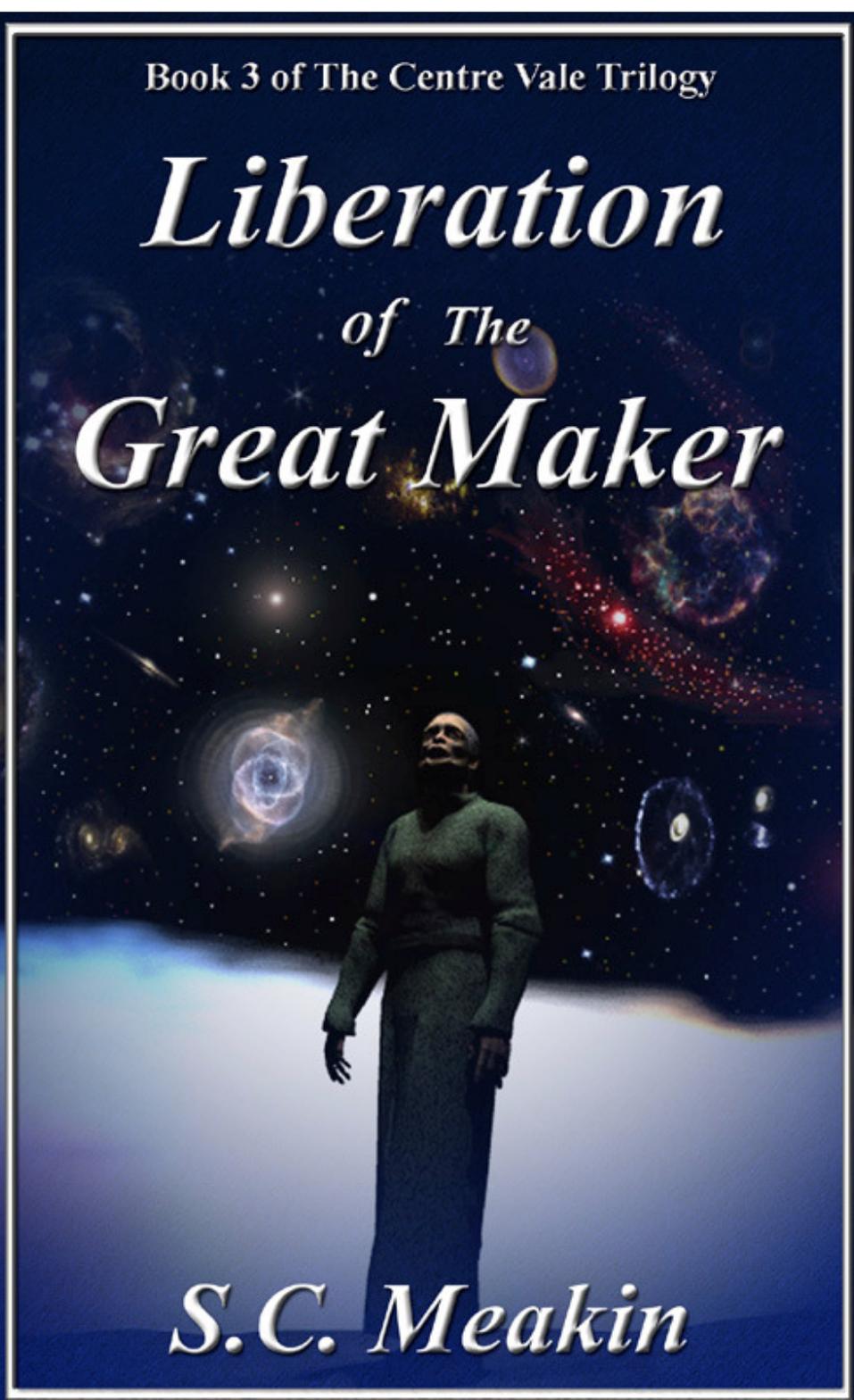


Book 3 of The Centre Vale Trilogy

Liberation
of The
Great Maker



S.C. Meakin

Book 3 of The Centre Vale Trilogy

Liberation of The Great Maker

by

S C Meakin

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Chapter 1 : The Fall of a High-Tard

Gasping and holding his chest, Brandor leant on the branched seating for support. “Did you feel that?” he strained, stunned by its potency. Talking with a number of Masters here at Tarden about their next step, each felt the tremendous pulse of energy.

“Yes,” Hosan - a Master said, catching his breath.

“He has found *it* then,” Feleeme, his colleague, stated over by the doorway.

“Our work is now of the utmost importance,” Brandor said, the others agreeing. “We cannot delay any longer.”

“Caldon is preparing Tarden’s forces and is waiting for us to grant him leave to move,” Woole said, putting aside a book. “Whether he will without High-tard Drola’s blessing remains to be seen.”

“Caldon’s loyalties are known,” Brandor acknowledged. “Grant him to the end of this turn to address it, but no longer.”

“That will not be easy for him,” Feleeme pointed out.

“But done it must be,” the Dai-laman said, getting round to the other issue that had been decided earlier. “We of the Hisian-set intend to travel with him to Tardoc.”

“You are not serious,!” Hosan was aghast.

“What if the Yarmorians come for Tarden?” Since, another Master said, breaking from her research. Close to finishing the foundations for the *Wall of Power*, the arrival of Brandor and his compatriots had given hope of *its* completion sooner.

“I am not convinced they will come if Maloree is to be considered,” Brandor said.

Upon arriving here at Tarden after their explosive confrontation with the Yarmorians, they had discovered the High-lady had taken ill about the same time. Some reports even suggested she was close to death. Born of the Yarmi Folk, she was closer to her people than previously presumed. Supporting the evidence against her, many were still reeling from the shock of her involvement. High-tard Drola had since become a recluse, destitute at her bedside.

“It is vital Tardoc stands to ensure the quest succeeds,” Brandor continued. “But also to make certain the mental link between Tarden and Manter is established. If Tardoc falls, can you reach Manter?”

“We are struggling to connect with Tardoc due to the fighting there,” Since said, frustrated. “Too much distress. Manter will be even harder.”

“Without that stable link,” Hosan decreed. “The *Wall of Power* will fail.”

“Then we must do all we can to guarantee Tardoc survives,” Brandor finalised.

“I would still prefer the Hisian-set stay here,” Feleeme said.

“It is a matter of judgement,” Brandor said, agreeing to go with Rinn and the others last night. Tired from worry about when the third *Pillar of Life* would be found, desires to see the fourth surpassed fatigue.

“What is more important,” Dinlef posed. “The *Wall* or *Pillars of Life*?”

Putting down the parchment, a vine lowered to retrieve it from Brandor, placing it back in the substantial racking with countless other scrolls and books. This project was important to the Masters, the *Fire of the Forest* surrounding Tarden had been a prototype to this mighty challenge. Even so, in his heart he could sense the *Higher Will* was directed at the quest more than here.

“The *Wall* is an experiment for the new era,” he said, thoughtful. “But... if there are no Freelands in which the new life form can exist, then this work will be pointless.”
“Are the *Pillars of Life* linked to The Freelands’s survival?” Woole asked.
“*They* make little sense,” Brandor said, being honest. The dream about the four *Pillars of Light* merging with the fifth central one gave little indication to what it meant.
“That is sometimes the hardest part,” Hosan said, stretching his arms. Working through the night, rest beckoned. “Working without discernment of what is to come.”
“Some call it *faith*,” Brandor grinned.
“Then I will drink to *faith*,” Woole said, spirits lifting now the third *Pillar of Life* had been found.

Chill and calculating, laughter echoed through the grand Halls of Orbaddon, Gorldarl’s pleasure evident to all. His great Plan was coming to pass, and the Source behind his power would reward him substantially. Betrayed by the Yarmorians, the loss of another Nyshifter was secondary, the challenge intensifying. Pulses of power stirred his envious blood, the third Pillar the strongest yet. Unable to predict what was to come, the mystery added to the intrigue. Returning to the concentrated state, there was much to do.

Watchful of the huge figure of Balkorn, Hanor did not struggle or speak. Enwrapped in blissful peace, the frantic scene unfolding around him held little concern. Oneness from obtaining the third *Pillar of Life* energised his limp but awakened body. Handled up and out of the pit, his awareness stayed sharp even though detached. The *Sacred Powers* were getting easier to manage, the understanding too.

Everything was vibrating about him as if life was designed to experience reality in a certain way. Even with the immense pain suffered by many, all remained harmonised at a deeper level of consciousness. Forces underpinning life belonged to everyone, but whilst in human form, such contact was minimal for most. Engrossed in the *mêlée* of life, unaware of the wondrous forces binding everything together, his heart was brimming with love for all.

Carried back along the main roadway to the High-house of Mandurin, he was in no hurry to get anywhere, for everywhere seemed to be right here. Time and space lost their edge, the commotions of life irrelevant. Low in frequency, a resounding call touched every nerve of his heightened body. As if the *Sacred* were singing life into being, sending forth harmonies of incredible depth, the heart-warming sounds were from *Heavenly Beings* selflessly humming so life could unfold. In awe, living *their* supernatural lives without the dramas experienced at these lower levels of reality, the scale was consuming.

Exhausted, his physical body pulling at his awareness, he did not see the many haunted features lining the way when carried into the High-house asleep.

“What will you do next?” Casvern Tarn asked Tarmon, a glint flashing in his eyes.

Sitting in a back room, only one lengthy window lined the outside wall, looking out onto an inner area to what was once a small-enclosed garden. Stacked high with supplies, there was little light filtering through to those gathered to discuss their next step. Aider Nash and Nonn were the only other men from Mandurin present.

“We will wait for Hanor to recover before we move on,” the Tardanian answered on behalf of their group, considering how much should be revealed. Everyone was here except Balkorn and Bane, the two watching over Hanor.

“Where will you go?” Aider asked, suspicious of those inconceivable powers. Embarrassed about failing at the pit, his shoulder still hurting from Greema’s decisive blow, he was only here because Tarn had insisted. Reeling from what they had seen earlier, regaining consciousness prior to Hanor reaching for that indescribable *point*, how was it possible?

“Tardoc,” Tarmon said.

“Is there another *Pillar*, as you have called *it*, there too?” Casvern Tarn probed, jumping ahead to the probability.

“There is,” Kifter answered this time.

“Four *Pillars of Life*,” Tarn said, astonished. Insatiable urges in his heart caressed his senses. “Our Masters used to work with the elements of nature, and some of the things they did was extraordinary. Manipulating objects was a most curious thing, something of which I was not good at.” Daring a slinky smile at Hayla, quite unabashed that they were not alone, he was on a natural high.

“What will your people do now?” Hallen interjected, a singe of jealousy rearing, disliking others of equal charm.

“There are many wounded,” Aider replied, ignoring the behaviour of his young compatriot. “And some will need many turns to recover. We have the supplies but... how much time do we have before our enemy returns?”

“There is much *darkness* roving these parts,” Raldama was respectful. “It would not be well to stay here.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Nonn agreed. “We have discussed the matter but... there are disagreements on what we should do.”

“Men will die if they are moved,” Aider bit, his stance clear.

“No need to argue about that again,” Tarn cut in, keeping his own views close to his chest. “I see Kifter and Raldama returned with your Kyboes late last night,” he said, needing to warn them. “They will be prized assets in this broken City.”

“It would be unwise for anyone to try what you are suggesting,” Hallen cautioned.

“The men and women here are free to do as they will,” Tarn explained. “As much as I would like to promise their safekeeping, people here have been pushed to the very edge.”

“We will take precautions,” Tarmon said, displeased at the prospect.

Tarn rubbed the thin stubble on his chin. Using the topic to approach his new plan, he was about to upset a lot of people. “I see there is one for each of you.”

“Yes,” Tarmon said, suspicious of the comment.

“Our Kyboes went south with the rest of our people,” Tarn continued, unfazed by the darting stares. “Will you need help finding the fourth *Pillar*?”

“No, we will not,” Hallen cut in before the murmurs did.

“I do not like the line of your talk,” Aider Nash growled at what his leader was implying.

“Thoughts get excited in dark times,” Tarn chuckled. Wrestling with himself since witnessing that *Pillar of Life*, he would be mad not to go.

No one laughed.

“Are you suggesting you want to go with them?” Nonn was dismayed.

“How would I?” Tarn shrugged. No one would be willing to give him a lift. Still not back to full health, they would see him as a hindrance. Desires to go however, were growing. Leaving his brethren would create a vacuum, but that was a side issue. Needing a clear head, loyalties could be stifling.

“You have been drinking too much hot-berry,” Aider said, unconvinced. Tarn had a crafty way of getting what he wanted.

Entering Hanor’s room, Balkorn concurred to Bane who sat against the wall at the end of the bed, arms wrapped around his knees. Surprised when the young lad motioned him over, checking Hanor first, the Baltian went over and sat down. Troubled eyes held a great burden.

“He has come a long way... since the beginning,” Bane said, a grey mood soaking him. Sporadic bangs elsewhere in the building were ignored. Others were recovering in adjoining rooms, the occasional groan filtering in.

“You both have,” Balkorn answered after a short pause. Husky, his voice carried a tenderness that surprised Bane.

“Can you make any sense of this madness?”

Not rushing his answers as was his custom, “The seed of the flower... gains nutrients from the earth. Out of that dark place, flower it will.”

Relating to their own struggles, Bane was comforted that at least someone felt assured all would be well. “He *is* like a flower.”

“There is much strength in his innocence,” the Baltian approved. Sitting tall, he could see Hanor sleeping. “When a seed is nurtured by a loving heart, its bloom is special.”

“Being a flower would be far easier than toiling blindly as we are.”

“The flower of a person radiates far more beautifully.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“That is because you do not see as I do.”

“And how do you see?” Thinking he meant his eyes, he presumed their size granted additional insights oblivious to him.

“You must learn to look through your heart, Bane.”

Confused, he sounded like Hanor. “How can you see through your heart?”

“To look through one’s heart is to look with eyes of love towards all things,” the Balt answered, his rasping voice comforting.

“My eyes are blind, love is not for me.”

“The fact you are here supporting Hanor is a loving thing to do.”

“I just care for him as a brother, that is all.”

“It is a matter of who you deem to be your brother.”

“Have you been speaking to Hanor lately?” Bane joked, looking up.

Balkorn’s huge mouth stretched into his cheeks. “Hanor speaks like a wise man.”

Bane sighed at how far from his friend he was. “I wish I could talk to him like I used to.”

“You are trying too hard.”

“What do you mean?”

“Acceptance,” Balkorn said, patient. “Enables peace to rise. You are fighting his transition, and likewise you fight yourself. By accepting his changes, you will see clearer your own path. You do not have to agree with everything he does, just grant him the freedom to do so, and you will be there as a friend should be.”

Soothing in temper, the truth had a sharp bite. "I suffocate him, is that what you mean?"
"Are you suffocating him?"
"I just want us back at Manson as it was, even without his brother, Nole."
"There is your problem. Longing for what you had, you cannot enjoy what you have now. Longing for the past holds you back and keeps you in despair."
"I would rather that than this misery."
"Life progresses. It sinks into the valleys and at other times reaches mountaintops."
"It has its ups and downs you mean? It is not just me but life itself."
"Wisely said. See, you and Hanor are not so far apart. You must learn to protect your thoughts against dark moods. Focus on the good rather than the bad."
"Easier said than done."
"That type of response is what I mean," Balkorn pointed out.
"I do not follow."
"Your thoughts are negative..., tapping into the darker aspects of life."
"Are they?"
"Reflect on it..., and answers will come."
"I could do with some answers," Bane said, managing a grin. Tempted to mention that *Voice* he heard prior to reaching Mandurin, his courage waned. Balkorn would see him as mad like everyone else.

Meandering out into the desolate gardens, Hayla savoured the sunshine, feeling like the trained fighter she was. Free from recent ties, even when Hanor had found the *Pillar of Life* and fell into that trance she had remained detached. A cold indifference was forming around her heart, but she did not care, craving stability.

Reaching the corner of the High-house, Casvern Tarn stood alone across the scorched grass by the remains of the monstrous Thwacker. Yearnings from her youthful past wanted to talk to him and find out more about the charismatic figure. Refraining, the defensive streak dulled any wild possibilities. Nodding to Kifter who sat disgruntled against the outer wall guarding their Kyboes, appreciating why some might resort to thieving, Mandurin had little left worth staying for.

About to turn, she stopped when Tarn beckoned her over. A questioning eye from Kifter warned her not to go, it would only encourage him. Heart pounding, drawn to Tarn's plight, he looked like a lost child in a hectic world. Confident she could manage it, keeping those childhood longings under wraps, a sharp inhalation reinforced her defence.

"What is it?" she asked, checking Tarn's reaction when drawing close. Seeking that elusive route by which his hopes might be gained, Casvern Tarn's gaze was sincere, his manner distant as though he was struggling with something. "I have witnessed much over recent turns; life and death, courage and weakness. But something deep has stirred my Soul. I never knew *powers* existed that could be so intimate." Gentle tugs at her heart were similar to when first listening to Hanor. Tapping into her feminine side, Hayla started wavering. "It is a humbling experience."
"How is it possible?" he said, staring down at the skull of the dead beast. Of the entire quest, she would be the most responsive to his call, letting her know how much this meant to him. "How can such feelings rise in the same place as our deepest hurts?"

Conscious of what he was like, Tarn was not the sort of person she could trust with her own heartfelt troubles. “What do you want?” she asked, getting to the point.

He smiled at her astuteness. “Do you not know?”

“I never presume anything.”

“It looks as though I am in your hands,” he said, holding his out, submissive.

“You are not in anyone’s hands,” she rejected. “Most of all... mine.”

“I have got to know you quite well, and if you are not receptive to my pleas, then I have little hope of witnessing the next *Pillar*. How else will I travel with your group?”

Giving him a lift to Tardoc was absurd. “What you are suggesting is impractical.”

“Is it?”

“Tardoc is four turns of the day from here,” she explained. The notion of him holding her for that long was out of the question. “The toll on my Kyboe would be great, and it would slow the group down. I cannot see the others agreeing to it even if I did.”

“One step at a time,” Tarn said, retracting his foot from the enormous skull. This was critical. “Putting aside the obvious, would you be willing?”

“And what about supplies?” she tried defending, his magnetic eyes drawing her in.

“I do not eat much,” he said with a smile.

It felt like being asked to court him, a racing heart impeding the firm stance of before. “It would be unwise,” she said, blushing like a red dawn. Hanor was a painful reminder of how tumultuous emotions could be. Where had the resilience gone?

“I would treat you with the utmost respect,” he promised. No glinting eye suggested he was lying. There was too much at stake.

Sighing, her resolve was melting.

“This is important to me, Hayla,” he pressed. “You know there are those who chase after life’s challenges and those who shy away and settle for mediocrity.” Unexpected, a grin crossed his lips. “I will run if I have to.”

Tugging on her heart, if she did not turn away now, she would falter. The powerful draw he still had enshrouded every fibre of her being. Spending countless turns watching him as a young girl, training and working at Manter with others eager to learn from him, that youthful longing was pinning her here. Over her shoulder, Kifter was looking in their direction. Speculating the Fife knew what they were discussing, she could not see them permitting this attractive, courageous man to join their ranks. Using it as an escape route, it was a gamble she was prepared to take. Under the cosh of Tarn’s attentions, she could not summon the strength to just say no.

“You are right about the draw the *Pillars* have,” she said. “But you are fooling yourself if you believe the others will allow you to come. Your injuries are still an issue.”

“Are you willing... is all I ask?” he posed, waiting for her consent.

“I have no objections to you joining us,” she said, consternations growing.

“And... would you be prepared to give me a ride?”

Nowhere else to turn, judging his light weight was manageable, the hole she had dug herself was deep. “Yes,” she said, a rush of guilt mocking her. Adamant the others would reject his proposal, *they* would not be swayed by his charm.

“I am indebted to you,” Tarn said, slicing her misty doubts. “And respect your concerns, but I will not forget this.”

Guilt hounding her, kept at bay by tiny pulses of excitement simmering beneath the surface, she watched Tarn make his way back to the High-house. Angry, where was the

determination when needed? Tempted to change her mind and call after him, his disappearance around the corner summed up her luck. Annoyed she could not say “No,” she stamped at the large bulbous skull as if it was her own clumsy head.

Daring a glimpse at Kifter, to her dismay, the Fife wagged his finger as though aware of what transpired. Groaning, what had she done?

Hanor’s eyes blinked open. Unperturbed by the rush of recollections, finding the third *Pillar* seemed as natural as breathing. Soaking in its joys, he was in no hurry to move. Swirling patterns in the ceiling drew Bane to mind, wondering how he was coping. As if responding to that enquiry, the door to his right squeaked open. Timid but familiar features of his best friend peered in, forcing a grin.

A hush fell across the narrow hall when Hanor, followed by Bane and Balkorn, entered the chamber. Used to the attention, Hanor was unfazed by the awkward silence. Setting to work by caring for the wounded, a hum of anticipation buzzed many conversations as evening progressed. Fear and hope for the future flashed like a flipped coin. Kind words mingled amongst tears and aches, new friendships developing.

Entering the High-chambers, Caldon - Master of Tarden’s Forces, made his way towards the Sleeping Chamber. Whether High-tard Drola accepted it or not, he was making preparations for Tarden’s Forces to move in aid of Tardoc. Confident Tarden would be next, he was not prepared to let that happen.

