, "They are Gorls... not Dortians," Kifter noted. "Misshapen just like the two Seekers said."

Hayla entered the room.

"Tell everyone to stay quiet, and keep their positions," Tarmon ordered.

"Who are they?" she asked. Everyone would want to know.

"Gorls, numbering twenty," Kifter explained, the figures edging nearer. "They have reached the outer fields and will be here shortly. Tell Hallen to stay with the kyboes."

Obedient, she disappeared.

Waiting was dreadful, Hanor and Bane staying with the Fife and Tard. Praying the enemy would run by, the jostling figures were discernable in the moonlight. Glimmers of steel warned they were armed and dangerous. Pounds of heavy feet and coarse wheezing broke the silence.

"They are tired," Kifter noted.

"If it was not for that *Nyshifter*, I would say attack and be rid of them," Tarmon said, considering the risks. "If they rest, it will be twice the battle."

“Facing them now, the darkness could be in their favour. We must wait and see what they do,” Kifter said, sitting back from the window.

The main track ran in front of the house they were in, a small enclosed garden with a hedge separating the two. Crispy steps and periodic coughs came along the road to within a short stone’s throw of the house. Typical, they slowed to a walk to recover. Growling voices convalesced with high-pitched ones, a skinny figure appearing to be in charge. Indiscernible as yet, the group waited in the shadows. The nearer they came, the more audible was their dialogue.

“*We stay here a while, yes?*” one of the Gorls asked, gulping a mouthful of water.
“*Yes..., yes,*” one of the huge ones boomed, simple in its manner.
“*Depends how long the Master’s servant chooses to stay,*” the one in charge said, handing its water-skin to another.
“*Why our patrol gets chosen... this work?*” another argued, whose extra long arms drooped down below its knocked knees.
“*Attending Master’s servant is tedious to you?*” The leader was astonished. “*Blackwing will make your stay interesting it will.*”
“*A spell with Gor-up-sa will be better..., yes?*” another scrawny one said, shrills of laughter filling the early morning darkness.
Drawing level with the house, “*Where... we stay?*” it said, eyeing up the building the group were hiding in.
“*Find Blackwing first,*” the leader said, coughing and spitting. “*Then decide. Any place is yours, no one left.*”
“*Good..., good,*” the other huge one said. “*Me... never had... house.*”
“*None have..., is why Master gave us life, to take what we want.*”

Cackles spewed into the air, the disfigured group proceeding down past the first two houses. Talking with nothing to fear, their voices disappeared into the dimness, leaving those concealed to breathe again.

Sneaking out after them, Kifter needed to check on where they would stop. Moving between clustered buildings, he left the others to discuss their next move.

“It makes me ill,” Greema said, the others joining him in the main room of the house.
“That was hard not to rush out there and put an end to them,” Hallen said from the doorway. Keeping an eye on the kyboes, the intelligent animals had stayed quiet, anticipating the need for silence.
“Most of us thought that, Hallen,” Raldama said.
“What are we to do now?” Hayla asked, none too pleased with this new development.
“We wait for what Kifter has to say,” Tarmon said, stepping by the big Hite to look outside. “We cannot go until the *Nyshifter* returns anyway.”
“It is fortunate there are no clouds,” Greema said, optimistic. “Which means... no *Nyshifters* once dawn arrives.”
“That is a relief,” Bane could only agree.

It was half a short-turn before Kifter returned to their relief, dawn a breath away.
“Where are they?” Hallen prompted, wanting to do something about it.

“Searching houses by the main pool,” Kifter said, disapproving. “And making plenty of noise whilst they are at it.” Raising a hand, he hissed for silence. “*It* is returning,” he whispered, scuttling away from the door.

Moving from the windows, they waited for that menacing sound. A slow rhythmic flapping could be heard swooping in above the house, the *Nyshifter’s* shrilling cry making everything shake. Heading back towards the central area and the newcomers who had just arrived, all were eager to leave.

“It does not get any easier listening to that,” Greema said, once it was gone. No one disagreed.

“Does this mean we can get out of here?” Hayla shared her own hopes.

“It is too soon,” Kifter said, moving to the door. Checking no other creatures were about to drop in, stars were the only ones winking back. A growing band of reddish gold on the horizon meant dawn was nearly here.

“At daybreak..., we will head out,” Tarmon said. It was too risky to challenge the intruders, even with the sun up.

Responding to the Tardanian’s thoughts, Hallen made his views known. “We should not leave them alive.”

“Our role is not to slay the *Dark One’s* monstrosities,” Kifter said, thinking in line with the Tardanian. “But to fulfil our objectives.”

“And have them kill others?” The Hitorian was not happy.

“Hanor is why you are here, nothing more,” Kifter closed the debate. Ignoring his grumbling companion, the Fife checked outside again. “Another short-turn should see us ready. Check your mounts and get them watered. They can feed later when we are away from here.”

“You have been around the Tardanian too long,” Hallen griped, leaving to go next door.

Preparing to depart, the sun took an age to climb high enough to guarantee no surprises could come from any *Nyshifters* daring to brave its burning rays. Leading their kyboes out into the fresh dawn, it had been a long night. Checking for a final time, it was difficult not to worry about what Mandurin might bring. Unsure how they were to get inside, the mood of the group was sombre, sharing the same concerns.

“It is a shame we cannot take their rags with us,” Bane said, doing up a saddlebag.

“What do you mean?” Hanor asked alongside, not seeing his point.

“Use their clothes as a disguise to get into Mandurin.” Saying it so matter-of-factly, the young lad did not realise the others had stopped at his comment. Sensing the silence, Bane turned to find his companions staring at him. “What?”

Tarmon and Kifter considered the remark, both sharing the same idea. A few others agreed at the possibility.

“Dare we?” Kifter offered.

Dreading the risks, Tarmon had searched for a way into the stricken city since leaving Selmor, yet Bane’s offhanded comment was as simple as it was daring. Rubbing his high forehead, could they be so audacious or was it worth waiting for another patrol to come their way in less hazardous circumstances? Unfortunately, he could not guarantee any would come. With barely a turn’s ride to Mandurin, could they afford not to? “It is a graven risk, especially with a *Nyshifter* close by.”

“No more than riding out in the open as we have been,” Raldama concluded.

It was a good point, which did not help. Running out of time, Tarmon finally conceded, hoping they would not live to regret it.

“A certain Hite will be pleased,” the Fife said, counting his throwing barbs. “Let us do this.”

Chapter 27: Fiery Shock

Running into the early short-turns of the following day, as dawn broke, the Hunter reached the end of the track between the last two mountains and halted. Like the parting of two magnificent curtains, a spectacular scene lay open before it. Standing on the crest where the base of the two mountains met, the main road ran down and away from its vantage point and out towards the Ravaged Planes beyond. Vast and open, the stony plane was encircled by two enormous arms of mountainous rock. Extending out from the Great Barrier Mountain Range and around, the gap where both arms fell short was the gateway to The Freelands and the cities of men. The route it had to go, but the Ravaged Planes were far from empty. A giant arena for its Master's dark preparations, a huge patch was occupied by Gorls. Awaiting the order to march south, four thousand were camped at the base of the hill. A low din reached up to the lone spectator on the rise.

Looking up from the batch of stimulated cells, Gorg-darl was pleased by the Hunter's progress. Eager for what was to follow, he returned to his work, the next line of dark blue containers ready. Sparking a streak of red and yellow light from his fingertips, the unifying powers were enough to multiply the living tissue inside each pot. From this batch, a hundred Gorls would be granted life. Unconcerned by what shape or size, for each cell would react according to the amount of energy absorbed, the real issue was the numbers surviving and how quickly they grew. To fulfil his Plan, the building of his forces would have to continue for sometime yet.

"Keep them warm," he said to Vinin, one of his aids. Sensing the Presence wanted to speak with him, Gorg-darl left the chamber and headed to the very heart of Grav-end. Out of bounds to all his servants, the intense powers generated by that incoming intelligence could not be endured by anyone but him. His Plan had enormous ramifications for life on many levels, and he could ill afford any mishaps. Risking many perils, nothing could be overlooked. Entering the small cone-shaped room, the Presence was strong this turn.

Leaving the Master's cavern, Vinin headed down one of many winding, torch-lit tunnels that led from the core of Grav-end. Descending in the grim half-light, the stimulated cells needed to be attached to her as soon as possible. Pining of late due to the Master's other attractions, incensed by the smallest of issues, Ish-meale would delight in this new batch. Protecting the containers within the curtain of his deep blue gown, the Gorin enjoyed teasing her. One of the Master's inner circle of aids, many of his counterparts were away directing the invasion, forcing the peoples of Pern and Dortia to action. He of course had been blessed by the Master to stay and do his bidding.

Ish-meale's wails when turning down the next passage were to be expected. She could tell something was on. "Ish-meale..., have I got something for you?" he tantalized, entering her substantial cavern.

Stopping short of the outer regions of her vast extensive form, the stench and stifling heat no longer affected him. A deep reddish orange glow from oils seeping from rock walls added a fiery atmosphere to the place. Across the carpet of countless unhatched lumps of her yet to be born offspring, her massive upper torso waited at the centre. Sitting in the middle of a skirt of skin tissue, she was the centrepiece, an island of wretchedness.

"More..., more for me," she pined, her high pitch voice like a smooth instrument.

“More what...?” he teased, stepping between the first few dark green oily pods. Safe within her protective wombs, these were just a few cocoons amongst hundreds filling her birthing chamber. Squelching discharge underfoot, oils of foulness were a result of this unnatural process. Growing to an incredible size since the early stages of her work, she had become insanely sensitive physically and mentally. Doting on each Gorl spawned before dropping them to survive on their own or be devoured to feed her insatiable appetite, she was incredible even by his own twisted standards.

“Tell me what you have... and how many,” she cooed, pushing back thick matted hair from broad shoulders as if worried about how she looked. Caressing her dark green oily skin, she reached down to the two lower arms not yet fully grown at her sides. “Tell me..., tell me now..., Vinin!”

The going was tricky through the pods, an unborn figure rolling in its sealed pod nearly tripping him up. Some of the unborn grew to be huge whilst others were undersized and would be fed on once they got into the outer halls. Heading for a large batch of empty wombs over to the left and behind her, they would suffice. “We have a hundred here, Ish-meale,” he promised, reaching the first empty pod. Lifting large folds of loose skin, he carefully placed five of the small clumps of jellied cells to the womb’s wall. Making sure they stuck before laying the skin back to help secure them in, he grinned at her reaction.

“I like that..., Vinin,” she chimed, wiggling at the centre.

A dirty yellow gel oozed to seal the cells inside, the womb massaging back into position.

“More... more!” she urged, watching as he hurried onto the next one.

Following the same procedure, well practised at this art, he did enjoy seeing her squirm in lustful pleasure. “Are you happy now?” he asked, working his way around.

“Look..., look,” she screamed, elated, pointing long greasy arms over to his right.

“Newborn..., newborn! Give me baby..., give me now. Vinin..., bring newborn.”

The head of a Gorl sat up in its womb. Finishing off his work, he made his way over to test the creature’s suitability. Squelching across Ish-meale’s abnormal form, she was a rare creature of warped beauty. Manipulating the tissue from her original legs, extended by the *Master* to create this breeding blanket now filling the cavern, never could she have imagined what she would become. Crippled at birth, *he* had promised her a new life that would help bring in a new Age. Now though, the incredible transformation had dissolved all knowledge of her former self. Marvelling at what she had become, if not for her, much of the *Master’s* Plan would not be achieved.

The new arrival was a scrawny Gor-up-sa. Nasty, even from birth, he had to be careful. Picking it up from behind by its neck, skinny legs thrashed. Hissing and spitting, its hands clawed at his grip. “They are not fully grown yet,” he said, the pain considerable. He turned to show Ish-meale.

“Give me my baby..., my newborn,” she crowed, throwing her arms in the air in a frenzy. Rocking back and forth as if for something long-awaited, “Come Vinin..., give me baby..., my newborn now.”

Walking over to her with the Gor-up-sa struggling, Vinin handed it to her.

“Baby... my baby,” she cooed again as though all her efforts were just for this creature.

Smothering it, Vinin knew what was to follow. Offering it one of numerous gangly teats, it bit her hard. Whatever natural instincts she had, this was not the environment to encourage them. Screaming in twisted ecstasy, it did not last long. Seizing its arm, she

hurled it at the cavern wall, her moment of pleasure satisfied. Dazed, the scrawny thing got up, scampering up the wall to escape through a jagged hole high up.

"Baby... baby," Ish-meale cooed again, the previous one now forgotten. Reaching round to the left this time, she started rocking again for her prize.

"Let us take our time with this one," Vinin advised, walking over to it. Head large and round, a chubby one, it was not a good sign. Picking it up, it was taller but not vicious.

"Give me newborn..., give me my baby... now," came Ish-meale's cry, dark emerald eyes imploring him to move. "Come... come, bring baby..., my baby."

The ringing of her voice did not reflect the inner ruthlessness that was to follow. Weaving between large and small wombs alike, he gave it to her before turning towards the exit. Mumbling like a devoted mother, Vinin knew there would be no scream of ecstatic pain this time. Her newborn was not that type. Sounds of cracking bones and the tearing of tissue reached him. She was the best judge as to their worth. He did not need to look, she would be gorging on the very thing she had been cooing over. Leaving, she would sleep after her meal.

Heading down the wide track, the Hunter was unperturbed by the numbers lying across its path. Running non-stop for nearly two turns of the day since Grav-end, it was not even tired, unworldly powers driving it on. Picking up speed, the slope added to its momentum. No Gorls were on the beaten road, just a large group of twenty stationed at its base were on duty. Reaching halfway before anyone spotted it, heads of differing sizes turned to watch the mysterious creature advancing towards them. Further out in the camp, others were equally intrigued.

Acting as the previous Gorln had, a large figure stepped onto the road, preparing to block the Hunter's route. Joined by others from its group, brute force was all that mattered. A pattern rife throughout Gorl-darl's forces, a blank barbarity that knew no loyalties, survival of the fittest governed their lives.

Shadows from the mountains cloaked the area, the sun not brave enough to get up above the rim. Growls of expectancy swept the awaiting group, each member ready for battle. Moving into an arc, a final warning to the mighty creature, blades flashed but it still would not slow. Sneering grins were that of victors. In no mood for niceties, their leader took charge. Standing firm, it bellowed for the Hunter to halt.

Furious at the new arrival for being disrespectful, the Gorln cursed, lifting its sword. About to swing, it stopped when the Hunter vanished right before them. What manner of trickery was this? Looking to the Gorln for answers, astonished by the vanishing act, they did not pay attention to the subtle sounds of the Hunter's advancement. Their leader, detecting mischief, called to stay alert. That call was the last thing it said.

A pounding of its torso sent it sprawling backwards as if hit by a rolling boulder. Searing and final, a blistering pain punctured its chest, thick purple-blue blood spewing out from the gaping wound. Crashing to the ground, flailing arms reached to plug the hole but it was too wide and deep. Gurgles were its last attempt to communicate. Sword falling away, there was no strength left to carry it.

Shocking the others, another Gorl fell, followed by two more. Rage and disbelief hounded the group, searching for the invisible beast. Events unfolded too quickly to gain control. Another two Gorls fell in quick succession, alarming those remaining. Calling to

others further out in the camp to aid them, but those watching seemed uninterested, a complacent mood engulfing them. Those doing battle with the unseen foe could not believe no one was coming. Shrieks of affliction meant nothing to the thousands nearby.

One by one, the Gorls at the bottom of the pass were brought to an early death, the scene defying explanation. Swords flashed at thin air. Fallen bodies impeded the survivors, attempts to flee thwarted by an unseen energy. "To run meant weakness," was the resounding echo in the back of each Gorl's meagre mind, forcing them to stand. One was hauled into the air by the invisible monster. Others came to its rescue, swiping beneath it. Not quick enough, the Hunter dropped the struggling Gorl into the path of a swinging blade. The carnage built up. Ten then twelve and finally fourteen lay lifeless.

Six stood ready, forming a defensive circle to cover each other. Two were enormous Gorls, the others that of an average person. Size did not seem to matter to the beast. A howling cry escaped one of the larger Gorls, as first one, two then three holes appeared, a shooting target for the Hunter's horn. With breathtaking swiftness, the enormous Gorl fell to a fourth and final blow. The others tried pinpointing their foe, slashing at where they thought it should be. The last big one took down two of its own, leaving only three. One Gorl was snatched by the leg and pulled away, slumping to the ground and dragged outside the rim of bodies. Flipped up and tossed into the air, it stalled the two remaining, unable to grasp the horrors of what was taking place. A crunching sound snapped into the morning, the helpless Gorl falling limp over the unseen leg of the beast.

Back to back, the two waited, certain of death. A body to their left moved as if kicked, whilst another was hurled in their direction. Edgy to what it might do next, a rush of wind to their right had them spinning, expecting the worst.

A sudden thud and stabbing pain in the large Gorl's back sent it lurching forward. Tearing itself away from the impact of the invisible horn, upon turning, it stopped when seeing the other Gorl suspended in midair, lofted high like a trophy. Large and gaping, the hole through its upper chest revealed the faint shape of a horn trickling with blood. Embedded inside the unmoving figure, the Gorl dropped when the Hunter pulled free.

The victor, the beast became visible as if mocking. Spattered in blood, it stood erect like the huge peaks behind. Its massive horn, the cause of the destruction, gleamed in the early morning light.

The last Gorl did not wait long. With a defiant roar, it charged at its enemy without care for its own pitiful life. The scene went quiet.

"Wait here," Kifter whispered, creeping forward under shadow at the rear of the houses facing onto the narrow pool. Avoiding the Nyshifter's side, confident it was clear when reaching the next building, he signalled for the others to follow. Leaving Bane and Hanor behind with Balkorn as their protectorate along with the kyboes, the Gorls were probably resting by now. Creeping nearer to the central area, they stayed as a group, checking each house as they went for signs of their foe. So far, none had been found, hoping they were not all nestled under the safe wings of that creature. Scurrying like an animal on the hunt, the Fife ducked into each building first, sharp senses determining whether anyone was inside. Returning with a shake of the head, it was not a good start.

Shining its rays into some of the shadier parts of the village, the sun climbed higher as they continued searching. Strenuous work, keeping everyone on edge, but still there was no indication of where their enemy was. The idea that each Gorl would take a

building for itself was now a meagre hope. Reaching the far end and circling around to the other side, hearts pounded as more buildings passed their scrutiny.

Motioning for the others to stay where they were under a hefty looping tree, Kifter disappeared between two structures, cutting through to check on the central arena of the Cropping Village. Tall with stone columns of grandeur to match, the Fife tiptoed up to the rear corner of the building, scanning the grassy area in front for signs of life. Nothing moved. The pool, with its encircling trees, showed no signs of life either. Frustrated, they would soon have to check along where the huge storage facilities were. Without windows, the warehouses backed onto the band of grass, the main road running along the front side. Their size explained why the *Nyshifter* had picked them to avoid the sun.

Just about to step away, a sharp movement caught Kifter's eye, ducking to avoid being seen. Halfway along the ring of trees, a scrawny looking thing was staring down at the cool waters. Unsure what it was looking at, another Gorl grunted from between a pair of storage units, signalling for it to get the water and move. Filling and carrying the skins in what looked like an ale bottle, the two shabby creatures cared not for anyone lurking in the shadows.

Estimating the second one's drab furry garb would fit Hanor or Bane, the first one however, would barely cover their torso. A call from the same building sent both scurrying back. Ensuring nothing else was to follow, Kifter headed back to the others.

"Some are halfway along that side," he said, indicating the tall building with a flat roof. "They maybe tending to the *Nyshifter*."

"What shall we do?" Raldama asked, his voice low and guarded.

"Their attire is adequate for what we need, but dare we risk it?"

"We also have to do this without that *Nyshifter* knowing," Hayla stated the obvious. "It is pointless disguising ourselves if *it* knows what we are up to."

Raldama agreed. "This is now too dangerous. If we leave whilst we can, I am sure we will cross another patrol sooner rather than later."

"Why not just burn the whole building down?" Hallen suggested. "Gorls and that *Nyshifter* thing."

"I thought this was to be a tidy affair," Greema said, having second thoughts. "Not to get embroiled in a battle."

"We have to improvise where we can," Tarmon said. "What do you suggest?" he asked Kifter. Shanene pressed him about the dangers, but the Tard declined her offer to guide them. Kifter and the rest were quite capable of seeing this through.

"I like the idea of a disguise," the Fife said, peering back between the two buildings. "A great opportunity will be missed if we do not see it through."

Mixed murmurs were unconvinced.

"We should do this and be rid of them," Hallen said, his views already known.

"Let us check a few more buildings before heading back," Hayla said, proving to herself that she was back to her warrior self.

A few nods agreed, Kifter ushering them to follow. "Keep tight."

The following three buildings were also empty. Creeping along a track to the next house that was in fact a large Inn, the shifty Fife signalled for caution. Ducking under two large windows to reach the back door, for the first time he could hear new sounds when

tiptoeing inside the front porch. Clicking the door ajar just enough to see in, Kifter reappeared ushering them to him again.

“There are six in there..., all asleep,” he whispered. “Strong lubricant to ease the strain of their long run has helped us. Two are slumped against this wall,” he pointed. “Two are over the other side, whilst one of those huge ones is just inside this door. The last one is sprawled out in the middle of the floor. I presume they do not have strong lubricants where they come from. They are out of it.”

Explaining who was to deal with who, with a final nod, Kifter crept into the Inn. Entering the darkened room on the ground floor of the three-storey building, the stench was awful, the slobbering individuals unaware of the newcomers. Taking up their positions, waiting for the Fife’s signal, his fingers counted down. When ready, the blows were deadly and final. Even the biggest one at the hands of Hallen had no chance, the resultant gurgles minor and not loud enough for the *Nyshifter* to hear.

“That was easier than I thought,” Hayla said, making a final check before leaving. Stripping their attire was one of the most disgusting things she had ever done. “Only fourteen to go,” Hallen said, cleaning his blade. Placing the pile of skins just inside the door, they would return for them later.

Exiting the Inn, they continued to the next building, as large as the previous one. A storage house, the clear aroma of oats drifted out. Peering inside, without many windows, the lighting was poor but nobody moved. Tuning into every cleft, Kifter searched the tall mountain of grain still untouched from when first stockpiled here by the croppers. Moving to the next storehouse, this one had reeds drying out on tiers of racks, an obvious haunt for any would-be weaver. Nearing the next large building, they stopped. On a corner plot, they had reached another main causeway just as Kifter supposed. Able to see for a considerable distance, chances of detection increased. Checking the building, it too was empty apart from rolls of brightly coloured material.

Sneaking on, voices alerted them, ducking inside a doorway. Approaching from between this building and the next, three figures turned and walked away from their hiding spot. Signalling for Hallen and Tarmon to join him, Kifter skittered after them, the three snatching their lives with the deftness of trained mercenaries. Pulling the three corpses back into one of the empty buildings, their repulsive attire was cut loose.

Finding another two sleeping in a doorway further along, a few empty bottles nearby made their work easy. Their numbers were dropping fast. Every Gorg now had to be taken. If one were to survive and declare the atrocities to that *Nyshifter*, the call would go out and steal away any hope of entering Mandurin in disguise.

Pulling on Kifter’s arm, Tarmon pointed to a building across the street. Touching his heart, the Fife understood, the Tard using Shanene as an extra pair of eyes. Lifting a finger, indicating how many were over there, Tarmon motioned for Hayla and Raldama to creep across the road and deal with it. The others moved forward.

Thankful that the sun was now over the rooftops, shedding its rays onto what they were doing, it meant no surprise attacks from the *Blackwing* as the Gorgs had called it. Tensions increased, the *Nyshifter* was about here somewhere. Trusting it was in one of these large Storehouses to avoid the sun, inside the next three buildings nothing moved. Estimating they were at the same building he had seen the two Gorgs at earlier, terrible

was the strain. Raldama and Hayla edged along on the other side of the road, slinking from doorway to building hoping to hear voices of where the others might be.

Tugging on Kifter's arm when he was about to look inside the next Warehouse, Tarmon shook his head. Two massive wooden doors were pulled closed, the Tardanian tapping his heart, alarmed at how close they were to stumbling on the *Nyshifter*. Just one lurch or trip, one cry from a Gorl was all it would take to give them away. Leaving it, the Fife moved on, checking the corner of every building. Where were those other Gorls?

For the next half a short-turn they searched the remaining Storehouses and other like buildings, but there was no sign of where the surviving Gorls were. Fears about the dead being discovered before they were located increased. Encircling to where they had started, the plan was about to fail. With a sufficient amount of clothes captured, albeit another larger one for Balkorn would help, the job was only half done. That *Nyshifter* would be on their tail when night fell. What had they got themselves into?

Kifter halted, considering the predicament. "Can Shanene not find them anywhere?" he asked Tarmon.

"She has searched everywhere and found nothing. She does not seek in the same way as we do. The fountain gives a broader picture of each building but not each room. For her to do that would take an enormous amount of concentration. You must remember, she is trying to rebuild Selmor as well."

Strolling back and forth, Kifter weighed up what to do. Tarmon had placed this into his hands, and defeat was unacceptable. Maturing since his failures during the early parts of the quest, but this was potentially far more damaging if he got it wrong. "When she warned you about the *Nyshifter*, did she go inside the building?"

Registering her reply as if she had been asked herself, there was a definite no. "She did not," Tarmon said, expressing her reasons for it. "She could sense *its* power. By entering, she feared *it* may have detected her enquiry, which could have been disastrous for us."

Wrestling with an idea, glancing up at the sun now shining over the treetops, the option forming in Kifter's mind was an incredible gamble. "The other Gorls are inside the same building."

"How do you know?" Greema asked.

"Where else can they be?"

"What are you suggesting?" Hallen posed. The Fife was up to something.

"We could burn it down as you said."

"*Nyshifters* are not ordinary creatures!" Greema said, disbelieving it. "That *thing* cannot be touched by blade or spear. What makes you think fire will do the trick?"

"If the others are dead then they will be discovered eventually," the Fife countered. "We do not have time to bury them..., especially the overgrown one Hallen put an end to. The distance between here and Mandurin is too far for us to travel before that *Nyshifter* takes to the air tonight. When out in the open, we will not stand a chance."

Inadequate reasons were given to avoid the plan, yet only half were in favour.

"We have to make a decision," Kifter urged.

"The group is split," Tarmon said, airing on the side of caution. "We are in great peril one way or the other." Now the shock of what Kifter was suggesting had settled, did they really have a choice? A few nervous glances fluttered between his listeners. Was this bravery or madness? Shanene left him to decide for himself. Through the shadows of

doubt, an answer solidified, encouraging them to do it. "We should go for the fire," he said, raising a hand when Greema started to object. "We need to act!" Hayla and Raldama bowed to the decision.

Sharing his plan, the Fife sent Greema, Hayla and Raldama to retrieve the clothes, whilst Hallen, Tarmon and himself made their way back towards the Storehouse, hoping the rest of the Gorls *were* inside with the *Nyshifter*. Darting along the track, they headed for the reed store to get fuel for the fires they intended to set. Checking as they went, their pace swift, they only slowed when passing the place where their foes were sleeping.

Hearts were in mouths as each gathered a large pile of reeds to use. Laying piles along the base of each wooden wall, curving steel door handles were secured with a rope of reed to ensure no escape for those inside. Even though a *Nyshifter* had escaped through the roof at Ags Ole, this structure was far more robust, made of sturdy wood to last generations. The fact the sun was hovering over the village meant there was little cover for the *Nyshifter* from its scorching rays. Stopping occasionally from a shuffle or grunt inside, tensions soared.

Completing a line of reeds on all sides, they lit a torch for each of them. No turning back now, one by one, they proceeded to light the bundles, moving along as each one took hold. Encouraged when the fires started licking at the sides of the walls, the light breeze added to the flames.

Completing their objective, Tarmon, Kifter and Hallen moved back onto the grassy area at the building's rear. Seeking cover under the trees encircling the pool, adrenalin pulsed. Urging the flames to rise, the slight breeze lifted the scorching tongues higher to Hallen's height and above.

Cries erupted inside, Kifter guessing correctly. Horrified Gorls hollered in terror when the flames turned a strange sizzling white. Whatever was stored inside the building had caught light, enflaming the fire further. Waiting for sounds of the *Nyshifter*, where was *it*?

Taking hold of the building next to it, the fire was spreading, dreading the whole village could go up in smoke. Using a heavy pole, terrified bangs came from the other side of the Storehouse, but the fastened door handles held. Thick insufferable smoke billowed out through every gap, climbing high into the cloudless sky.

Sudden and mighty, a resounding thump shook the building, the awaiting group jumping at the impact. Another indicated the roof was the target of the *Nyshifter's* escape. Pounded by another breathtaking blow, a heart-wrenching shrill proved the creature was stuck inside too. Drawn by a twisted fascination, the three stood and stared as more thumps from the rooftop echoed. Edging to their left in case the monster escaped, the *Nyshifter's* shrieks were verging on panic, the suffocating smoke as furious as the flames. Gorls were no longer shouting, already overcome.

Another bang in the roof was accompanied by a large splintering of wood. The *Nyshifter* was outside! Filling the onlookers with dread, expecting *it* to appear above the roofline, but *its* desperate cries sounded different. Convinced *it* was outside, but the frantic clawing was from inside the building. Wails of despair were of a dying animal trapped in a snare.

"It is stuck," Kifter decreed, distracting the others from the horror. Tuning in to every vital sound, a few more heartbeats of *its* suffering confirmed exactly that. "The *Nyshifter* is trapped in the roof and cannot free itself."

"Those horrendous sounds must be the sun burning *it*," Hallen said, checking through leafy branches for signs of movement.

Fighting for its life, thrashing at the wooden claws of the roof gripping tight, the Nyshifter could not break free. Searing pains of the scorching sunlight were too much, the choking black smoke suffocating. Head clear of the hole, but thick wooden splinters were about its vulnerable neck, leaving it to writhe like a struggling scoundrel in a noose. For the first time in its despicable life, the Nyshifter faced its own demise.

Screeches lessened in potency as did the scratching and clawing. Where there was frantic commotion, cracks from the raging fire replaced it. Flames reaching the rooftop showed no signs of ending, sooty smoke spewing out into the clearness of day. Sending a huge column into the dazzling blue sky, the breeze took it northwards to where the instigator of such evil lived.

"There must be something flammable inside," Tarmon said, overwhelmed by the despicable setting. For so much smoke, there was no other explanation. Feeling the heat from their position, structures either side were now alight. "This is the end of Muelly," he said, a small price to pay for their victory.

A long floundering wail resounded for a final time. Gasping at what it meant, this was too good to be true. Crying like a dying child to its missing parent, full of woe and affliction, while it sounded there was a glimmer of hope *it* could be saved. But no comforting hand came to relieve *its* suffering. The chilling sound ended.

An eerie silence crept out to the three onlookers through the snaps and cackles of a rampant fire. The impossible had happened. Too amazed to move or even celebrate, it was like witnessing the start of the end. In defiance of the *Dark One*, promising the war was not over yet, Kifter, Hallen and Tarmon were amazed by the spectacle.

"We had better stand back before the building collapses," Kifter warned, breaking the hypnotic mood.

Moving along, it was difficult to look away.

"Was it the sun or smoke that killed *it*?" Hallen asked, half-expecting the creature to rise from the rooftop.

"Both I would imagine," Tarmon responded, heart pounding.

Halting further down, the sight was incredible.

"*Nyshifters* will be clawing all over this place tonight," Hallen said, rubbing his nose. Dry from the heat, he was thirsty.

"Accidents happen," Kifter said, unconcerned. Any repercussions were a problem for the future. This was a time to enjoy the incredible. "If I had Sasta, I would drink to this."

Just then, the building crashed to the ground, spewing out a wave of smoke and red-hot ash. Fizzling embers lay on trees and bushes, threatening to ignite everything.

"What has happened here?" a call came from further along the pool to their left.

Raldama, Hayla and Greema were heading their way. A pile of raggedy garb was left at the end of the tree line, the three needing to find out what was going on.

“We heard *its* cry,” Greema said, astounded. “To believe it possible!”
“Extraordinary,” Hayla said, amazed they had done it.

Hanor, Bane and Balkorn appeared with their kyboes in tow. If they were in trouble their mounts would be needed to escape, they too could only stare. Even at the outer reaches of the village, the wails had sounded terrible.

Sharing in the moment, the onlookers needed to know the *Nyshifter* had perished. Keeping an eye on the other buildings ablaze, Hallen lifted Kifter onto his shoulders, looking for the black shape of the *Nyshifter* amongst the burning wreckage. Protected by *Gorl-darl's* powers whilst *it* lived, they hoped it would not do the same when dead. Moving forward as close as the heat would permit, the carcass could not be seen anywhere. Signalling *it* was gone, Kifter was wary of talking too loud.

“Let us leave this place,” Tarmon ordered, the need to be as far from here as possible now paramount. “We will talk about this later.”

Heading for his kyboe, he did not dally, only stopping to pick up some of the pungent clothes that were to be their disguise and route into Mandurin.

The huge funnel of smoke would draw unwanted attention their way, so the group left the burning village and its unbelievable events behind. Fearful of what monsters might come to investigate, no views were exchanged when charging into the after-turns. With the best part of four short-turns left in the day, it was vital to get as near to Mandurin as possible before nightfall. At some point, their kyboes would have to be left, but that was the last of their worries.

Acting like creatures haunted into action, even with the additional eyes of Shanene watching ahead, tensions would not shift. Holding tight the rank garb that had been so dangerously retrieved, the sun arced down towards the horizon, guilty also this turn.

Chapter 28: Wretched Spy

Heading south, the Hunter made its way through the camp without further incident. Detached from the carnage, only now did cries erupt into the dawn behind. The hypnotic veil enshrouding the camp was lifting, returning those close to the scene to their aggressive ways. A wave of commotion rose, hundreds of Gorls stretching to see. Casting the Hunter a probing glance, now too far away to be associated with the noise at the foot of the pass, only its unusual appearance roused wonder at what it could be. No Gorl crossed it, passing beyond the outer limits of the camp undisturbed.

Crossing the well-trodden stony plane, the Hunter headed for the gap between the two opposing mountain chains in the near distance, the final barrier between the northern realms and the southern regions. The vast array of mountains behind shrank into the landscape as the ones in front grew. Already proving its capabilities, much devastation was to come.

Over one hundred of the weird contraptions now surrounded the city, positioned and ready to fire. High-grove Fordain cursed, not envisioning it to be this bad. Spewing over distant hills shortly before half-turn of the day, but nothing imagined compared to the real thing. Warned by the two Seekers, Lister and Ram of the approaching evil, it was eerie now they were here. His son Orl was not yet back from the Cropping Village of Holen End, adding to his concern. Anticipating this for so long, respecting Brandor's early warnings, this was to be a most grievous war. Hoping Hanor and the group's decision to enter Selmor was not a self-condemning one, finding the *Pillar of Life* under Grovan had lost its sparkle, speculating *its* relevance.

"There are many," Falone said, taking a break from her duties with the other Masters.

"Too many," Fordain coughed the words out such was the foulness. "How is your work going?" he asked, meaning Brandor's *Wall of Power*. Unsure what the Masters were attempting to do, he could only visualise it as an invisible structure of considerable size. Whatever it was, they needed it now.

"We are making ground," was all she said. It was not the first time he had asked.

Shuddering, Fordain felt sick, tensions mounting. Early evening, they were expecting an attack after sundown. Keyster, the Structure Bearer, joined him on the ramparts, handing him a cup of water. The three stood watching the simmering storm of hate. Countless others stationed along Grovan's walls waited. What was to befall them?

"Over there," Kifter called, pointing to a huge jutting rock. With an overhang, a score of trees was rooted at its base.

"Will that not be an obvious place to search?" Hallen asked from behind the leading pair.

"Only when they discover the dead Gorls will they know it to be foul play, but we will be long gone," Kifter said, making his way over.

"Foul play?" the Hite said, frowning. "We just played by their rules."

No one else questioned the decision. Their group had to be out of sight, so too their kyboes. Sheltered enough to protect them from above but alas not below, it would do. Skimming the horizon, the sun allowed just enough time to sort out the filthy garb in case Gorls did appear in the night. The idea of sleeping in them was not welcomed.

Sitting silent amongst wild-bush and tree, Hanor felt ill from the turn's events. Unwilling to share in their excitement about what happened, everyone discussing the details whilst eating their cold portions, this was terrible. Picking up the grotty furred overcoat back at Muelly, its stench nauseating, his stomach had wrenched at the touch of cold blood. Covering his hand, rubbing off what he could, traces left in the grooves were a cruel reminder of how it was won. Now, through the fading light, he peered down at his hand again. Too shocked to scrub it with water, how could they have done what they did?

Respecting a disguise was the only way of getting inside Mandurin, the idea of killing twenty Gorls had not sounded too bad. Arguing the cause justified the need, it seemed reasonable at the time. Nevertheless, when hearing that horrendous wail from the dying *Nyshifter*, something had sunk in his heart like a beaten stone. An important line had been crossed, a barrier that separated good from evil. Lowering their standards to that of *Gorl-darl*, slaughtering them whilst sleeping was wrong. Even though it meant his companions had survived, it just stabbed to the core of his being. The same for those trapped in the building, burning them alive was an atrocity too far. How could he proceed feeling like he did?

"Hanor..., are you all right?" the concerned voice of Tarmon asked, drawing the heir of Manson back to the group.

On the verge of crying, Hanor's pain was severe. Closing his eyes, the cold mixture of blood and the foul odour of smoke tinged his nostrils. He felt awful. The overcoat given to him lay behind as if from a skinned animal. Told they were to be put on before going to sleep, like rubbing salt into an open wound, how could he do it? Without the stomach to respond, he was tempted to just give up and go home. The others fell silent, waiting for him to reply.

"Come on, Hanor!" Hallen said a little too loud when the boy did not respond. Dismissing a sharp retort from the Tard, he took a swig of Sasta. "You should be happy."

Wanting to yell, to run away forever, to go home and see his parents, Hanor could not share in their jollities. To celebrate, even though Muelly's outcome would save countless lives, just seemed so wrong. Reaching behind for a water-skin, he poured a few trickles onto his stained hand. Dazed by the sombre mood, he started rubbing it clean, a weak attempt to wash away the revulsion.

"Hanor!" Kifter said this time, sitting to his left amongst thick leafy bushes. "What is troubling you?"

A lone tear rolled down the young man's cheek. Staring at his Fifanian friend through the dimness, the sickness turned to anger. "Does it not alarm you what you did? Are we now... no better than *him*?"

Surprised by his temper, Kifter responded on behalf of the group. "It may seem unpleasant but... decisions have to be made whether we deem them morally right or wrong." Sensing the lad's direction, he continued with care. "The Freelands is in a dire situation and fighting for its survival. Horrors are part of any war."

"It seems so wrong though," Hanor said, too upset to appreciate any arguments. "Do you not feel it in here?" Touching a hand to his heart, pain was in every word. After experiencing the unconditional love flowing through the *Stone*, that was why he felt like this, their acts despicable by comparison.

“What did you feel when those three Grovians were snatched outside Grovan?” Greema asked, unable to understand the young man’s reasoning.

“As I do now,” Hanor said. “And that is my point, and why this is so hard. There is no difference between the two.”

“What would you have us do?” Hallen fired at him. “Shall we put our blades away now and go home? It is for you and the so called *Sacred* that we are here in the first place!”

“You are not listening to me,” Hanor defended. “There is good and there is evil. What took place at Muelly is the latter, and there is no disputing it.”

“That may be,” the Hite growled. “But we have ridden ourselves of a great evil whether you like it or not.”

“Sometimes we have to do things that we would not normally do,” Raldama said, trying to calm the situation.

Respecting the point, even so, observing the two extremes hurt. “I can taste its foulness!”

“What will we see at Mandurin?” Greema tried, worried for the lad. “You saw what was happening in the fountain. It will be far worse up close.”

Rubbing his hands slowly, Hanor still could not calm down enough to see sense.

Sympathetic to both sides of the issue, through his unity of heart with Shanene, Tarmon made his point. “A seed germinates in the dark soil, and has to take root before it rises into the light of day where it blooms into a beautiful flower. Our struggles are no different. If we want to achieve a lasting peace and have a future that blossoms, we have to be willing to fight for it. You mentioned something similar before we entered Selmor, and nothing has changed. Think carefully on this Hanor before judging your good companions here.” Wrestling briefly himself whilst riding, Shanene, through her depth of understanding, had dissolved the guilt attempting to sabotage their success. Through her many long dark seasons, it was one of the most prized lessons she had learnt since gaining her freedom. Such forces granted each person the opportunity to define themselves and to grow.

“It will be difficult for us to proceed,” Raldama said. “If you see us as tainted.”

“It is at times like this,” Hallen said, frustrated. “That your talk about unconditional love and the *Sacred* turn my stomach. If what we did back there was not for the love of The Freelands, then what is?”

Greema had to know one thing. “Are we going to Mandurin or not?”

“All of you need to back off,” Bane cut in, protective of his friend. Even though he could not grasp what Hanor was saying, he did not deserve this.

“We need to know, Bane,” Greema warned, not swayed by the temper of a friend. “I am not putting my life at risk if his so called *heart* is not in the right place. I thought the *Pillars of Life* were the issue here.”

“He is not your enemy,” Bane fired back. “Some of you have forgotten that.”

“Perhaps he should start talking normally,” Hallen said, calming down.

The fact Hanor was not defending himself showed he was in sore distress. “Just have some respect.”

A familiar piercing shrill to the north cut the topic short, darkness setting in. A considerable distance from their position, it was answered by another from the same direction. Drawn to the flames burning in the distance, Muelly was still ablaze, a tinge of orange on the horizon.

"It is time to get these skins on," Tarmon ordered, to their distaste.

Sorting out the rags to suit each person's size when first stopping, some were oversized or undersized, but would do. Sown together with twisted hair and crude fastenings, they were heavy.

"And you doubt my love for The Freelands!" Hallen griped, checking the oversized garb. Part of the back was trailing on the ground, his short blade fixing it, but its reek was disorientating. "I hope we do not have to fight in these."

Balkorn, with his natural course skin, did not have to cover as much as the others, nipping and cutting his into shape. Taking two separate coats and working them into one, strips of excess material helped bind them. Baggy hoods would help conceal their features. Only in the morning could they determine just how convincing they looked.

Another shriek, this time closer, the starlit sky through the trees showed no hints to where the *Nyshifter* was. Heading for Muelly, how many more would come?

"Get some rest," Tarmon urged in the half-light.

The double moon was not yet up, restricting their vision. Sitting in reeking garments churning over quiet thoughts, their mats and bags stayed strapped to their kyboes for a quick flight if necessary. Tensions were evident in that haunting silence. Hanor's comments raised doubts about the wisdom of their actions. If the Northern Hordes were to sweep through here, what chance did they have? Had they brought too much attention this way?

Huddling tight amongst trees and large bushes, their kyboes seemed to know of their quandary. Barely a whimper was heard, not expecting much rest this night.

"How can we sleep in these rags?" Hallen groaned, annoyed at what had been said.