Dark halls were eerie. If it were a fine turn, parts of the branched roof would separate to let more light in. If rain came, it would close to keep out the wet. Unique just like Tardoc, most people here wanted to aid their brethren, but the scandal surrounding Maloree and the Yarmi Folk had caused a furore. Intending to keep Tardania divided, he still could hardly believe it. Meeting members of the Hisian-set earlier, refusing to move unless Tarden was protected, thankfully they had changed their minds and decided to stay instead. Confident he could now gain Drola’s support, he was not looking forward to this.

Reaching the multi-petalled doors of their bedchamber, tensions soared. Barely a sound anywhere, this part of the City had been cut off from the rest. Unnatural, he had no idea what to expect. Making a final check, he urged for the doors to open, the *One Life* of the City doing as requested.

Shadows merged with the sweet scent of Susa Bushes, a favourite fragrance of the High-lady. Concealing any trace that the person inside was ill, the magic of the City filtered the stale air and replaced it with an uplifting freshness. Familiar furnishings were visible in the half-light. A long low dresser with various sized mirrors lined one wall, with two large round openings opposite peering back like unblinking eyes. One was a room to dress and the other for washing. Spacious but not too refined, he stepped inside, looking left to where the large bed lay in shadow. Creamy and light, the blanket showed the contours of the sleeping High-lady. In that state, one might think she was blameless, but pale features declared otherwise. Grey as if the blood had drained, she looked ethereal. Frail, she was dying.

Pressures eased now he was here. Some had said he should not bother the unstable Drola, ordering the move anyway. Nevertheless, it would not be well if Drola climbed

out of his despair only to find half the City empty. Unwilling to move without his High-tard knowing his intentions, their long friendship deserved openness.

Down to his left, Drola slouched against the side of the bed, one hand stretching across to his High-lady. Even with sleep he did not want to be apart from her. A dependant love rather than the unity of heart, the way he had won her hand still weighed just beneath the surface. The betrayal of Polon, who at that time had been like a brother, had left a scar across this relationship.

Approaching Drola, clasping his shoulder with a gentle shake, his friend stirred. Wiping drool from his mouth, the High-tard winced at the stiffness. Sitting straight, through bleary eyes he looked up. Dazed as if intoxicated, gaunt features questioned the intruder. "What..., who...?" he stuttered. Reminded of something tragic, Drola turned to Maloree, checking her condition. The sigh was of a broken person clinging to hope. Rubbing his unkempt bearded chin, Drola's respectability was long gone, unaware of what turn of day it was.

"Cal...don...?" he said softly, turning away from her for a moment.

"Yes...", the Master of the Forces replied, his nerve faltering. Observing his old friend in such a vulnerable state threatened his will to see this through.

"She... is dying..., Caldon," Drola murmured.

"There is always hope," he tried comforting him.

Sitting back, staring at her fragile features, "What... will I do... without her?"

"Wait and see what happens," Caldon said, affections wrestling with her treachery. Some had said this was a fitting end to the cunning, but now he could see she was just as vulnerable as the rest of them. Making mistakes and paying the price, Brandor had said her illness was a result of her mental link with the Yarmi Folk. Reflecting the sufferings of her brethren, if true, it promised Tarden would be safe if they *were* to go to Tardoc. "We need to talk."

Drola did not move as if deaf to his appeal.

Resting a hand on the High-tard's shoulder, Caldon crouched. "Drola, we need to talk."

Sunken eyes stared as if he was an intruder to this precious time. Passions of yester-turn were gone. "Caldon..., how can I... talk... when she is... like this?"

"I need to discuss... Tardoc."

"Tar...doc?" The word had some distant meaning.

"Yes," the Master said. This was not the place to tell him. "Can we go to another room?"

A stinging request, "I cannot leave her." Cupping a hand around hers, she did not stir.

Sighing, Caldon did not want Drola to explode in her presence. "I am going to Tardoc."

It took a moment for the words to register. "Why Caldon...? We need you... here?" Showing no signs of the aggression of recent turns, he was half the person he used to be.

"I am not going alone."

"I do not... understand."

This was awful. "I am taking our Forces."

A glimmer of his former self tried igniting, but it did not last. Gazing up as if something significant had been declared, but a quiet groan from Maloree drew Drola back towards her suffering, another long pause ensuing.

Wanting recognition, even a cry of betrayal if necessary, but Caldon received none.

"Did you hear me?"

The High-tard still did not move, lost in his trance of despair. Through a dim light, he half-turned so that he could be heard. "I am losing my will to live. I have laboured hard for this City... only because of this relationship." Sighing, he continued, solemn. "Now she is dying..., I too am dying. I am no longer your High-tard." Staring back at his frail love, a tear rolled down Drola's cheek. There was nothing left to care for.

Struck silent, the answer he had least expected punctured Caldon. Now he could see how the fire of his friend had all been a struggle against his own self. Denying the treachery of long ago, whilst Maloree lived, Drola had something to focus on instead of facing the truth. Using his position to fend off deeper emotions, without her support, what was left but the mirror of his own betrayal. Focusing on external circumstances, without her, it would force him to look inside. But with that last statement, even now Drola did not want to face it. Caught in misery, perhaps at a deeper level he could sense her treachery, but had refused to confront it. Shattering that illusion would unhinge everything he had become.

Leaving the chamber, relieved but shaken, it was the closing of a sorry era for the Master of Tarden's Forces. Trapped in pretence, perhaps Caldon never really knew the person crouched forlornly against that bed. He certainly did not know the dying High-lady. Certain he had made the right decision, there was much to do.

Chapter 2 : Determined to go

Suffering the howling winds, Hanor stood firm on the shaking hilltop surging across the darkened plane. Thick and grey, the sky above churned like the changing canvass of a storming artist. Defiant, three spears of brilliant light jetting forth from the palms of his steady hands pierced the earth in front like a spiked leash. Riding as if a monstrous beast, he turned the mountainous hill towards the west, guided by a Higher Will.

Waking with a start, his body taught, Hanor needed a moment to gain his bearings. Alone in a small chamber, the noise of his stirrings drew a friend to the door.

“Everything all right?” Balkorn asked, sincere.

The dream seemed as profound as this physical world. Wiping a sodden brow, “Er... yes..., just a dream.”

“Dreams can be lively,” Balkorn said, stepping inside.

“My dreams are a little too lively.”

“They can also be a form of communication.”

“Communication...! From who?”

“We all have inner guides. Dreams can show us the way forward and also lessons to be learnt. But do we want to take heed? Sometimes the *Higher Lives* seek to explain the miraculous to us,” Balkorn explained, looking away, hoping his own destiny could be avoided. Not one to run from what had been revealed by his Sage, an acceptance of his fate simply strengthened Balkorn’s commitment. Dreams were precious, regularly running through fields with his yet to be born son.

“What is it?” Hanor urged, noting the glint of sadness in his round, over-sized eyes.

Forcing a smile, “Some things... are unavoidable.”

Surprised to see his sizeable friend was troubled, believing the Balt to be unassailable, Hanor did not pry. “Shall we see what the others are up to?”

Considering what it would have been like to have Hanor as a son, adopting a fatherly role as well as that of protectorate without invite, the fondness Balkorn felt for Hanor was very real. Letting go of cherished thoughts about his own unborn child, he agreed.

Stopping short of the doorway, Hanor splashed himself from a bowl of clean water placed on top of a low cupboard. Cool and refreshing, the round mirror hanging on the wall reflected back a lean, shadowy figure with keen dark eyes. Disbelieving just how much he had changed, full cheeks and soft smooth skin had long been burnt away. Wisps of fine hair spreading across his chin meant he was becoming a man. Taking a final look before leaving, his life had changed beyond measure. What would his parents say?

“I was just on my way to get you,” Greema boomed, meeting Hanor and Balkorn at the foot of the stairs. “Tarmon has called an urgent meeting.”

“About what?” Hanor feared the enemy was back.

“He did not say,” the Grove shrugged.

Leading them along the main corridor to another high narrow chamber, a lengthy polished table mirrored the thin sky-light in the high ceiling. No windows clung to the walls, the only illumination entering from above. Others from the group sat on crafted chairs of elegance, Hallen sitting on two for support. Seated along one side, they faced a line of men and women representing the people of Mandurin. At the far end, Tarmon

stood talking to Casvern Tarn, a bitter gleam in his eye. Used to people staring, Hanor sat next to Bane. Balkorn took up his position behind, a forbidding guard to ward off any aggressors. The low din quietened when Casvern Tarn urged silence.

“Thank you for gathering so swiftly,” he said, sweeping an arm wide, now absent of bandages. A statement that it was on the mend, his keenness was obvious. “I have restricted the numbers to keep this civil. The news Tarmon has is grim.” Keeping his agenda quiet for now, Tarn sat next to Aider Nash, motioning for the Tardanian to start.

“Most of you will recall our tale prior to arriving at Mandurin,” Tarmon proceeded, his audience wary of what was to come. “And that included our experience in Selmor Forest with the eventual liberation of Shanene, Lady of the Woods. Because of that encounter, I now have a strong mental link to her, which means we are aware of each other even though a great distance separates us. It is by this connection that I now share grave news about what lurks north of here.” Murmurs of dissatisfaction were expected. “Shanene uses a fountain to look outside of Selmor, so she can see anywhere in The Freelands. This morning, she searched north for perils, and to our dismay, has seen thousands more of the enemy camped across the Ravaged Planes preparing to head south. Their intent is clear and her warning stark. You cannot stay here and expect to live.”

“Thousands!” a burly bearded fellow called Tiln exclaimed, devastated. “Where do they come from?”

“How are we to know if this is reliable?” a female called Rosea asked, sceptical.

“Would I risk error in such detestable circumstances?” Tarmon defended.

“Your group has opened our eyes,” Aider Nash spoke this time. “If what you say is true, fear will all but dash the hopes of those still hanging on for dear life.” Passionate, discussions at what they were to do had already caused tempers to flare. “If some are moved, they will die. How certain are you?”

“I would place my life on it.”

Another bout of discontent rumbled the hall.

“Then hope does evaporate this turn of day,” Tooly Roe said, others agreeing with her.

“And if we move, we will be picked off by *Nyshifters*,” Nonn said, aggrieved.

A chorus of opinions erupted, Tarmon saddened by the frustrations. Casvern Tarn seemed hesitant to bring the hall to order. Members of the quest tried to be sympathetic, but there was little they could say. Not until Hanor stood did quarrels simmer. If one person warranted respect, it was the young man from Manson.

“When first arriving at Mandurin, amongst the horrors of war, I witnessed something remarkable.” Hanor said, looking around at each troubled face, compassionate to their fears. “Whilst standing at the main entrance to this High-house, I witnessed the passing of one of your companions. Letting go of his battered body, he rose as the light of his *Soul* returned to *its* source. His peace and joy is why I stand here now. Futile as it seems, much of this *darkness* serves a purpose. Character can only be developed when one faces trials. Without such tests, there would be little growth for any of us. Many layers there are to life, and those who have been lost to you now know that to be true. The Masters who lived here at Mandurin also knew this..., seeing life through different eyes than what you presently do. I speak to comfort you in your time of need. Do you wish to live as your Masters did, by challenging your fears, or will you lose yourself to despair?”

Permitting hearts and minds to find their own understanding, Hanor sat down. Penetrating the veil of woe, the atmosphere was tight, unsure if had done the right thing.

“You say you witnessed one of ours departing this world,” Tooty Roe said across from him, his description touching a sensitive issue. “If that is true, why do we put up with this misery and darkness? Why not just end it now?”

Detecting an underlying pain, Hanor stood and leant forward across the table to where she sat. “Hold my hand,” he offered, unthreatening.

Expecting trickery, the softness of his appeal however, reached within the doubt enough to gain her trust. Meeting him halfway, the others in the chamber watched, bemused. Clutching his hand, warning against trying anything untoward, she was angry but controlled. Determined not to let him influence her, the grip stayed tight, aggressive. Moments clicked by, but there was no resistance from him. Needing to justify the beliefs she had come to adopt, staring down at their hands, the others in the hall started fading, irrelevant. Pulses of aggression were contrary to how *he* was dealing with this. No battle of wills to prove a point, she was the forceful one. Traces of peace emanating from him were as though he had all the time in the world for her. That peace started caressing her. The closer she looked at their clinch, the more she could see the strength of her own resistance, not to him, but to the *Hidden Powers* of this World. Resenting the *Sacred* the moment her brother had been hurled against the Masters’ Keep by *Nyshifters*, her heart crumbling at the atrocity, she had blamed *them* for permitting the evil to happen in the first place. When the Masters had fallen too, it had sealed the fate of the *Sacred* in her life for good. But the longer she looked into Hanor’s deep brown eyes, the more his touch softened her resistance. Not wanting to give up the fight, but she seemed helpless against it. Warmth began filling the space between them, opposing her struggles. Loving pulses enfolded around her knowing no pain. Fierce, but her clasp loosened, her will faltering. Gazing at her like a brother, she wanted to hold and trust him, to rid herself of all the fury. Inviting her to live a life of harmony, but the blame would not let go. Building a new life of denial, to rid herself of the *Sacred’s* influence meant hurting *them* back. Protests surged, but Hanor’s love was too embracing. Tears rolled down softened cheeks, dispersing the wrath. The atmosphere lightened, casting the darkness of her past out.

In that precious moment, she understood she had to live now and only now. The past no longer existed, and hanging onto it was destroying her future. Aware the *Sacred* had been there all along running through life but hidden by the pains of an ignorant mind, she could not reject *them* now. Forces of harmony and love shattered the clouds of illusion she had erected around her hardened heart, replacing them with the peace she had so longed for.

In her mind’s eye, a threatening sword turned into a crown of peace, blood no longer tarnishing its vital glow. Instead, it represented the outcome of the future. Eventually, peace would reign if the forgers were permitted to do their work, forgers like Hanor and his companions. The chaff needed separating in the fires of experience to gain the victory. She too could join them, needing only a brave heart to see the end miracle.

More tears flowed at the beauty of life with all of its conflicting dramas. Groans of her past faded and memories no longer had their emotional bite. Unable to experience it whilst consumed by anger and revenge, it was time to step boldly into the future.

Reaching out her other hand to clasp his, she lowered her head and started sobbing, Hanor's tear-filled eyes were too much. Sharing her pain but also her joy, without a word, he had answered her questions. If his work and others like him were fulfilled, the Freelands would find peace. Their freedom to choose as a people was a restriction on just how much the *Sacred* could get involved. Much of the work had to be done by men and women like her. Fascinating and terrifying to believe, she was exhausted.

Astounded when Tooty excused herself and left the hall, rumbles unsettled the people of Mandurin.

"What did you do to her?" Nonn challenged.

"Light dispels the Dark," Hanor replied, respecting their consternation. "How she deals with it is up to her."

"You speak in riddles," Rosea decreed, disliking it. Tooty was a close friend. "That is not like her, you must have done something?"

"As a friend..., no doubt you will be there when she is ready to talk."

"You have changed since you first arrived," Nonn decreed.

"I am confronting the fears descending again on this beleaguered City."

Nonn did not respond.

"What do we do now?" Tiln asked, the Meeting Chamber settling after the strange interactions between Tooty Roe and Hanor.

"That depends on the wounded," Casvern Tarn said, addressing the issue.

"We cannot leave them, and some cannot be moved," a voice from the rear said.

"Have you asked the wounded what we should do?" Tarn tried.

"They would urge us to leave," Aider Nash answered, unimpressed.

"Clearly they see sense," Tarn returned, to their displeasure.

"Would you accept that?" Tiln asked, disturbed. Tarn's views would persuade many.

"Is it wise to stay knowing what is to come?" Tarn said. "Holed up here, you would not last long. But joining a larger force south could make a difference." Horror stared back, but he continued. "Defending the dying at the cost of your lives is irresponsible. I do not expect you to agree, so decide for yourself."

"You shock me," Aider Nash growled, alarmed by the betrayal and weakness. "Survival is not an acceptable reason to leave them to die. *Defending the dying* as you so crudely put it, is a phrase that could motivate our fighters to stand one last time in defiance." Struggling to keep his temper, a split was imminent when Tarn's views were known.

"I respect how you feel my friend," Tarn said, delicate. "But free we are to voice our opinions. I respect yours... but do not share them."

"Friends do not abandon one another," Nash shot, the words twisting in his chest. Rising, if he did not leave now, their friendship would be undone.

"Is that what you intend to do?" Nonn asked when Nash had gone.

The opening Tarn had been waiting for, composing himself, his next comment was even more disturbing. "I intend to go to Tardoc..., on foot if I have to."

"Why would you want to go there?" Nonn's disgust reflected everyone's.

Taking a while for the chamber to quieten, the sober question climbed above the protests.

Startled reactions from Tarmon and his group raised consternations about Casvern Tarn's timing. Nevertheless, he was sure any heartfelt pleas would not have won them over. "I have served Mandurin well, but it is time for me to head in a new direction."

Born in Muelly thirty-eight full seasons ago, he had arrived at this gracious City upon reaching his fifteenth season. Welcomed due to his outstanding abilities with the blade, rising through the ranks, his reputation had grown just as quick. Staying at Manter for a couple of seasons, the people here had urged him to return when grim warnings had filtered out of the northern regions. Encouraging women to become fighters, old timers like Aider Nash had eventually given heed to its wisdom. The fact so many were still alive was a fitting tribute. Yet yearnings since Hanor's encounter with that *Pillar of Life* had sealed his fate. Not kidding when he said he was prepared to run, this was not up for negotiation.

"What about your people, and your friends?" Tilm asked, stunned by the admission.

"So you will always be..., but true friends permit freedom of choice."

"The City is going to divide over this," Yevan said.

"What does Tarmon and the others think about this?" Nonn pressed.

"Casvern Tarn's desires are not new to us, but his final decision on the matter is," Tarmon explained, needing time to deal with this.

"I am not certain Tarn is in control of his faculties," Hallen grumped. "He has charmed one of my companions already," he said, Kifter informing him of the man's manipulations. Not looking at Hayla, her embarrassment would not be a pretty sight.

"He speaks truly," Tarn admitted. "I have discussed this with Hayla, but no foul play is involved. I merely seek a route by which to go."

"Should you not wait for an invitation before declaring your objectives?" Greema posed, unhappy at his approach.

"With respect," he said, looking at the Grove. "No invitation would have been made."

"That in itself speaks volumes," Hallen said.

"If all of you reject me, then I will go on foot." Unthreatening, it was the truth. "What we witnessed yester-turn beckons me on to the next one."

"Another *Pillar* exists at Tardoc?" Tilm was confounded.

Respecting the group's need for secrecy, Tarn cast an apologetic look at Tarmon before answering. "Possibly."

"You no longer wish to lead us then?" Rosea confronted him.

"My time here is at an end."

"Casvern...!" Raldama spoke this time. "Our ride to Tardoc will be gruelling, surely you are not fit enough?"

"I feel stronger by the moment," he said, moving his arms about to prove it.

"You believe you are not abandoning your people?" Hayla felt sick, disbelieving it had come to this.

"From Hanor's account," he said, walking on delicate ground. "All of us will meet again in the *Realms of the Soul* anyway, which takes the edge off our dependency."

"That is a poor answer," Rosea argued.

"You want to tie me down with emotional attachments just like Aider does concerning the wounded."

"Many are relying on your leadership," a thin man named Wane said.

"And so a new leader must be found," Tarn countered.

“Just like that?” Rosea snapped.
“Would it be any different if I were slain?”
“You are being selfish,” she fired.
“I have enough respect for you not to get into a fiery exchange. Sometimes it is difficult just to let go.”
“Then count yourself gone,” she spat, rising. “I hope these good people see sense and reject you like you have us.” Storming out, four others joined her.
“It has not been finalised that he is coming,” Hallen reminded those left.
“Do you propose one of us gives you a lift?” Raldama asked.
“Hayla has already agreed,” Tarn said, to her discomfort.
Words failing, the only place to look was into the palms of her sweaty hands. An accomplice to Tarn’s crime, there was nowhere for Hayla to turn.
“Your extra weight will slow her down,” Greema stated the obvious.
“I weigh a lot less than you think,” Tarn said, braving a smile.
No one shared his humour.
“It appears you are not welcome,” Nonn said.
Expecting this, Tarn dug in. “This has nothing to do with personalities but about following *Higher Ways*. It is not a whim, it is the right thing for me to do. Do you think I was ignorant of the commotion this would generate? My goal remains the same. I would be but half a man if I were to stay. Is that what you want?”
“Fine words,” Nonn commended, accepting the unthinkable. “If your heart is no longer here... then ride you must.”
Nonn was highly regarded and would make a great leader. “Then let us hope the others will be as forgiving as you.”
“That does not mean I like it.”

“You have put us in an awkward position,” Tarmon said, after the men and women of Mandurin had gone.
“I apologise,” Tarn offered as payment for the turmoil.
“You seem prepared to give up so much to follow your dream.”
“It is not a dream,” Tarn said, candid. “There is nothing ignoble about what I have decided. It is merely a more pressing direction I should go.”
“Obstacles before us will not fade because of an intense desire,” Tarmon said. “The travelling arrangements and your health cannot be dismissed. Your skills are known, but may not be enough.”
“I see delays ahead of us because of this,” Hallen said, a few others agreeing.
“Much has been said,” Tarmon continued. “We need time to reflect. We intended to leave Mandurin tomorrow, but because of this, that has changed. Give us until half-turn of the day and we will answer you. Prepare, but do not expect anything. Upon our decision, we will leave this once glorious City.”
“You are a faithful leader,” Tarn decreed. “And again, I am sorry to put this on you.”