Kifter hissed at him to be quiet. Picking out what the others could not hear, sounds of flapping followed by a whooshing hum to their right emerged. Nobody moved. Passing their position, the *Nyshifter* was flying at tremendous speed. From their concealed position, they could see *its* enormous shape gliding across the terrain towards the fiery glow of Muelly on the horizon. Searching as *it* went, when *its* formidable frame disappeared into the night, relief was felt by all.

"Get what rest you can," Tarmon commanded.

Passing the two looming mountains at each end of the encircling chain, the Hunter ran on into the night. Unconcerned when six troubled Nyshifters flew by at speed, fluctuations of power through the horn from its Master were irrelevant. Flat and rocky, the landscape was replaced by hills of wild-grass, scattered boulders and large outcrops of rock. Lighting its way, the double moons shone bright, periodically hiding behind sections of moulded cloud. Focused, nothing could keep the Hunter from its purpose.

Alerted by an approaching danger, Kifter woke the group and whispered for quiet. Staying hidden in the small wood, through the dark, distant sounds like hundreds of nassap-loe on the run were heading their way. Recently acquired attire drooped about them, the stench forgotten, concerns for what was happening taking priority. Unsure what short-turn of the night it was, it seemed they had just closed their eyes before this disturbance. A silvery sheen across the surrounding landscape was a favourable backdrop to spot anything moving. Through gaps in the trees, numerous dark shapes appeared on a

nearby hilltop, moving with a fiery passion. Some skinny, others larger and more fearsome, the few leading ran past their hiding place, oblivious to the fearful eyes watching them go. Ushered on by a *Nyshifter* above, the original few turned to hundreds. Heading for Muelly, the golden glow on the horizon was still burning.

Veiled by tree and bush, they watched the last few Gorls disappear over a distant hill. Numbness stole their voices for a time, hesitant in case stragglers were about. Success at Muelly had drawn large numbers away from the invading force, granting the southern defenders additional time to get ready. An unforeseen benefit, it gave little solace when the enemy was so close.

"I am... sorry... for earlier," an apologetic Hanor said, slicing the silence. Witnessing the scale of what was infecting The Freelands, there was more to love than he realised. "It was... unfair of me to... blame you for what you did. It is hard to live a normal life when experiencing these unexplainable things." His voice parried like a healing medicine. "But it is me... who is mistaken. Love... is not always about making easy choices. Some decisions may seem harsh on the surface but underneath are full of care." Burdens lifted with every word. "Thank you for putting up with my irrational behaviour and ignorance, especially you Hallen. The last thing I want is disunity."

A warm breeze caressed his humble admissions. Vital in its timing, it meant they could face the morrow without doubts undermining their efforts.

"You will have me in tears if you keep talking like that," the tame Hite teased, hiding any returning affection behind the humour.

"I am glad for you, Hanor," Greema said to his right. "We do what we must to get the work done."

"Supporting each other will help us win the day," Tarmon said, pleased the young man had come to his senses. "Let us put this affair behind us and find that third *Pillar of Life*."

"You cannot expect us to run all the way to Mandurin in these?" Bane protested, checking what he looked like at first light. The foul stench had got easier, but the oily clamminess had not. Sleeping in the garb resulted in itches making matters worse. Cumbersome, the heavy fur-skinned overcoat drooped to below his knees, and the arms were just as baggy. Pulling up the hood, "I do not believe this."

"You are the one who came up with the idea," Hallen reminded him of his input. "It suits you." Better after Hanor's apology, the Hite was back to his old self.

"Keep your humour," Bane snipped. The notion of running for most of the turn was not encouraging either, Tarmon already explaining they could reach Mandurin by early evening if they pressed hard. By kyboe, it would only take a few short-turns. Leaving their mounts undercover here, if successful, they could return to collect them later.

Turning to check on his friend, Hanor looked self-conscious, embarrassed by what was said the previous evening. Smiling at his soft ways, Bane could see a glimmer of his old companion there. "It does suit you," he joked.

Lifting his hood and settling back into its depth, at least it covered Hanor's pale features. Adapted for the harsh climate in the northern realms, to his discomfort, it encased the stench inside. "The sooner we start the better," he said, managing a half smile. Whirling at a presence behind, the mighty figure of Balkorn stood staring down. Concealed within a huge hood, his new attire hung loose like a wrap around cloak. The Baltian had done an admiral job with what he had.

"If either of you get tired," Balkorn said, hoarse voice rumbling through the early morning setting. "Tell me. Last night, some Gorls were helping the smaller ones by letting them ride on their backs. It will not be out of place."

Surprised the big fellow could speak, Bane thought the offer was a generous one. "You may end up carrying us both," he said, nudging Hanor. Even though Tarmon had said they would not stop once they got going, a few quanners and roots stuffed inside crude pockets would ensure he did not starve. No additional belongings could be taken either. Running light, Bane felt upbeat, forgetting about the *Voice* with its cruel lies. It felt good to normal again.

"Are we ready?" Tarmon asked, stepping back to get a better picture of how they looked. "You are convincing," he applauded. Hooded, they seemed just like any hideous Gorl patrol on a wet turn of day. The fact it was not raining did not matter. A brightening blue sky with its wispy clouds meant *Nyshifters* would not inspect this unusual patrol returning to Mandurin. Waiting for Hallen to check their kyboes for a final time, they were about to embark on the impossible. "Let us go," the Tard decreed.

"Do you see that creature?" Greema warned, the group passing through juts of rock in the grassy terrain.

Panting hard, it was well into the after-turns, the sun beating away to their left. So far, their run had gone undetected. Only occasional grumps about the pace had disturbed the jaunt, but shifty movements ahead dissolved the strains. Sitting proud on a lump of rock, the skinny Gorl was a lookout. The question was what to do.

"It is a scout, so keep your heads down," the hissing words returned along the line.

Proceeding as if nothing was untoward, the lengthy boulder it sat on was high and a good place to scan the surrounding area. Standing and making its way to the edge of the rock where they had to pass, the fact it did not suspect anything despite having their hoods up was encouraging.

Squint eyes above skinny, extended features waited. Scratching its scrawny shoulder, the skin and bone creature watched them approach.

"*What is the word for these poor ears of mine?*" it called, its superior position worthy of respect. Not expecting the Patrol to respond, the differing factions despised each other. "*Is there strife in the distant regions?*" it asked, standing tall on the limb of rock, this time scratching its ashen leg that was no thicker than a wrist. "*Are you not going to answer poor Mische?*"

Scuttling to the edge of the boulder where they were to pass, it tried looking beneath their hoods. Not questioning why they were up in the first place, this was a chance for some fun. Clutching a lump of rock, it leant out over where they ran to tease the larger, dopier ones. The first few passed by without acknowledgement, too low for it to reach. Trying to seize the hood of the first large Gorl, but its momentum was too strong for it to retain a grip, refocusing on the second instead. Timing its efforts, it was its duty to keep the rift between them strong. Renowned for their nasty bites, hence why many patrols avoided interactions, this group was no different.

About to grab the second large Gorl's hood, it halted when the dopey one looked up. Two enormous discs stared out from beneath its drooping hood, the scout stalling, never seeing one like it before. Hypnotised by those captivating eyes, retracting its mischievous

hand, it did not see the powerful arm reach up and seize its scrawny frame until it was too late. Vicelike, the grip cut off its air supply, wincing when its chest was squeezed like a water-skin. Yanked down into the murky shadows beneath the runner's sullied coat, the yelp found no supportive ears listening.

Limp and lifeless, Balkorn discarded the foul thing into a suitable crevice, out of sight from others passing this way.

"I commend you, Balkorn," Raldama approved from behind, checking no others were in the vicinity.

"Can we walk for a while?" Hayla asked, the going tough whilst wearing the heavy overcoat.

"Yes..., if wisdom is to rule," Greema seconded her appeal.

Scanning the area, Tarmon sighed at the laziness, Shanene already warning him not to overdo it. The fact Balkorn had dealt with that scout granted some leeway.

"It is clear," Kifter declared, confident nothing was nearby.

Easing up to their relief, "Only whisper," Tarmon cautioned. Anything could creep up on them.

Passing around the water-skin, Hallen was thankful for the rest. Balkorn did the same, the two volunteering to be water-bearers. To the Hite's peril, the extra weight was taking its toll.

Receiving the skin, Hanor's throat felt raw. Staring into the large patient eyes of his Baltian friend, how he had dealt with that scout disgusted him, but since maturing from previous interpretations, some situations just had to be dealt with.

Giving the skin back. "Thank you," he whispered, grateful. "And thank you for what you did back there."

Surprised but pleased, Balkorn knew wisdom had won the day at last. Hanor's reaction last night had fired his own doubts, but he had concluded the group had done the right thing at Muelly. The boy's apologies during the early turns had not convinced him it had sunk in. Now though, he could see it had. "You are welcome," he said. "How are you coping?"

Bane stood next to him, cursing. "It is these rags that make it hard." Receiving a couple of hisses to be quiet, he forgot how close they were to danger.

Hanor could only agree. "At least they do not smell so bad now."

"Let me know when it gets too hard," Balkorn urged. "We may not sleep this night."

Both boys had not considered that, getting inside Mandurin their prime concern.

"You can carry me now if you are willing?" Bane grabbed the offer.

Checking Hanor was fine first, Bane was not the Baltian's main worry.

"You had better take him, his moaning can be unbearable," Hanor chuckled.

Running into the after-turns, their route was now guided by a plume of smoke in the distance, Hanor fearing the worst. Not as thick as the one at Muelly, but substantial enough to suggest buildings were alight, it forewarned them of horrors to come. Forcing back the rocky terrain, lush wild-grass and flowers eased the going, but that was not the only change. Clouds started forming. Out in the open, the risk of sharp-eyed *Nyshifters* was enough to spur them on. Glimpsing differing parts of the city through gaps in the rocky hillside, the true extent of the invasion was still hidden.

Pointing out to their left, everyone looked to where Kifter indicated. Fretful, another patrol was returning, but fears of a confrontation eased when that group headed west. Encouraged, they pressed on determined to do this.

Running in the dark after sundown, an orange glow of many fires lit their way, illuminating the clouds above. Fearful of what was to follow, the group was certain they were close. Passing between two rocky pillars, they had little choice but to stop, the sight stalling their progress. Shocked, Tarmon and the others were horrified at what lay at the base of the low wide valley. From their higher vantage point, the scene defied belief. Mirroring what they had witnessed at the Five Passes, the scale of this invasion dwarfed that camp. Thick like an encircling tar, Mandurin was surrounded by scores of fires and thousands of creatures. Low and menacing, a thrum buzzed the air as if the city was groaning under such a reckless onslaught. Outer rims of the city were dark, already stripped and fed upon by this hideous gathering. Trails of smoke from smouldering buildings drifted skywards, accumulating amongst the illumined clouds of peachy gold above. Further in towards the centre, fires burned and walls tumbled. Unrushed, as if the marauding Horde was stretching out the torment, feeding on fear as well as flesh, dark was the evil this night.

"There are men and women still fighting," Shanene's thoughts entered Tarmon's mind, warning him not to get distracted by the horror.

"There are so many," he thought, wavering.

A lull had rested over the outer camp, bloated from its recent feed. This was but half, the rest already marching south. Where did they come from?

"Tarmon, my beloved," Shanene's thoughts interrupted the dread. *"If you linger, your strength will falter. You must be strong, for the younger ones especially."*

At her prompting, he looked at Hanor and Bane. Just discernable under their voluminous hoods, both were petrified. "Let us not delay," Tarmon said, inducing the group to move. "Keep tight and hoods low." With Kifter at his side, he pressed on into shadow.

Chapter 29: Entering into Darkness

Atop a muddied hill, the Hunter stared down and across at the stricken city of Mandurin. Detached from the destruction, the Master could see through its eyes by way of the horn. Fires raging towards the centre billowed into the night. A low din of thousands could be heard, the creature waiting for the next impulse to move.

Lying on the stone plinth at the centre of his cavern, Gorl-darl was pleased with the scene. After the death of one of his Nyshifters, he was glad to see resistance, the Source behind his power rewarding him the longer the conflict lasted. In no rush to end the invasion, expecting other Nyshifters to fall, it was a small price for his plan to work.

Horried by the thick black band with its studded jewels of orange fires, Hanor gulped at what they proposed to do. Writhing like a hideous monster at rest, the low din was just as haunting. A fiendish shadow at work, to pass through was insane. No Gorl would fall for their trickery. Pushing back his hood to get a better view, this was even worse than when viewing it through the fountain.

Heart pounding, when Tarmon called for them to begin, it left no room for fears to fight a floundering spirit. They had to do this. Thankful that Balkorn was running beside him, carrying him for a short-turn earlier when struggling to keep up, as soon as Bane had been put down he had not needed to ask. Scooping him up as if just another pouch to carry, he was growing fonder of the huge Baltian warrior with every turn.

Reaching down for his gilth pouch whilst running, he so much wanted to hold the *Stone* again, to feel *its* wondrous powers. Needing courage to continue and to inspire the others, if ever bravery was required, now was the time. Hoping Bane was holding steady, a fleeting concern for Hayla was not misplaced either. The only female here, he glanced across as she ran close by. As if moved by an invisible force, her hood turned towards him, concealed eyes staring his way. Surprised at wanting to hold her, he thought those feelings had dissolved. Looking at her for longer than he should, he turned away, focusing instead on the approaching lights, avoiding any further confusion.

Churnings in Hayla's stomach returned, annoyed that he could trigger the feelings just by looking at her. Disbelieving it after rebuilding her shattered life, it was madness when about to descend into darkness. Angry that her guard had been knocked aside, was she ever to get over him? Talking to Bane with a vague hope it would release her from exactly this kind of response, now seeing it as a foolish attempt to deny those urges, she was going to fail them all if she did not get her act together. Growling, she seized the hilt of her sword beneath the foul overcoat to reinforce her commitment.

Solemn, the silent but lengthy exchange between Hanor and Hayla nearly stopped Bane in his tracks, a lump forming in his parched throat proof of just how much it hurt. Through the dimness, they could not see each other's eyes, but that short interaction meant they still cared about each other. Rejecting what the *Voice* had promised as ridiculous, losing *its* support if he did not give his trust, was this the first step to that happening? Preferring the calm state prior to *its* whispers, he was annoyed at the jealousies active again. Uncertain if *it* was an outside entity or a figment of his

imagination, he felt sick. Fighting back, resisting the lies, Hanor and Hayla did not deserve this. If he did not gain control, he would end up doing something foolish.

Trudging forward, the group tried emulating any other patrol returning from a turn's search. Encircled by their companions, minimising the risk from whatever might draw close, Hanor and Bane shuddered at the emerging fires. Covering the gap quicker than expected, as if the massive camp had rushed out to meet them, there was no turning back.

Pace steady, they did not falter. Through the wide band of campfires, the main entrance to Mandurin was a small square halfway along the city's wall. Missiles were being fired over them making no sense. The defences had already been breached, leaving the outer sections dark and lifeless. Granting the group something to look at rather than the vile creatures around them, this was mad.

Reaching the first lines of billowing flames, Gorls were sleeping or lying down staring up at the flame lit clouds above. Uninterested in the newcomers, most were recovering from the turn's successful routing. Ample room for them to run between each fire, this horde was taking up as much space as possible to ensure the scale was epic.

Passing the outer fires actually relieved the runners, fearing an inspection might have been in place. Descriptions of just how vile Gorls were fell short of the reality. Occasional arguments erupted out in the middle, brutish attitudes fighting over minor issues. Sometimes the sound of steel clashed, twisted cheers encouraging explosions of raucous aggression. Bitter entertainment to break up the monotony, the discreet group were on edge when trotting between the firesides. Tensions high, straining eyes kept searching for the unexpected.

An explosion of coughing just in front startled them, slowing as a result. A mountainous Gorl similar to the one Hallen had dealt with stood straight holding its throat. Splutters and gasps for air bellowed, the choking Gorl struggling with whatever was stuck. Bending before standing tall, trying to dislodge the guilty object, gurgles sounded revolting. Other Gorls watched for the outcome, seeking any opportunity for a quick feed. At last, a defiant gasp accompanied by a belching growl succeeded in removing the wedged piece, a sizeable bone flying out of its mouth and landing beside the passing group. Avoiding the steaming object, for those who knew, it was a piece from an arm, probably human. Crossing all boundaries of decency to satisfy their lust for blood and death, the group held their nerve.

Halfway across the flickering fire-lit band surrounding Mandurin, confidence rose that their plan could work. Acting like messengers, their steadfast movements suggested something important was in the making for those intrigued enough to notice. Determined, this despicable mass could not be left to destroy their beloved Freelands.

Objects ahead were still firing over the wall like a contemptible shooting game to fight back boredom. A wide opening where the main gates had hung was distinguishable, its doors long gone and used as fuel for these endless fires. A considerable distance away, the secured darkness inside looked inviting.

Familiar and shrill, the heart-piercing sound jolted the small group whilst they ran. Coming from the city, another round of shrieks scratched the sky, fears of discovery

obvious. Dreading the worst, Tarmon eased their pace. Flapping sounds meant a *Nyshifter* was close.

Not waiting long before the creature materialised from the shadows, *it* was making *its* way towards the outer sections of the Mandurin. Shuddering the atmosphere again with that treacherous cry, *its* glee apparent, but why? Gangly arms and legs kept flexing, hovering as if pinpointing something beneath *it*. Suspending life in the camp, its power was felt by all. Many woke to investigate. Others stood gawping, overawed by the unfolding drama. Beating enormous wings above the focus of *its* wicked intent, swooping a short length before rising again, *it* continued following what was on the ground.

Anticipation gripped the camp. The *Blackwing* had found *its* prey and was not after one of them. Through the murmurings, an additional sound surfaced, faint at first but getting louder. Trotting amongst the furore, a screaming voice reached the secretive group, a terrified sound that was human.

Heading down the gradual decline, Tarmon and the others feared what this meant. Helpless, that pathetic cry broke through the open gateway and the dulling effects of the wall. A lone young male, half-naked and dishevelled was running for his life. Pale and bloodstained, his frantic screams whipped up a frenzy around the camp. Sprinting and half-stumbling, the helpless young man carried on without a care for where just as long as he could escape. Another piercing shrill shook the boy, sprawling to the ground between two large fires. Spluttering when scrambling to his feet, he pressed on, desperate and forlorn. Swooping again before stopping just above and in front, the *Nyshifter* cut off any chance of escape, enjoying every succulent heartbeat of fear.

Growling at his companions to hold their nerve, they had to stay fixed to their cause and not be drawn towards the doomed boy. "There is nothing we can do!" Tarmon grimaced, fury rising within their numbers.

Too far away to do anything anyway, charging amongst so many would be suicidal. Not wanting to look, but the scene lured them in, the *Nyshifter's* final dive heart draining. The young man's last scream tore at the approaching group, wrenched to see him picked like a flower before taken back into the city. Silhouettes against the backdrop of fires, the *Nyshifter* disappeared into shadow, the screams fading.

Understanding the controlled fury of his companions, Hanor felt ill. Raging, a strong urge to use the *Stone* had soared again. To run out and burn that cruel wretch, but *it* was not designed for that purpose, his failure at Grovan proof enough. The *Stone* was for shedding *light* into a darkened world and not a weapon of destruction. Whilst his motives sought punishment and retribution, the *Stone* would not ignite. Willing *it* to do harm prevented the *powers* from rising, even for the sake of justice. Those *powers* embraced all, no matter how foul they were, even *Gorl-darl* if *he* was willing.

Trying to explain that to the others was futile. Without the inner awareness, one would not understand the beauty underpinning it all. Hard to justify amongst such perils, the fight for freedom brought with it an expensive price. Remaining true, a scratchy voice fired him back to the present.

"What is the news you have?" the voice called from in front. The small Gorl, similar to the one Balkorn had disposed of, was waiting for them now that the other

entertainment had finished. Observing the group heading towards the main gates, something important was on.

Tarmon and Kifter kept going as if it did not exist. As riled as they were, the last thing they needed was an outburst. Expected at some point, what were they to do? A question on everyone's mind, the scrawny Gorl was unwilling to give up.

"Do you not speak?" it pressed when not getting an answer. *"What news?"* the scrappy voice appealed again, louder this time.

Running alongside when they did not stop, its branchlike limbs flailing in protest, its blackened skin reflected in the surrounding firelight. Minds racing at what to do, the Gorl was drawing unwanted attention their way.

"What is this silence, can you not tell?" The vile creature called. When nothing came, it nimbly leapt up onto the shoulder of Raldama before leaping higher onto Hallen. Expecting the larger ones to be docile, it asked again. *"Are the Blackwings..."*

It did not finish. Hallen reached up and seized it just as Balkorn had. Crunching and twisting its form as it thrashed about, the charged up Hite tossed it next to a nearby fire.

Delighting the slouching Gorls there, the once dozing creatures sprang to life, fighting over the dead wretch. No one considered the passing group, common behaviour in such despicable company.

Glancing at each other through the twilight, Hanor and Bane sighed. That was close! Marvelling at how effective their friends were, they could not have achieved this without them. Supernormal powers were incredible, but without the everyday bustles dealt with, such forces had little room to move.

Hanor could not believe how carefree these creatures were. No frantic drive to kill and take at any cost, and no rush to deliver the Freelands into the murderous hands of their *Master*, it seemed like another day of work. Humiliate and mutilate, consume and burn, and leave when the task was complete, he could not fathom it.