“They were powerful words you spoke in there, Hanor,” Tarmon said, checking over their Kyboes, everyone getting ready to leave.

The lad had said little since leaving the hall. Talking with the others, the view remained the same; it would be unwise to permit Casvern Tarn to join them in his

condition. Even Bane had expressed reservations about Tarn going. Wanting to be sure Hanor was supportive of the collective view, his mood suggested all was not well.

After what had taken place earlier, the intimate experience with Tooty Roe dominated Hanor's musings. Sharing much of her pain surrounding her brother, he had never felt so close to a person, not even Hayla or Coreema. Uniting, her troubles had become his, now washed clean by the rising powers within them both. Harmony had dissipated the darkness of separation. That of course was the miracle of the *Sacred*. Dissolving lifelong hurts, no matter how bad, the cleansing was for now with no condemnation from the past. The magic was that he had shared in that incredible exchange. Hoping she would embrace the awakening, potentially she could be a greater motivator than Casvern Tarn.

"Have we decided what we are doing?" Raldama asked, walking out through the side door of the High-house.

Choosing to pack away from the main entrance, they had already felt enough sharp reactions from the men and women of Mandurin. Tarn's desire to go had spread like fire, and they were to blame. "The atmosphere here has gone cold."

Waiting for Greema and Kifter to return with more supplies, Nonn had granted them some food and water but nowhere near enough.

"Most of you have made your views known," Tarmon said, pleased when Kifter and Greema came around the corner loaded with additional supplies. The Tardanian just wanted to get out of here. "It appears Casvern will not be joining us, unless anyone has anything to add." Glancing at Hanor, the boy still did not respond.

"There was never much in his favour anyway," Raldama stated, finishing his packing.

"No..., but we have to be sure."

"They look eager to get going," Hayla noted, indicating Greema and Kifter. Carrying a couple of bags of quaner, she still felt irritable by what had been decided. Unsure why, the fact Casvern Tarn had been so sincere was now hassling her.

Tarmon questioned Hanor again. "You have not given your opinion?"

Lost to his deliberations, the lad looked up. Considering that issue too, their collective views did not seem right. "Is my opinion of any value compared to the rest of you?"

"All opinions have value," Tarmon assured him.

"What about Casvern Tarn's?"

"But he is not part of our group."

"His heart is more in tune with what we seek than some attitudes I have heard of late."

Hanor's comments caught everyone's attention. Greema and Kifter arrived, surprised by his words.

"That is a strong statement," the Fife contested, placing the quaner into a saddle bag.

"I state what I see," Hanor said. Disliking the discussion since the impassioned meeting earlier, it seemed they had taken a step in the wrong direction.

"Are you questioning our commitment?" Hallen grimaced.

"Have I not questioned my own at times?" Hanor was blunt. "Is it something to be ashamed of when we admit our shortfalls?" Checking the straps and bags were secure on his Kyboe, there was a purpose behind Hanor's reasoning. "You are misguided about Tarn's offer. You see the hindrance of his condition and the fact he has no Kyboe. That is understandable, but does that mean you are right?"

“What do you see that we do not?” Greema was unsure of his direction.

“I see a person talking wholly through his heart, just like when Tarmon wanted to enter Selmor. If Tarn could not fight, our choice would be obvious, but that is not the case.”

“And what if others want to join us?” Tarmon posed.

“You are using the wrong senses,” Hanor disagreed. “It is not about words, he spoke with his entire being. Do you not see what he is leaving behind to follow this through? Many of you came on this journey at the request of Brandor, without knowing what would happen. Nor did I, but now your whole hearts are in it. Everyone here is fully committed, but it is difficult to accept someone can have such a profound experience that they may have the same commitment as you. Is Kifter more committed to this cause than Raldama just because he has been with me since the beginning? It is no different to Casvern Tarn. His desires burn for the *Sacred*, not for you or me. He is willing to sacrifice everything for it. Nothing else matters to him except being there. He has injuries, but when driven as he is, pains become secondary. Have no doubts about his dedication and ability to deliver. None of your comments explain why someone so wholehearted should not join us. Brandor did not fix a number to this group. Tarn’s objectives are in accordance with our own, and that should be embraced.”

Stunning the group to silence, Hanor’s intense comments bowled their meagre objections over. Bane and Hayla were astonished, his sincerity putting each of them to shame.

“I should have learnt by now not to be so hasty in deciding,” Greema propounded, seeing Casvern Tarn in a new light. His own earnestness to see The Freelands saved mirrored back when considering the slim man of Mandurin. Admiring the enormous depth of Hanor’s reasoning, they were all struggling with it.

Halting what he was doing, Tarmon respected Hanor’s insight. If Tarn was prepared to alienate his people just to see this through, he wondered if he himself would do the same. Guilty eyes re-evaluated the situation.

“How does everyone feel about the issue now?” the Tardanian asked, not wishing to spark any outbursts.

“It looks as though *he* has made the decision for us,” Hallen snorted, pulling the final strap tight. “People should not be allowed to speak like he does. I do not think it is a good idea for Hayla to give Tarn a lift. There is a trickiness in him to watch. Do not blame me if this goes wrong.”

“Does everyone agree?” Tarmon asked. No one contested. “I will retract my initial views and welcome Casvern Tarn as an equal to this group.”

“Hallen is right about Tarn on the back of Hayla,” Kifter said, their female companion looking a shade of grey.

“I will take him,” Balkorn offered from the rim of their group, surprising everyone. “He will have little effect on my Soo,” he said, patting his enormous Kyboe.

“Your offer is generous,” Tarmon said, amazed at the turnaround.

Inside the small room on the upper level just above the group, Casvern Tarn stood and headed for the exit. Certain they were going to say no, Hanor’s appeal stunned him too. Not registering his own motives in the same way, the young fellow’s clarity could only be admired. Passing a couple of compatriots when reaching the stairs, one nodded

whilst the other ignored him. Unmoved, the depressed mood settling over this dying city was not his fault. To live was to move forward, especially into the unknown.

Filing down the main causeway two abreast, only a few people were present to watch the group go. Resentment of Casvern Tarn accompanying the group cut deep. Nonn had said his farewells, so too a couple of others, but the residing feeling was grim. Their sadness reflected back from the broken shells of dilapidated buildings escorting them down, a sorry end to a remarkable encounter.

When Tooty Roe called out and come bounding down the causeway after them, Tarn had hoped to see Aider Nash and a few others join her, but no such gathering ensued. Surprised when Tooty stopped beside Hanor, only to reach up to hold his hand like a departing lover, whatever the boy had done, she was now glowing like someone reborn. Casting a smile Tarn's way when wiping a tear, she intended to help Nonn rebuild a shattered dream by taking the others south.

Pressing on, the guards on the outer wall seemed equally doleful as if mourning a lost brother. With nothing else to keep the group here, misty rays of sunlight encouraged them out from the suffocating clutches of a broken city.

"What do you propose we do now?" Sharn asked Brandor, members of the Hisian-set making their way back up the stairs from the Eating Hall.

Torn between two important choices, Brandor shrugged when reaching the upper level. "We promised Caldon we would stay to protect Tarden against a possible Yarmorian attack. At least that will give us a chance to explore other avenues whilst here."

"I am having second thoughts about that commitment," Whis said from the rear. "The chances of attack are slim. A miraculous opportunity will be missed if we do not go."

"I agree," Brandor conceded. "But Caldon will not commit a full force unless he can be sure Tarden is safe. He thought his only enemy was from the north, not right here in Tardania. Even when he saw Maloree's manipulations, he did not piece together Yarmoria's objectives."

"And now he fears they will seek revenge?" Bronn proffered.

"It is understandable."

"But if they are suffering like Maloree?" Hader tried.

"Caldon sees life in terms of the physical. He does not understand that when a group is mentally tuned to each other; if one is harmed, it affects the rest. If she is as bad as they say, then the Yarmorians must be too."

"Careful," Rinn said from the rear. "You sound as though you approve of what I did."

"Thank you for that," Brandor said, unmoved. The *Ileng Power* was still a sensitive issue. Cross that Rinn had been willing to risk everything, even so, they would not be here if he had not acted as he had. Dismissing the point, he needed to see how well the Masters were getting on with his *Wall of Power*. A call from behind caught their attention.

"Brandor...!"

Everyone turned, surprised to see an old Tardanian bounding after them.

"What is it, Timal?" Brandor asked, suspecting Drola had done something grim.

"There has been an unexpected development," Timal replied, panting. "You all need to come with me."

About to turn, Brandor grabbed his arm, in no mood for guessing games. "What is it?"

“We have visitors... from Yarmoria!”

Chapter 3 : Yarmorian Surprise

Raldama was right about the tough going. Casvern Tarn's wounds hurt far more than anticipated. Concealing the gripping cramps beneath a forced grin, the others were keeping an eye on him. Only a short distance from Mandurin, they would take him back at a moments notice if deemed unfit. Trusting the mighty Balkorn would do anything Hanor asked, he was not about to let the young man down after supporting him as he had.

Passing through the darkened landscape where the marauding Hordes had camped, words could not describe the atrocious setting. Hardened to such contemptuous waste, it would not be forgotten. Directing the anger against his wounds enabled Casvern Tarn to endure the ride. Repetitive jolts of Balkorn's Kyboe were a reminder of what he had survived. Resting in his own suffering, this new challenge was a blessing, pulses of excitement energising him.

High up on the crest of a muddied hill, Gorg-darl's Hunter watched the group leave and head west towards Tardania. Enhanced by the horn, its astute vision relayed the details through to its Master. Not waiting for long, a stream of power prompted it to move. Setting off at a steady pace after the small band of riders, its jutting horn glistening in the after-noon sunlight, its destructive destiny was at hand.

"How are you?" Hayla asked, moving up to ride alongside Casvern Tarn. Surviving another darting stab down his left side, it was the strongest yet. A genuine smile crossed his lips when looking at her. "I am all the better for seeing you," he said, holding Balkorn's saddle with one hand whilst saluting her with the other. Putting up with the sweaty odour of his big travelling companion, the idea of leaping across to her was an inviting one. "I would welcome a smooth rubdown if you are offering." Disregarding his wit, now that he was here, Hayla did not want to see him suffer. If a medicinal rubdown was what he needed, then for compassion's sake, she might have to do it. She was not about to tell him though. "You are mad coming with us." "I would be *mad* to turn away from your delightful eyes," he said, another short stab forcing a wince. "If you knew what I have been through, you would know this is just a prickly rest."

"I am sure the others will not mind if we pull up early," she offered, to his disapproval. "I have enough bitter enemies as it is," he rejected the idea.

Concurring before dropping back, keeping her guard, Hayla was not about to leave herself open. Thorny to speak as she just had, knowing what draw he still had on her, why could she not forget about men and just get on with the path she had chosen? First Hanor had shunned her, and now the object of her youthful longings was here too, it seemed the more she resisted, the harder the battle was. Glancing back at Bane, he too looked saturated by worries, the stony glint received suggesting troubles of his own. Tempted to talk, but she would not be good company whilst wrestling with misplaced emotions. Thankful that Hanor was in front, she had hoped this journey would lift her from her qualms not add to them. Picturesque, the setting of stony outcrops amongst dunes of wild-grass and scrub was a place to fade away from endless troubles.

"Are you all right?" Raldama asked beside her, detecting her woes.

Forcing a smile, she nodded but said nothing. For the first time she felt out of her depth amongst so many males. Not realising how much she had enjoyed the company of women at Mandurin, enjoying similar interests knowing their blades were as important to them as her own, she wished a few had joined them.

Echoes from that whispering *Voice* returned to haunt Bane, the jealousies getting stronger. Hardly talking to Hayla since before Mandurin, but she had found plenty of time for Casvern Tarn. Her glance just now flickered with guilt as if caught out. Hiding the fact she and Tarn were probably courting, why else would she want him to come? Dwelling on the possibilities made it look all the more uglier. Churning in his own misery, the temptation to blame Hanor for defending Tarn in the first place was another band of hate festering. Looking forward to making camp, sleep seemed the only haven from this unmerciful mood. Why had he listened to that *Voice*?

Expecting figures cloaked in dark gowns when entering the chamber, Brandor and his companions halted, perplexed at who was standing before them. Expecting conflict, but to their astonishment, no challenges came. No ill intent could be felt anywhere. Instead, three strangers stood opposite Caldon and Feleeme - the female Master, along with a few others from Tarden. Rounder in appearance than Torna and his associates, apologetic appeals stared back at the eight men of power, adding to the mystery.

Respecting their shock, the eldest of the small figures stepped forward, arms spread wide. "I know who you are..., Brandor of the Sleep."

Brandor permitted his hand to be shaken. "I... I am... sorry, but... who are you?" The stuttering question received an even wider grin. Similar to Torna, there was enough however to suggest a difference in both manner and speech.

"You will not remember me, I was too young the last time you came to Yarmoria."

Presuming he meant long before recent troubles, Brandor could barely remember the last time he had entered without a threat hanging over them. "You will have to forgive our... lack of manners but... this is not what we expected."

"That is because we are not of the Lani Clan."

Recalling Torna's brief description that his Clan had surpassed the others in stature and power, an unusual picture emerged. "You are... from one of the other Clans?"

"I am Daffin... of the Seema Clan."

"I... I need to sit down," Brandor said, daring to get his mind around this. Traumatized by what had happened, to see this picture of peace was too much to have wished for.

Those in the room stood back, the *One Life* of this City setting to work. Rustling sounds penetrated the din, spindly branches reaching up from the floor with purpose. Chairs and a long table took shape at the centre of the chamber.

"This is Eavearn... of the Mani Clan," Daffin indicated the female figure to his left as they sat down. "And this is Prayle... of the Runa Clan," he said, pointing to his right.

"We should have done this a long time ago," Eavearn said, regretful.

Warm memories of the Yarmi Folk long ago now mirrored before Brandor. Movements in his heart suggested this was genuine, adding further hope. "How... has this... come about?" Sitting down across from them, Caldon sat to his right, so too Feleeme. The rest of the Hisian-set sat to his left. Other Tardanians present remained standing.

“We have explained briefly to Caldon and Feleeme here,” Prayle continued. “The Clans of Yarmoria unwisely took to living their own lives selectively, granting the Lani Clan permission to be Keepers of the Gateway to Yarmoria. Separating ourselves from the Freelands, we were content to live on our own plane without concern for here.”

“The troubles,” Daffin continued. “Are a result of our selfishness. Separated, we did not realise darkness was spreading here. *Gorl-darl* entered our domain in the distant past, and our ancestors embraced *him* as they would any wounded soul. Certain they could help *him* forgive you - the Hisian-set, *he* gained much of *his* strength and knowledge from them. They shared as if *he* was one of their own. Upon leaving Yarmoria, our ancestors were convinced *he* had been healed. But alas, the seed of *his* resentment was not extinguished. The love given was not enough, and that anger germinated into the monster you see today.”

“We have come to offer you our aid,” Prayle declared, raising a few eyebrows. “Not to wage war or take up arms, but as a balancing force so that our love can be used to counter much of the horror permeating this Realm. You Brandor, know life is an intelligent energy, and when parts of that energy are consumed by darkness, a light is needed to shine forth and push back evil.”

“The four remaining Clans of Yarmoria,” Eavearn added. “Are willing to reach across into this Realm..., and be that light of hope and freedom.”

“How do you propose to do that?” Hader asked, unsure if it was possible.

“Fear..., as you know, is a monster of its own accord,” Daffin replied, expecting the question. “Fear paralyses, and the energy of hope is a reflection of this. We intend to counter the fear, thus permitting the peoples of The Freelands to react as they should.”

“To gain heart rather than lose it you mean?” Sharn said.

“Precisely,” Eavearn agreed.

“Despair can undermine a person’s will,” Prayle continued. “*Gorl-darl* knows this. We have looked at nature’s history and found that is exactly what *he* has been working on. *He* is not just conquering... but feeding on people’s fears.”

“Feeding?” Sharn said, trying to picture it.

“Yes.”

“And this stems from *his* bitterness towards us - the Hisian-set?” Brandor asked, unable to comprehend how such hate could last. Fear collects like a ball of energy, but to think *Gorl-darl* was feeding on the dark energies seemed surreal.

“And all four Clans of the Yarmi Folk can counter that fear which *he* is generating?” Whis posed.

“We can,” Daffin said. “This *darkness* has to be rectified.”

“You feel guilty because of your failed efforts to heal *Gorl-darl* you mean?” Sorlam challenged, disliking anything that might threaten Rinn’s *Ileng Power*.

“Not guilty, just taking responsibility for our part in this,” Eavearn replied, surprised by the undercurrent of the man.

“And what of the Lani Clan?” Tralle posed, not forgetting the danger.

The three glanced at each other before Daffin replied. “Our brethren are in a very poor state. Their intentions are not typical of all Yarmorians. We are here also to apologise to both the Hisian-set... and the people of Tarden.”

“You are aware of the influences of Maloree then?” Caldon asked, the trauma still affecting him.

Carefully, they nodded. "Some of the Lani Clan have shared their objectives," Evearn explained. "Not all were present in that ring of power. The shock has shaken many."

"How badly injured are they?" Sharn asked, Rinn's *Ileng Power* explosive.

Sadness lined their features. "They will be lucky to survive," Evearn replied, solemn.

"We do not wish to see anyone fall again like our misguided brethren."

"Did you not suspect what they were up to?" Hader quizzed.

"The four Clans are peace loving." Prayle was candid. "We seek to understand life's mysteries... but do it at a leisurely pace. The Lani Clan however, had stronger aspirations. Descendants of *Gorl-darl*, it was a serious failing on our part to not monitor just how far they were prepared to go to gain knowledge and power."

"*He* was in their blood you mean?" Brandor said, the dangers now obvious. Not mentioning the lost Souls at Tarkons Tomb and *Gorl-darl's* deception, they could ill afford to open up another sensitive issue.

"Yes..., we can now see that," Prayle said.

"And what of the effect your realm is having on our southern regions?" Feleeme questioned, scrutinising every word that was said.

"That too is something we were ignorant of," Daffin admitted. "And we will work towards rectifying the problem after this *darkness* has been nullified."

"Destroyed, you mean?" Caldon cut in.

"We accept you may reach for that conclusion."

"How else could it be done?"

The three checked with each other before Daffin replied. "Are not the Masters across The Freelands erecting a *Wall of Energy*?"

"How do you know about that?" Hader asked, surprised.

"The Lani Clan found that intriguing too," Prayle answered him. "They did not want to share The Freelands with *Gorl-darl* or anyone, so were considering all possibilities."

"And this *Wall of Power* could have upset their plans?" Brandor suggested.

"They recognised a *higher will* was at work in *its* manifestation," Evearn explained. "But wanted to know if they could create one themselves."

"I presume Maloree informed them of the plans?" Brandor added.

"She was involved in many ways," Evearn said, sympathetic. "She does love Tarden, especially the *One Life*, but she was caught up in the illusion that the Lani Folk were superior than everyone else."

Disgruntled by the statement, a few Tardanians in the room were not yet convinced of her betrayal.

"How do you propose to influence these Realms from your own?" Rinn asked, fascinated.

"If it is acceptable to the people of Tarden," Evearn started. "We would like to set up a link here to this wonderful City. We need a place of considerable power to direct our forces to achieve the goodness we want to imbue across The Freelands. This will not be possible unless we have people in this Realm."

"You expect us to let your people stay here at Tarden?" Timal was astonished.

"We respect your concerns," Daffin began, sensitive. "But to prove our sincerity, we will share with the Masters of Tarden key elements which will prove our faithfulness."

"What elements?"

“Certain factors underpin our Realm.., and we are prepared to reveal the details,” Prayle said, waiting for Feleeme to react.

Startled by the offer, if true they *were* serious. “That is a gracious proposal.”

“How many do you need to stay here?” the Tardanian called Anden asked.

“Twelve.”

“And these would be your link?” Brandor asked, not understanding the logistics.

“Yes. The combined forces of the four Yarmi Clans will channel through them.”

“You ask a great deal,” Caldon exclaimed, wary of the proposition.

“We know,” Daffin agreed. “But it will benefit all.”

Searching the three newcomers, Caldon just hoped they were sincere. When the Master Feleeme concurred, it was enough for him. “Then let it be so.”

“Indeed,” Feleeme agreed, eager to learn more about the Yarmi Folk.

Pulling up at a small clump of trees, Tarmon gave the signal to stop. A short time before sundown, the hollow in which the trees sat was ideal to make camp. Thick with undergrowth, swords soon made a clearing. Strange to be travelling again, to see the small-canopied fire on the go still radiated its own kind of magic. Consuming their meal, conversations were light but far from easy with the newcomer present.

Surviving the afterturn’s ride, Casvern Tarn’s whole body ached with a vengeance, trying to conceal the hurt when sitting down. Odd snips of displeasure were because of him, but he was not about to be deterred. Appreciating the hot food, he said little knowing the sparks would fly if he did. Hanor seemed equally distant as if the world was resting on his shoulders. Detecting underlying problems throughout the group, tame attitudes at Mandurin were not so apparent out here.

With the fire lowering to a simmering red glow, its light concealed from prying eyes above, one person sprung to mind to which they all had something to say. Using it as an excuse to talk, the dour atmosphere was getting to Tarn. “What do you think Brandor is doing now?” he asked, wincing when a shooting pain ran across the back of his neck.

When no one else spoke, Tarmon offered a word. “He should be at Tarden,” he said, hoping the Yarmi Folk’s intentions were now known.

“I wonder what he would say about your remarkable journey,” Tarn said, massaging his neck. More aches were creeping in now they had stopped.

“He would marvel just as we have,” Raldama said, warming at the idea.

“Are other members of the Hisian-set with him?” Tarn probed, trying to be friendly. Stretching from side to side, he was starting to seize up.

“Hopefully,” Kifter answered this time.

“All should play their part,” Tarn said, unsure if he could maintain this dialogue in his condition. One final stretch triggered a response he did not expect.

“You are a pitiful sight,” Hayla declared, rising from across the fire. Stepping round to where Casvern Tarn sat, “Take your overcoat off,” she ordered, startling him.

“Why...?”

“Are you not part of this group?” Kneeling behind him, she had little choice considering he was here because of her.

Awkward when looking at the others, Tarn did as asked. Hesitant when pulling back the nape of his shirt, his heart jumped when her cool hands began massaging his neck and

shoulders, to his obvious delight. Tender and fluent, her touch sent pulses of relief through him, the tightness easing. Uncomfortable that everyone was watching, he was far from worthy of such attention. “Do I deserve... this?” he asked, wincing when a tight muscle did not want to relax. Assuming this would generate further animosity, the subsequent relief melted any protests.

“The sooner we get rid of these aches and pains, the more comfortable everyone will be,” she said, astounded she was actually doing this. “And do not get the wrong idea.” She was not joking, her reputation was on the line. Determined to make a success of him rather than a burden, if only she had said “no” when she had the chance.

“I have a stiff leg,” Hallen teased, leaning back and stretching it out as if in pain.

“The only thing you will get from me is a sore head,” she glared.

“Am I not worth treating as well?” he toyed, holding his hand over his wounded heart.

“Here Hallen,” Kifter reached out beside him. “Let me do it for you,” he ribbed, grabbing his knee.

Slapping his hand away, “Not for me, Fife,” the Hite griped, the humour turning sour.

Pulling his blanket up, nauseating sensations made Bane feel ill. The fact Hayla had gone to Tarn’s aid was enough to prove how she felt about the man. Not even looking at him once, tears ran down his flushed cheeks. The *Voice* had been right; his relationship to her would come crashing down. “*Do you not believe that I can influence the future?*” it had said. “*Plead..., and I will come,*” it had added, leaving him a tempting door open if he so chose.

Pains in his heart were unbearable, the love for Hayla increasing with every turn of the day. How could he continue knowing her love was for someone else? Bad enough that Hanor had caught her eye, this Tarn character seemed mischievous, his intentions of the passionate sort. Why had Hayla succumbed to such trickery?

Seated on Tunder, Brandor pulled his cloak tight, the early morning chill biting. Pleased that hundreds of Tardanians were filing out from beneath the great treed City, it was a remarkable sight. Collecting on the wide band of grassland surrounding Tarden, Caldon proudly declared two thousand were mounted with nearly twice that on foot. Promising a swift passage, many would double up, some running for a time only to swap with their mounted companions to ensure rest. It meant a slow but steady pace that would have to do. Checking the rear, several lines of Mallen were loaded with supplies, an invaluable lifeline for this ambitious force. Permitted to travel to Tardoc, since the group of Masters had returned from Yarmoria declaring it was indeed safe for the Hisian-set to go, Caldon had welcomed the news without hesitation. Everyone was eager to get going.

Peering up at the higher levels of Tarden, hundreds of people were waving down from the numerous tiers, cheering them on to victory and a swift return. On the uppermost floor, a few Masters were watching, curious. Taking a break from their work, he was about to turn but halted, noticing another lone figure further round to the left. Half concealed by the bush that lined each landing, gaunt sad eyes stared wantonly down. Deep inside, Drola knew he should be leading this resistance. Saturated by his obsession with Maloree, his path was now of a darker sort, full of woe and emotional upheaval.

Not mentioning Drola was watching, Caldon was too busy checking his troops anyway, and so too were his companions. Slim and sorry, Drola disappeared, Brandor

praying the Tardanian Leader would find himself before they returned. So too Maloree, he hoped she would recover now that his anger had subsided. The Yarmorians' arrival reminded him of what everyone sought in the long term, to be loved and forgiven for mistakes made. Hope again was in the air just as promised.

Urging all to follow his lead, Caldon set off, the tide of people surging into the trees behind him. Flashes of steel amongst musty brown cloaks declared war was at hand. Belts lined with darts remained concealed with small shooters strapped to waists. Nervous smiles and pockets of laughter faded, replaced by a determination to succeed.

Cries echoing throughout Tardoc's elegant Halls, High-tard Polon had seen many fall over recent turns. Defying the invading monster at its door, only two turns of the nights ago had their outer defences finally faltered. Breaching the lowest wall, the next few sectors had fallen quickly to the aggressors. Due to its open planned design, two of Tardoc's prominent towers had succumbed to that surge, leaving a third under threat.

Gaining respite here, confident the upper sections would not fall so easily, substantial walls atop steep rock faces would slow any budding intruder. Three tunnels cut inside the mountain, two of which were stairs and the other a ramp, had been sealed off. Never had the City endured such a sustained attack, but its calculated design was now seen for its worth.

For the first ten nights, this monstrous horde had camped outside the City and waited. Expecting an attack at any time, the permanent state of readiness had psychologically worn his people down. A sickening tool of warfare, only with the arrival of three *Nyshifters* had the mental siege ended, sealing Tardoc's fate.

Peering down from the safety of a sturdy rampart, High-tard Polon shed bitter tears. How long would it be before these upper regions were breached too? Rocks in the tunnels were being removed far below, sickly gusts of wind lifting wafts of smoke and death to his secluded position. Unable to get away to rest without those suffocating reminders, it was difficult to keep his temper. Battered, bruised and exhausted, only when a slinging stone shot from one of the lost towers had nearly killed him had he taken a reprieve. Even though the tactics of the invading force never permitted them to rest for long, easing off only to come again, fatigue was now hampering the defenders.

Biting into a piece of quaner, he was ravenous but had not the heart to chew. Leaving half on the side, he made his way down the spiralled stairs towards the awaiting battle. It was not right to stand back when others were dying.

Heavy clouds swept in on a blustery wind during the morning, Tarmon and the group pressing on towards the Irdahills. Gradual changes of the landscape saw rocky outcrops replaced by greater expanses of lush wild-grass. Aiding their speed as the number of trees lessened, the threat of *Nyshifters* however increased. Without the sun as an added protectorate, if the monsters were in the vicinity they had little chance of hiding.

Accompanying grey rolling clouds, a fine drizzle fell. Dim attitudes from the previous evening reappeared whenever they took a break, the grimness eager to stay. Undulations ran above large sweeping channels, savouring the occasional far-reaching panorama whenever they could. The going was tough but steady. If the rain cleared, an enjoyable ride it would be. Explaining it was another turn's ride before the hills levelled

out, Casvern Tarn used to come here with his men, training hard before relaxing from the hubbub of city life.

By the turn's end, they had experienced enough of the scenic yet arduous landscape. A deep circular hollow with a sharp drop along one edge was the best they could hope for shelter. Kyboes felt the strain, the constant rise and fall of the terrain taking its toll. No one could complain.

Braving a small fire to get a pot on the go, the canopies overhead were meagre cover from the sodden atmosphere. A chill crept in, grumps from the Hite adding to the dour mood. Sarcastic when Hayla set to work again on a still struggling Casvern Tarn, such sharpness sealed the depressing fate for the rest of the evening. Awkward, the group seemed powerless to shift the mood, one of Kifter's lighter tales failing to clear the air. Needing Hanor to break out into an inspiring speech again, but he too seemed affected. Hallen and Raldama took the first watch.

Chapter 4 : Strike through The Fog

Tensions about Casvern Tarn did not shift the following morning, the thick fog reinforcing reservations about the dangers to come. Munching quaner and dried fruit, washed down with Kifter's hot broth to take away the chill, camp was packed and personal duties taken care of. Mounting their Kyboes, the fog seemed determined to stay. Short, misty breaths hissed, the coolness a good motivator to get moving.

Waiting for everyone, "We need to ride hard," Tarmon said, Hallen the last to settle in his saddle.

"I am all for riding hard," Hallen joked. About to add another dry comment, a hefty thud behind alerted him to movement. Turning, an unexpected draft rushed by. Something terrible was about to happen.

"What was...?" Raldama was about to ask but stopped.

Materialising at the centre of their small group, the Hunter's speed caught everyone off guard. Aiming for its target, their warning was too late.

"Hanor...!"

Bearing down on the young lad's exposed position, the horned beast ploughed into the unsuspecting lad who was looking the other way. Pounding the side of his Kyboe, deafening shrieks split the grey setting, the beast's blackened horn plunging deep into the stricken animal's side. Shocking everyone, the force of *its* momentum bowled the Kyboe and its rider over. Sprawling to the ground, the impact knocked Hanor unconscious, falling into a crumpled heap.

Disbelieving it, Balkorn was the first to act. Springing from his Kyboe onto *its* spiked back, veins pulsed and muscles strained as he grappled with the larger foe. Gripping the monster's thick neck, bold efforts were admirable but not enough. Countering the Balt, it lurched back and fell to the ground taking the wind out of Balkorn. Desperate to hold on, but a quick shuffle to the right unfastened the brave warrior from the south. Leaving him exposed, the beast span and stabbed him with *its* horn. Missing his chest, it pierced Balkorn's abdomen, pinning him to the ground. Searing inside as if the creature was pouring a fiery liquid from the horn, struggles were futile, unable to lift *its* forbidding weight. Stuck fast, Balkorn's large eyes started dimming, his vision blurring.

Reaching for weapons, the group's speed did not match the agility of the monstrous foe. Dismounting, they were too late to make a difference. Their Kyboes made a bolt for it, but that was the last of their worries.

Standing tall, leaving a gruesome hole in Balkorn big enough to put a hand into, the *beast* turned towards them. Hanor lay unconscious nearby, the group struggling to think straight. Aghast when the mountainous Balt slumped back as if dead, blood pouring, confusion turned to aggression, determined to put an end to this thing.

Jabbing his blade into *its* side, but Casvern Tarn was not quick enough to avoid the beast's sweeping arm. Knocking him aside, landing against the hillside that had served as cover the night before, to his companions' astonishment, Tarn shook his head and bounced right up as if unaffected by the pounding impact. Surrounding the creature,

Greema unleashed his thumper and struck *it* full on the brow, but the Hunter did not waver such was *its* unfaltering power.

“What do we do?” Raldama yelled, covering the rear to cut off the creature’s retreat if that were possible.

“We must find a weakness,” Hayla barked round to his left, searching for tender points. Bane stood nearby holding his short blade like an amateur. “Hold it up like this,” she commanded, showing him how.

Lost to terror before her sharp retort snapped him out of it, Bane did the best he could.

Rotating her sword, Hayla could not believe the might of the thing. Awesome and deathly, what mother had spawned such a horned abomination? Short spikes around *its* shoulders and down the back of *its* arms added menace to the fierce-looking monster. Tarmon stood opposite searching for a way to defeat *it*. Kifter’s admirable attempts had little effect, six throwing barbs sinking into the creature but to no avail. Just standing as though inviting them to inflict pain if they dared, untroubled by the carnage, concerns for Balkorn increased.

Jets of mist huffed through the foggy dawn, eyes wide with a controlled dread. Edging forward, Hallen held his blade ready, confident they could pull this off just as they had with that Gorln at Mandurin. About to swing his mighty sword, what happened next shocked everyone. The Hunter vanished!

Terror erupted from the defenders, searching for where *it* could be. Expecting the enormous horn to strike, flashes of steel were wild but hopeful, fending off an attack.

“*It* went by here!” Hallen yelled, shocked that *it* had ran straight past him. Astonished he was still alive, why was *it* heading away from them.

Darting across to the Hite, Casvern Tarn was the most experienced amongst them to deal with this trickery, searching the ground for clues. “*It* has stopped... over there,” he pointed, locating an indent on the soft grass halfway up the sloping embankment. Not helping their plight, the fog worked against them.

“Is *it* playing with us?” Greema stormed. Such a foe could easily finish them off.

Swords held ready, even Bane could make out *its* heavy footprints in the leafy grass. Edging forward, uncertain if it was the right thing to do, apprehension flickered between wary faces. Wanting *it* to reappear, within ten paces they still had no idea what *it* wanted. Imminent death hung before them, how was this possible?

Holding his hunting knife, Kifter took the initiative, hurling the blade at the point where the beast stood. Expecting it to strike, but to their horror, the knife hit the grass bank behind. Shocked, the beast was not there, panic sending everyone into a spin.

“Where is *it*?” Hallen cried, dreading that invisible horn. Without tracks indicating where *it* was, it could be anywhere.

“I know where *it* came from,” Kifter said above the frantic commotion, retrieving his blade. “*Its* horn is from that dead Freeloaver.”

Bane agreed, caught between loyalties. Unable to see Hanor, the dead Kyboe obscuring his view, he was not brave enough to check on his friend in case the creature attacked.

Time slowed, heartbeats pounding. Searching the fine mist, *it* had to be here somewhere. Battling their nerves, the fog refused to give up on *its* whereabouts.

“Where is Hanor?” Hayla cried, horrified to see the area where he had lain bare. Searching for Balkorn, he too had vanished.

“What in all The Freelands!” Greema spat, running over with the others.

“They cannot just... disappear!” Tarmon exclaimed.

A distinct outline of each was evident, but the area was not crumpled and trodden as it should be. Strange, the wild-leafy grass was fresh as if untouched by the damp or cold.

“There is no evidence to say that thing has taken them,” Kifter noted. “There are no marks apart from the original struggle with Balkorn and Hanor’s fall. “Searching around the dead Kyboe, he shrugged, perplexed.

Thoughts about the beast’s whereabouts were temporarily forgotten, the group distraught at this new development. A terrible prospect emerged. Had *it* taken them?

Extending their search wider, Kifter, Tarmon and Raldama inspected the area, the others waiting, half-expecting another attack. Working their way out to the rising embankment and up to its rim, through the fog, shadowy forms cursed. Dreading a great shadow of evil would appear alongside their searching companions, swords were shaky. Prospects of that creature snatching both Hanor and Balkorn increased the longer the search continued. Nothing indicated *it* had, but then a short time before they were adamant *it* was standing where they had struck. What despicable forces were they up against? Suspecting Balkorn was dead, it was a stark warning.

Approaching half a short-turn since the attack, “Over here!” Kifter called from the top of the basin.

Out of view, Hayla and the others followed the sound of the Fife’s voice. Solidifying in front, bent to the knee, the Fifanian was examining something.

“*It* went this way,” Kifter said, pointing in the direction of Tardoc, the place they were heading.

“Does *it* have Balkorn and Hanor?” Tarmon asked, suspecting the worst. The Baltian was not that much smaller than the creature, but *it* had already proven *its* prowess to do the miraculous.

“These tracks do not suggest *it* has,” the Fife said, moving to the next footprint. “But we are not dealing with normal powers here.”

“If *it* did,” Raldama tried. “Why? *It* could have killed all of us.”

Tarmon started filling in the gaps with wild theories. A preposterous idea, did *Gorldarl* know where they were and what they were attempting to achieve? The creature had attacked Hanor first, but details were lacking. Why did *it* kill the Kyboe and not Hanor? “I could not tell, was Hanor dead?”

“I think not,” Greema answered. Apart from Balkorn, he had been the nearest to him. “He took a heavy fall, but nothing more.”

“Time is running out,” Tarmon pressed. “We need to decide what to do next.”

“We should check those outlines where they fell,” Greema urged, disliking it. Certain they were missing something, it did not make sense.

Kifter agreed. Heading back to the dead Kyboe, hoping the two had somehow returned, his luck did not hold. Checking over the area again, the untainted wild-leaf on the ground where they had lain was disturbing. If the foul beast had taken them, where were the signs?

“Something unnatural has happened here,” Greema concluded, picking a stem of the wild-leaf grass.

“But what and by whom?” Kifter was still unable to find an explanation.

Long moments clicked by and still they could not decide. Expressing other possibilities, anxious that Hanor was being carried further away from their position, chasing after that beast was not a welcoming prospect either.

Bane was getting impatient. “We have to do something,” he urged, hoping the monster was not coming back.

Kifter stood and turned to the others. “It is a matter of choice. There appears to be little alternative but to go after *it*.”

“What about our Kyboes?” Hayla said. None were in sight, the fog refusing to lift.

Climbing to the rim of the hollow, Hallen whistled, calling his mount back. Waiting for sounds of pounding feet, the others joined him, but nothing came.

“I do not like this,” the Hite admitted. “She would not run far from me.”

“That monster shook them,” Raldama said.

“Standing here is not doing Hanor or Balkorn any good,” Bane groaned.

Tarmon’s frustrations were hampering his ability to decide. Peering down into the foggy basin, shutting out further whistles from Hallen, the Tardanian went back to where Hanor’s Kyboe lay. If nothing had changed, they had to pursue that thing.

The renewed patches of wild-grass still looked woefully out of place, the unusual outline affirming supernormal powers were at work here. Unclipping one of Hanor’s water-skins and a small bag of his supplies, he left the other in case the lad was to return. Needing to retrieve their Kyboes, he could only hope this confounded fog would lift.

“Let us get going,” he said, climbing to where the others stood waiting.

“Our Kyboes went in that direction,” Kifter said, pointing to the left where the monster had run.

“We cannot afford to lose that creature’s track,” Tarmon decreed. “Keep calling... but let us stay on *its* trail.”

The prospect of running all the way to Tardoc was absurd. “Can Shanene not look for them?” Hayla asked. Worried for Hanor in particular, old feelings were stirring.

“The fog makes it just as difficult for her as it does us,” the Tardanian said. “She is already looking.”

“Did she not see that creature coming?” Hallen snorted as though she had let them down.

“You cannot expect her to see something invisible,” Tarmon answered over his shoulder.

“She is also healing Selmor. Her attention is not solely on us.”

Trying his unique Hitorian whistle again, Hallen’s hopes of finding them faded with every trudging step. “Surely they did not come this far?” the Hite protested after a lengthy period of running.

“The sun is now up,” Kifter said, the mist starting to lift now they were on higher ground.

“Chances are we will see them before we hear them.”

Apprehensive about running blind as they were, concerned about their two fallen friends, shock seeped in. Balkorn’s gaping wound meant precious time was being lost. Half-expecting him to be dead, the outlook was dire.

Constant thumping filled the void of darkness about Hanor, a high-pitched ringing duelling for dominance alongside. Nothing else could be discerned through the pitch. No light shined or aid was in the coming. “What has...?” The question did not finish, unconsciousness overcoming the boy from Manson.

Running for nearly half a short-turn, the trail veered left, the beast changing directions. Wondering at the cause, the mist was clearing, but nothing yet was visible. Raising a hand, Tarmon pulled them up. Stalling as if saddened, haunting eyes promised harsh news.

“What is it?” Raldama asked.

“It is ill tidings,” the Tard said, peering in front. Forewarned by Shanene, she could see what lay ahead in the fountain.

Walking, the others expected the two dead figures of Hanor and Balkorn to emerge. A short time passed before a shadowy form did appear, but it was not one of their companions. A Kyboe lay lifeless, slaughtered.

Catching her breath when realising it was hers, Hayla rushed over, horrified by its grisly wounds. “Why would *it* do this?” she cried, tearful.

Kifter pointed to another a short way off. Dreading its implications, the others went to look. Greema bent down this time, a sign of respect, his Kyboe’s innards wantonly exposed. Shaking his head, his thoughts mirrored Hayla’s.

“Search the area,” Tarmon ordered. “Be careful. That thing might still be close.”

“This happened some time ago,” Kifter said. The blood had stopped pouring and was congealing. Buzzies were not yet airborne, but once this fog cleared, they soon would be.

“Here is another,” Raldama called, further out to their left.

“It must have happened quickly for them to be this close to each other,” Tarmon said, expecting his lifeless Kyboe to be somewhere nearby.

“Pointless,” Kifter agreed, heading over to where Raldama stood. Familiar colours of the animal meant one thing. “It is mine,” he sighed, heady at the despicable sight.

Burning away the haze, the rising sun revealed six carcasses. Two had escaped or were yet to be discovered. Sadness turned to rage, the carnage contemptible. Forgetting the beast, they could be forgiven for thinking this was a twisted game. Why were they spared but their Kyboes slaughtered?

“What do we do now?” Kifter asked, stopping beside his Tardanian friend who stood next to his dead Kyboe.

“At least their death was swift,” Tarmon said, trying to piece together the mystery. Not attached to his Kyboe like the others, the animal belonging to his people, a bond had still formed over recent turns. It was the sheer waste that disturbed him. “It is a long run to Tardoc.”

“I have searched the area,” Kifter explained, concerns returning to their companions.

“There is no sign of Balkorn or Hanor anywhere. No blood of any sort.”

“Are the Irdahills renowned for the unexplainable?” Tarmon asked Casvern Tarn, the man from Mandurin drawing near.

“Not that I know of,” he replied, confounded. “I have spent many nights out here, and I have never known anything untoward.”

Dispersing the fog, the sun was not strong enough to undo the evil running rampant this turn.