A winding sound followed by a clattering noise explained what the flying objects were earlier. Small winching machines around the perimeter of the wall were simple tools to get their numbers inside. Effective but suicidal, as the group approached, another was released, a gleeful cry accompanying the Gorl when disappearing over the ruined wall. More were fired, occasional crashes the result. A hardy breed, their scrawny appearance concealing their resilience, Hanor was amazed to see them return through the gateway for another turn. Large unsightly Gorls were barking orders. Training seemed odd, but showed a measured balance. Uncomplicated, the contraptions were light and portable, ready to take to the many cities yet to be conquered. Seating each Gorl before ejecting them through the air, with more than a hundred on the go, it did not matter how impenetrable the walls were, they were irrelevant when the enemy could fly unimpeded over the top.

Aiming for the main gate, Tarmon led them through the shrewd contraptions, at last breaking from the campfires to the short space encircling the beleaguered city. Other Gorls were entering but not in vast numbers. Groups of twos, threes and fours were common, ready to wreak havoc. Just as many were leaving, carrying loads. Not until they got closer could they see what they were, another gruesome sight etching on struggling

minds. Wood was a regular asset, but so too bodies and limbs. Many were dead Gorls, disfigured and cut down to size, but pale-skinned bodies were also lugged out.

Riling them, Tarmon hissed again to stay focused and not get embroiled in any conflicts. Their purpose was to be remembered at all cost, the warning directed at Hallen in particular. Passing through the broken gateway, parts of its walls were cast down and strewn about. Further along, Gorls were busy dropping stones from the ramparts, dismantling the city rock by rock, building by building.

When inside, Tarmon and Kifter searched for the safest route. The main road ran straight ahead to the next inner wall, but was too busy. A large open space in front had been the old trading area where merchants sold their wares. Buildings facing onto the once rich area were either burnt down or ruined. Walls and partitions were skeletons of what once was. All roofs were gone, used as firewood outside the city or burned away in the original onslaught. Pitch-black windows stared like terrified witnesses to what had happened here.

A chill ran through the group, the essence of life gorged from this stricken place. Whisperings on the wind carried awful tales, and for those who could see, stranded *Souls* added to the cold.

Pointing to their left, Kifter proceeded once the Tardanian agreed on the lesser road discernible through the shadows in the far corner. All seemed quiet there, an opportunity to reach the inner sector without disturbance. The others were close behind as they hurried along, retaining the disguise of Gorls with a purpose. Grass that had once grown was parched, stained by spilt blood or long trampled to dust. Others who watched them go did not stop long, nothing unusual happening here anymore.

Reaching the corner, the shadowed road was still, Tarmon slowing to a walk. Conserving energy in case they stumbled across anything unexpected, sporadic clatters kept them on edge, so too crashing sounds of a falling rafter or supporting beam. Strong and putrid, the odour of charred wood and smouldering ash singed the senses, a constant reminder of ongoing horrors. Every building was gutted, all contents gone or smashed into fragments. Ensuring no dedicated modeller could ever rebuild what was now lost, the destruction was plain even in the dark. Sidestepping or leaping over discarded objects, it was a sorrowful, wasted sight.

Cautious, moving under relative cover of the dilapidated shells, the group stayed alert. Gleeful wails echoed from other parts, a deathly atmosphere seizing this once thriving place. Crunching steps of a haunted advancement were steady, the road running straight for most of the way. Veering right towards its end, shadows on walls flickered in firelight, daring them to proceed. An added concern was where that *Nyshifter* was and to which part of the city was *its* lair.

Meticulous when checking every side road, Mandurin was a giant maze of a place. Only Raldama, Kifter and Hallen had visited before, but in its present condition, it was difficult to gain bearings without landmarks. Not renowned for a fast life, the people of Mandurin were friendly but protective of their uncomplicated lifestyles. Gardens were uncommon, its size unable to cope with such luxuries. The once splendid buildings however, had been more than a match to any Grovian structure. Most of that eloquence was now gone, even the remaining husks giving no indication to their former grandeur. Sad was the road they travelled.

A number of snaps froze the advancing group. Someone was running their way from the left. Odd slips and crunches meant it was in no mood to slow. More cracks and crumples, a skinny Gorl scurried from inside a building. Breaking cover, a flash of steel stole away its life. Alarming the others, Hallen picked the lifeless creature up and dropped it like a rubbish bag inside a doorway.

"We cannot afford to behave like that!" Tarmon scowled, storming over to him. Checking no one else was in the vicinity, the Tard was unnerved by the huge Hite's unpredictable nature.

"Are you trying to get us caught?" Kifter hissed. Standing at Tarmon's side, he knew what response his big oaf of a friend would give.

"It is only right to take out a few of these vile things whilst here." Hallen was unimpressed by their protest.

"And who will forgive you if we are discovered and all is lost?" The Tard's sharpness surprised him.

"What happened to that loving Tard I have seen recently?" Hallen mocked, wiping his blade. He was not letting anyone dictate what he should or should not do. "Decisions have to be made, so I just made one."

Tarmon's composure was faltering.

"You cannot expect them to live on a knife edge and react correctly every time," Shanene's soft words soothed Tarmon's mind.

"I need you to be in control," the Tardanian said to Hallen. "Wildness has no place here."

"I cannot think of a better place to get away with it," the Hite said, staring from under his hood.

"Just think before you strike," Kifter cut in, leading Tarmon away. "Standing here will get us caught."

Tarmon warned the others. "We cannot afford to be reckless!"

The sharp incident was put behind them. Tensions high, anything could be lurking close by. Greema and Hallen kept tight to the buildings on the left whilst Hayla and Raldama took the right. Balkorn remained just behind the boys with Tarmon and Kifter in front. No right or wrong way to travel, yet too orderly would look suspicious. Noise levels rose the more they progressed, stopping again at the sounds of slapping feet.

Rhythmic like a drum, "There are four of them," Kifter discerned.

Four Gorls scrambled around a corner. Expecting a fight, the creatures were in a hurry, and to their surprise, did not dally. Far from sociable, they continued by without a grunt to acknowledge they even existed.

"No decency," Greema grumbled.

"Worse than Hites," Hallen joked next to him.

"Ermm... that would be a close one," the Grove chuckled, starting forward again. "I approve of what you did back there," he whispered to his big companion.

"Perhaps you ought to lead us then," Hallen added, cursing under his breath when a hiss for quiet shot across at them from Tarmon. "He is becoming very annoying."

"Let it go," Greema advised, concentrating on the murky shadows.

Hallen shrugged when his Fifanian friend warned him to simmer. Whilst Kifter remained loyal to the Tardanian's leadership, there was no questioning it. Huffing, he promised to do

it again if the chance arose. Retribution was appropriate for these atrocities, owing it to the countless dead of this place. Their enemy deserved nothing less.

Pitch-black eyes watched the Gorls shuffle along below. Resting in the tallest tower of Mandurin, the Nyshifter considered their orderly movements. Balanced on a supporting beam of the enormous sundial below, the slatted building not only protected it from a scorching sun during the day but also permitted an ideal view across the city. Tempted to investigate the curious figures, but a whimper down to its left distracted the Nyshifter. Huddling in the corner, relishing the dark energies of fear in the boy, his terrified eyes were a treasure. Keeping him here until madness set in, whilst he sought to escape, that fear would remain. Allowing him to sneak out so he could be hunted down, the dread was enthralling. How sweet fear was, the taste surpassing meat.

Staring back to where the individuals below were, they had gone. The Master wanted this conflict to be drawn out for as long as possible, so there was no need to investigate. With the loss of one of its brethren at Muelly, the idea of resistance was appealing. Like this quivering boy, the more defiance, the better it would be and the longer it would last. Flexing its claws, the boy cowered, the ecstasy of fear rising for the Nyshifter to feed on.

Bearing round to the right, the roadway curving back to the central aisle, the vigilant group prepared to break into a run if necessary. The orange tinge reflecting off the walls was brighter, the sound and smell of timber burning strong. More rank cries shrieked and howled, Gorls on the rampage getting closer. A defensive wall behind the line of burned out buildings had recently been heightened to counter this strike, but it too had failed. More crashes tumbled, countless monsters determined to undo this place. The destruction showed no signs of easing. Reckless creatures were enjoying every terrified scream, every wall that collapsed.

Rounding the corner, the gateway to the second level came into view. Busy as expected, Tarmon signalled for them to stay tight. Gorls seemed preoccupied in the monstrosities to worry about the hooded group walking amongst them. The stench was nauseating. Screams raised hairs on the back of taut necks. An argument over a dead corpse just outside the gate gave the disguised intruders a doorway to shuffle through unnoticed. An entrance smaller than the outer one, its iron gates were lying twisted just inside the walls on either side. A poor defence, its wooden beams had already been stripped and used for firewood.

Straddling the walls, other vile wretches shrieked, knocking large lumps from its upper parts. Bludgeoning all traces of artistic elegance to the ground, mindless was the destruction.

Staying close to Bane, with Balkorn and Raldama to either side, Hanor was wrought with horror. Unable to cover his ears due to the heavy overcoat, he wanted to leave this tomb of evil. Atrocities churned an empty stomach. Tarmon's comment that men were still fighting somewhere at the centre was incredible, looking for flashes of steel through the melee. Aches in his heart drew a tear but nothing more. Too much was happening to get burdened by strife.

Passing into the next sector, what were once small neat homes alongside narrow enclosures were now shells of stone and charred wood. Some structures were on fire,

hysterical Gorls running across burning roof beams for fun. Others were busy ripping up roof tiles on adjacent houses to get at the dry wood beneath. The sneaking group ignored the countless distractions testing their nerve. One huge Gorl was trying to push over the remaining wall of a large hall-like building. Not stopping when a loud crash behind was accompanied by a triumphant roar, the creature's success was pointless.

Searching for human life, the smouldering shadows only carried the black movements of Gorls on the prowl. Inspecting every niche, checking for that terror-stricken face that could still be hiding, no one was to be left alive.

More fires were ablaze as they continued, now approaching the centre of activity. A few taller buildings were on fire over to their left, too tall to pull down by hand. Artful masonry was blackened, stained by this intruding evil. Figurines and ornate sculptures fell to the ground, the time consuming efforts of skilled workers gone in a few turns. Tearing apart the lives of a prosperous people, every broken slab was like a tombstone to a dying culture.

Restraining himself from taking out a few wretches, Hallen was wavering, needing to release the wrath before exploding. Infuriated by the gleeful expressions filing down the main track, many were carrying the dead. Holding onto the handle of his short blade, surely one or two would not matter? This far in, who would notice an extra dead Gorl or two? Tempted, but warnings about giving them away was enough to stay his hand. To be caught now would be a travesty. Not until a huge Gorl came trudging towards them carrying a blood-soaked female did the Hite change his mind. Trailing slender arms, her long fair hair reminding him of Hayla, it could be her in a short-turn. Too much, his temper boiling, he had to do something.

Easing his blade out from its protective sheath when the monster drew near, his action was as swift as any Fife's. Driving it out and up at the huge monster, he whipped the knife back from its grisly head and carried on his way as if innocent of the brutal assault. Shrilling as if struck by lightening, the Gorl dropped the lifeless girl and started gurgling, clutching its head before slumping dead.

Unprepared, the others turned to investigate.

"Keep moving!" Hallen growled, not looking to see if the creature was alive. "Keep your blade... sheathed!" Kifter was furious when realising what he had done. "You will be the end of us," he scorned, from the darkness of his hood.

Behind them, a furore resulted when others saw the giant dead Gorl. Easy pickings, a natural trait of these monsters, no one stopped to ask why. Just seizing the opportunity for an undemanding feast, it was as mindless as it was grotesque.

Guarded, their enemy numbering too many this far in, scores were running in every direction. Shrieks echoed beneath the orangey red clouds above. No stars shined through to this forsaken city, too terrified to approach. Only one of the moons dared make its presence known through a gap in the cloud, half-expecting it to turn blood red.

Avoiding clusters of Gorls blocking their way, the third level came into view. For those of the group who knew, it was the High-house of Mandurin, its walls heightened and strengthened too. The road remained straight, a familiar layout for most cities of the Freelands. Discerning it through the flames, louder cries reached them, a blend of insanity and glee.

Tarmon slowed, wary of losing anyone. Too many Gorls lined the route. Where were the fighters of Mandurin? Amongst the increasing bellows, faint human cries were distinguishable. Verging on desperation, but there was order to their call. Substantial walls surrounding the High-house loomed, the men and women fighting to the death inside.

"I hear instructions," Kifter called to those behind, encouraged, the hubbub of noise nearly drowning out his voice.

Scrawny, wild looking Gorls were sitting or standing on the walls of the High-house grounds, barracking those trapped inside. Passing another burning building, the High-house itself came into view. Windows on the upper floors were populated by shooters, men and women trained to fire specially cut stones that were lethal to ordinary folk, but not so these creatures. Most of the Gorls this far in were skeletal, nasty and uncontrollable. Bloodletting eyes were glazed and motivated by unnatural powers. Some were multi-limbed, their shrieks fierce and frenzied. Scrambling up walls as if scurrying along the ground, only to be shot down at its peak, many skipped along the rim, fearless. Many who were shot got back up, oily blood from gaping wounds irrelevant.

"We have to enter over there, the defenders are inside," Kifter said, pointing to a wide-open archway.

Above the din, a coarse voice hollered through the burning light. Picking the huge creature out, it sat atop the stone archway where they had to enter. Just out of range of the shooting stones, it teased and spat, lapping up every harsh moment. Ordering Gorls to move, this one was different to the others. Powerful, its bulky size matching Balkorn's, they doubted it would be tricked by their disguise, unlike these others. They had to be careful.

"We cannot stay out here," Kifter said to Tarmon above the uproar. Worried about that calculating Gorl on the arch, the Tardanian was astonished they had reached this far. Shanene had said at least three hundred men and women were fighting inside. Unacceptable to just leave them whilst they tried to find the third *Pillar of Life*, but what could they do? Torn between finding the *Pillar* and helping, "Let us head for the arch," he ordered, needing time to decide. "And keep your blades sheathed!"

Chapter 30: Mighty is The Gorln

Confident victory was at hand, the Gorln - overseer of Mandurin's demise, stared across at the line of defenders making their last stand. Beyond the reach of their stinging stones, there would be no turning back from this final assault, no leaving the city as they had repeatedly since first attacking this pitiful place. Receiving from the Blackwing an impression not to finish it too soon, now it could see why. The gradual annihilation of an entire people was gratifying, basking in the misery. Initially wanting to strike without mercy, cursing at the prospect of drawing it out, only now could it appreciate the cunning beauty and power involved.

Picking out swift movements of the slim figure it had fought on the outer walls four turns ago, a twisted pleasure rose that he was still alive and fighting. Ordering his floundering troops to hold their position, he was an inspirational leader, and one to respect. Confronting him before had nearly cost it dear. Quick and nimble, the scoundrel had moved too fast to be cut. Side-stepping like a trickster, many times it had received a sharp sting from his flashing blade. Even when cornering him, the clumsy stumbles of a huge Obe-Gorl across the back of its legs had permitted him another chance. Falling face down, it had come close to feeling his blade in the back of its neck. Saved only when the wooden ramparts had collapsed under the weight of the invading force, tumbling amongst wooden beams and debris, the willowy figure had escaped to regroup his men at the next level.

Sharp-witted, now commanding his men to hold the defensive arc around the huge High-house, by morning they would be no more. Encouraging hundreds of the nasty Gor-up-sa to trample around these once luxurious gardens, ripping up trees and bushes, nothing was to be left. Positioned in one corner, the grand building was not designed for an invasion. Bricking up windows at ground level to protect the wounded and dying inside, such meek efforts were pointless considering the vast numbers at its disposal. On the upper two levels were their Shooters, picking off those attempting to reach the High-house along the wall. Certain they must be getting low on ammunition, each Gor-up-sa took at least a couple of body shots to die such was the Master's power driving them on.

The black writhing mass below shrieked in contempt. Only one task did it have, to kill and feed. No other intelligence had been bestowed upon these malicious Gor-up-sa. Barely able to control them itself, only the promise of blood did they obey, or the heady movements of Blackwings would they listen. Hysterical shrills captured the hearts of the bravest as scores pressed forward, clawing and biting their way to success. Existing for one purpose, the consummation of the enemy, it was the Master's will and they knew nothing else.

Echoing around the inner walls of the High-grounds, defiant cries from the fighting men and women counterattacking kept meagre hopes alive, but only just. Standing beneath the huge archway out of sight of the watchful Gorln, Tarmon and the others considered their predicament. Standing on a fallen rock for a better view, the Tard could not believe what they proposed to do. The defenders had drawn a defensive line, relying on the Shooters to take down any Gorls that got through. Dragging the wounded to the High-house wall, left to die or to regain strength to fight again, grim was their plight.

How could they join them and expect to survive to find the *Pillar of Life*? If they did, any help from the *Sacred* would be lost, leaving the Freelands even more vulnerable to destruction. Strong temptations urged Tarmon to stay hidden, only a miracle could save these people. Priorities were to their mission and nothing more. Could they really make a difference anyway?

Bodies carried from the fighting resulted in the clasping of Tarmon's overcoat. Turning, Hallen's huge frame stood close, his intent obvious.

"We have to make a move *now*!" the Hite growled. "We cannot leave these people to die." Every lost moment meant another defender falling. "All we have achieved means nothing if we do not help them."

Standing alongside, Kifter was waiting for Tarmon's decision as were the rest. So much at stake, a charge from the defenders exploded behind as they tried to retake lost ground. If the group did not act, it could well be their last.

Tensions between the Tard and Hite was the last thing Hanor wanted. Pulling his arm from his sleeve to feel the gilth pouch, yearnings to hold the *Stone* had never been so strong. Waiting for those all-powerful sensations to surge in his heart, but desires to use the *Stone* as a weapon he knew were blocking *their* flow. Even to scare these foul creatures would not do. He had to be free from concern for the *powers* to rise. Before, his helpless state had permitted the *light* to burst forth. Shocked into submission, it had been enough to defuse any objective of his own.

Frustrated as to why, he slid his hand inside the pouch. The *Stone* was where he had left it, cold and uninterested. Lifting it out, he hoped something would fire if he managed to stay neutral. Nothing did.

"Let us go," Tarmon ordered, adrenalin pulsing his decision. The determination shown by these embattled people deserved more from them. If they were about to throw the hopes of the Freelands away, then the *Sacred* would have to find another way to deal with this degradation. Hallen was right, it did mean nothing if they were to stand back.

Making their way along the wall to keep out of sight of the Gorln, a narrow gap enabled the disguised group room to move, filing along in twos amongst the hysterics. The whizzing noise of shooting stones hitting their mark above was worrying. Needing to be careful, the risk of Hallen and Balkorn becoming targets was natural.

Halfway along, Tarmon cut away from the wall and headed diagonally towards the main thrust of defenders. Intending to make themselves known once they reached the front, the Shooters were the problem. Debating whether to cast aside their disguises so as not to be shot, but that would leave them open for attack. Mowing these vile things down dressed as they were was another option, giving the defenders an idea that they were friend and not foe, but that was not appealing either. They pressed on.

Making their way through the sea of bodies, there were only a few large Gorls in the area, making Hallen and Balkorn stand out. Most of the devastation was left to scrawny creatures, their viciousness making up for their lack of size. Heading for the main defensive thrust, short blades stabbed from the secrecy of their coats, Gorls sliced as if from nowhere. Balkorn and Hallen helped themselves to a few, twisting their lives in one foul jerking motion before dropping them to the ground. So far, no stones whizzed their way, the shadows concealing their movements.

Through the dimness, fire-beacons on the High-house walls burned, so too lamps inside the open-sided passageway at ground level. No elegance radiated here anymore, no smiles to welcome a traveller.

Suspicious of the group heading towards the centre of the furore, the Gorln was certain something was not right. Calculated movements were not his Gor-up-sa and not Gorl either. Jolted as if by a bolt of lightening, the realisation dawned.

Standing on the archway, it hollered after them. Those who heard knew not what to do, for only Gorls seemed to be moving where indicated. Slow on the uptake, the Gorln pointed in their direction. More came from outside the grounds to investigate but could not make out what was wrong.

Leaping from the arch, the two creatures the Gorln landed on were left for dead in the rush. Unconcerned, it started after the suspicious group. Survivors sneaking in, riled it. Lifting its enormous blade, thick veins on a stocky neck strained, rage supporting the need for action. Red blood was to be spilt this turn of night.

“That Gorl is coming!” Hallen shouted to the others.

Pulling hoods back to see, the charging creature was closing in fast, knocking its own kind aside as it did. Someway off from the front line, should they stand and fight?

Dreading what this meant, Hanor held the *Stone*, urging it to blaze. Nearly dropping it when lifted and tossed over Balkorn’s shoulder, the Baltian carried him through the skeletal figures, bashing those in front to one side. Concerned about Bane, Hayla and the rest of the group, they would be trapped if they did not hurry. A chorus of angry voices alerted him to more terror. Unable to see due to his awkward position, Hanor had no idea what was going on. Was this the end?

Fallen victims were impeding their defence, Casvern Tarn refusing to give in to this evil polluting their city. Acting like a man possessed, he charged again into the black mass to drive them back. Watching the Gorln above the archway mock him for most of the turn, Tarn cursed but stopped when it stood and started shouting and pointing. No doubt wanting this battle over, but that foul cry was different. Indicating the centre of this abominable horde, something was amiss, but what?

“Aider..., cover me,” he called to his Second in Command, letting another skinny Gorl feel the bite of his sword. “Something is up.”

Cutting back behind the line of fighting, Mandurin’s leader leapt up onto a fallen pillar of stone to get a better view. Fending off a Gorl following him, a flash of silver blue steel put an end to its wickedness.

Another enraged call echoed above the din of fighting. Surprised, the huge Gorln dropped to the ground and headed their way, searching for the object of its wrath. Braving a hope that someone was trying to get back, but nothing was obvious. Accustomed to the half-light, countless figures were scrapping towards them. Heart pounded at what this meant. If someone was to limp from the darkness, what a boost it would give his fighters. But no pale figure came running.