“What is the meaning of it?” the Tardanian stormed. Doubts were gaining in potency. Without Hanor, it seemed pointless going to Tardoc. “Have we missed something?” Bane and Hallen were gawping down at one of the other poor animals. Fortunately for them, their Kyboes were still missing. This was a major blow.

“I keep thinking about that renewed grass where they lay,” Greema said, joining them.

“So do I,” Kifter said, wishing Brandor was here. “That creature is definitely *Gorl-darl’s*, the horn proving that. But why did *it* not slay us?” Another notion sprung to mind. “Does *he* know about the *Pillars of Life*? Perhaps *he* has concluded another one is at Tardoc.”

“That could be a good reason to take Hanor,” Greema said, horrified.

“It is plausible,” Raldama agreed.

“*Gorl-darl* wants the power for himself,” Casvern Tarn exclaimed.

Nearby, Hallen lay a hand on Bane’s shoulder, the poor lad suffering by what had transpired. Missing Hanor, when the boy turned to look at Tarmon for answers, there was nothing he could say. Beckoning the two over, lingering here was not helping.

“We must decide what to do,” Tarmon said, the others gathering around.

“I say... go after *it*,” Hallen urged, resting a hand on the hilt of his sword.

“This is about Hanor... not revenge,” Tarmon warned.

“And Balkorn,” Raldama reminded them, not giving up that their friend was dead.

“Of course,” Tarmon apologised. “Does anyone have any suggestions other than follow that thing?”

“We are still missing something back at the camp,” Greema repeated his earlier statement.

“Shanene assures me they are not there,” Tarmon answered his qualms.

“We have little choice but to pursue *it*,” Kifter said.

“Hardly inviting,” the Grove grimaced.

“Are we agreed?” The Tard waited for other comments, but none came. “Gather some essentials, water and food easy enough to carry. Travel light for the road ahead is long and no doubt hazardous.”

Chapter 5 : Frustrating People

Strange hushed voices could be heard as if wary of disturbing the silence. A soft light added to Hanor's fears. Eyes closed, he did not move. Unusual words rolled nearby like the mumblings of people imprisoned by a fever. Unaware of where this place was or what he was doing here, what in all The Freelands had happened? Lack of answers encouraged the child in him to rise. Where were his friends?

Waking before these people arrived, a faint glow in the tunnel outside this small underground cave had cast enough light to gain his bearings. Shimmering dusty brown rock lined with deep grooves ran down from the arcing ceiling to the grainy floor. Without furniture, paintings or windows, nothing hinted where he was. Even his bed was just made of dried grass and wild-leaf. Trying to rise at one point, but his head had whirled, nausea pulling him down. Not in a healthy state, the blurs of a misty mind had refused to reveal how he got here.

When hearing these strangers approach, expecting the *evil one's* savage hordes, dread had dissolved his will to flee. Entering the chamber, the newcomers had continued talking quietly, Hanor's expected execution not materialising. Not sounding like Gurls, but the endless whisperings were still of a powerful people in control of his destiny.

The voices stopped. Fearing discovery, Hanor waited like a trapped ganti. Padded steps on the stone floor drew near. The touch of a small cold hand on his brow startled him, but he did not move. A bead of sweat trickled to his ear. Parched, he wanted to lash out but refrained.

Relieved when the hand lifted, the stranger rose and moved back to its companions. More whispers, the slapping of feet leaving the room tempted Hanor to look, but he stayed where he was in case it was a trick. Satisfied that he was on his own, a sigh of relief did not reflect his true feelings. Clinging to caution, long moments dragged by. Unforgiving heartbeats pounded. Daring to look through half-closed eyes, the dimness a screen to any cunning foe, he could not see anyone. Sight readjusting, he lifted his head to look around.

"Do not... be afraid," a sudden but gentle voice said from near the craggy exit of the small cave.

Panic sent Hanor reeling. Scrambling to his feet, his head span but he got ready for an attack. How could he have been so naïve, the treachery infuriating? Reaching down for his short blade and gilth pouch, but they were gone. Defenceless, he searched the corner camouflaging the enemy. Pitiful attempts to defend himself impeded control over the situation. Easing back against the lined wall, the sizable exit was a step and jump in front. His only chance of escape, but where was his adversary?

"Who... are you?" he yelled, confronting the dread.

There was silence for a moment before the soft voice replied. *"Do not be alarmed. I am not here... to harm you."*

Blind to the aggressor, Hanor edged along the wall to the corner. Powerless, this seemed worse than dealing with Gurls, Dortians and Tarkons Tomb. At least he had known where he was and what he was doing. Now, without his comrades, weaponless

and lost to the *Stone of Tarkon*, the pathetic boy was at last revealed. Calling for aid seemed pointless. Who would come?

“Show yourself you coward,” he shouted, defiant. Who was he fooling?

“Yours angers... does nots becomes you,” came the accented reply, unchallenging.

“Do not play with me,” Hanor returned, the room still void of movement. Patchy brown with slithers of grey, the shimmering walls cast the enclosure in a gentle light.

“I woulds be a fools to evens considers... such a things, ifs I ams gainings yours meanings correctlys. I ams no threats... I cans assures you.”

The newcomer’s voice came from inside the room. “Why are you still hiding then?”

Through the resultant silence, Hanor actually found the strain easing. This was not how Gurls or Dorts acted. Keeping his guard, anything could happen. The apology that followed was even more unexpected.

“I cans onllys asks fors yours forgiveness ats mys... timids behaviours, buts I was nots sures... hows you woulds reacts to mys beings heres. I senses yours fears... whens I touches yours heads..., ands dids nots wants to startles you. As we boths sees, I haves failings in mys workings. You ares differents ..., I ams sorrys.”

Hanor’s head was still swimming from this violation. How was he to escape? “Who are you?” he demanded. If death was inevitable, he wanted to see his aggressor.

“You ares stills nots takings mys meanings..., I means you no harms.”

A final admission forewarning action, Hanor expected the worst.

Ahead of him in the opposite corner, a shimmer of light began forming. Soft like a moon through a foggy sky, Hanor watched, fearful yet fascinated. Compact and purposeful, a sense of life and energy radiated similar to the *Stone of Tarkon*. Melting the anguish and uncertainty, the glow solidified, transforming itself into a shape, a person. Eyes closed with hands held together, the person stood silent like a delicate statue. Milky grey, its complexion reminded Hanor of Shanene. Searching for mischief, like when the old woman had appeared at Selmor, but none came, his heart alight from its appearance. Similar to when at one with a *Pillar of Life*, though small by comparison, this was odd. To his chin in height, the figure’s aged features showed no malice. No long claws or fangs, no battle scars, just a measured sense of wellbeing assured him it was safe. For a while, its eyes remained closed wrapped in solitude. Hanor had nothing to fear here.

Flicking open, large, dark eyes startled Hanor. Beneath its small pale pointy hat, worn and bent, a regretful stare wanted forgiveness. Parting its hands, an open gesture of apology, Hanor had never seen such a person. Resembling a small old man, that exuded childlike tendencies, who was he?

“I ams... sorrys,” the figure said again, lowering his gaze.

“You do not have apologise,” Hanor said, bewildered by this whole affair. Daring to step away from the corner, he stopped a few paces short, unsure what was happening. Staring, the old man, yes, it was a small man of some description, seemed fragile, weightless and not quite real. Plain and unadorned, his pale grey over-gown seemed light to wear, but appeared tough and weathered much like an overcoat. Falling to a pair of plain shoes, where was he from?

“This is confusing,” Hanor said, the flame in his chest subsiding on completion of the old man’s transfiguration. Taking any fear with it, he was back to his old self. The chamber seemed to close about the two of them. Hanor was cold. “Who... are you..., and

where am I? What... is this place?" Racing with questions, what had happened to him and his friends? Why had he blacked out? Hands reached again to his side. "My gilth pouch, where is my gilth pouch?" Taking a step back, the small figure stood cowering as if his last breath were about to desert him.

"I ams... sorrys," it repeated, scared.

"I do not want your apologies, I need answers."

"Gilths... pouchs?" the petite fellow said.

"Yes, gilth pouch," Hanor said, highlighting his waist and its lack of a belt.

"Yes..., yes," the little man said as if understanding.

"Where then..., and where are my friends?"

The old man looked up at the ceiling, trancelike. Deep dark eyes then refocused, a tame smile appearing.

"Well?" Hanor invited.

"Yes..., they ares safes."

"What are?" he urged, irritated by this fiasco. "My friends or the gilth pouch?"

"No... no, yours friends I do nots knows abouts..., buts ones. Its is yours pouchs thats I ams takings mys meanings froms."

"You know where it is?"

"I do nots knows wheres its is, buts... I knows its is safes." he replied, nodding.

Taking stock of the situation, trusting this fellow was telling the truth, but without his pouch, the exposure grew. Calming down, Hanor tried again. "Who... are you?" The tone was less urgent.

Standing proud with a huge beam of cheerfulness, the peculiar figure replied, *"I ams... Lunar ofs the Ree."*

"That is your name, yes..., but who or what are you? What is this place and how long have I been here?" The blank look received annoyed him. Frustrated, The Freeland was being stripped of life, and here was this strange creature devoid of purpose. What was he doing here? Turning away, "I need to talk to someone right now," he said, heading across to the exit. "Can you take me to somebody who can give me proper answers? I am on a very important journey and wasting time here."

"I wills gives you answers."

Peering out, an arched tunnel ran both ways in a gradual arc before disappearing from view. Similar to his room, thick grooves ran down from its roof, so too the dim light. Radiating from the walls, the setting was similar to Grovan's tunnels.

"I am sorry," he said, determined the pale features reflecting back were not going to stop him. Feeling brave, he had no option but to find his own answers. "Which way?"

"I do nots... understands, whys you rushings?"

Disregarding the enquiry, Hanor could not afford to linger with this simpleton and chose to go left. Without the faintest notion where or what he was doing, "I need answers," he said, trying to convince himself he was being positive. Mumbblings hurrying along behind him were irrelevant. How long had he been here? What in all The Freeland had happened? Concerned about his missing pouch and friends, the last he could remember was their camp.

Checking the occasional empty room when passing, the passageway ahead showed no signs of giving up its secrets. Deserted cocoons lacked character and life. Coated by a

dull sheen of moisture, he ran a finger down a groove in the tunnel wall. Oily in texture, similar to Tarden's golden entrance, but no such light lit up his fingers. Odd, another doorway was coming up fast. Huffing when that too was empty, *'Does anyone else live down here?'*

Unrepentant, eager steps charged his mood. Disregarding the odd call from behind from Lunar, this lengthy maze amplified the necessity for answers. Coughing, the air stale, did people actually live down here?

Tunnel lurching left, the sound of voices accompanied the new direction. Slowing, foreign musical words chimed, a room just ahead the focal point of the otherworldly dialogue. Subdued but penetrating, the low din seemed to be everywhere.

"I cans gives you answers," the forgotten voice of Lunar said from behind. Jumping, Hanor turned. "Do not creep up on me like that!" he barked. Disliking his own mood, conceding just how dependant he had become of his friends, facing the miraculous seemed a long way from dealing with simply being lost.

"I ams... sorrys," Lunar apologised, pained as if longing to do something right.

"Where are we?" Hanor sighed, struggling with this. Everything fell silent.

"We ares nears yours friends... ins thats rooms," Lunar said, pointing just ahead.

"Friends...?" Hanor said, hopeful.

Stopping when turning, he gulped. They were no longer alone. Standing at the entrance to the cave-like chamber, two sets of dark eyes similar to Lunar's stared. Soft stone-grey features seemed unthreatening. Hanor swallowed hard, claustrophobic. Trying to think straight, the low ominous din started humming again from inside the chamber. Chanting, he had no idea why. Groans alerted Hanor to who was inside, fearing one of his companions could be suffering.

Dashing past the two, "Balkorn!" he cried, rushing into the half-lit chamber. Lying on the floor wrapped in bandages around his midriff, another like Lunar sat in the corner chanting. Unperturbed by the intrusion, it continued, its work of the highest sort.

Nauseous, Hanor was horrified to see the Baltian in this state. Desperate to remember what had happened, but nothing came. Large patches of seeped blood on the sallow bandage meant the Balkorn's wounds were deep. Not responding to any promptings, only the slight rising of his chest promised life still pulsed his mighty veins. Kneeling, wanting to take away the hurt, Hanor could not see any other injuries.

Wiping his brow, Hanor turned to the others. "What has happened? Why is he like this? Talk to me..., what has been going on?"

The three, including Lunar, stood at the doorway unmoving. Cloudy, Hanor's emotional thoughts refused to reveal anything either, frustrations turning to anger. Bending low, the Baltian's breathing was slow but steady. "Balkorn!" he tried. "Balkorn!" Claspng his enormous hand, it was cold. "Can you hear me?" This was sickening. Thick rough skin, taut and hardwearing, was useless against the internal injuries he had sustained.

"He is... restings," said an accented voice behind. *"He has losts... much bloods."*

"Is he going to... live?" Hanor asked, unable to contain the tears. Of all his companions, the Baltian had given him the most sense of security, a formidable shadow ready to wreak havoc on anyone crossing their path.

"Withs much times..., he may recover, and much rests."

“What... has?” he started but could not finish. So much had happened, so much pain and suffering, and now this. Wiping another tear, “I am... so sorry,” he said to his unconscious friend, as if to blame for the injuries. Pleading for forgiveness, it was his fault? Travelling on this impossible quest with its endless demands, resentment flushed him. How many more were to die? Relying on a feeble child, what a waste. The apology faded.

Sitting motionless, surveying his friend’s peaceful features, the bulbous head etched with tiny battle scars revealed a harsh upbringing devoid of life’s comforts. Taught from an early age that life had its own design, and how you handled them was a true reflection of yourself, true and noble was a fair description of this cultured creature. Long moments drifted by before he spoke again.

“Can you tell me... what has been going on?” he asked. Drained, thoughts turned to the rest of his companions. “Where are the others?”

“Others...?” came the careful reply.

“Yes, my friends..., where are they? Bane, Tarmon, Kifter, Hallen...?” He stopped, his once beloved Hayla. Head hurting, thirsty for water and answers, he peered up at the enigmatic spectators, not confident he would get either. “Where are they?”

In their own distinctive language, the three conferred. Conversing like huddled children, they seemed to lack direction. Finally, Lunar broke the deadlock.

“We ares nots... ofs a hurryings sorts ofs peoples, ofs which we asks... yours forgivings, buts we do nots knows alls.” Pausing to check he still had his companions’ support, Lunar proceeded. *“Yours friends heres was injureds alongs withs you... by a creatures froms the norths.”* Aggrieved by the memory, *“Bads was thats things, was mades froms hands ofs evils. Much pains we felts ins its beings. We sees many things..., buts nevers such as these. We are ofs the lands thats you calls Free ands... ares ofs the livings. Ins you, we sees somethings different, ands ins yours friends heres... we sees greats injuries. Ins savings you, we saves yours friends.”* He finished, indicating Balkorn. “Creature...?”

Backtracking, memories were obscure to Hanor. Their group had been on a quest for the *Pillars of Life*, finding one at Mandurin, but there was nothing relating to an attack. Instinctively reaching down again for the gilth pouch, panged by its absence, without answers, inadequacy added to the pitiful situation. Uneasy exchanges between the onlookers showed confusion, but they kept quiet, not wanting to ignite another outburst. The atmosphere inside the small chamber grew tense. Only the low chants of the one seated stayed constant.

Rising, gripped by doubt and disillusion, Hanor checked his friend for anything missed. Satisfied these strangers had done their best for Balkorn, not that he could have matched their skills, answers were now a priority. Turning to the three curious creatures that were his only communication to anything real, a low tone warned them his patience was wearing thin.

“Now listen to me,” he began, dry and lacking strength. “I have travelled far, and have witnessed things that would fill you with dread.” Huddling closer to each other from the soreness of his words, he did not have the inclination to be subtle. “I am exhausted

and do not have the energy to play guessing games with you.” Parched, three wide-eyed figures did not move, only the occasional blink indicating they were still alive. “I see your intentions are good. The care you have shown Balkorn is obvious, which I am grateful, but... I need to know what has happened.”

The three stood staring as if deaf to his plea. Annoyed, the only person who seemed to have purpose was the one sitting in the corner chanting.

Behind Lunar, one of the two stepped forward. Cautious and timid, “*Theres is ones amongs us... thats mights be ables to gives you whats you needs to hears.*”

In their own tongue, the others bubbled up, disliking the yet to be disclosed proposal. Lunar shook his head, anxious.

Biting through their flustering, “Who can help me?” Hanor demanded from the one who had spoken.

Worry stalled them as if an unwritten law was about to be broken. “*Forgives me... fors mys lacks ofs strengths,*” the figure said, humble, dark eyes blinking like a muted duet.

‘So strange,’ Hanor thought, eager to hear what he had to say.

“*Theres is ones amongs us... who is nots of ours kinds. Ones who comes... froms the outsides. Shes is olds, very olds... and mads also. She has no names, buts is very powerfuls. She sees things... ofs the pasts ands futures. Boths goods... ands bads. She laughs... ands torments, hisses ands spits. Mads she is..., mads. Nots evils..., nots goods..., justs mads.*”

Stepping back to stand with the others, taking comfort in their numbers, they waited for Hanor’s response.

“I must see her,” he demanded.

“No..., no,” Lunar protested as if realising there was another option. “*You cannots sees hers untills you havs mets the others.*”

“The others?”

“Yes, others. Theys are... likes us,” he replied, indicating all of them.

Sighing, Hanor could not help but think it was just another delaying tactic.

Lunar went into a momentary trance before refocusing. “*Yes..., yours gilths pouchs. Yes..., whats you wants, answers... yes?*” Taking hold of Hanor’s arm, “*Comes..., comes..., answers. You do nots needs... to sees olds ladys..., No?*”

“Gilth pouch? This is what I have been talking about.”

“Yes... yes,” Lunar said, pulling him towards the doorway.

Hanor’s mind was spinning. “Why did you not say this before?”

“*No times..., comes.*”

Hesitating, not wanting to leave his wounded friend unconscious and alone, a twisted guilt appeared. Questioning Hanor’s motives, was he stalling because he was too frightened to what lay ahead? Dismissing the notion, “I will come back shortly,” he vowed, leaving Balkorn in the hands of what he presumed was a healer.

Chapter 6 : Shavani Folk

Unpredictable, Lunar headed left, leaving the small chamber with its healer and Balkorn behind. Taking a sharp right, the two others joined them. Irritated by their aloofness, “Why did you not do this before?” Hanor challenged, concerned at how much time had been wasted. “Lunar!” Resenting the avoidance, his newly found hosts were still oblivious to the importance of the situation. Veering around another corner, “At least something is happening,” he had to admit.

Tunnel walls stretched up and out, yawning in width and height. Other half-lit passages fed from this central one, this underground warren extensive. A whole maze of coves and passageways spanned out in every direction, the odd figure intrigued at this invasion into their covert underworld. Floor sloping as the ceiling reached higher, its soft sheen glistening in the dimness, Hanor halted when entering the very heart of this underground community. Huge, the multi-holed cavern was longer than it was wide. Struts of mountainous rock ran along each side dotted with small caves. High and low, they seemed to be places of rest and work for these weird people. Individuals stared at them from the first few caves. More similar to Lunar made their way between caves going about their business. Worn stairs cut into rock gave access to the strange abodes. Far from elaborate, these people seemed happy to live like animals. Just enough light to see the far end of this huge underground cavern, the place was not eerie even though cold. Soft reddish browns and faded tans painted the rock with minerals of splendour.

Continuing along the main cavern, his guides not saying a word since leaving Balkorn’s room, it was pointless trying to fathom them out. Weird yet fascinating, Lunar hustled along, proud that he had a purpose at last. Unconvinced by their apparent innocence, detecting intelligence beneath their childish manner, Hanor had to be careful. Needing a drink, a sizeable hole in the ground filled with a dark liquid tempted him to believe it was water. Refraining from asking, knowing it would not take much to stall them, they reached the far end of the substantial cavern. Caves on the upper levels disappeared when entering the large tunnel in front. Apprehension gnawed at the young man from Manson. Why were they reluctant to reveal anything? Plucking answers from thin air, were they trying to protect him from terrible news?

A sharp left drew Lunar to a quick stop. Raising a finger to his mouth for silence, he started again as if careful not to disturb anyone. Uncomfortable at the secrecy, Hanor edged forward. Rumbblings in his stomach cried for attention. Without sun or moonlight to indicate what short-turn of the day it was, he had no idea how long he had been here.

Voices squabbling just ahead sounded like bickering children. ‘*Maybe life down here is not so tranquil after all,*’ Hanor thought, Lunar looking back apprehensive, the innocence gone.

Easing up at a wide entrance, the little fellow peered around like an apologetic intruder, the foreign tongues falling quiet. Beckoning them to follow when entering, Hanor had no idea what to expect.

Halting inside, scores of people similar to Lunar appeared disgruntled, everyone staring at him. These strange people were definitely not as peaceful as first presumed. Stepping in front of Lunar, the little fellow overawed, these were clearly his superiors. At

least answers were now likely. Absorbing what he could in a few heartbeats, a row of simple stone benches gelled to the wall on the right were stacked high with scrolls and parchments. Four figures at the centre of this large cave-like chamber were the focal point of the debate, those encircling like warring factions heckling each other. Hesitation swept the room.