Following the Gorln's direction, only a cluster of hooded Gorls cutting across to the middle seemed strange. Moving as a protective group, was that what the Gorln was angry at? Were some of its own defecting?

One of the larger ones lifted a smaller figure to its shoulders and rushed forward. Not acting like Gorls, but not human either, swords started flashing through the dimness. Striking Gorls to either side of their group, the newcomers were clearly on their side. Leaping to the ground barking orders for his troops to move, "The centre!" he called, pointing at the hooded figures coming their way. "They are allies. We need a pincer. Take a line that way," he ordered, motioning for Aider to move right. Disbelief swept through the defenders, amazed it was possible.

Taking those nearby with him, Aider Nash charged out into the mass of bodies whilst Tarn went left with his own group. The resultant gap left room for Gorls to break through, but they were stopped by those moving in to cover. Arcing round to meet, both men were determined to save those out in the midst of this madness.

Receiving bites to add to the others, the Gor-up-sa relied on savagery instead of a sword. Running on deeper reserves, much of Casvern Tarn's battered body was numb to such attacks, cutting down anything standing before him. Pressing forward, if this was the end it did not matter, the need to do this charging every flash of steel and barking order. Intending to encircle the small group to protect them, it meant confronting that monstrous Gorln again, relishing the prospect. A finale to Mandurin's survival, what he would give to finish it off.

Against incredible odds, the embattled men and women supporting the counter-manoeuve sliced through the tar of evil. Flickers of brilliance were inspirational. Turning and jabbing his way forward, Casvern Tarn took down many whom came at him. Ferocious and tight, the training at Manter was again here in its elegance. Fighting their way around, linking up with the aged Aider Nash to form a loop against the oncoming foe, Gorls caught inside the circle were set on from all sides, the newcomers adding to the rout. Commending his companion, Tarn laughed at Aider's crooked smile, so familiar amongst the sweat. Covered in patches of blackened blood, he fought like a man half his age, encouraging those following him.

"This will not be our end," Aider cried to his young leader above the hectic noise of battle. Stabbing and slashing with the dexterity of a writer, he had taught Tarn much of what he knew. Relinquishing his leadership to the younger man, whose natural gifts with the blade and elegance with the word had proven himself worthy, surpassing even his own talents, a wise move had it been. Tarn's abilities had shown an old man how to merge with steel, to move with little effort to achieve the greatest impact. Without Tarn's training, their men would not have survived this long.

"Maybe tomorrow night then," Casvern Tarn joked, taking down a Gorl.

Suffering many horrors together, Tarn and Nash's short exchange was appreciated by both. A final salute, they turned towards the impending strike. Bearing down on their position like a moving mountain, the Gorln seemed pleased to see them. Confident they could win, they had to for the sake of those still fighting.

Picking up on what the leaders from Mandurin were trying to do, Hallen admired their bravery, both charging into this dark ocean of hideousness. Gorls about him were

still unaware of what was happening. Finishing off eight already, their group was making a considerable clearing. Dim-witted, the creatures seemed incapable of working it out that many were being cleaved in two. Heaving their swords back and forth like croppers taking in the harvest, it was too easy. Relieved when Balkorn reached the front with Hanor over his shoulder, throwing back his hood to prove who they were, Gorls near them went into a frenzy. Too quick for them, the Balt mowed many down to make their escape.

Amazed the two leaders linked up behind, the Hite's short period of observation distracted him from those about him. From behind, two Gorls leapt on his back, their vicious claws cutting beneath his coat into his arms and chest. Cringing, he jabbed his sword in the ground and seized the vile things. Flailing arms and legs, he held them out, clashing them together like instruments. Three swift bashes broke their resistance, tossing their limp frames amongst the black carpet surrounding him. More came, cutting off his chance to support the two leaders and their struggling band of men. Not quick enough to retrieve his sword before they struck, searing pains hurt, grabbing those biting him. Throwing them off, needing to pull back his hood just to see, that alone was like turning a light on to the others. More headed his way. Where was his sword? Looking for it, it was too late, sharp fangs sinking into his back.

Grinding to a halt, the Gorln grinned at who stood before it, fiendish and crude. Facing Mandurin's leader, the slim figure was worn and cut. Deserving respect, the second man alongside also needed watching, enjoying this confrontation.

Anticipating the fight, a clearing opened as if the very stars wanted to see this clash. Roaring at the moon peeking through a gap in the fiery stained clouds, its victory inevitable, few could stand up to its brute menace. Forced into this situation prematurely by the intruders, some of whom were breaking through the line at the front, its suspicions had been proven right. They too would feel its wrath.

Glaring down at the awaiting two, both relying on speed rather than power, it swirled its sword in circles at their heads. Hesitant but watchful, they were waiting for it to make the first move.

"Stay here," Balkorn ordered, setting Hanor down just outside the main doorway to the High-house. Confident enough to leave him under the pillared porch, the Baltian headed back to the fighting.

Many victims lay bleeding or dead nearby, the orange glow of fire-torches casting a bleak light across ashen faces. Placed here to prevent them from being devoured, Hanor felt helpless and sick. Rotating the *Stone* in his hand, frustrated, he watched Balkorn take off his disguise and the two water-skins to fight. Striking two Gorls breaking through the line, his speed and power was frightening. More creatures came only to be mowed down by the Baltian's rod, crumpling after just one blow. Humbling yet terrifying, it was more than the boy from Manson could manage. Wanting the *Stone* to flare, the short blade at his side was useless against such a tangle of arms, legs and gnashing of teeth.

Relieved when Bane was hauled out of the mass of bodies, his friend picked himself up and started running, urging him to hurry.

"Are you all right?" Bane asked, drawing near and out of breath.
"I am fine, but where are the others?" Checking for them, Hayla especially.

Shocked at what they had got themselves into, “They are making a stand with the men of Mandurin,” Bane said, unconvinced it was for the best. “Even Hayla is.” He stalled, both sharing feelings for her. “They are bound to fall against such numbers, can you not use the *Stone*?”

“*It* cannot be used like that,” Hanor explained, hopeful when seeing Raldama and Hayla fighting side by side.

“You must be able to use *it*!” Bane was astounded. “Does this fighting not warrant it?” If *it* had frightened off a *Nyshifter* and Bovern, why not now?

“*The powers* are pure..., I cannot pollute *it* with my desires.”

“You must be able to use *it* or we will die,” Bane stormed, verging on hysterics.

Tolerant of his concerns, Hanor had nothing new to reason with. “*Its* power is to shed light and love and nothing else.”

“That is ridiculous!”

Equally frustrated, ‘*I am blocking it,*’ Hanor wanted to say, but refrained. Asking many times why, *higher purposes* always seemed to outweigh the lower ones. “I know it is!”

“Then use *it*!” Ordering him, Bane was not backing down. “If you do not then... give *it* to me and I will.”

Unexpected, the demand alarmed Hanor, never even considering it possible. Surprised at his own response, he held the *Stone* out. “Go on then, use *it* if you can.”

For his closest friend to have *it* would normally rattle him, but with *its* power blocked, it would be no different with Bane. Holding *it* out, the *Stone* shimmered from the glowing lanterns on the wall above. Black and lifeless, *it* seemed as worthless as any other stone.

Hesitating, Bane searched for the mischief. Just the idea of those *powers* exploding was frightening, no matter how meaningful. Caught between loyalties, was he tempting himself with the unbelievable? The *Voice* had mentioned his importance, perhaps he was meant to use *it* when Hanor failed. A seductive idea, he stretched out his hand. A flicker of doubt in Hanor’s gaze stalled him. “You do not want me to,” he said, using it as an excuse to reject the offer.

“Because you cannot use *it* either,” Hanor said. “No matter how sincere your intentions, *it* cannot be used for ill purposes. Those desires stop the *power*, and was why *it* failed against those *Nyshifters* at Grovan.”

Bane could not think of another time when *its* help was needed more than now. The noise of battle burnt his ears. Everyone was going to die.

The first strike came from the Gorln, its huge blade slicing through the air like a scythe. Quick for something so large, but Casvern Tarn was accustomed to fighting in the half-light. Sidestepping and then thrusting his sword forward, it too failed to meet its target. Half-stumbling over a dead body, readjusting to regain his footing, Aider Nash to his side also moved in time. The blade’s momentum followed through and cut down a couple of Gor-up-sa, but also their unsuspecting companion Immon who was doing battle with them. Witnessing too many atrocities to get distracted by the death of a comrade, Nash and Casvern Tarn got ready when the mighty blade swung back, both ducking as it took down another vile creature nearby.

A point of grey humour, “Cannot slay us... so you slay your own,” Tarn mocked.

Enraging the Gorln, throwing itself forward, Tarn’s rapidity saved him, but Aider’s stocky frame was unable to match. Caught by the monster’s forearm, he fell back into a

heap. Seizing its chance, the Gorln clasped Aider's throat, shutting off his air supply. Sword dropping, scrapping at the creature's grip, Aider could not breathe.

Clutching the struggling figure of Aider Nash, the Gorln turned to locate the other but was too late. A stabbing sting in the back stunned it enough to free Nash, the older man gasping for air.

Pulling his blade from the Gorln's back, darkened blood dripping like wasted oil, the deafening roar of its counterattack shook all who stared on. Growling, the creature swept the area clean again, missing the one it sought.

Learning much from their previous encounter, Tarn searched for weak spots, needing to find them to win this. Thrusting forward, he found one just beneath its sweeping arm, jabbing, another roar resulting. Avoiding the clash of blades, his would shatter from the impact. Aider was still kneeling on one knee recovering, holding his throat.

Picking up on the man's concerns for his companion, the Gorln lunged backwards, its heavy frame crashing into the unsuspecting Nash, knocking him out.

"No...!" Tarn cried in horror. Leaping into the air, both hands on the hilt of his sword, with all his strength he plunged it into the chest of the Gorln lying on its back.

Roaring in pain, the Gorln was not undone, sweeping Tarn aside with an arm. Pulling the sword from its heaving chest, it stood tall, a ravenous growl signalling to its *Master* what a worthy servant it was. Tossing the blade away, it searched for the wretch.

Left with just his short hunting knife, Tarn would barely inflict surface wounds. Fighting about them continued as the two faced each other. Neither could afford to get complacent. Staying calm, to lose his nerve now would mean his doom. Enduring this war for fourteen turns, he was not about to lose it now. A battle of wits swinging in favour of the Gorln, with Aider possibly dead, the short dagger behind his back was Tarn's only hope. Suspicious when a wry grin crossed the creature's features, the answer as to why was there before he could react.

Jolting forward, a Gorl leapt on his back, knife-like teeth sinking into his shoulder. Excruciating, for the Gorln to permit the intrusion summed up its wretchedness. Knocking him to the ground, the searing pain shot down his right side. Tarn twisted, dislodging it in two swift actions. Leaving the Gorl to his side, it was all skin, bone and ferociousness. Rolling to avoid the Gorln's stamping foot, his knife found the skinny target next to him, promising the scrawny thing would not try again.

About to leap to his feet, it was too late, the Gorln clamping its iron grip around his throat. Squeezing tight, Tarn was hauled into the air to face his aggressor. Struggling, the lack of oxygen stunned him, dropping his blade and the last chance of success. Prising open the thickset hand was futile, legs thrashing about helpless. Head spinning, the Gorln sneered at its victory. Tarn's head was about to explode. Dizziness blurred his surroundings. Surviving so long, he had little left, the darkness inviting.

Unexpected, the vice grip let go, dropping him to the ground. Coughing as if the hand still held him, when trying to inhale, the air would not come. Sweeping in with a promise of peace, the darkness of before came again. Blissful, the panic ceased.

Sharp crunching thuds pounded Hallen's back where the vile Gorls tore at him, struggling under the weight of numerous creatures determined to feast on him. Two dropped away as another went limp at his feet. Seizing the two in front, their destruction

was swift such was the fury. Who had come to his aid? Spinning, the stout figure of Greema stood a short way off, the Hite speechless for once. Discarding his disguise, the Grovian was free to use his thumper.

"We are in this together," the Grove exclaimed, swinging around to release his thumper at another charging Gorl. The speed and power of the lethal weapon crushed its ribcage. Snatching his arm back to retrieve the weighted bone before releasing it again at another with equal devastation, Greema's skill had to be admired.

"I owe you my sword," Hallen called above the din, searching for it. Less crowded, more foul creatures had been put to the slaughter by their group and the fighters of Mandurin. Retrieving his sword, he searched for that huge Gorl. It was easy to find, towering above everyone else. Fighting Mandurin's Leader, he cursed when a smaller Gorl leapt on the man's back.

Furious at the treachery, he discarded the filthy garb, cutting down Gorls that came at him. Needing to be quick, the man's chances of survival were fading fast. Fighting through the melee, growling at those barring his way, many fell beneath his sweeping blade. To his horror, the enormous Gorln lifted the fellow by the neck. Turning away from where Hallen was charging, the Hite raised his sword and bore down on its position. Swinging up and around, the first strike cut deep into its neck, so too the second. Dropping Mandurin's Leader, the Gorln staggered. Hallen's third strike severed a hand before the fourth cleaved its block of a head clear from its shoulders.

Gripping the *Stone*, Hanor could see no end to the carnage. Desperate to calm down, Bane's frustrations penetrating, he tried to let go of his worries so the *powers* could rise. Like wrestling with an inner monster, a chattering mind kept his motives at the forefront. Riled, the more he tried relaxing, the further away the *powers* seemed to get.

Bane had gone over to where men lay in agony, giving up on him. Heartened to see his friend talk to the wounded, Bane propped one up whilst easing the shredded leg of another. Grisly injuries meant there was little hope. Burdened by the evil bearing down on them, Hanor detected a change in the atmosphere, wondering at its cause.

Awareness transforming, the surroundings altered and seemed to simmer. Peace emerged as if to comfort the wounded. Soft, stilling the rawness of their suffering, time slowed, Hanor's senses heightening. A choir of song as if from the heavens chimed, soothing, granting the reprieve everyone desired. Inviting all to return to the *Realms of the Soul*, the change felt up-lifting.

A tear rolled down Hanor's cheek, for in that moment, he too was tempted to give in. To pass beyond the wrenching pains of war, to be free and merge into the *Sacred's* love and light, the subtle music took the edge off their misery. Radiating about the dying men, his heart filled with an undying love for them and their cause and what they had endured. Watchful, the life force of one man left his torn body just beyond where Bane sat talking, his friend oblivious to the miracle. The white misty hue rose and waited for a moment before rising further and disappearing into the night.

Warmth tingled Hanor. Different from the overwhelming *powers* he had experienced through the *Stone*, this was far more sensitive, a personal inclusion responding to a need. Promising the darkness was there for a reason, he did not want it to end. Proving there were greater mysteries to their existence, burdens eased in that glowing moment.

Closing his eyes as more tears fell, Hanor composed himself. Holding the *Stone* as if it was a tool by which he could contact the *Sacred*, he focused on the only thing left for him to try. Peering up through a break in the clouds at the moon and the stars beyond, pouring his whole heart into a few powerful words, this was just him and the *Sacred*.

“We are weak and destitute; shine forth your *light* and end this *darkness*.”

Short and to the point, every word resonated. Potent fears subsided, giving way to a serene peace promising his prayer had been heard. The *light* of his heart buzzed again to his delight.

For a short time, the hubbub of noise from the fighting went unheard. But like all blissful dreams, the snap back to reality was cold and startling. Heart-wrenching shrieks from above drove a spike into his resolve, fearing the opposite of his prayer was about to descend. The inner *light* dissipated, replaced by an instance of distress. Dreadful sounds of *Nyshifters* filled the area. Swooping at leisure above the throngs, driving fear into the bones of the defenders, cries went up at what this meant. Dreams of surviving were all but dashed. What chance did they have now? Spurring the Gorls into action, hysterical shrieks resounded as more pushed forward from the black heaving mass.

Woeful, Hanor cursed, the defenders struggling to maintain their positions. Expecting the vile creatures to break through to the dying, up until the *Nyshifters*’ arrival, he had thought they might survive. Cries of falling men and women were drowned out by the terrible shrieks of *Nyshifters*. All was lost.

Chapter 31: Ileng Powers

Coming to the end of the third turn since Boverns Crossing, expecting to reach Tarden during the latter parts of the following turn, the Hisian-set's mood remained upbeat but wary. Reaching this far without conflict, hopes about getting through increased. If the Yarmi Folk were to strike, they would have to come this night; the *Fire of the Forest* protecting Tarden would be reached the next morning. Explaining this whilst eating, when they finished, Brandor motioned for them to mind merge. A procedure to be reinstated into daily living, it was the only way they could be effective.

Talking after their unification, spirits were high but not complacent. This was crunch time for the Yarmorians.

"I doubt *Gorl-darl* has ever experienced such unity," Whis said, optimistic about the future.

"Would *he* change if *he* knew what it was like?" Tralle asked, thoughtful.

"Evil cannot know unity," Brandor said. "It is too selfish."

"But what about the Yarmi Folk?" Sharn said, daring to speak their name. "Have they abandoned this, if their path is as we believe?"

Cautious, they were unsure how such comments might travel in these parts.

"We will see what they intend soon enough," Rinn said.

Hader shared his thoughts. "If they do believe life is what matters and not love, it would explain their involvement and the saturation of this region."

Lack of movement in the shadows around them proved life no longer existed here. The stillness of night was eerie. Odd bush and wild-plant clung to life with a faint hope, but were not enough to tempt wildlife to return.

"Tomorrow we will see more colour," Brandor promised, disturbed how much the deadness had expanded since his last visit.

"I am not certain what I would prefer, the *Fire of the Forest* surrounding Tarden or the Yarmi Folk," Sharn said, not looking forward to either.

"You would not like the latter," Brandor said.

"What of your young band of travellers?" Rinn asked, trying to be sincere, sensing the underlying grievance Brandor still had towards his *Ileng Power*.

"They should be on their way to Mandurin."

"Is Mandurin not under siege?" Hader posed.

"They will adapt," Brandor said, respecting the risk.

"You cannot blame us for doubting their chances of success," Sorlam said.

"Or the *Wall of Power*?" Tralle agreed, pinning hopes on Rinn's *Ileng Magic* instead.

"Are you tempting me into a conflict?"

"Let us be glad there are other options," Hader interjected, an argument just a loose word away.

"Even Rinn's *Ileng Power* is still a tool," Whis said. "Even if a dangerous one."

"It feels good to be active again," Sharn said. "I have had to let go of a few dreams to meet these challenges. These are exciting times."

"I am not sure about the word... *exciting*," Brorn said, chuckling at his passion.

Relaxing whilst they talked, a sudden rush of intense power caught them out, arriving before they had time to act. Kyboes went quiet at the rushing force. Scrambling to their feet, their worst fears had arrived.

Throbbing from unworldly powers, the presence of the Yarmi Folk hummed in every direction. Intruding on their humble position as if the *Sacred* had descended, hearts filled mouths as fluttering minds tried to think straight. Invisible, the field of energy emanating from the Yarmorians alarmed the Dai-lamen. Hot to the senses, vibrating at a potent frequency, it was difficult to breathe. Draining the life force from this once splendid Tardanian Forest, there was now no denying it.

Shielding their intentions, it was possible the Yarmorians still had no idea why the Hisian-set were here. Early signs however, suggested otherwise. Many eyes were scrutinising them from behind the invisible veil. Standing in a circle facing outwards, the campfire lost its glow, starved of essential forces to keep it alight. Shimmering like evaporating moisture, trees about them quivered.

When picking up Hanor, Brandor had not registered so many unnatural qualities. For the Yarmorians to alter so dramatically fuelled further concerns about their motives. Kind and gentle by nature in the past, what had gone wrong? Was Yarmoria dying just as Rinn suggested? Separated for so long from the pains of mankind, the idea of returning was no doubt difficult. Their harmony depleting by the day, if the Yarmorians were forced to do this by necessity, then their actions could be extreme.

“Everything is fine,” Brandor called to his comrades, acting as though the Yarmorians were here to enquire and nothing more. “The Yarmi Folk have grown in stature and power..., that is plain, but we are amongst friends.” Respectful as though they had nothing to fear, he stepped forward spreading arms wide in greeting. “You are welcome High-yarma Torna,” he said, managing a slim smile. A poor effort, but he had to do something. Receiving a tempered response before, it did not look promising.

Waiting in the half-light, the atmosphere stayed tense. Huddling together nearby, cowering kyboes spoke volumes at what they were up against.

Without warning, the landscape shifted. Where trees and their mounts had been, the miraculous powers of the Yarmi Folk transformed the arena into a clearing, everything else disappearing. Even the fire was gone. Eight Dai-lamen surveyed the new setting as quickly as possible. Haunting and dark, a starless sky highlighted the unnaturalness of Yarmoria, reflecting the lifeless realms they had just left. A shadowy outline of trees edged the large grassy area, but it was the ring of hooded figures that struck them cold. Cloaked individuals appeared hostile, dark matted gowns adding menace. Estimating a hundred, the Yarmi Folk were clearly wielders of great power. Intimidating, no one moved or uttered a sound. With so many potent minds set against them, chances of escape were bleak. A secondary light, hazy and silver, lit up the area, illuminating the final destruction of the Hisian-set.

Searching for High-yarma Torna, Brandor hoped to find a cure for this misdirected drama. Most were of a similar stature, unable to locate him. Long moments dragged by. Vulnerable, Brandor took the situation in hand, stepping away from his companions.

“We expected to meet you on our journey,” he began, talking loud so all could hear. “We have travelled far, and although I have been here recently, we cannot delay for long.

Dark Forces are already at Tardoc and will soon arrive at Tarden. It is to their aid we now go.” Waiting for someone to respond, another awkward period ensued.