Tallest in the room, Hanor was not intimidated by the numbers. The son of a High-man, he got straight to the point. "My name is Hanor of Manson," he said, uncertain if it was wise to share his identity. "I have travelled far, and need answers." Blank faces was typical of them. "Can anyone tell me what happened to Balkorn and me?"

Silence befell the small assembly, frustrations simmering beneath the surface of Hanor's appeal. Unable to grasp these strangers, wanting to shout to wake them up, where was the fire he had heard but a few moments before?

Relieved when one moved forward from amongst the four at the centre, the others parting, an aura of respect was apparent as he approached. Hatless, unlike most of the others, thin wispy white hair looked inadequate to keep the aged head warm. Small and stern, the fellow did not speak, scrutinising him. Strolling behind, for the first time, Hanor felt awkward. Returning to face him, wise eyes suggested wisdom. A wrinkled brow was evidence of a thinker, someone who got things done. Tight lips stretching into the occasional slim smile pursed as if awaiting inspiration. Skinny hands kept clenching due to the cold or a sign of inner conflict.

"You haves broughts... a greats deals of commotions to our homes..." a moderate voice eventually said, making a point to those behind. *"Ands much debates haves takens places heres... decidings whos ands whats you ares."*

If he was expecting an answer, he did not get one, the young man from Manson struck silent by the taut setting. Dreading what truths lurked ahead, Hanor waited, the room joining him like students expecting a lecture.

"You should answers questions fors us firsts," the figure said, overriding Hanor's earlier plea. *"Whos ands whats... ares you? Fors you ares nots likes anys we haves seens before. You ares of The Freelands..., the very grounds we lives ins. Whats is the meanings of that whichs is ins you?"* he said, pointing at Hanor's chest.

Echoing the same intrigue the Old Lady of Selmor had, Hanor tried to discern what he meant. Did he mean the *Powers of the Sacred* that sometimes rose in his heart? But they were not there now. "I do not know what you mean."

Eyes half-closing, suspicious, the interrogator had not expected the reply. Leaning forward, again indicating Hanor's chest, *"Insides... you?"* Shrugging, "There is nothing there."

Turning around, the small manlike figure invited others to speak. Unsettled, a few mutters and motions of the head did not offer anything conclusive.

"That's creatures, which attacks you, is this whats its was afters?"

Hanor's hand rose protectively to his chest, covering anything that could be triggering this. Alerted to what else was said, Lunar had mentioned about a creature attacking but had shared little else. Had their camp been overrun? "What creature attacked us?"

The fellow continued, ignoring his desire for answers. *"Ands the bags, whats is ins the bags..., fors we senses powers also?"*

"My gilth pouch!" he stormed, a little too loudly. "Where is it?"

Stepping back at the outburst, fear streaked across his face.

Calming down, every move monitored, Hanor hoped a quick response might prove his integrity. "Bring me the bag and I will show you." Doubting the *Stone* would work, mumblings reverberated around the sizeable chamber, his request hitting a delicate spot. Did the *Stone* frighten them? Wary of what other talents they possessed, they reminded him of the Yarmi Folk.

The first one spoke again, uneasy. "*You tells us... whats is ins the bags ands thens we gets its fors you.*"

"You have nothing to fear," Hanor promised. "Bring me the bag and I will show you." Unthreatened by this predicament, wanting to show them to gain their trust, but more stern shakes of the head and groans of disapproval ricocheted.

"You ares nots understandings ours needs to knows. Much powers is insides. Nots goods to be carryings such a things. We feels its historys..., its pains..., nots goods fors you."

Amazed how they could tell, Tarkon had given the *Stone* to his beloved Shoona prior to his death when chased by that mob from Tardoc. There was also the issue of those lost *Souls* trapped at Tarkons Tomb, highlighting the evil that had once surrounded it. Horrifying incidents with the *Nyshifter* and Bovern no doubt added to their worries.

Sighing, there was only one thing to do. If they wanted truth, then truth was what he would give. Judging they were on the side of good, his first enrapturing encounter with Lunar's appearance giving credence to that, what else could he do? Looking back at their leader, "I had better tell you what has been going on."

Stretching into the chill, Hanor's overcoat was still inadequate, desiring a fire and one of Kifter's infamous hot brews to warm his bones. Unsure how long he had been asleep, he felt numb after the epic tale telling earlier. Not expecting to go so deep, wiping a tear on numerous occasions, he had revealed a great deal considering he was gaining nothing in return. Left to hope the openness would help, even though Brandor had urged for secrecy, it was too late to worry about now.

A fresh tray of food by the doorway invited him over. Famished, he got up, grimacing from a few achy joints. Roots and tangy wild bulbs were tasty. Sitting down, savouring the light meal, worries tried pulling at him. Difficult to stay upbeat amongst so much uncertainty, before any grim mood could bite, Lunar appeared at the entrance. Wary of what welcome he would receive, his tame, apologetic smile moved Hanor.

Laughing, '*bewildering*' Hanor thought, motioning the timid figure in. "I am not sure I will ever get used to you or your friends."

Cautious, Lunar entered carrying a cup. "*I ams sorrys fors interruptings you... buts I thoughts... you mights likes somes waters,*" he said, daring to present it.

"How can someone be angry with you," Hanor grinned.

"I do nots... understands?"

"It does not matter," he assured him. "Come and sit here," he invited, patting the bedding.

Obedying, a short awkward hush followed as Lunar sat down, both uncertain of how to start. Eventually, the little fellow was brave enough to speak.

"Hows... ares you feelings?"

"Better...," Hanor said, sipping the cold water. "I hope I did not alarm your people." Checking his dark mysterious orbs, flickers of concern were there but also something else, a gleam of hope. "I got carried away. I do not know how they will interpret it."

“You... did the rights things,” Lunar said, encouraged, surprising Hanor. *“Yes..., you have answered many questions. We watch the lands you call free..., and much pain does it have. We have wanted to know what we could do but... we are non-violent. Much debate have we had, but much remains unknown to us. You have intensified our debate, for now we know we must do something. We cannot live hidden forever from those Dark Powers. Yes..., you have been a blessing for those of us who seek to help. Now we talk about... what we can do.”*

A revelation, Hanor was stunned. Huge ebony eyes proved a genuine need to help, but what *could* they do? Enigmatic, but these rare creatures were not the foreboding type to shake mountains. Appearing to have a covert strength below the innocence, wisdom based on knowing, but what other talents did they possess?

“What will you do?” he asked, grateful for any aid. The Freeland was their home too.

Guarded, checking the doorway as if embarrassed like a child unable to explain their parents’ behaviour, *“This agains... is where we fall short.”*

“What do you mean?”

“Agains, there is much talk. I do not know what will be decided. Some are ready to go, to move..., others are more hesitant, more cautious.”

“And my girth pouch?”

Shifting, uncomfortable, the little fellow looked down at his small bony hands, clenching as if hoping the question would drain away.

Waiting, Hanor could tell it was still an obstacle. “With all that I have been through, all the pain and suffering...,” he began, drawing back at Lunar’s cowering response. *‘You do not understand, I have nothing else left to hold onto’*. The thought did not materialise into words as concern for Balkorn disturbed him enough to move. Forgetting the issue, “Balkorn!” he cried, rising, the sheet dropping to the floor. “How is he?”

“He is resting,” Lunar said. Reaching out to the resurgent newcomer, but it was too late, Hanor already scuttling into the passageway and bearing left. Hurrying after him like a flustered carer persevering an unruly master, *“He is sleeping,”* he tried, but to no avail.

Focused and resolute, Hanor freed himself from the shackles of dithering. Love for his injured friend dominated any reservations about his own pitiful situation. Failing himself, Balkorn meant too much to warrant the same shortfalls. Turning at the bend, shuffles of Lunar behind meant nothing to him.

Entering the rocky chamber, the only difference was another healer had taken up her position in the corner. Humming that familiar rhythm, the rise and fall of Balkorn’s breathing seemed to move in conjunction with her voice. Eerie, helplessness pressed at him again. Owing his life to his companions, praying the others were safe, he slumped on the cold floor beside Balkorn, desperation getting stronger.

“He will be all right,” Lunar said from behind, wary of what way Hanor would strike next.

Relying on these people, even though he was yet to gain their trust, a grey mood drifted in to steal Hanor’s purpose. “How long will he be like this?”

"We ares nots... sures," he admitted, sensitive. *"A fews turns, nots reallys knows. Depends ons hims."*

"And what injuries does he have?"

"Much bloods has beens losts..., ands greats pains to his internals workings. Thats creatures nearly strucks his hearts. Buts... withs mores rests, he wills starts to wakens soon. Specials potions helps hims sleeps withouts movings."

Taking hold of the huge Baltian hand, still cold and lacking life, it granted little comfort. Closed eyelids hid away a most noble person. Curious, Hanor peered across at the small female in the corner. Similar in stature to Lunar, he had still not fully come to terms with this new world. "What is she doing?" he asked, sensing power in her voice.

"She is callings forths energies froms the Higher Realms to helps hims," Lunar explained. *"She is ins tunes withs his vibrations ands is encouragings his bodys to rejuvenates itselfs."*

"What creature did this?"

"Bads creatures," Lunar said, dismayed.

Not pressing for details, the more important issue of where his friends were dominated his musings. Frustrated, once again, Lunar became the object of attention. "Take me to see that leader of yours," he ordered, dispassionate to the small fellow's startled reaction. Determined to get things moving, if he got no help there then the one Lunar's companion talked about would have to do. Answers were now just as important as his gilth pouch.

Grumbling, but Lunar did as asked. Since Hanor's compelling tale, a different atmosphere had descended on their world.

Three small figures stopped talking when Lunar, followed by Hanor, entered the chamber. Gathered around a low-lying stone table, they were looking over old manuscripts. Rolling them up as if sacred material, one of them was the same person Hanor had spoken to before. Pulse racing, he had to be careful.

"I believe it is my turn for answers," Hanor said, not shying away. Uninterested in Lunar as if someone unimportant, *'a hierarchy indeed'* he thought, surprised. Registering a jitteriness about them, *'What do they fear?'* "I have told you everything," he began, stopping a few paces short. "Maybe too much, I do not know, but there is no retracting it now." Demanding their full attention, at last they were listening. "Much suffering has occurred to those living above ground, and many are dying as I speak. You have heard what we have endured, so I need to hear your story, what you witnessed and how Balkorn and I came to be here." Pushing for the gilth pouch was premature, leaving it for now. As expected, nobody moved, irritating him at the lack of urgency.

"Excuses us," the first one said, motioning the other two to follow. All seemed happy to leave Lunar out.

Stopping out of earshot, mumblings of a debate unfurled, the two, both wearing hats listened. Nods accompanied stern shakes of the head, giving nothing away.

'No wonder nothing gets done' Hanor groaned.

Returning, the leader addressed Hanor, respectful. *"You haves causeds... stirrings beyonds stirrings,"* he proceeded. *"Ands we ares fars froms the answers we needs, buts... we alls agrees somethings musts be dones. Greats deals is ats stakes..., mores thans you knows. The grounds is alives withs fierys powers, goods ands bads. We haves felts its."*

You ares rights withs yours urgencies fors activities, buts you musts knows the balances ares fragiles. Ones steps thats is wrongs ands everythings is losts. You does nots knows whats is ins you, buts we senses greats energies, greats powers ats works. We cannots deals withs this lightlys. We wills answers whats we cans, fors we thinks you wills explodes ifs we do nots.” Pausing, a faint smile touching the old fellow’s lips, but he seemed far from easy with the appointed task. *“Mys names is Rinar ofs the Doons. These ares... Forar ofs the Doons ands... Eleam ofs the Ree. We ares ofs the Shavani Folks.”*

Indicating his companions and Lunar, Hanor realised the one called Eleam was a female. This obscure underworld, with half-lit chambers and passages, dulled the senses. Well-adjusted eyes still missed a great deal he was quite sure. Younger than the others, with rounder eyes and fuller lips, such subtle differences were hardly noticeable. Drawing back to Rinar, he waited for him to continue.

“Yours tales ofs yesterturns we feels is trues. The powers you calls the Pillars ofs Lifes... weres felts heres also. Froms the Realms ofs the Unseens dids these powers comes. Its is this thats we sees ins you ands ares confuseds bys this. Whys do you haves this Lights ins you whichs shines so brightlys?”

Self-conscious, Hanor did not have an answer. Stirrings in his heart were the nearest he could think of. “I do not know,” he said, the unifying experiences with the *Pillars of Life* and *Stone of Tarkon* long gone. Like a hapless tool, he was impotent without his friends, the gilth pouch and that *light* within.

“You says theres is a Stones ins the bags,” Rinar changed direction.

Watching him like Fliryns, Hanor could tell the other two were weighing up every pause. “Yes. No one can retrieve *it* except me. The gilth pouch’s magic prevents you. There is no evil, the pouch was given to me to safeguard the *Stone*.”

Hesitant, testing his words, Rinar started nodding, content with his response. Requiring one final piece of evidence to convince him of Hanor’s faithfulness, *“Cans we keeps the Stones heres to verifys its authenticitys?”*

Appalled by the notion, regarding it as another delaying tactic, about to respond, he caught himself, wondering why they wanted to keep *it*. Did they think he would use *it* on them? Doubting it, he stayed calm and answered. “The *Stone* is important to me, but you may keep *it* for observational purposes. When we leave, I want *it* back.”

“We ares startings to trusts you..., Hanors ofs Mansons,” the one called Forar approved. *“Althoughs... we likes nots yours tempers.”* Chuckling, as did Eleam and Lunar, only Rinar remained unresponsive.

“My fire is not as fierce as it sounds,” he said, smiling. *“But that makes my journey no less important. It is imperative you help me understand what happened at the camp, and how Balkorn and I ended up here.”*

Striking a chord with their leader, to Hanor’s great relief, Rinar relayed what his people had witnessed. The arrival of that monster had generated disquiet of their own, but when *it* had struck the group, they had wanted to help.

“Thats beasts... lefts the areas,” Rinar said, graven. *“Ands yours friends followeds afters Its. We broughts you heres fors yours injurias weres bads, especiallys Balkorns... as you haves calleds hims.”*

“They would not have left us,” Hanor said, horrified that they had chased after *it*.

"We ares to blames," Eleam apologised. "Yours wounds were too graves to leaves ins the opens. We broughts you heres to starts yours healings."

"Without telling my friends?" Hanor charged, riled.

"Ours ways... ares nots ofs the outsides," Forar said, as if it was enough. "Ours ways... is ofs services to The Freelands. We do nots gets involves withs those aboves grounds unless its is necessarys..., likes yours injuries."

Caught between their heartfelt need to help and their ignorance of not letting the others know, Hanor wanted to scream. "Are they still in the vicinity?"

The three and Lunar looked at each other before Rinar responded. "Its is nows two turns ofs yours days since thats attacks, ands theys have gones fars froms heres."

Sinking as if hearing a tale of great loss, rubbing tired features, what hope did he have now of getting to Tardoc to find the fourth *Pillar of Life*? The others had gone on a wild chase after a monster, adding to his woes. Conceding these people had reacted the only way they knew how, burdens of the unknown returned. "Was anyone else injured?" "No..., theys alls wents afters thats creatures," Forar said, seeing the error. Determined to keep their covert world protected, it had shut them off from what effects it might have.

Weary, a lack of natural light hampering Hanor's efforts to stay alert, emotional strains doubled his troubles. Undecided if they intended to give the gilth pouch back, he was not in the mood to confront it. Needing to see Balkorn, he stalled, recalling what Lunar's companion had said before. Mentioning a mad old lady, the idea she might help was heartening. "Can you take me to see the *Mad One*?"

Startled by the proposal, Lunar received the brunt of their dissatisfaction.

"Whys woulds you wants to sees hers?" Rinar asked, suspicious.

"I need to find my friends," Hanor reasoned. "She sees the past and future. I need to know if she can help."

"You do nots knows whats you ares askings fors," Eleam said, pursing tight lips. "She plays tricks... ands talks ins riddles. No senses are mades froms hers words."

"I need all the help I can get," he said, willing to try anything.

"Its is nots goods fors you to go," Rinar urged.

"Give me the gilth pouch then, and when Balkorn is ready, we will leave this place."

That too was not what they wanted. "You ares too fierys fors us," Eleam said. "Wills you nots listens to gentles reasonings?"

"Like you listen to mine?"

"We looks fors cautions ins alls thats we do," Forar said.

"Hence, your inactivity!" Hanor blurted, Lunar pointing out the weakness. "Do you not want to just live? Be brave for once and do something unplanned. Act now and forget your worries. If I were like you, I would not have achieved half of what I have. Just show her to me and be done with your fears. Smile and laugh, be free for once." Echoing Brandor's words on numerous occasions, Shanene had recognised it too. Valuing rest and play, but also the need for adventure, unblinking expressions staring back meant it did not have the desired impact.

Sighing, he was not putting up with this anymore. Agitated, he left, their lack of action testing his patience. Time would be better spent at Balkorn's side. He could not do much until his friend was better anyway. Not wanting to be delayed here for long, he prayed the *Sacred* might weave some magic on his wounded companion.

Chapter 7 : Taunts on the Wind

Balkorn's groan roused hopes he was coming round, Hanor jolting up from his dose. Unsure how long he had been lolling, his companion's mumbles were encouraging. Frustrations about Rinar and the others earlier had simmered, rest calming the issue. Leaning across, "Where are you, Balkorn?" he whispered, thick contours on the Baltian's forehead making it difficult to guess his age. The Baltian's large eyelids moved as if animals were trapped inside. Praying for them to blink open, hopeful when another mutter escaped, Hanor had to believe his big friend would heal.

Low vibrations of the Healer's chants were soothing, relaxing enough to doze off in the first place. Elderly and petite, troubles above ground would have little effect upon the Healer's peaceful state. Giving up trying to figure these people out, Hanor was quietly confident they would give him the gilth pouch back.

Another pocket of groans alerted him to Balkorn's suffering. Surprised the Balt's bandages were clean, he had no idea how the Shavani Folk managed it, amazed how they moved him here originally. Small and simple in their ways, but there was a definite intelligence there. Picturing twenty of them carrying the big Balt drew a smile.

"Balkorn...!" he tried again. "Balkorn..., can you hear me? It is Hanor." Touching his shoulder, he did not want to shake him because of the injuries. About to sit back, his companion gasped for air as if erupting out of water. Wincing, Balkorn's head turned as if searching for something. Grimacing, opening his huge mouth as though calling a loved one, Balkorn's suffering was heartbreaking. Arching his back off the bedding, mighty muscles strained. Wanting to take away the pain, Hanor cursed the monster that did this.

To his relief, Balkorn eased off, the struggle ending. The Healer had not faltered, the chant continuing throughout the Balt's short bout of life. Now lying limp and drained of energy, Hanor refrained from trying to wake him again.

Needing to stretch his legs, he stood and walked the few steps to the exit. Peering along the dim corridor in both directions, he missed the sunshine and open fields. Unnatural for people to live underground like this, a starlit sky would fire these people to action he was quite sure. Happy in their out of the way world, the blandness was too much of a price to pay for their serenity. The Shavani Folk needed to get out into The Freelands more, to explore and meet new people. A call from behind snatched him back to reality.

"Hanor...?"

Whirling, the young man from Manson was pleased to see his friend awake. "Balkorn!" he said, swooping down like a Fliryn. Tempted to barrage him with questions, just to see him conscious was enough. "How are you feeling?"

"What... has... happened?" the Balt asked, suspicious of the small room. "Where... are we?" Stopping when seeing the Healer nearby, "Who... is...?"

"In due time, Balkorn," Hanor assured him. "You must take it steady. This is a Healer... from the Shavani Folk. They live, I think, in the Irda Hills."

Eyes wide, horrified at a memory, "That... creature!" Balkorn cried, trying to sit up, a shooting pain in his side alerting him to the wound received. "Where has it gone?"

"It is not here," Hanor promised, the Healer behind no longer chanting.

A faint light amongst the turmoil drew the Balt back from panic. Disorientated and bemused, Balkorn eased down. "What... has happened? Where are the others?"

"I do not know."

Checking his midriff and the tenderly wrapped bandages, Balkorn felt where that huge horn had penetrated his stomach, expecting to find a gaping hole. Amazed a layer of skin had sealed it, how was this possible? Convinced boiling oils from the horn had poisoned him, his Sage had predicted such a creature would take his life, but why was he still here? Enticing to think he might see his yet to be born son, he discarded the notion, refusing to believe his Sage was wrong.

"What is it?" Hanor interrupted, disliking the Balt's starry gaze. "Was it that bad?" Managing a weak grin, the Baltian was just as surprised to see Hanor alive. Struck first by that creature, what had happened? "Bad enough," was all he said. "These Shavani Folk saw *it* too," Hanor said, aghast that such a beast could do this.

"You stills needs rests," the Healer said, waiting for the right time to speak. *"Nots readys fors runnings and jumpings."*

"Did... you do this?" Balkorn asked, in awe.

"Nots justs me... buts the Shavani Folks."

"What is your name?"

"Weemel ofs the Doons," she said, rising. *"Keeps this ins places, fors its wills supports the insides whens you moves."* Indicating the bandage, she bent to check his eyes and pulse. Pointing to where the horn had struck, *"The skins wills be tenders... buts nows you ares awakes... you wills contributes to yours owns healings."*

"I... do not know... how to thank you enough," Balkorn said, astonished at their craft. Even their Healers in Baltia could not compare to this.