At last, a lone figure strode towards their position. Stopping ten paces short of Brandor, High-yarma Torna left his hood up as if to conceal his motives.

“These are troubled times...” Brandor began but was cut short by the swift wave of a hand from his opposing number.

“You need not say anything else,” High-yarma Torna said, unimpressed by the politeness. “We... of the Lani Folk, one of the five Clans of Yarmoria, are aware of where you go and your intentions.” He did not shout, but his voice carried to his listeners. “And it is to this that we have come to face you.”

“You say... *face* as if to confront,” Brandor highlighted. Retaining his nerve, the tone of the shadowy figure’s voice supported how severe the circumstances were.

“Do you not deserve to be confronted?”

“No..., why?” Brandor was stunned a reason existed.

Laughing in silent anguish, Torna postured how he felt. “You do not know...,” he scorned, decreeing it would be so prior to their arrival.

Hesitating, Brandor had not expected this. Presuming it was due to their intended aid for Tarden, he could not see anything to justify this confrontation. “What do you mean?”

Turning on his heel, Torna strolled out towards the ring before swinging back to his original position. “In recent times, we had a visitor. Some might call *him* a distinguished figure, others a monster. But visit *he* did and truth did *he* reveal.”

“Who...? And what truth?”

“Memories fade and guilt dissolves, forgetting the atrocities of yester-turn.”

“Atrocities...?” Brandor glanced behind at his companions, receiving shrugs in return. Rinn stood at the back watchful.

“Is the word foul to you?” Torna snipped. “Old as you are, ancient by any standards, forgetfulness often afflicts the elderly.”

“What have we supposed to have done?”

“Does not Tarkons Tomb mean anything to you?”

Brandor froze.

“Ahh..., I see it does,” Torna said at his reaction. “Guilty eyes show it is true.”

“Will you not just speak plainly?” Sharn barked. “We have done nothing wrong.”

“Is not imprisoning *Souls* an atrocity?” Torna fired, eyes cutting like blades.

“Who has told you this nonsense?” Brandor demanded to know.

“Be careful how you speak,” Torna warned.

“Truth is worth fighting for.”

“A fight it will be,” the High-yarma assured them. “In due course.”

“Who told you this lie?”

“Do you deny setting up a field of energy to draw *Souls* into the valley?”

“They were *Souls* caught between the Freelands and the *Realms of the Soul*. It was created so they could find their way home.”

“Imprisoning entities as you did is evil. The fact *they* have been trapped for so long supports this. It is an abomination!”

“The purpose of any *Soul* is to evolve. Tarkons Tomb was a way for *them* to face up to what *they* did in the deep past.”

“Why were *they* chosen? There are many *Souls* stranded in the *Netherworlds*?”

“The vibration of the surrounding field was set to attract those *Souls* responsible for the death of Tarkon... and no other.”

“So you did it as a punishment?”

“We did it because the *Sacred* willed it,” Brandor defended. “A way for *them* to be redeemed by taking responsibility for their actions.”

“You do the work of the *Sacred* now.” Torna motioned to his brethren. “See how proud they are.” Turning back towards Brandor, “The *Sacred* would not approve.”

“We were prompted to do it by a vision,” Brandor said, trying hard to stay calm. So much was at stake. If he could undo this treacherous lie, a catastrophe could be avoided. “It was not set to imprison but as a way to freedom. Admitting *their* involvement in Tarkon’s death, freedom could be gained. Some *Souls* did and were freed, but most did not. They knew of the location, but did not make the connection or refused to.”

“Hence the endless suffering?” Torna spat, unmoved.

“Suffering is an integral part of life.”

“Not when you live by Higher Laws as we do,” Torna declared, proud of what his people had achieved.

“But at what cost?” Brandor was getting brave. “The southern regions of Tardania are dying because of your realm. You are absorbing too many energies and unbalancing the natural forces there. It is unsustainable.”

It was Torna’s turn to find an adequate response, choosing not to get distracted from the initial argument. “You cannot escape what is due by elusive words that deny what you have done? It is like Tarden, our ancient brethren, they too have used the Tomb of Tarkon as a play area for their young.”

The people of Tarden used to send their young there so they could experience true fear. A process Brandor had never agreed with, a shift in attitude had halted the practice recently. Even so, it did not warrant going to war.

“Does that mean they should be punished for what they did? What gives the Yarmi Folk the right to be executioner, even when in error? Is that the will of the *Sacred*?”

“Whilst it is true our realm is suffering, to replace lesser beings with an advanced one is a small price if harmony is to flourish. If crops were devoured by too many Fliryns, would you not rid the world of one pest to ensure a stable environment?”

“To replace them with another pest you mean?” Brandor shot back a little too quickly.

“Your tongue is sharp Brandor of the Sleep.”

“*Gorl-darl* will not permit you to live in *his* dark world if *he* succeeds,” Brandor tried another direction.

“Who do you think showed us your atrocities at Tarkon’s Tomb?”

It did make sense. “And you believe *he* will permit you to share the Freelands? The fact *he* has enticed you into believing our actions were against the *Holy Ones* is a grim sign of what will befall you.”

“Do you not know where the Lani Clan comes from?” Torna tested. “*He* was here long ago, our ancient forefather.”

Pieces of the puzzle fell into place. This Clan was gaunt compared to the others. One of many traits they no doubt had, hunger for power was another. “I should have known,” he said, looking closer at the High-yarma. “Where are the other Clans?”

"They still live as they always have," Torna admitted. "But we are the Gatekeepers of Yarmoria, and they have no power to say otherwise. Their ways are insignificant. To love all is fine..., but when knowledge and power are the main motivating factors of life, it is foolish to refuse that path. The Hisian-set should know that."

"It is *Gorl-darl's* seed in you that drives such an ugly desire."

"*Gorl-darl* is sick on revenge, which makes *him* weak. We seek not to unite with *him* but expand our Realm to bring about a new age of wisdom and understanding. No more complacency and petty appetites. Our way is a *Higher Way* following *Higher Laws*."

"Those *Laws* encourage the greater to lift up the lesser, not to stampede over them as if they have no worth."

"That is your interpretation," Torna said, unyielding. "Removing the sluggish people of this world is not committing a sacrilege. To tamper with *Souls* once they have passed onto the *Finer Realms* is. You are no better than *him*." Torna spat the words out. "It is to this that we now take charge and find you guilty."

Heading back to the outer ring, Torna's decision was final. Seeking no counsel from his brethren, they were already in unison on the matter. The dialogue with Brandor was a mere forewarning to the eventual outpouring of justice they now intended to exert. Nothing the Dai-laman had said made any difference, their actions of long ago deserving retribution. Subjecting those poor *Souls* to that much suffering had fired the Clan to fury. When Brandor had come to reclaim Hanor, they knew then about his part, but it was not just one man they wanted but all. *Gorl-darl* had retrieved the details from nature's ever-present history, revealing the graphic torment. Tarden's involvement only made matters worse, sealing their fate too. Forcing the Yarmorians to act, the fact their Realm was deteriorating was secondary. Even so, new lands were required to preserve their way of life, making sense to deal with it all now.

"*Oosaa...mone...sama din*," the low chant began, the Hisian-set regrouping, discussing what to do. The groaning sound gained in momentum.

"A protective wall similar to what we put around the Sleep is needed," Brandor declared, stopping when Rinn shook his head. "Why not?"

"Listen to what they are chanting," the Dai-laman advised.

"That is an invoking sound," Hader said.

"What are they invoking?" Rinn questioned. "It is not energies."

"What then?" Sharn said, agitated by the rising tension.

Rinn looked up and around. "They are calling something," he said, stopping when another chant began.

"*Imni... ine... leme sa*," rumbled into the night like an approaching storm.

"We had better get a move on," Sharn urged, shocked at these developments.

"Sorlam..., Whis!" Brandor bellowed, snapping their hypnotic trance. "Get in here. Rinn...! We need to keep a tight circle," he ordered, startled when he refused to move.

"What are you up to now?" Brandor barked. They only had a matter of moments. Chants were growing in volume and power.

"Your efforts are futile," Rinn stated as if without a care. "Can you not feel the power they are summoning?" Holding his arms out, his grin seemed ill placed.

“Rinn..., we will die if you do not join us?” Hader urged, fearing their comrade was losing his mind.

“To have me... is to have everything I represent,” Rinn said, unfazed by the circumstances. The atmosphere was tightening, recoiling by the chants.

“Are you not part of this group?” Sharn shouted, the pressures on his chest increasing. Rinn’s grin disappeared, a cold calculated look staring back. “There is no me... without the *Ileng Power*.”

“Are you not concerned for your life?” Brorn called this time.

“*Ileng Power* or not...,” Hader scowled. “Just get in here!” Leaving a space between himself and Brandor, the old man still did not move.

Chants continued vibrating with a mighty charge. Rinn was waiting for Brandor’s approval, both men locking eyes. Even though it appeared as if he was sacrificing everything just to win the argument, he knew different. Only when a grimacing Brandor agreed and waved him forward did Rinn move.

Feverish sounds soared towards their climax, the pitch quickening with a throaty rhythm. Incredible powers made the air electrify, tiny sparks flickering as if the atmosphere could not cope.

Standing between the two men, Rinn took charge. “Whis, Sorlam, Tralle and Brandor, create a shield above us. No time to doubt me, just do it,” he ordered the astonished men. Trusting he knew what he was doing, the four men began calling forth fire energies to form a cloak of protection. “Brorn, Hader and Sharn, a wall around us,” Rinn instructed, sitting down at the centre of their ring and closing his eyes.

Amazed at what he was up to, they proceeded, the full Yarmorian force about to be unleashed. Enclosed, the small group at the centre of the large ring waited for the strike. Working together, doubts about why they were energising a field above them affected their concentration.

“Keep focused,” Rinn ordered, to Whis in particular.

Just then, a heart wrenching shrill shook their nerve, almost faltering from their task. Not one but six *Nyshifters* dropped from the blackness above. Flicking claws nearly the size of a man’s chest, Rinn’s advice was seen for its worth.

Lighting up, the defensive barrier ignited, red and blue streaming sparks arcing in all directions. Forcing the *Nyshifters* to slow *their* descent, sizzles of searing heat bit the attacking creatures as more shrieks rendered the air. Small but potent, the force field was enough to slow the monsters, but not entirely. The *Nyshifters* pushed on through the defensive barrier eager to catch them.

Calls rang out from the four energising the field of power, their efforts not enough. Resistance wavered, their power draining. Scrawny arms and legs were ready to strike, black lidless eyes glistening in the twilight. Slathering and hissing, more shrieks called out to *their* Master, promising revenge would be *his*. Enormous wings contested for space as the six closed in on the struggling men.

“We cannot hold *them*,” Brandor yelled, mesmerised by the massive ribcage of the *Nyshifter* above. Even with the powers summoned, the streaks of fire and lightning did not stop them. Nearly perishing when these creatures had attacked when seeking their lost companions, but here there was nowhere to run, no mountain cleft to hide in.

Chants reached fever pitch around them, the powers about to be unleashed by the Yarmorians. Coming so far for it to end like this, Brandor had little left to give. Transfixed by the terror, even the *Sacred* could not help them.

Gaining insights as to what was intended, from Rinn's sitting position, he could see the incredible events unfolding in his mind's eye. Holding his *Ileng Power* in check, the timing was crucial. Tuned into the outer chants, the mounting energies sucked the atmosphere out towards the ring, intending to fire it back at the struggling group in the middle. Including the *Nyshifters*, the Yarmorians' plans stretched far indeed. Inviting *Gorl-darl* to this finale, Rinn could not believe they were double-crossing their own forefather, proving just how far they were prepared to go.

Releasing their monstrous power, the Yarmorians uttered the sound as if firing a weapon. United in purpose and direction, never had they summoned so much energy. Watchful of the imploding force, this was just the beginning.

Furious at the treacherous manipulations of their hosts, the Nyshifters were too late to get out. Victorious shrieks turned to exasperation as the pummelling force exploded inwards. Invisible at first, the rushing powers heated as they condensed, transforming into a wave of the deepest reds and purples. Turning to a flashing yellow when reaching the centre, the heat intensified. Stranded just above the Dai-lamen, six monsters were helpless. Surging like a fiery lava sucked towards a gaping hole, desperate wings could not lift them quickly enough.

Only one person stayed alert enough to act. Conjuring the wilful forces of the *Sacred*, the charge called forth by the sitting man sparked and crackled. Leaping from himself to his seven companions, streaking arcs of magnificent greens and deep blues flashed, forming a small dome of incredible power over and around them. Sizzling lights buzzed as shrieks from the *Nyshifters* rendered the air in throes of pain.

Caught in the folds of the looping shell of life-changing energy, the efforts of seven Dai-lamen dissolved under its overwhelming impact. Completing its protective sheath just as the Yarmorian's powers hammered into their position, the colliding forces exploded into an array of lights and fiery heat. Energies coursed in every direction, dazzling in brilliance. Explosive, the impact sent tremors through the earth, everyone falling to the shaking ground. Returning to its creators, the deflected wave of power pounded the outer ring of Yarmorians, sprawling backwards as a result. Sharp minds blistered, unable to contend with such potent forces.

Hurled into the vastness of night, six Nyshifters rolled uncontrollably, reaching the moonlit upper regions amongst soft clouds of silvery white. Overcome, they slowed and started tumbling like falling rocks. No shrills escaped limp jaws, and no triumphant cries of victory polluted the twilight. Meeting their match, a cold descent roused them from their lumbering state, wings spreading instinctively wide to ease the fall. Below, the clearing where Yarmoria was had disappeared. Only a thick bed of trees remained, Tardania was as it had always been.

One Nyshifter did not pull up in time, too staggered to regain control. Crashing into the trees meant nothing to the other five. Soaring on an uplifting draft, they headed back to where they belonged, wounded but alive.

Chapter 32: Rare Survivor

Maddened Gorls stopped fighting, the new sound reverberating around the death-ridden High-ground gardens. Indiscernible to humans, the chilling tones of the three *Nyshifters* were different, the defenders searching for what it meant.

Obedient, Gorls halted their invasion and just turned as if giving up the fight. Snatching the dead as they went, howls were no longer aimed at the survivors. Carrying or dragging dead Gorls, men and women alike, they headed for the main gate, leaving the astounded onlookers speechless. Daring not to charge for fear of re-igniting the conflict, what manner of twisted game was this? Moving away from the central arena and out across the camp, the *Nyshifters*' shrills called for the entire camp to move.

Suspecting this was another sick ploy, over two hundred fighters kept their guard. Wary, the last few exiting the grounds, they were certain mischief was in the making.

Kifter and Tarmon, along with a couple of men, crept over to the gate. Leaping over a few bodies littering the compound, they dared to peer around the wall. Heading down the main way, the din of thousands declared they were leaving. Crashing sounds of falling buildings accompanied the exodus, hope starting to fill them with timid gladness.

More joined them to view the incredible departure. *Nyshifters* were just visible, showing no signs of changing their minds. When the mass of bodies was out of sight, disbelief echoed, careful of making too much noise in case they returned. Some sobbed, too exhausted to even hope this might last. Many sat down, unable to celebrate. Sounds of that horde reaching the outer regions of the city soon passed.

Experiencing this teasing departure numerous times before, the defenders knew too much to get excited. Worn out, the silence for the first time was inviting. Some were already asleep, propped against the wall unable to keep awake.

Breaking from those at the main gate, Kifter skittered down the road undercover of bedraggled buildings. Causing a stir from the people of Mandurin, but no one had the strength to protest or go with him. Unsure who he was, the fact someone was prepared to check was enough.

Bleary eyed, Rinn inspected the aftermath, thankful the Yarmi Folk were gone so too their Realm. His companions lay scattered nearby, barely conscious, groans of discomfort promising that at least some were alive. Certain he had sustained no lasting damage, a throbbing head was a minor issue. Embers from their campfire had gone out casting the grim setting in deep shadow. Their kyboes were close by, too scared to move. Astonished, there was no time to reflect, the crashing sounds of a *Nyshifter* out to their right alerting him to action. Hader was sitting up dazed.

"We have to move," Rinn whispered, not wishing to alert the *Nyshifter*.

Warning his companion of the lurking danger, they roused the others. Hissing for quiet, there was plenty of room between the Woodell trees for the creature to strike, doubting the Ileng Power would be as focused if used. Confused minds wanted answers, but Rinn would not give any yet. Needing to get out of here and reach Tarden, how much the Yarmorians had been affected he did not know. Helping his companions onto their kyboes, it was a sorry but enthralling sight. Adopting the role of organiser just to get them moving, they left the camp with its lingering danger. This was to be a long night.

Wedge between the branch and tree trunk, the Nyshifter was unable to stop them. Helpless in its present state, it needed a couple of turns to recover from its injuries. Surprised by the treachery, the Master would be enraged, demanding revenge on the Yarmorians. Many would die because of this.

Kifter's reappearance roused fearful hopes, those at the gate drawing close. It did not matter who he was, they just needed to know what was going on.

"They are leaving," the Fife said, over fifty waiting for the news. His companions were there, but the two leaders of Mandurin he had seen earlier were not.

"What do you mean?" A gruff sounding man said to his left. "To camp outside the walls like before?"

"No..., the entire camp is moving south."

"That cannot be," said another, unconvinced.

"I speak the truth," the Fife said, respecting their disbelief. "The fires are burning... but none remain seated. Even those catapults are on the move."

Shadowy silhouettes refused to believe it.

"It is a deception," a female voice called from the rear. "We know their ways."

"The *Dark One* taunts us," a burly fellow said near her.

"You are free to see for yourselves," Kifter invited. "I tell you, they are leaving."

"Then check we must," a slender man said from the end of the line.

"I will go with you Simman," another man said, joining him.

The two headed down the road, a few others following.

"Who are you?" the blunt question came from an older fellow. "And your friends, why did you come?"

Tarmon stepped forward from the rear. "It is fitting that you should know," he said, standing next to the Fife. "But now is not the time."

"Your arrival has been a blessing," a woman of dark countenance said.

"Did not one of yours seal the fate of that Gorln?" a short man said at the front.

Others agreed.

"We have much to talk about," Tarmon said, raising his hands. "But the wounded need our help. I promise you..., tomorrow much will be shared about our unusual, and some might say... mad arrival. I only ask for your patience, so seek rest whilst you are able."

"Your brave leaders require attention," Kifter said, witnessing their fall.

"We will keep you to your promise," one said, heading back to the High-house. "And may your explanations be more reasonable than what we have seen this night."

Others went with him leaving a handful observing the road. Amongst those gathered, Kifter was relieved to see his companions, Hanor and Bane included. "It appears the *Unseen* has come to our aid."

Reaching a small glade at dawn, the clear blue sky was welcomed by Rinn and Sharn. Shattered, their slouching companions were still sleeping. The night's ride had been slow and hard.

"This morning is precious," Sharn said, stopping for a reprieve.

"There is a new hope burning," Rinn said, inhaling the cool morning air.

Thoughtful, Sharn debated whether to say anything. "Your *Ileng Power* saved us?"

Rinn was not about to deny it. "There is much to discuss when we get to Tarden."

Rousing at the sound of their voices, Brandor groaned, aching. Gaining his bearings, without commenting on what had happened, he noted their location. "The *Fire of the Forest* is beyond that tree line."

"Is that something to get excited about?" Sharn asked, disliking the prospect.

Sitting up on Tunder, "I will alert them of our arrival," Brandor said, the Masters of Tarden familiar with his vibration. "We do not deserve more abuse."

"Are you well enough?" Sharn asked.

Taking a diva stick from his bag, Brandor started eating. "I soon will be."

Hanor's makeshift bed on the floor at the end of the long leisure room felt luxurious under the circumstances. Bane was asleep at his side like most of the others here. Unsure what short-turn it was, the fact nothing had disturbed their slumber meant the enemy had not returned during the night. Sun shining outside, reflecting off shades hanging over narrow windows, he got up.

Three score slumbering figures populated this elegant room, some of the wounded lying at the far end asleep. Injuries too severe to move them to comfortable beds upstairs, whimpers were of someone in pain. Each with their own horrendous tale to tell, what he had seen last night at least took the edge off their suffering. The surreal embodiment of the *Sacred* embracing the dead and dying, the softening of their passing was heartening. Some of those at the other end of the hall would no doubt leave soon too.

Surprised when entering this High-house last night, it was in good shape compared to the destruction outside. Packed high with supplies stored when the city was first attacked, enabling the defenders to last, it was why many now slept in rooms like this.

Unsurprised that Kifter, Tarmon and Raldama were absent, the Fife and Tard were always ahead of the game. Glancing down at a sleeping Hayla lying the other side of Hallen, their celebratory hug last night had threatened to trigger old feelings. Shutting out the distraction, Bane would have something to say about it if he did.

Dreading what macabre scene was waiting outside when leaving the hall, he doubted this place would ever return to former glories.

Balkorn let him go, the boy needing space after what they had survived. Confident the Northern Hordes had left, their next step was not easy either. Shutting his eyes, the huge Baltian would only sleep for a short-turn.

Opening the large doors to the substantial garden area, Hanor halted, appalled by the despicable scene. Unprepared for the charred setting, an arcing sun shed ample light on the desolate place. Dark red stains carpeting the area lay like dusty oil, the pungent smell repulsive. A small group of men and women were building a funeral pyre for the line of bodies lying along the far wall. An honourable parting from this world, too many had perished. Another pile of twisted limbs and broken bodies was outside these insufferable gardens, preparing to put dead Gorls to flame. The last clue to what tempestuous force had struck here, eight men stood by the gate anticipating their enemy to return. Sympathetic, it would be a while before these people could rest from their woes.

"How are you young man?" The familiar voice of Tarmon said from behind.

Turning, Hanor could not smile even though glad to see his friend. "I am... well," he said, depressed at what had happened here. "Such a waste."

"It is," the Tardanian said, strolling out into the sunshine.

Black and bloodied, the line where the defenders had made their last defence ran right across in front and around the side of the High-house.

"Has the enemy truly moved south?"

"It looks like it. I have been down this morning; there is no one left. The scene is similar to what you see here."

"I wonder if the grass will ever grow again," the boy said, burdened by the scale of destruction. Ambling alongside the Tard, the sun was invigorating, enough perhaps to create another miracle. "I wonder if the people will return?"

"That is for these brave people to decide," the Tard said, sensitive. Tardoc was under a similar siege, and to do this again was not inviting. Hoping Tarden was still free, the fact the Hisian-set was going there did draw comfort.

Reaching down to his girth pouch, Hanor took out the *Stone of Tarkon*. "I could not use *it* last night," he said, the guilt painful.

Tarmon detected there was more to the statement.

"I have become a hindrance to *its* use," Hanor continued, sombre as if inadequate. "You would expect *its* powers to have erupted last night, but my desires to use *it* as a weapon blocks them."

"Would we be any different?" Tarmon asked, realistic. "Would we not want to use *it* to rid the world of this evil?"

"It is so... infuriating," Hanor growled. "It is strange but... those *powers* embrace all of this. Every wretched Gorl, can you believe that?"

"I have few doubts about what the *Sacred* are capable of."

Keeping their distance from the pyre, more of the dead were placed on the prepared area, then a flame lit by the few men brave enough to deal with the mess. Unconcerned by what might be attracted to the fire, a thick plume billowed into the clear sky. Another fire set outside the High-grounds was set ablaze, stains of the dead Gorls removed.

"I have not given much thought as to why we are here," Hanor admitted, treating it as a side issue.

"We are in shock," Tarmon said. "That will change in due course."

Embracing the miraculous again seemed irrelevant, agreeing with him. Praying prior to the *Nyshifters'* arrival last night, it seemed Hanor was indebted to the *Sacred*. Hardly in a position to oppose *their* agenda now, he still longed for this to end.

"Is this the wonderful Hite who freed this city of that vile Gorln?" Aider Nash said, wincing when getting up. Battered and bruised, claw marks etched around his face were that of a warrior. Creased but affectionate eyes beneath grungy bloodstained grey hair approved of the huge figure entering the sun-chamber. Warm rays of the half-day sun were comforting, others in the room agreeing.

"I like the word *wonderful*," the Hite joked. Sitting alongside Mandurin's Second in Command, his own wounds would take time to heal.

Fifteen men and two women were resting, disbelieving they were alive. "We owe you a great debt."

"You do not owe us anything," Hallen disagreed, intrigued by the odd shape in the garden. The carcass of an abnormal creature, nothing surprised him anymore. "It is you who risked much to aid us."

"We still do not believe you came as you did. I am sure the reasons are just as remarkable. The shock of your arrival got us... excited."

"Then I commend your excitement," Hallen said to the gentle but stocky old man, checking again the huge rounded skull outside. Stripped of flesh, it looked mean.

"We call them *Thwackers*," Aider answered his thoughts. "They were once kyboes but have been disfigured to look like that."

"They look too big to be kyboes," Hallen said, judging it to be twice the size of his own beloved mount.

"*Gorl-darl* knows how to manipulate creatures," another man said. "My name is Nonn."

"I am Hallen... of Ebanor."

"This is Aider Nash..., our Second in Command," Nonn said, introducing his elder.

Concurring, Hallen was fascinated by the monster. "It must have been a mighty foe."

"They were used to break down our gates," Aider said, hurt by harsh memories. "That bulge of bone on its head was used to hammer away at the hinges. Gorls by then were already inside the city of course, using those crazy catapults, but these things enabled the others to enter. Not all Gorls wanted to be fired over a wall."

"We saw those catapults when we arrived."

"You will find another Thwacker buried under the old Reading Hall," Nonn said, witnessing its demise.

"Why did you come to Mandurin then?" a younger man asked from the rear of the long room of glass, cutting to the point.

Sighing, Hallen was not in the mood for a long explanation. "The tale is lengthy and the reasons complex," he said, not wishing to be rude. "I am not the best storyteller. It might be wise to wait for my companions to explain our remarkable story."

"Remarkable it must be for you to enter as you did," Aider said, not wishing to pry. "And the sooner your story is told, the better."

Late in the after-turns, Bane exited the High-house grounds, wanting to see the devastation of the city. Rancid, burnt flesh tarnished the atmosphere, numerous pyres now just smouldering ash. Jealousies about Hanor and Hayla were suffocating him again. The fact their celebratory hug last night had been brief seemed irrelevant. Since that *Voice* had whispered its cunning, he feared Hayla and Hanor would get back together.

Determined to shake himself out of it, sounds of someone approaching made him turn. Heart jolting, Hayla approaching sent him spinning.

"You are looking well," she said, walking alongside.

Trying to hide the inner conflict, "It is hard to believe we survived," he said, sneers of that *Voice*'s words returning. '*Your closeness to Hayla will end.*'

"The Freelands are suffering," she said, saddened. "I fear for my home, Manter."

Daring a quick glance at her whilst ambling by a crumpled building, bloodstained as she was, but even when grimy she looked beautiful. "Manson will not last long against them," Bane said, trying to think of others rather than himself. Empty shells of nearby buildings indicated what that future meant.

Three men stepped out from a narrow structure. Unsurprised by their silent questions, Hayla wondered what Tarmon intended to say later to explain why they were here. Receiving a few wounds during the fighting, she did not show it, that dogged resilience returning, sharpening her will.

"I was glad to see you lifted clear by Balkorn last night," she said. "And Hanor too." Frustrated by his friend the previous evening, Bane had still not apologised for the outburst when all seemed lost. "He said he could not use the *Stone* to protect us."

"I did wonder if the *light* was going to shine."

"His desires to use *it* as a weapon block the *powers*."

"I do not know what game the *Sacred* are playing, but lives are being lost. I am starting to agree with Hallen about *their* intentions."

"I got angry with him."

"His burden is great," Hayla said after a short silence.

A pulse of dark emotion wanted to be heard. "Is that what attracted you to him?"

Glaring at Bane, his tone suggested jealousy. "I thought we made ourselves clear?"

"I did not mean it like that," Bane managed to cover the lie. "I feel his burden, and want to get close but... it frightens me."

Respecting his explanation, they proceeded adjacent to the High-ground wall. "It scares me too, and we have not even found the third *Pillar* yet."

Faltering, Bane slowed, his head aching.

"Are you all right?" she asked, touching his shoulder.

Just the tenderness of her hand seemed like medicine. "The strain of our journey is catching up on me."

Sympathetic, his tired eyes spoke volumes. Grabbing hold of his arm, "Let us go eat."

"It is good to see you safe," Hallen said to Greema, the Grovian sitting at the rear of the large hall. Bars crossing tall windows did not hinder the view of the tainted gardens outside. Countless stares from the hundred or more gathered were dismissed.

"How are your wounds?" Greema asked, the Hite wincing when sitting down.

"They did not eat too much of me," he joked. "I should be fine in a couple of turns.

What about you?"

"A few nasty cuts. A charming young lady has been tending to them," the Grove said, peering round to see if he could pinpoint her.

Plenty of people were present eager to hear their story. Word had spread about Tarmon's intentions to share the details of their journey as promised. Some had been carried in, determined to listen for themselves. An air of expectancy buzzed with interest.

"I have not seen Kifter this turn," Hallen said at his absence.

"He went for the kyboes at first light with Raldama," Greema said.

"Without me?"

"You are in no condition to travel."

"It is good to be friends with you again," Hallen teased, a few sharp stabs hurt when stretching. "A drop of Sasta will cure this."

"And where is your Sasta?"

"Will you behave!" he toyed. "Cannot a Hite have his own grumbles... or is that solely for our Grovian friends?"

"Steady, I am sure we do not want to fall out again over your weak humour."

"I have not thanked you for saving me," Hallen said, surprised how easy that came out.

"Seeing you alive is thanks enough."

Just then, the main door opened, Hayla and Bane entering.

"They are a friendly couple," he ribbed, waving them over.

Greema disregarded the loose comment.

"How are you?" Hallen asked, the two pulling up a chair.

"Tarmon will be here shortly," Hayla said. "He is talking to their leaders."

"I met one earlier..." Hallen was about to explain when the door opened again and a couple of wounded men, one of whom was Aider Nash, walked in with Tarmon.

Murmurs in the room heightened, the three figures shuffling to the front. Addressing the assembly, the tall slender albeit wounded man held up his hands urging quiet.

"It is... remarkable to see so many of you alive and well," he began, keen dark eyes searching the gathering for who was here. Tight stubble matched his dark shoulder length hair. "For those of you who do not know me, my name is Casvern Tarn, and this brave stout fellow is Aider Nash." Rounds of cheer approved. "I need not talk about the pains this city has suffered..., but we must not forget those that have fallen." Reverent, holding his chest from the discomfort, a change of clothes granted him an air of respectability. A pale grey hooded overcoat looked stylish yet simple. Shoulder straps fastened to an oversized ornate buckle at the front helped support his movements. "I like to be realistic, this you know, but last night's events have silenced even me over how it ended, if that is not a premature statement to make." Rubbing his neck, that Gorln's grip was evident each time he swallowed, an irritating reminder of how close he had come to death. "I have been informed of the *Nyshifters*' arrival and their subsequent departure. I have little to add on the matter, but there are other issues here that need addressing, which I know interest us all." The few extraordinary details Tarmon had shared meant they were trustworthy at the very least. "This is Tarmon of Tarden," he said, indicating the Tardanian. "And at the back are some of his men..."

"And a lady," Hallen called from the rear.

"You sound too coarse to be a lady," Tarn joked.

"It is good to see we Hites are not the only ones with a sense of humour." Through the jeers, Hallen laughed.

Taking a second look at Hayla sitting next to Hallen, Casvern Tarn was sure he had seen her before. "Have we met?"

"I used to watch you train at Manter," Hayla said, blushing.

"I am not one to forget a lovely face," Tarn said, charming as always. "That must have been fifteen full seasons ago."

"Fourteen," Hayla replied a little too quickly. Embarrassed, after all of these seasons she would never have thought it possible. Handsome, even with his battle scars, apart from Hanor, he was the only one she had ever wanted.

"I trust your counting abilities," Tarn said, surprised but intrigued by her sensitivities.

Awkward with so many staring, Hayla took hold of Bane's arm as if declaring her allegiance to him. Emotions running wild, '*Where is that composed fighter from Manter?*' she chided herself.

Moving on at her discomfort, Tarn indicated Tarmon. "Our guest has a few things to share," he said, motioning for the Tard to start. Sitting next to Aider Nash, Casvern Tarn wanted to hear everything about this mysterious group of many talents.

Anser, High-grove of Rovot, stood on the ramparts searching the group riding hard towards them. A fifth of what had left many turns ago, where were his two sons, Hasdam and Grasdon? Insensitive considering so many had been lost, but he had to know.

Convincing him to stay here whilst they took the city's forces north, he had not cared that his seasons were old. Arguing that if they failed he would be here to lead Rovot's defences, he had given in to their pleas knowing their worth. Now though, with so few returning, his heart cleaved. Relieved that the Northern Hordes were in no hurry to pursue them, he waited as a whimpering parent whose sole concern was for their kin. Jalean, his High-lady was busy organising the old, women and children into groups for this. Refusing to leave their proud home, those who could fight would do so.

Sighing when spotting his youngest son Grasdon, but where was Hasdam? Beleaguered faces hid any signs of him. A lump formed in his throat at what this meant. Peachy and distant, a warm sunset did nothing to soften the pain. Concluding the life of his elder had been lost, he wiped a tear, turning to see Jalean staring up from below. Covering his eyes, he could not speak.

Disbelieving mutters whispered back and forth, some doubting the truth of Tarmon's tale. Casvern Tarn raised a hand for silence. Wincing, for once the fluent Tarn knew not where to start.

"I have never been interested in the *Unseen*," he began, thoughtful. "As you may understand, when faced with evil as we have, that is the last thing on your mind. But your story paints another picture that gives hope to the Freelands."

"Why should we worry about the rest of the Freelands?" shouted one man. "Where were they when we needed help?"

That issue alone could upset these proceedings, Tarn urging restraint. Suspecting their deliverance was not just down to these newcomers, but he could not see the *Dark One* allowing them to live without good reason. These men and women would eventually be fighting for their lives again he was more than certain.

Another broad shouldered man called Gillen had something to say. "Your arrival here was not to aid us at all then?" Directing the question at Tarmon, the Tardanian was forced to his feet.

"What we seek to achieve is not to save just one city but all. That includes you and your families who have gone south."

"Why was this not done before we were invaded?" the woman Reena asked at the front.

Questions lined up, echoing what the group had already asked themselves, Tarmon refusing to be drawn into a subject about the supernatural. Explaining what he could, time drifted without gaining ground. It was Aider Nash who summed up the mood of their people.

"It sounds like you are asking us to trust in something unproven even by your own standards. We are exhausted and have little joy left. If what you say is true, then all well and good, but I cannot see these battered people wanting to dig for something that you say has some value but do not know what. You say our survival may depend on this sacred Pillar, adding why our enemy moved south in the first place, but with

what we have endured, I do not see many here at Mandurin willing to aid you.”

“I understand your reservations,” Tarmon said, but was cut off.

“I do not think you do,” argued another man from the back. “Most of our city lies in ruins, our homes destroyed. Our families are far to the south and now in the way of that monstrosity. We will not brush them aside for hidden purposes of little value.”

Murmurs of agreement swept the room.

“I respect that,” Tarmon said. “But when we find this *Pillar*, I promise you will not be disappointed.”

“Are you trying to tempt us?” Gillen said, sceptical.

“I can say little to convince you now but... it is imperative we do this.”

Casvern Tarn motioned for quiet. “Let us leave this as there is much to consider.” The newcomers were quite a batch. Handpicked by Brandor, the Dai-laman was known in these parts. Promising help might come prior to the invasion, alas, his sincerity had been good but not the aid in its coming. Hardly expecting a small band like this, the fact they had survived meant they deserved respect. “It is getting late, and with the coming of night,” he continued, turning back to the main body of people. “We cannot afford to get complacent. *Nyshifters* are at large. Tomorrow we need to make important decisions, so sleep on this. I urge you not to make too hasty a judgement now.”

Leaving a tide of voices behind, the group followed Casvern Tarn, Aider Nash and the one called Nonn from the hall. Led along corridors of elegance, paintings and ornate items of interest proved this fine High-house had a charm worth defending. Entering a set of double doors, a back chamber for the staff to this High-house, walls were drab greys and browns instead of crisp whites and creams like the outer halls. Strolling down numerous passages, Casvern Tarn finally stopped in front of a plain door out of sight near the rear. Taking a key from his pocket, he unlocked it, entering the small empty room without windows. Three bolted doors, one on each wall, were the only points to note.

Waiting for everyone, Tarn needed to do this, even though Aider disapproved. “I thought it appropriate to show you this in case we are invaded again,” he said, wincing from a shooting pain in his side. “These doors are entrances to ancient tunnels that run beneath the city. No longer common knowledge to the men and women out there, they are known only to a few. Some of the tunnels have caved in and deemed no longer safe to enter. I tell you this for your own safety. Aider and myself have been down recently to see if they could be used for storage or as a useful hiding place, but the walls are cracked with lumps scattered about the floor. There are a few chambers as well, but we decided they were too risky and therefore left them as they were.” Coughing to clear his throat, another pain ran across his chest. “After hearing your tale, I am convinced we should do all we can to aid your search. I am intrigued, hence why we are here. If you wish to search the tunnels now you can, but I only ask that you use discretion. There are people here who might question why you are able to search out the heart of Mandurin when you are strangers to these parts. How they would react, I cannot say, for I am not their High-man. He is no longer with us, but that is another story altogether. I lead them, but that is all.” Tarn was unsurprised to see Aider

shaking his head. Protective of the men and women of Mandurin and this High-house, the old man was stuck in his ways.

“We are honoured and respect your trust in us,” Tarmon said on behalf of the others. “We will discuss this when the others are present. It would be unwise to search now so will leave any further enquiry until tomorrow.”

“I would have preferred it if he had not shown us these doors,” Hallen moaned. “Hites are not very good in holes.”

Already liking the big fellow, “I will enlarge them for you... if you so ask,” Tarn said, chuckling. “I am indebted to you,” he said, meaning the Gorln.

“I will not complain if you want to regard me so highly,” he said, drawing a round of mirth. “My immediate concern for now is... how do we get out of here?”

Stiff from his long sleep, Hanor left the High-house needing some air. Warmed by the orange hue on the distant horizon imbuing long sinewy shadows across the scorched gardens, night was closing in. Wondering where everyone was, the place seemed deserted apart from a couple of people by the main gate. Eerie, the silence felt cold and uncaring, adding doubts about the serenity. Sparkles of starlight were just beginning their twinkling dance in the deep blue sky, half-expecting a shadowy form to fly past ready for another night on the rampage. Difficult to accept he was here amidst such quietude, he clasped the gilth pouch for comfort. Soft and silky, its touch never failed to soothe him.

Thoughts about the *Pillar of Life* reminded him of *its* importance. Walking about these gardens seemed silly but an obvious way of discovering where *it* might be. Ambling round to his left, he stopped at the corner, the large silhouette on the ground across the way alarming him. Curiosity getting the better, the remains of a huge carcass not much smaller than the Great White Freeloaver lay in shadow. Edging forward, the size of its domed head was huge. Larger than his torso, a few of its limbs and midsections were missing, eaten by Gorls. Reeking, he did not linger for long.

Strolling around the garden, hopeful of inner stirrings to indicate the *Pillar*, he was foolish for thinking it might be so easy. Without success, he made his way over to the main gate and the two watching him. The sun disappeared below the horizon, hoping it was too early for *Nyshifters* to be out. A quick look outside these walls might produce results. Approaching the two, one was a woman. Middle aged, she had the physique of a healthy man and keen eyes to match. Hanor was polite, supposing he might need their help when the *Pillar* was discovered.

“It is a beautiful night,” he said, not really in the mood for light talk. Unsure where they would find digging tools, he felt strangely confident. After the episode at Grovan, he searched for bulges in the ground.

Scrutinising him, the woman spoke first. “The stars are the only enchantment here at Mandurin,” she said, gazing up with a quiet song in her heart. “But their light too has been dulled by what has happened to our home.”

“Your city has suffered much, so too its people,” he said, not wanting to be dragged down into their suffering.

“Why are you out here and not in the meeting?” the tall slender man asked, stroking a stubbly beard.

“Meeting!” Hanor said, surprised. “About what?”

“Have you risen from the dead?” The woman was suspicious.

“It feels like that,” he said, the High-house behind solemn. “I have been asleep. None of my companions are about, so too the rest of your folk.”

Weighing his words, “Most are in a meeting with your companions,” the woman said, studying his reaction.

“What is your name?” the man asked.

“Hanor... of Manson.”

Assured of his sincerity, the woman managed a tame smile. “And my name is Tooty Roe, and this is Ararn loor,” she said, her tone softening. “I am sorry for our grim welcome, but these are graven times, and your arrival has caused quite a stir.”

“I can understand that.”

“Your friend Tarmon is explaining what your purpose here is,” Ararn said, hoping Hanor would share details now.

“He is probably the best person to explain why,” he said, reading their thoughts. “I just need some cool night air.” Cutting away from them, temptations to find the third *Pillar* were strong. Even if they were not yet ready, it would not hurt to locate *it*.

“I would not stray far,” Tooty warned, displeased they were not to get anything from the lad. “*Nyshifters* dwelt here, and could be somewhere close.”

“I will not go far,” Hanor promised. The tug in his heart was urging him to search whilst he could, even under threat.

Keeping near to the High-house wall, he worked his way along. Approaching a line of desolate buildings, they looked haunted, shadows thickening. Concentrating on his heart for that first sign of movement, he started to believe the *Pillar* was close. The two guards back at the gate were distracted by a call inside the compound. Shrugging when they disappeared, he kept going.

Confident he was doing the right thing, shuffling, scraping sounds alerted him to danger. Across to his left, dreading what it could be, behind him, Tooty and Ararn had not returned. For a shaky heartbeat, he was on his own. Half-expecting a Gorgon to attack, he froze when another scratch echoed from the growing darkness. A narrow alley between two buildings hid what was inside. Disbelieving he was still here, captivated, his mind raced.

Breaking from a nightmare, the young man tottered forward from the alleyway, dazed and dishevelled. Bleary eyed and barely able to see or walk, the lad half-stumbled before stopping to keep himself upright.

Stunned at who he was looking at, the familiar state of half-dress, fair hair and slim frame, Hanor could not believe he was real. The lost *Souls* at Tarkons Tomb and that departing *Soul* last night sprung to mind, supposing he was an apparition. Not until the young man looked at him did he freeze. This was the boy who had been taken by that *Nyshifter* outside the city.

Kicking himself, Hanor ran over to where he was hobbling. How was it possible? Streaks of blood from a head wound and gashes across his chest had congealed. Another miracle, Hanor was overjoyed by the lad’s survival.

Chapter 33: Through The Quake

“There are many here who have grave ideas about all this,” Nonn said to Greema, everyone returning to the hall after Casvern Tarn’s revelation about the tunnels.

“It is difficult even for those of us who have been part of it,” the Grovian replied. “Do you agree, Bane?” he said, inviting his young friend into the conversation.

Snapping back to respond, “Er... yes, it is,” Bane managed, only half-hearing him.