"Bys nots undoings whats we haves dones," she said with a smile. *"I wills sends foods, ands you shoulds eats alls ifs you cans. Stays heres untills the morrows..., ands then takes to yours feets."*

Balkorn nodded, reverent.

"I will make certain he does not move," Hanor promised.

When the small figure left, words seemed insufficient for what her people had done. "I will ask Lunar if I can have my bedding made up here," Hanor said, indicating where Weemel had sat.

"Lunar...?"

"You will like him. He is an unusual character," he laughed for the first time in an age, grateful that his friend was going to live.

Bolting upright in the dark, figures from Tarmon's nightmare leapt around like wraiths of despair, taunting and leering, knowing his weaknesses. Mocking his futile attempts to salvage their plight, but as reality took hold, the sneers began fading, dispersing to whence they came.

Hissing into the now eerie silence, it took a while for the Tardanian to settle. Two turns of the day had now passed since the fateful attack by that monster, the shock no less real. Poor young Bane had cried himself to sleep each night, and like the rest of them, was devastated by the shocking events. For Hanor and Balkorn to be dead and dumped somewhere out of sight was a grisly prospect. Clinging to a hope they were still alive,

other explanations had been suggested whilst running, but none had been conclusive. Heated discussions upon making camp had not helped either. Finally accepting no amount of theory would return them, even acknowledging their present course was reactionary, there was little they could do but follow the beast.

Exiting the Irdahills earlier, the curvature of the landscape less demanding, the odd scattered Woodell tree was a warm reminder of the Tardanian's homeland. Now camped under one to protect them from evil eyes above, they had stopped early due to exhaustion. Bane, Hallen and Greema had found both turns the hardest, demanding rest well before sundown. Reasoning that finding the creature whilst weary would give them little chance of defeating *it*, just the thought of failing Hanor and Balkorn was disgraceful, hence the nightmare.

Dawn was a short way off, looking through the shadows to what might be prowling out there. Casting a silvery sheen across the landscape from its low position on the horizon, the second moon seemed in no rush to leave. Hayla was sitting with her head resting in her hands, whilst the propped up figure of Greema was slouched against a small tree nearby. Tarmon wondered just how much of their watch they had stayed awake. "*Lack of concentration will get them killed,*" he thought, about to wake them. Stalling, who was he kidding? Pushed to the limits, who was he to dictate otherwise? Sniggering through the silence, wraiths from his nightmare were gone but mocking echoes were quick to remind him of his folly.

Pulling his blanket tight, not sleeping much last night either, burdens of their plight were heavy. Failure! The prospect was more frightening than any Gorg. Even as an energetic young Tard he had won most situations through skill of hand or speed of thought. Outwitting his elders, he had soon earned their respect and trust. Encouraged by Brandor, even the great Dai-laman had not foreseen just how testing this quest would be.

Sighing at the dire circumstances, with his beloved Shanene far away, a bitter taste tinged the path he now walked. Ignoring the dread of failure, strong desires to be with her intensified. Just the thought of her felt uplifting. Sinking head in hands, he missed her dearly. Protecting his thoughts, he did not want to wake her across the expanse separating them. Needing time to think straight, doubts would not shift.

Solemn and ponderous, a breeze stirred. Lifting his head, Tarmon sensed something strange to it. At such an early short-turn of the day, its touch should be cold, but this felt warm and inviting. Standing, his blanket dropping to the floor, the smoothness on his cheeks reaffirmed original suspicions. Something insidious was afoot as though the atmosphere was charged by an electrifying storm. Raising a hand, the current swirled through his fingers, probing. Pimples ran down his arm and back. Most unnatural.

Taking a few steps out from under the enormous tree, he looked up, convinced something must be there. Anxious at what might be hidden in the depths of the predawn sky, but nothing was visible amongst the stars. This close to sunrise, *Nyshifters* could be discounted, its rays a fatal reminder of their mortality. No, it was not fear he felt, moreover an underlying reeling as if walking through a bog. The problem was, there was no smell and no bog.

Behind Tarmon, exhausted companions remained in blissful slumber. Should he wake them? But every extra moment would make a difference later. Scouring the camp again, no threat seemed imminent.

Ascending a nearby foothill, the breeze got stronger. Dawn was still some way off. Breathing deep, hoping for a clue to justify his suspicions, it was not that beast he was sure. Permitting the freshness to enwrap him, contours of low-lying hills rolled away like gentle waves on the sea. Scattered tree and bush were like boats moored into the earth.

It would be so easy to loose oneself in a place like this, he thought, not recognising the breeze at work. “Such wonders,” he murmured, the warmth smoothing away the edges of his purpose. Its touch was hypnotic, a welcoming embrace from the harsh miseries of this accursed quest.

Why do I bother? The question did not alarm him. So much pain and suffering, the loss of Hanor increased the despondency. Supposing Brandor was in as dire a situation as them, the abrupt shift in perspective still did not disturb him. Aggrieved, could not this wind take away the burden? Such hardship, when was it all to end? The subtle breeze kept exaggerating every doubt, promising there was more to life than running on wild ventures doomed to failure. Thinking about his true love far away, alone and wanting, aches to be with her strengthened. That brief moment together now appeared even more vivid. The warmth of her smile and softness of skin, their love knew no bounds. Nothing really mattered apart from being with her.

“Tarmon...!”

Cracking the moment like a clash of thunder, splitting the delusion, Tarmon reached for his sword.

“Hey..., it is only me,” Hayla said, rocked by the cold blankness staring back. “Tarmon?” A fierce pain stabbed the back of Tarmon’s eyes as if a knife was being withdrawn. “What was that?” he said, searching about as though the very air was guilty.

“What was what?” she asked, concerned for him. Alarmed by his glazed expression, the one person she presumed would not succumb to weakness was the Tardanian.

Rubbing his forehead, a sense of intrusion convulsed through Tarmon. Vulnerable and suspicious, glaring at Hayla through the half-light, what had he just experienced? Timely and calculated, the *wind* swirled as before, seductive, prompting recognition. Cackles on the wind swooped in ensuring there was no mistaking the source. Horrified, the cunning violation had probed his Soul and read his mind about Shanene. Enraged, but Tarmon was too numb to do anything.

Watching the Tardanian head away from her towards the next small hillock, Hayla still could not detect anything apart from the warm breeze. Comforting but unthreatening, it was the only sign of change. Turning, the shadowed figure of Casvern Tarn drew near.

“Is everything all right?” he asked, Tarmon’s actions irregular.

“I do not know,” she admitted, uneasy. “He seemed oblivious to who I was, and now...,” gesturing towards the Tard, “He looked right through me.”

“Strange!” Tarn said, his newly appointed leader edging further away “Did he say anything?”

“Only..., *What was that?*”

“Do you know what he meant?”

“No.”

Tarmon was now out of earshot. “You have not seen or heard anything?”

“Not a thing,” she said, troubled.

The Tardanian was not one to mix words or do things out of the ordinary, so something was wrong. "I will check on him."

Seizing his arm when about to move, "Be careful."

Tarn agreed.

Searching the predawn sky for that elusive power, "I know what *it* was," Tarmon stated, without turning to acknowledge who was behind him.

Casvern Tarn paused at the declaration. "Forgive my intrusion. What is it you seek?"

Halting atop a bulge in the ground, relieved but confounded by the violation he had suffered, Tarmon was still coming to terms with it. Upon discovering the insidious power at work, for a short period, disgust had seized him enough to confront that power without care for his life. Devastated, that *Force* had invaded his relationship to Shanene, gazing upon them like a twisted villain. Worries for her had fuelled his wrath. Only when sensing someone following had his instincts resisted. Seizing the lifeline, it had pulled him back from losing himself to hate. Feeding the intruders hunger for suffering, only one person could reach so far. Departing without fear of loss or failure, Tarmon had sensed mocking impressions to *Gorl-darl's* retreat. Unsure whether to be angry or relieved, he had survived a mighty power, shudders running through him.

Turning, Casvern Tarn wanted answers, but Tarmon was just grateful to be himself again. A brush with the *Evil One* triggered an additional thought. "*What in all The Freelands have you been through, Hanor?*"

Through half-closed eyes, Hanor pretended to be asleep. Lunar stood with another of his brethren, a female, by the entrance whispering.

Yawning as if just rousing, Hanor stretched. Sitting up, looking over at the two in the doorway, "What are you muttering about?" he hissed, wary of waking the Baltian.

Awkward, Lunar moved towards him, so too his female companion. "*This is... Emnee of the Ree,*" he whispered. "*We comes to sees hows you ares ands to tells you thats the others havs agreeds fors you to meets... Hers.*"

"When?" Hanor asked a little too loud, eager to see the old woman and find out what had become of his companions.

Eyes flicking open, "You never were good at keeping quiet," Balkorn mused, half awake anyway.

"This is good news," Hanor beamed.

The Balt winced when sitting up, affirming his healing was not complete.

"*You ares exciteds... buts we do nots knows whys?*" Emnee said, nervous. "*She is nots to be likeds as normals peoples ares.*"

"But... if she can help us, then why should we not be cheerful?"

"*Thats... ifs she wills helps you,*" Lunar appealed, disturbed by the young man's reaction.

"There is only one way to find out," Hanor said, climbing to his feet.

"Caution is still required," Balkorn interposed, respecting the two Shavani. "Our excitement can conceal the dangers. They would not warn you unless it was warranted."

Trusting the wisdom, it did not mean he had to be sombre about it. Alarmed when Balkorn got up ready to leave, "You are not coming with us are you?"

A wide grin crossed the Baltian's mouth. "Would I let you go alone?"

Concerned about the injuries, Balkorn's determined look warned there was no debating the matter. "If you tire..., you must tell me."

Standing tall, his head nearly reaching the ceiling, the Baltian seemed steady enough. Their hosts stood back, unused to such dominating figures.

"*I wills gets yours clothes,*" Emnee said, Balkorn's state of half-dress not ideal. "*Somes ofs the bloods has beens washes froms thems bys cleanings salts, buts not alls.*" Eager to move, Hanor, Balkorn and Lunar followed her.

"What made you say... *yes?*" Hanor asked, entering the long narrow chamber packed with more scrolls and books.

Balkorn stayed at the entrance, still fascinated by this strange new underground world.

"*You nots... wants to go nows?*" Rinar, the Shavani Leader, questioned, standing alongside Forar and another Shavani.

"I do, I was just curious," Hanor said, studying the tall thin staff Rinar was holding. Taller than its carrier, the small glass ball at its peak was half-full with a clear liquid.

"*You ares likes a stabs fors us,*" Forar joked, but with a hint of realism. "*We ares runnings outs ofs arguments againsts whats you says.*"

"That can only be a good thing."

"*You ares earnings ours trusts..., pieces bys pieces,*" Rinar continued. "*You ares adamants you shoulds sees the Olds Ones. We says no... buts we honours thats whichs ins you ins cases its is leadings you to sees hers.*"

Unsure what he meant, Hanor let it be, not pushing for his gilth pouch either.

Forar and the other Shavani began clearing away the bench top, Rinar introducing the other person. "*This is... Lennan ofs the Ree. He knows abouts the Olds Ones. He is likes you, inquisitives.*"

"That as a healthy trait," Hanor defended, suspecting they felt threatened by it.

"*We ares verys different,*" Rinar said, checking the glass Orb at the tip of his staff.

"What is that for?" Hanor enquired, the hand-sized ball fragile.

"*You wants to go to the Olds Ones? As you wills sees,*" Rinar explained. "*Manys things ares possibles ifs you haves patiences to waits ands learns.*"

"I know," Hanor had to agree.

Rinar tapped the pole on the stone floor.

Content everything was in order, the Shavani Leader turned serious. "*We hopes this wills be worthys ofs ours times.*" Checking Forar and Emnee were ready, he strolled by Hanor and out through the entrance past Balkorn.

Following the trail of the creature, Casvern Tarn was still disturbed by Tarmon's weak explanations of what had happened at dawn. Running through the mottled landscape, now halfway through the afterturns, the Tardanian seemed detached at the head of the line, avoiding any approach with a polite '*Not now*'. Keeping a few paces behind their leader and Kifter, Tarn was convinced not all had been divulged. Refraining from a direct confrontation for the sake of the group, Tarmon's comment "*He knows about us,*" was a statement too powerful to dismiss. If he meant *Gorl-darl*, then *Nyshifters* would surely follow, and the Tardanian was taking a terrible risk by keeping this to himself. Dropping back to Hayla a couple of times during the course of the turn had not gleaned any insights either. Growling, this was not good.

Stopping at a small alcove perched in the corner of the passageway, Rinar waited for the others to catch up. Veering away to the left, the tunnel continued deeper into the Irda Hills. Walking for nearly half a short-turn to get here, the scale of this oversized burrow was incredible. Expectant, the small group waited for the wielder of the rod to proceed.

Following tradition, Rinar composed himself and then emitted a low resonant hum of power. Steady, the atmosphere started changing, warmth emerging to replace the chill. Anxious glances flickered between the Shavani Folk, wary of unlocking this ancient route. Holding his staff in front, Rinar rapped the rod on the floor three times. From the glass *orb* at its tip, a hazy white light flared. Striking the floor again, the unusual chant transformed into an energy field. Pulsing as though in an airy liquid, hairs tingled, the two newcomers alert to the change.

Surprised to feel the powers beat subtly within his heart, Hanor studied the small *Orb*, the liquid inside pure and energising. A tool by which *higher powers* could be invoked, similar to the *Stone*, there was a connection but he did not know how. Strong vibrations continued, the atmosphere buzzing from the invisible power.

Satisfied, their leader ceased humming and turned to check everyone was ready. “*Shalls we go?*” he said, not waiting for a reply. Facing the small alcove with its flat wall at the rear, he walked towards it as if entering another tunnel. “*Keeps ups withs us.*”

To Hanor and Balkorn’s astonishment, the wall within the alcove parted before the little fellow reached it. Splitting like a giant wound, the force field pushed back the once solid earth as if passing through water. A hissing, squelching sound ensued, Forar and Lennan following him.

Obeying his advice, everyone entered. The noise, like the rustling of leaves, was all about them as they pressed forward into the earth. Walking along inside the capsule, behind them the ground closed in, returning to its primary state. Faint, the pastel hue of the main passageway reflected here too, the small cocoon moving in conjunction with their own steps. Rinar did not falter, attentive to the task.

Gazing up and around, shades of stone arced over and around them. Words failed Hanor at how such powers worked. Accounting for Balkorn’s extra-large frame, he got a glimpse of how he and Balkorn may have been rescued. Excited at their potential, such powers could serve their cause in countless ways. Beyond their guide, it seemed nothing could slow them. From the hardest of rock to the softest of mud, both reacted like the same watery substance. Trusting they had used this route before, wonders dazzled the once ignorant boy of Manson.

Chapter 8 : Old Lady

Travelling underground for a distance, Rinar slowed, reaching their destination. The area in front split into a gaping hole, a lightless place emerging. Mud and rock continued rolling back above and around them, edging onwards and outwards.

Careful not to unbalance the surrounding area, Rinar finally broke free from the earth, halting on a small rocky plateau at the end of a huge underground chasm. Wary as though something might pounce, the little fellow scanned the shadows, trickling water the only sign of movement. Standing alongside, the small group waited, hesitant at what was to come. Tapping his staff three more times on the ground, the force field vanished, the white light dimming.

Acclimatising, the damp cold bit Hanor's cheeks. Peering through the dimness, odd shadowy shapes were just discernible, tiny sparkles of crystalline rock reflecting the intrusive light. Unnerving, his guides seemed equally cautious.

Certain it was safe, Rinar rapped the rod on the stone floor, the white light from the *orb* intensifying, illuminating the wide ledge they were standing on. A sharp, narrow slope to their left led down to lower levels cast in shadow. Patchy grey and brown stone glistened in the half-light. Rocky edges in front promised a sudden drop, vanishing into the eerie darkness below.

Heading for the slope, "*Keeps closes,*" Rinar whispered. "*She might be anywhere.*"

A sudden splash below and out to their right stalled their advancement.

"What was that?" Hanor hissed.

Black and oily, the lower regions were coated by a sheen of glass, presuming it to be water. Foreboding for a boy from the upper planes, large stalagmites stood like watchful sentries, cold and uncaring.

"*A larges pools ofs waters runs the lengths ofs these places,*" Lennan explained from in front. "*Swimmings things lives heres alsos,*" he said, pointing to their right.

Working their way down the tricky slope, it got colder.

Why someone would want to live in a cold place like this, Hanor did not know. A shiver ran down his spine. "I do not like this place."

"*We soids so,*" Emnee of the Ree said.

Not responding, Hanor kept searching the depths for movement. Pleased Balkorn was here, vulnerable without his *Stone*, he wanted to blame Rinar but left it.

Floor levelling out, the scale of the cavern became more apparent. Faint sparkles of crystal stone high above proved its size and just how mineral rich this place was. Other shadows leered from juts in the rock, given life by their arrival. Trickling water got louder, the noise doing little to allay anxieties.

Halting, the floor seemed to disappear in front, Rinar's light revealing a sizeable body of water running away from their position. Black with a mirror effect, ripples from the splash earlier was lost in its pitch vastness. Unable to see where it ended, another splash heightened nerves, but no monster loomed or person appeared.

"Where is she?" Hanor whispered, half-expecting someone to creep up behind and push him in.

"She wills comes whens she is readys," Lennan said, nervous.

Greyish white, the Shavani complexions gave them a haunted presence that was hardly comforting. Appreciating why they really did not want to be down here, how bad was she? Not enjoying the jittery wait, "She must have a place where she sleeps," Hanor said, trying to be brave.

Heading left towards a narrow ridge running along the base of a steep rock face, Rinar skittered across the tight stretch of stone to the wide bed of rock on the other side. Holding his staff up so the others would not falter, straining eyes expected something monstrous to lurch out of the water as they made their way across. Another splash further out generated more unease. Once across, Rinar proceeded alongside the murky expanse of water. Guarded, a natural ledge bordering the lake permitted easy passing.

"What is that?" Hanor asked, a shadowy object emerging through the dark.

Perched high on a rocky hillock, the faint outline of a low ragged structure protruding from the rock grew more defined the nearer they got. An opening for a doorway and two poorly shaped holes for windows was proof that someone might indeed live down here. Granting the occupier a clear view across the hidden lake, she no doubt knew of their arrival.

"Do you stills wants to sees hers?" Rinar said, a hint of sarcasm present.

"I was not expecting this," Hanor admitted, batting down trepidation.

"You wills nots expects hers to be likes you thinks eithers," Lunar added this time.

Watchful of the emerging shape, Hanor could not understand why someone would not want the warm rays of the sun on their skin. Forever dark, what a grim life this was. Nearing the end of the lake, the huge rock formation loomed large. Reaching its base, a steep climb led to its peak.

"Will she not come down to us?" Hanor protested, starting the short climb. Finding the ascent troublesome, there was nothing to hold onto, no indents or footholds. "Could you not have built her some steps?"

"She needs no steps," Lennan said.

Slipping, Hanor found that hard to believe. Even though his Shavani friends found the climb less problematic, he wondered if it was more to do with their fear of her than a desire to help. Checking on Balkorn behind, beads of sweat meant he was struggling. "How are you coping?"

"I have managed greater tests," was all the Baltian said on the matter.

Unconvinced, Hanor admired the enormous efforts he was making, hoping they would not regret it later.

Over the rise, Rinar's light caressed the structure's walls, casting deep shadows within. Levelling out, the wide ledge ran past the barren looking structure only to drop down the other side. Daring a glance to where they had just walked, Hanor stood awestruck. Flickering in the half-light high above, the cavern ceiling stretched away from their lofted position. Far larger than the Shavani central hub of life, and far more intimidating, Hanor steadied his nerve. Turning back to the rock dwelling, all was still.

Edging forward, the damp mineralised air gave no clue to any human existence. No fires were lit or ever had been. Suitable for cave dwellers, the group stopped a short

distance from the structure, dubious at how to proceed. Worrisome guides troubled the doubt-ridden boy from the upper world.

Catching his breath, a cackling, twisted laugh echoed, chilling the newcomers to this dark abode. Verging on hysterics, the Shavani shifted as if preparing to flee. Hanor stood his ground, supported by the watchful Balkorn. Shrieking as though victorious, the sound was more animal than human. Coming from inside the dwelling, no one was eager to step forward to question the yet to be seen lady of this place. Maddening cries of insanity lengthened, pleased to keep them waiting.

Taking charge of the situation, their purpose was too important to play games. "We need your help?" Hanor called through the continuing shrills of warped glee. The screeching did not lessen. "What is her name?" he whispered to Lunar.

"She has no names," the agitated fellow replied.

Composed, Hanor tried again. "We have come for your aid." After another brief pause and no sensible response, Hanor's wariness changed to annoyance.

"We saids she is mads," Emnee said, to prove a point.

"She does nots thinks ands acts likes us," Lunar added.

Stepping a few paces in front, Hanor needed to distinguish himself from the others. Balkorn moved too but stayed just behind.

"We need to ask you some questions," Hanor called, ignoring the wretched shrills of her disjointed merriment. "If you cannot help..., we will leave."

Challenging her, when the maddening glee did not alter, he shrugged and started back towards the steep slope, leaving the Shavani to stare after him.

"Wheres ares you goings?" Lunar called, not realising what he was doing. *"This is whats she is likes."*

"She wills comes outs whens she calms downs," Lennan supported him.