Talking to Nonn and the man called Simman, others were in huddled groups also discussing recent developments. Hallen had been collared by two fierce looking women whilst Tarmon spoke with another group. Bane tried listening but could not concentrate, Hayla very much on his mind. Talking to Casvern Tarn and another man in the corner, whenever laughter erupted from their direction, a pang of jealousy fired. Surprised when she had held his arm earlier, only to amble over to Mandurin’s leader after their return here, what was she up to? In all sorts of bother, the wrenching tide of emotions drew him back to the edge of despair. Grey moods felt like someone riding his back, sometimes asleep without a care but most of the time awake and demanding attention.

“What made you join this quest?” Simman asked Greema, a Seeker himself.

“Brandor,” Greema smirked. “Even with the threat facing Grovan, I chose his way over my own.”

“That must have been hard,” Nonn said, concerned for his family further south.

“It was.”

“Well, young man,” Nonn said to Bane. “What about your home, have you left family wondering where you are?”

Sitting straight as if waking from an impolite doze, Bane had to think to answer. “I have parents but we are not that close.”

“That is a shame,” Nonn said, quietly disturbed. “It is only when they are no longer here do we miss them.”

“They were always too busy for me,” he said, not wanting to give details. “Maybe things will change when I get back. This journey has turned me inside out, and I am not sure anything will be the same again.”

“Your words are noble,” Nonn agreed. “We will all do well to come out of this alive.”

“You are a friend of Hanor’s?” Simman asked.

Bane tried to ignore another bout of laughs from Hayla’s corner. “Yes,” he said, the grim mood heightening. Not in a talkative mood, tired and irritable, to lie down now feeling jealous would make him ill.

“Like a good friend, you wanted to support him?”

“He was asked to get involved by Brandor, and I followed.” A lump naturally formed, missing Nole.

“Brandor is thought of highly here,” Simman said.

“I am angry at him for upsetting our lives,” Bane admitted. “But... I respect him for what he is trying to do.”

“We all do,” Nonn had to agree.

“Shame his assurances were not enough to save Mandurin,” Simman said. “We told him no one would come, and it proved correct, well almost.”

“What about your Masters?” Greema asked, surprised he had not seen any since arriving.

“Our Masters are no longer with us,” Nonn said, saddened. “Like our High-man, they went down early on in the siege.” Pursing his lips, it was easy to get angry.

“You do not have to say if it is too sensitive.”

Simman patted his friend on the back. “You are right, it is sensitive, but we have hardened to the details. It is the shock of remembering that staggers us.” To go into depth here would upset some, but as there were no apprentices about, he spoke with care. “Prior to the battle, our High-man fell from the walls of Mandurin when the recently strengthened ramparts above the main gate gave way. Disbelieving our luck, hopes for a time were dashed, saved only by the strong leadership of Casvern Tarn and Aider Nash. Even when those catapults were brought forward we believed we could survive. Supporting us with their fiery powers when the war started, our Masters helped protect us against *Nyshifters*. Distracting the creatures enough to keep *them* from wreaking carnage on the walls, it worked to begin with as there were only a few. But when ten arrived on the third night, our Masters had little chance against so many.”

Pausing, those in other groups simmered down, listening to the tale. “*Nyshifters* started snatching men and women from the ramparts, causing many a grievous death. Wanting the Masters above all, *they* hurled people at their abode where they worked. Crashing into the walls, dull thuds tormented the Masters, the dead piling up. With little choice but to act, they came out fighting to stop the bombardment. Fiery powers lit up the night sky, but the creatures seemed to enjoy the pain. Flagging fast, two *Nyshifters* shot down from the dark behind and bowled them over, ending their valiant defence. Caught out, they were undone when the others joined in the slaughter.”

Simman’s shaky description was a tribute to their Masters, touching everyone. Most had chosen to blot out the monstrous acts. To look back meant to relive the gory event, his words finally laying them to rest.

Evening closing in, one of the main doors opened and an excited man rushed in. Oblivious to the sombre setting, his news was miraculous. “Young Diven is alive even though he was taken by a *Nyshifter*!”

The buzz was slow at first before rising as it should, dissolving the solemn mood for now.

Excusing himself, Bane left the hubbub of noise to find somewhere quiet. Determined not to look at Hayla for his own sanity, how could he compete against the leader of Mandurin, Casvern Tarn being much more of a man than he? Angry for playing the fool, had she not made it clear about their friendship? All knotted inside, he just wanted the destructive feelings to go.

Warnings from the *Voice* he could not believe were coming true. “But there had been no relationship in the first place,” he tried reasoning, but the whispers refused to listen. Heading for the stairs, he had to find some normality if that were possible.

Lying on his back sprawled wide like a cross, Hanor stared up into the deep night sky and the potentials out there. Enormous in scope, laying right across the Freelands, he was the mountains and lakes, the trees and fields. The low din was of countless lives inside his body.

In his left hand, a rod of brilliant white light pulsed vertically into the heavens. At his feet, another soared into the vastness above. His right hand was scratching at the soil as

if searching for something. Alarmed that the top half of his body was covered by black buzzies, unable to sweep them away, he focused on his right hand and what it meant.

Reflecting on the strange dream, Hanor left the High-house, the cool silvery blue of dawn refreshing. Few people were up, only the four manning the main gate awake. Urges within his heart to look for the *Pillar of Life* were strong this morning. Reinforced by that piercing dream, obeying the impulses he hoped might lead to something.

Strolling over to the guarded gate, the mutterings fell silent when approaching. "A safe night then," he said, self-conscious at the resultant silence. Eventually, the tallest one spoke. "All is not as we would hope," he said, unimpressed by the illusions of peace. "The Dark Ones will return you can be certain." Wishing they would just savour the quiet, Shanene advising that these soundless periods helped sustain oneself for the future, it was not his place to say. "Let us pray the rest of the Freelands has awakened to the threat," he said, walking past them. "We do not believe that either," another one said, watching him go. "Where are you heading at this short-turn of the morning?" the tall one asked, the sun not yet above the horizon. Talk of otherworldly powers by the new group were absurd. "Silence can lift one's spirits," Hanor replied over his shoulder, heading to where he had seen young Diven.

Concentrating on the inner impressions guiding him, strange, he had not felt them at Grovan or Manter. A result of maturing towards the miraculous perhaps, whatever underpinned the mysterious *Pillars of Life*, he was left to trust *they* would make a difference in the end. Just thinking about the enigmatic *sphere* heightened his senses. Probably embedded somewhere within the boundaries of Mandurin, but as yet, there was no glowing recognition in his heart as to where.

Passing where he found Divan, the High-house loomed to his right, its windows blocked up for protection. Perched in the corner of the High-grounds, hundreds of angled blades along the length of the large building ensured no Gorl could skitter up its sides. Many had tried and failed, cutting themselves in their maddened efforts. The blades would not be taken down for a long time to come.

Light from the emerging dawn increased. Heading in a different direction from where they originally entered, he half-expected Balkorn to follow, but for once he was on his own. Guards passed from view, obeying the urge to keep going. Unfazed by what he was doing, to experience the supernormal again charged his steps. Periodic tingles suggested something substantial was soon to take place. His pace quickened.

Working his way down through fallen and scorched buildings, he crossed what were once grass clearings, now barren and devoid of life or laughter. Carrying no sword for protection, he did not care, such was his faith in the force directing him. A stone-ridden track separating desolate homes led to a wall and the outer level of the city. Large sections had been pulled down, granting access to the regions beyond.

Clambering over piles of rubble, buildings ahead were in a worse state than he could remember. Under the veil of night, it had been bad, but not this bleak. Astounded that not one dead body littered the way, the Gorls had literally stripped Mandurin of every morsel. Beyond the outer wall of the city, blackened hills were forlorn, scars of invasion deep.

Halfway down into the outer section, he halted in the middle of a wide clearing. Dry and lumpy, shelled out structures lined its sides. Stains scarred the earth, signs of fighting discernible even for his unqualified eyes. Envisioning men and women fighting right here, an eeriness swept in on a breeze, chilling whispers of what took place. Startled as if waking to the madness of what he was doing here, the impressions guiding him seemed to dissolve, leaving him alone. The stillness was acute, a rattle of a loose flap alerting him to deeper shadows. Another rap of fallen debris was unnerving.

As quickly as the breeze arrived, it dropped. Silence ensued, forewarning of something momentous. Without tree or wildlife, Hanor braced himself, searching for what was to come. Nothing moved. Throat parched, adding to the tension, he wanted the *white light* to rise up in his heart for protection. Reaching down to his gilth pouch as a comforter, tempted to get the *Stone* out. Why was it so quiet?

A distant rumbling, deep and ominous, alerted him to danger as if something monstrous was in the making. Anxious as to where it came from, he span, checking every direction. The resultant eerie silence did not last long, the ground groaning and then shuddering as if a mighty creature was trying to rise up from below. Another judder, more came, tremors increasing in speed and power. Deep earthy noises caused buildings to shake and walls to tumble. Ground quaking, lurching back and forth just like in his dreams, Hanor crouched for fear of falling. Crashing sounds exploded, the whole area crumbling to dust.

Fretful, vibrations persisted, the motion scrambling his bearings. Huge and fierce, cracks appeared nearby, ripping the earth in two. Another tore by his side, leaping for his life. Expecting to be swallowed, the area heaved under the strain. Unable to go anywhere, the raucous noise was deafening. Hopes of the others coming dissolved in panic.

A sudden bumping of the ground sent him sprawling, a massive chunk rising as if lifted from below. Another on the other side twisted, grating in pain. Quaking every corner of this ransacked place, another section jabbed at the sky from somewhere deep. Amidst the broken landscape, huge lumps fell away into bottomless holes. Where were the calm assurances of earlier? Why was he even here?

Struggling thoughts were stilled by jarring shudders in front. Trapped, rasping sounds were drowned out by groans beneath his feet. Buckling as if with purpose, sharp movements sent him flying, a gap appearing ready to swallow him. Catching hold of a bump in the rock, the area shuddered again, lurching upwards, lifting him clear of the looming cavern. Hissing plumes of dust and dirt jetted into the air, the ground sighing from the released tension.

Shocks seemed to last for an age before finally simmering, quietening like an angry giant returning to slumber. Slow at first, rumbles lulled to a few groans before a stunned quietude returned as if nothing had happened. Dust clouds of grit drifted only to settle, the haunting stillness returning.

Clutching the edge of the rock, Hanor half-expected another round of shakes. Eyes closed and not wanting to move, he spat dust out and wiped sandy drool from dry lips. Braving the unknown, he dared to look around.

Hampered by other boulders and huge outcrops of rock, the place was broken and torn. Clambering up to the brim of the enormous piece he was resting on, he stopped and

peered over, alarmed at the setting. On one of many rocks jutting skywards, large pits and gaping cracks covered the area. Fallen buildings gave little clue as to where he had entered. Still standing, the city's outer wall was just visible through the mangled mess, hoping the High-house had survived too.

Led here by inner promptings, he had to ask why, suspicious of *Gorl-darl* causing this. A graven prospect, he let it go, needing to get out of here fast. The small road he came on was littered with debris. Buildings were in a terrible state, only a few with their upper levels intact.

Sliding back to where he had fallen, he leapt across to another lump of rock and then further down onto a smaller level that had escaped the upheaval. There was no clear way out, the upper reaches of this twisted wilderness impassable. Scuttling his way through, from rock to rock, he made his way between menacing struts. Squeezing through two projected slabs, the possibility of them slipping to his end hastened his passing. A couple of times he had to double back, the way blocked by vertical struts of immovable rock. Scratching hands on jagged edges, the rock was warm, friction the cause. Sweat streaked his face, rubbing grime from his brow. Uncertain of his position, he climbed a large stretch of rock to its peak. Travelling barely half a stone's throw, frustrations got the better of him. Worried about his friends, he had little choice but to carry on. Picking a possible route out, he climbed down and started in that direction.

Panting into the rising dawn, clambering over and under precarious looking chunks, the area was larger than he remembered. Determined and making good speed, the main road was close. Catching his breath when pulling up, a wide crevice in front cut off his escape. Cursing, the gash in the earth stretched twenty paces across and three times that from right to left. Too deep to risk a jump, he would have to cut back and go around. Crouching to recoup, his legs were getting stiff.

Annoyed, not until his breathing eased did Hanor notice the faint stirrings in his heart. Taking a moment to register the change, he could not believe it, how was it possible? Suspecting a mistake, but the familiar movements were real, searching for evil that might be the cause. Satisfied that he was on his own and no danger beckoned, he did not dare move in case the sensations faded. Relieved at what it meant, he peered down and around. Where was the third *Pillar of Life*? Judging the only place was the trench below, standing, the stirrings disappeared. About to bend to reignite the fluttering, but the delicate sensations rose as if to find him. Once again the *forces* in his heart ignited.

Voices caught his attention, an anxious looking Balkorn followed by Kifter bounded down the beaten road. Others from their group came, but Hanor stayed tuned to the new discovery. Far more alert than at Grovan and Manter, this was to be an even greater experience.

"He is over here," Kifter shouted to those behind, standing beside the huge Baltian on the other side of the cavernous ditch. Panting from their frantic search, both noticed the ambient look in the boy. "Are you all right?"

Managing a tame smile, in Hanor's mind he could see the dynamic *powers* course through his chest like a glowing white fire.

Cautious, Balkorn did not want to jump to conclusions. "Do you feel *it*?"

Wishing they too could feel the *energies*, “It is down there,” he said, peering left along the gorge’s crooked base. Unable to see the *Sphere*, the streaming *forces* from his heart showed *its* hidden location. The longer he stood, deeper the sensations energised.

Tarmon and Raldama arrived followed by Hayla and Greema. Surprised, their bodies emitted a glow, something Hanor had never seen before. Perception expanding, every aspect of his inner being was aglow, cleansing his body of ailment and ill thought. Purifying, drawing him into harmony with the *powers* below, the rising peace reinforced that conviction. Such interactions were to increase in preparation for something significant in the future, a preparation that would demand his full cooperation. No shadow of ignorance was to blind him from the ultimate decision to come, and this third *Pillar* would include his willingness far more than the previous two.

“Can you feel it?” Raldama exclaimed to those around him, holding his chest. Strong urges to merge pulled like an addiction.

“Yes..., I do,” Kifter said, fearing his heart might escape if he did not stand back. Pulled as if by a giant hand, the compulsion felt blissfully painful.

Bane and Hallen arrived, wondering what they were staring at.

“Not that again!” Hallen protested, the force seizing his heart. Stepping back, “You have found *it* then?”

Nonn and Tooty Roe were the first from Mandurin to come, word spreading like a plague.

“The third *Pillar* is here,” the Hite beckoned. Enticing *powers* once again affected him, stepping further back out of *their* reach. Not wanting anything to do with *it*, too much had happened to permit those *forces* a chance to redeem him from the dark.

“What... is it?” Nonn said, breathing in the concealed *powers*. Holding his chest, Tooty and the others were also dazed by the enwrapping *forces* escaping the pit.

Hanor stood on the other side, a subtle aura glistening about him. Healthy and vibrant, radiating an authority never seen before, only now could they respect Tarmon’s tale. It did have to be experienced to be believed.

Casvern Tarn and Aider Nash arrived, the tremors of earlier now forgotten. Remarkable engineering had ensured the High-house had not given way, but not so down here at the epicentre. The place was a mess. Ground tremors did shake the area periodically, but not to this degree. Following reports that Hanor had headed this way, more joined the dash to see the exceptional.

Many curious faces lined the rift opposite, Hanor sympathetic to their wonder. Only he could see the incredible *forces* rushing from his heart towards the hidden *power* buried down across to his left. Humbling them to silence, few moved such was the intensity of the unfolding drama. Increasing in tempo, the *powers* started melting the mud and rock just as it had at Grovan and Manter. A large section slid away like water down a hole, another rush causing further consternation from those watching opposite.

The mystifying *powers* sought to unify with every person here. Hanor knew they were not ready for such dynamic contact, unable to handle the immense energies involved. Their weak bodies would not cope with the strain and intensity. Raging *powers*

surging from his heart would consume them. Not because he was superior, but due to evolution, a process that followed natural laws by which all progressed.

Other layers of reality appeared through the grime and sweat. Every person was standing in the middle of a myriad of colours, aflame within their own intricate forces. A rainbow effect, each individual was a creature of complexity, magnetic energies swirling about them. Resplendent colours arcing in different directions followed invisible lines of magnetic energy. Aura's interchanging on subtle levels, their owners were oblivious to them to their loss.

In a flash, that changed, each one now a blinding ray of white incandescent light. Blotting out the brightness of the rising sun, at their core, everyone was the same as him and that of the *Sacred*. It was to this that the *Pillar* concealed below was reaching out to. Merging with *its* own kind, that *light* was what empowered every form, generating a body for them to experience life in.

From a higher perspective, many mysteries were revealed in that instant. Absorbing the unworldly light show, he could now understand why the *Sacred's* unconditional love enshrouded all things, good or bad. For in essence, everything was of the same sacred substance. Details of the reed twanged by Morn returned. There was only one band vibrating at different speeds and in different ways to create the separate realities. Glimpsing those realities now, life was glorious.

Another round of gasps drew him back to the present. More mud and rock slid away, and for the first time the *Pillar of Life* came into view. Encased in shadow, countless sparks shot out from that *Sacred Point* before disappearing at the *Sphere's* outer casing. Earthy rock kept rushing away into the depths, revealing more of the spectacle. This was to be special for all.

Thirty hand-spans down, *its* protective field of power definable, the large *Sphere* sat embedded in the ground where *it* had lain undisturbed for countless cycles until now. Stimulating life to grow on this world, *its* work here was soon to end. Supporting each other, the onlookers were unable to withstand the *powers* on their own. Electrifying, the normal was once again contacting the supernormal.

"No..., Aider!" Casvern Tarn's urgent cry slashed the atmosphere.

Snatched back from the hypnotising *force* below, to their horror, Mandurin's Second in Command leapt to the base of the pit, sinking to his knees on an unstable outcrop of muddied rock. Shouts of concern went unheard. An abomination if he were to touch that sacred *Sphere*, but their once proud leader seemed lost to their pleas.

Enshrouded by the magnetising *forces*, Aider Nash was dazzled by the *Pillar of Life*. Pains of war were gone, healing all ailments. Every breath boomed, so vital and precious, waves of indescribable power rocking him on his sunken feet. The ridge upon which he stood was softening. Leaning forward to reach the object of his dreams, to be at one and rest after all he had endured, shouts above meant nothing. Stretching out a hand, he was not near enough, yearnings urging him to try harder. Feet stuck, the *Eternal Point* streamed forth *its* life-giving energies. He wanted *it*, he needed *it*.

A sharp crunching pain in Aider's shoulder stunned him, lurching and then sitting back on his rear. Searing, the pain was the last thing he remembered, blacking out to the wonder radiating about him.

Hanor remained detached, unsurprised by the man's yearnings for the miraculous. Greema's thumper had saved the man's life. If he had touched *it*, Aider's life-force would have been dissipated. Reacting emotionally, but other conditions had to be met before merging. Important that one is purified, it was why he was waiting for the right time to move. The same at Manter and Grovan, cleansing Hanor's heart and mind with the otherworldly *powers*, it was the purity of heart and readiness of Spirit that counted.

Making his way forward, a build up of mud when sliding down the side of the cleft eased his descent. The ground was soft but his frame felt light. Barely leaving impressions in the mud when moving, he reached Aider who lay unconscious. Unperturbed, he did not wait or even check if the man was well. In front, the *Eternal Point* waited for him to step inside *its* protective sheath. Many now lined the pit, but he did not care. It was just him and the *Pillar of Life*, him and the *Sacred*.

Reaching the half-sunken *Sphere*, the field's magnetic waves pulsed, humming life into existence. His body was now tuned to the same frequency. Granted the capacity to understand his actions and their implications, he was maturing with each remarkable encounter. Awakening to Higher Realms, preparing him for larger scales of being, his awareness shifted again.

Everyone's thoughts above and behind became discernable, a mangle of voices filling his mind. Unable to pick out specifics, something was preventing him from grasping individual thoughts. Getting a glimpse of how the *Sacred's* expanded consciousness worked and why *they* were conscious of every living thing, it was the strongest impression gained, the *Sacred* shedding the light of understanding onto those who were ready.

Extending a hand, his fingers penetrated the magnetic field, the biting heat tingling his arm when moving forward. Balanced and harmonised, at this point, Aider Nash would have dissolved. Entering the liquefied force field, the searing heat pulsated in tune to his body, every atom singing as one. At Grovan, he had slid to the base of the *Sphere*, his body too heavy to move within. But now, he glided as if in transparent oil. Invigorating, the *Central Point* hovered just in front, spewing out life-giving energies. The starting point of existence, Hanor stopped short, entranced by the seemingly impossible. A seeker of knowledge and truth, he moved closer, countless sparks flying through him. A hand-span away, the *Point* did not falter, continuing as if he was not there.

The *light* in his heart was permitting him time to absorb all that he could, *its* rushing presence flowing towards *it*. A mystical exchange, he reached up. Clasp the *Point* was a token of what his intentions were, the willingness to merge. Much remained hidden even though he sensed more on a deeper level. The Universe began and ended right here, each person a Universe in the making. Insights were astounding, but nothing compared to the climax.

Cupping a hand behind *it*, he passed it through, moving it back and forth for a time. Captivating, a sharp urge to clasp and declare his willingness to unite simmered the wonder. Obeying the impulse, he closed his hand.

Map



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 Altia

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

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
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

Nyshifter - 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
Fliryms - Small flying animals
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
Whirlwind of Sorrow - The Gateway to Yarmoria
Whis - Member of The Hisian-Set
Woole - Master at Tarden

Yalno - Member of The Lani Clan
Yevan - Man from Mandurin