Resolute he was not about to be manipulated, the fact the Shavani put up with her performance meant she was not going to change. Lonely individuals longed for contact, viewing Bane's youthful moods within that laughter. The more one pleaded, the happier they were. Taking a risk, the big Baltian followed without a word, suggesting he agreed with the calculated response.

"I will see you at the other end," Hanor called, ensuring she heard him.

"I nots understands," Lunar called, bewildered.

Smirking, Hanor appreciated the little fellow's reaction added to the drama. Waiting for a change to the shrills, upon reaching the slope, he grinned when the sound lowered. Making his way down, she would have to come down if she wanted to talk. Estranged mutters of the disbelieving Shavani were comical, but Hanor was determined. Marching the way they had come, avoiding the water, Rinar's light up on the small plateau was enough to light his way. Interested in the creaking laughter, it simmered to a quiet inquisitiveness.

Hopeful, Hanor continued towards the exit. Chancing another look over his shoulder towards the rocky hill, he gasped when spotting a short pale grey figure with gangly arms sliding down the slope and enter the water. Swimming after them, he did not waver, his gamble paying off. Rinar's light descended the rock, the other Shavani following, mutters of discontent echoing alongside shuffles of agitation.

Checking the waters, Hanor pinpointed her movements upon the polished slate of water, long spindly arms and a bobbing head loping along upon its smooth surface. Apprehension mixed well with a nervous hope, guessing what might develop. Supposing she was not dangerous, with Balkorn nearby, his courage strengthened.

Slaps on the water grew. She was gaining on them! Huge, lengthy strokes moved her form with ease. Assuming she intended to cut them off at the ridge, she drew level to their position. Tempted to run, he stayed the idea. This was what he wanted.

Reaching the narrow ledge, when searching for her again, he stalled. The dark waters were empty! Where had she gone? Disliking the prospect of getting caught halfway across the ledge, he waited, trusting she would need air soon. Long moments passed but still she did not appear. Disregarding the grumbling Shavani making their way back, where was she?

Daring a step onto the narrow stony ridge, checking the black inky water, he just hoped she wanted to talk as much as he did. Using that as a motivator, he continued across, pretending to be untroubled by the lurking dangers.

Passing the halfway mark, Hanor was wrong to think he was going to make it. Shrieking cries accompanied an explosion of noise in front, spraying him with water. Pulling up, a short pale grey slithery figure landed across his path. To his chin in height, the expected lady was far from that. Appreciating now why steps would not do, her legs were short stumps with large flapping feet. Torso longer than his own, what were once breasts sagged like folds of skin. No real telling if she was male, female or a half-breed between the two, she seemed unperturbed by her nakedness. Two tiny black dots on whitewashed eyes looked eerie, Hanor faltering.

Wide and sneering, a thin grin stretched across her rubbery features, pleased by the chase. Reaching up with one of her extensive skinny arms, a large pale knuckled hand wiggled fingers at him.

"You likes... whats you sees?" she screeched, slapping her feet playfully like a young child.

Recovering from her appearance, Hanor could now see why the Shavani Folk were wary, unsurprised when they came to a hesitant standstill at the edge of the ridge. Casting its soft white light over the obscure setting, Rinar seemed to hold his rod for protection. Answering her question, the sort any lonely person would ask, he supposed she was no fool. "I... I have never seen anyone... like you before."

"Nots as prettys as you likes... eh?" she said, reaching into the lake. Teasing, she splashed a handful of water at him. *"You likes funs...?"*

Surprised when she lifted her frame into the air, swinging between extended arms, he had not expected this. "I... like to play... when the time is right," he said. Unsure how to handle this, she hardly seemed capable of knowing deeper issues to life.

Spinning around on one arm, she let out a yip of delight as if accepted as a friend. *"Lonelys sometimes downs heres,"* she said, standing still again. *"Shavani nots likes me,"* she said, frowning at them.

Before they could respond, she span on one hand and dunked herself into the underground lake, only to return with an explosion of water. *"Lots ofs creatures plays ins theres,"* she said, reaching up again to Hanor's cheek.

Trying not to jump, she seemed as much a child as she was mad. A result of too much time on her own, her touch was icy. "I used to play in the water," he said, daring to relax now he was here. "But... there is much evil across The Freelands, and I am doing my best to help save it."

Unexpected, a round of shrills erupted, waddling on the spot as was her way. "*Darkness is essentials to lifes,*" she said, calming down. "*Darkness... kinds, hides things its does.*" Surprised by the wisdom, "Light is also kind, but you will not know living down here." Eyes narrowing, suspicious, "*You knows nots whys I ams downs heres.*" "Tell me why?"

The answer stood before him. She would not be accepted as she was. Wanting to hear her answer, compassion formed, her loneliness reflecting many who had no disfigurement but remained trapped inside themselves as if they had. Bane's moods of late was a classic example of how lonely a person could get. Often such people only needed a sincere moment to radiate light into their lives.

"*I likes you,*" she said to his surprise, touching his other cheek this time. "*We knows I woulds nots be likes ups theres anymore than I ams downs heres.*" Turning serious, reliving a distant memory, "*I useds to lives... ups aboves.*"

Saggy chest expanding as if a deep-seated pain dwelt there, Hanor was amazed at how quickly this had turned around. Glad to have come, even if she could not offer anything, living here alone and unloved moved him. "Where *did* you live?"

Checking his motives first, she burst into laughter, waddling like a dizzy animal as if to avoid the intimate question. Dunking herself into the water, her strength was impressive, launching herself back onto the ridge without effort. "*You tells me wheres you lives,*" she ordered, prodding his chest with a lengthy finger.

"I live in a place called Manson. It is a long way from here."

A frown creased her forehead, considering the answer. Scratching her head, her eyes went wide in recognition. "*Bys lakes... ins souths?*" she said, celebrating with a squeal of delight. Spinning again on one arm, she used a bulge of rock this time as a springboard to plunge back into the water.

Expecting her to bounce right back, Hanor waited, worried when the lake went still. Looking to where the ledge ended and the wider walkway beyond, he wondered if she was testing him to see if he would flee. An eruption of water in front secured that notion.

Dripping with a beaming grin, the misshapen lady seemed pleased. "*I sees Mansons ins the lakes,*" she said, pointing at the water, waddling on the spot.

"How did you see?" he asked, surprised.

Standing still, judging if he might indeed be a trusted friend, she waved a large hand for him to draw near, suspicious of Balkorn and the other Shavani who stood watching from the sidelines. Hanor ignored her pungent odour and leant forward.

"*I sees things... ins the lakes,*" she whispered. "*Lots ofs things. Lifes ands deaths, futures and pasts. These waters ares specials. Grants longs lifes fors me.*"

Reaching around his shoulders, a chill shuddered him. Rubbing the back of his neck, Hanor kept his nerve, hopes for answers amplifying with this developing friendship. Smiling at the notion, she deserved nothing less.

Checking nobody was prying, she carried on like a child. "*Mansons..., I sees wheres you lives. Downs theres, whens I swims, mys eyes ares opens to wonderfuls things. No*

needs fors me to lives ups theres.” Pointing at the cavern roof, she proceeded, eager to share her secret. *“I sees darkness likes you says, buts I sees lights alsos. Funs..., much funs you haves ups theres.”*

Shocked by that last statement, he could see how her childishness might see wars as a game. “People are dying up there. It is not a game.” His efforts were more than a pastime. Thinking about his lost companions, “Can you see other things in there?”

Nodding, excited, she shuffled around and bent down to the water, holding the back of his neck and taking him with her. Signalling to Balkorn not to intervene, crouching, he leant forward. Shocked when realising she intended to dunk him under the surface, he managed a quick gulp of air as his head was dipped into the biting waters.

Shaken by the extreme cold, his skin sizzled as if from an icy burn. Numb, he dared to open his eyes, not expecting to see anything. Nearly choking at the resplendent colours on display, lights at the bottom of the lake merged as if moved by an underwater current. Desiring to stay down longer, but mortality declared otherwise. Requiring air, but her firm grip would not lessen, unaware that he needed to breathe. Trying to pull himself up, her clasp was too strong, flashing in panic that he was going to drown. Struggling, when grabbed and heaved out, coughing and spluttering, calculated slaps on the back helped, Balkorn coming to his rescue.

“How are you?” Balkorn asked, concerned.

“Fine..., now anyway,” he said, strong pants escaping through blue lips.

“She is insensitive to your needs,” the Balt warned.

“Thank you for being here,” Hanor said, astonished the mysterious lady was still bent over immersed in the lake. “I saw colours down there.”

Pitch waters showed no signs of life or colour. Aware of the latent possibilities in water, it did not surprise Balkorn. His Sage had shown him numerous marvels to which water could be used, one as a tool to cut stone. “She is very intriguing,” he said, just as she lifted her head out and rose to meet them, innocent of any charge.

“Dids you likes whats you sees?” she posed, forgetting her secrecy. She was not even panting for breath.

“What were they?” Hanor asked, back to his normal self. His face felt deadened.

“We sees into others worlds, ands times ands places. You likes, yes?” she said, pleased at sharing her personal world with him. Waddling, she was eager to do it again.

“I saw lots of colours... what were they?”

Frowning, she rubbed a tapered jaw, puzzled. *“You nots sees peoples ands places?”*

“No..., just colours.”

“You wants to sees agains?” she asked, thinking he might not have seen correctly.

As marvellous as it was, he did not like the way it had to be viewed. “You tell me what you see,” he urged, an idea forming. “Can you see... Manter?”

Considering what it might be, she wiggled before diving into the water. Trying to be optimistic, Hanor waited, glancing behind to check on Rinar and the others. Holding his staff like a piece of safety apparatus, the glowing Orb helped beyond words. A short time passed before she reappeared.

“I sees Manters,” she said, like a rewarded pet. *“Bigs walls ands buildings. Nots nices, readys fors battles.”*

“Can you see Tarden?” he asked, hoping she just might be willing to find his friends. She disappeared and was quick to return. *“I likes bigs trees citys,”* she said, the details enough to convince him of her abilities.

Not brave enough to ask about his companions yet, a subtle fear of what she might find worried him. Respecting her innocence, he did not want to frighten her if it was ill news. Revelling in this contact, she was in no hurry to leave. “What about Tardoc?”

Staggering back as though he had slapped her, scrunching up her wrinkled features in pain as if reawakening old wounds, she faltered. Disbelieving he had asked her to do such a thing, the question why was in that last appealing gaze.

“What is it?” he called, but it was too late.

Turning, she threw herself into the icy water, the loud splash lumpy and inelegant. Appealing to his Baltian friend at what had happened, the Shavani Folk started moving along the ledge towards them. What had he said?

“This might be a times to go,” Rinar said, halting behind Balkorn.

“But why? I only asked her to look for Tardoc!”

“We saids she is mads,” Lunar said.

“No..., that is not good enough,” Hanor barked, their cowering posture irrelevant. “She seemed so hurt,” he said, thinking aloud. Not wishing to leave it like this, Rinar and the others edged by, their minds made up.

“We haves seens hers reacts likes this before,” Lennan explained. *“Tardocs is a sores points fors hers. Whens she is upsets, she wills nots speaks to anyones.”*

“But why, what happened there?” Irritated that they seemed too eager to get out of here, “I am not going!”

Ignoring him, Rinar reached the wider path and continued back towards where they had first entered.

Annoyed, Hanor was still bemused at how quickly it had collapsed. Tempted to jump into the lake to find her, it was a ridiculous idea, but he could not let it go, not like this. Needing to find out about his companions, but that was a side issue. Compassion stayed his exit as deeper shadows closed in. Rinar and the others had disappeared behind an outcrop of rock, shutting out the light. Only Lunar stood imploring him to move before he too left.

Talking to the silhouetted Baltian, Hanor could not move. “We cannot just go.”

“We are restricted to our circumstances,” Balkorn said, candid. “You must choose for yourself what is best. I would at least make my way back to the end of the lake. You can decide from there.”

Appreciating his point, the lake was still, traces of Rinar’s light fading. Unable to see her abode from here, she may have already reached it.

Solemn, Hanor strode off the ledge and followed around to where their guides had gone. What could be so traumatic about Tardoc to cause a reaction like that? She had said she had come from above, probably rejected by her people, she had also mentioned about her long life. How long ago had this happened?

Careful not to drift too close to the lake, he dared to hope she was following underwater. Strangely appealing, her deformities irrelevant, he did not want to leave.

Rinar’s light gradually rose and arced around towards their entry point. Time was running out. Slowing as the end of the lake neared, Hanor was angry at their guide, so

impatient. Stopping at the edge of the water, its outline running away towards the other side, across the virtual blackness there were no signs of her. If he did not do something, this was about to end.

“I... AM... SORRY!” he called out, unashamed, startling everyone.

Halting in their tracks, his voice echoed around the vast cavern. Apart from throwing himself in, what else could he do? Crouching at the edge of the lake, imploring her to come, he ran his fingers through the water hoping she might detect it, the chilly bite secondary. Still damp from his earlier dousing, he was cold but coping. Long moments passed, and again the light behind started moving towards that final platform. Balkorn stood close by, vigilant. Strums on Hanor’s heart did not want him to leave, but he could not stay here forever.

About to rise, he gasped when a white knuckled hand slowly rose out of the water, tenderly clasping his. In that delicate moment, he might have cried if he had been on his own. Her cold touch mirrored that of the icy water, but he held it as a lifeline. She needed him as much as he did her, pledging to one day return.

Emerging through the pitch, the pale lone figure climbed from the depths. Watchful of him, black dots stared, water droplets cascading down her rubbery skin. Affectionate, Hanor helped her out. Checking his sincerity, a slim smile cut into her cheeks, establishing a friendship that would last.

Unsure how to respond, Balkorn called for Rinar to wait, but Hanor was unconcerned, fascinated by the rare creature standing before him. Tuning into her feelings as though they were his own, similar to the exchange with Tooty Roe at Mandurin, it felt natural and absorbing. Not letting go of her hand, she was sharing his warmth. Unique, he wanted to hold her but refrained, not wishing to scare her off again.

“*You likes me... alots,*” she stated, seeing it as real.

Agreeing, “I do not like to see people on their own.”

“*Me nots ons mys owns nows,*” she said, smiling.

Hardened gums were laid bare, but the young man from Manson was unfazed, only seeing the purity of her heart. “No, you will never be alone again.”

Yipping in delight, she leapt back into the lake, long gangly arms flapping as she went. Tinged by regret, Hanor wished he had been brave enough to give her a hug. Laughing when she broke from the water again, she was back to her childish self.

“*I likes you a lots,*” she exclaimed, those up on the rise able to hear her. Spinning on one arm, she stopped and tickled his chin. “*Me glads you comes.*”

Triggering in Hanor the reason why he was here, astounded by this encounter, he could not risk anything other than what he needed to know. Explaining about his companions, she listened carefully, shuffling on the spot.

“These people are my friends also,” Hanor finished.

“*Yours friends... mys friends,*” she said, spinning before vanishing with a splash.

Nervous now more than at any other time, believing she might be able to find them, it did not matter how, he just wanted the results.

“I commend you, Hanor,” Balkorn said from behind.

Not seeking praise, “I just hope they are safe,” he said, drained.

“We have not seen the last of them yet.”

“Let us hope we have seen the last of the beast that attacked us,” Hanor said, quietly intrigued to what *it* looked like.

Balkorn did not respond for his own reasons.

Taking longer than hoped before the white figure appeared from the depths, but for whatever reason, the happy frivolous person of before had gone as though she had stared death in the face. Sombre, lifting herself out of the water, Hanor feared the worst. Dim eyes stared right through him as if something tragic had occurred. Dragging her arms along the ground, she trudged around in a small circle, seeking strength to cope. Disorientated, any attempts by Hanor did nothing to pull her out of the trance. Sadness trembled the corners of her mouth.

“What... did you... see?” Hanor asked, careful. Not receiving a response, he asked again. “Was it... not good?”

Shaking her head like a whimpering child, “*You goes froms heres, you leaves me behinds.*”

Concerned she had misinterpreted him earlier, surely she did not expect him to stay. “I have to go and help my friends.”

“*You nots seeks friends,*” she whined. “*You seeks things... ins the grounds.*”

Startled she knew, glancing behind at Balkorn, Hanor did not know what to make of it. “I have to do what I can to help save The Freelands.”

Unexpected, she stopped and stared. “*Nots saves The Freelands, you helps the Maker.*”

No idea what she meant, he had never heard of the *Maker*. “What... do you mean?”

“*You frees things ins grounds so Maker is happys. You wills nots comes backs fors me.*”

Supposing she had seen into the future, “Why will I not come back?”

“*You goes ands leaves The Freelands. You nots needs me anymores.*”

He would leave The Freelands! The idea seemed ridiculous. Where would he go. “I do not intend to leave The Freelands.”

“*I sees futures..., you wills go ifs you chooses the rights paths.*”

“Right path?”

“*Twos choices..., Tardocs... or Pools ofs Lights. Ifs you makes rights choices, you wills leaves me. Ifs wrongs, you wills dies buts stays withs me.*”

Lost to her meaning, *Pool of Lights* or *Tardoc*; the fact she had mentioned the city was perplexing after her earlier reaction. What was she talking about? “If I die... I will stay with you, I do not understand.” Upset, her whole countenance sagging, “Tell me what you mean?”

Wiping the tears as if they were alien to her, she did not want to look at him. “*You musts goes,*” she said, pointing up to where Rinar and the others stood watching. “*You musts chooses yours paths soon ors alls wills be losts.*”

What had she seen? “I thought you were looking for my friends, did you not see them?”

After a brief pause, she answered, still solemn. “*I nots always ins controls ofs whats I sees. I dids nots sees yours friends, buts theys ares nots ins these hills. Deads animals..., buts...nots friends.*”

“Where did they go?”

Shrugging like a moody youngster, she slouched to the ground and lay on her side, head lolling on a lanky arm. “*You goes, you musts..., fors muchs mights be losts. You finds me ones mores times ands I ams happys. I cans rests nows knowings this.*”

Disliking her tone, acting as though she *was* surrendering her life, how was this possible? Kneeling beside her, there was so much he wanted to ask. “This does not make sense. I have found you one more time, what does that mean? Why are you like this?”

A grin crossed her lips at his sincerity. As imprisoned as she had become in her own dark world, the veil of her ignorance had been lifted by what she had seen. Too painful to fully comprehend, but now at least she knew her time had come.

“I useds to lives ins Tardocs,” she began as if her tale needed telling even if only once. *“Longs lifes I haves liveds. Manys memories gones ofs thats times..., buts somes stays. I was borns withs shorts legs, ands my parents dids nots likes me. Manys peoples laughs ands teases, ands I was so lonelays. I runs aways to the hills. Hurts was I bys mys conditions, buts I founds this places bys accidents ands grews to loves its. Its has beens my homes ands mys... tombs. I wanteds to forgets ands nearlays dids, buts the waters ares special... ands looks afters me. You ares my firsts friends in heres,”* she touched her breastbone. *“Mys times has comes nows thats I haves founds you mys friends.”* Peering up to where the Shavani waited, she smiled again at Hanor. *“You friends ins heres,”* she repeated, as if it meant everything to her.

Head whirling, Hanor did not know what to make of it. “Why are you... lying down, you are not ill?”

“You makes me better nows. You makes better... in heres.” Tapping her chest again, she inhaled slowly, her strength failing.

“This is ridiculous!” Hanor stormed, not accepting it. “You cannot die just because you have found a friend. I will not let you.”

Chuckling, shaking her head on her arm, *“I ams nows alives because ofs you, buts you nots sees its. You haves to go ands lets me rests. I ams happys nows. You haves choices to makes... nots me. Mys illnesses ares gones.”*

“Do you... not want to live?” Outside the High-house of Mandurin, he had seen a man die, his Soul leaving his body to find its peace. Accepting that, but this was different.

“You musts go mys kinds friends,” she implored this time. Her childish ways were no longer present, respecting her end gracefully.

Hanor began protesting only to find Balkorn reaching forward, resting a giant hand on his shoulder. “We must learn to accept when it is time to let go.” Without force, he eased Hanor to his feet. “She is well at last Hanor, you can see that. She has lived for a very long time like this. She knows best if her time has come.”

“Why do I feel like this then?” he whimpered, wiping a tear.

“Because this is both a sad... and happy moment,” the Baltian explained, her eyes closing. “Her pain here ends..., that is something to be joyful about.”

Nearly as painful as the loss of his brother Nole, Hanor allowed Balkorn to turn and guide him back towards the slope and the awaiting Shavani Folk. Leaving the pale, shadowy figure lying on her side, she was again all alone.

Sighing at the loss when the newcomers disappeared into the rock face, darkness closed in, feeling a chill for the first time in an age. Rolling over, she looked at her special lake one more time. Consumed by this underworld cavern, the insights she had gained on her last dive had cleared away much of her ignorance. Shocked at who she was and had been previously to this life had burnt away the illusion of her childlike self.

The young man's love had permitted the Light to break through the hardness surrounding her heart. Not seeing her hideousness as she and everyone else did, it had been the beginning of her long awaited healing.

Traumatised in her previous life about the loss of her loved one, those negative vibrations had generated her deformities for this life such as her grief. Now though, the love she so dearly missed had returned to free her from her self-inflicted bondage. Strengthened by his courage, to lose him for good this time hurt, but she had to let go for love's sake. Closing her eyes, peace settled Shoona, her final breath passing.

Chapter 9 : Distrustful Minds

Resting in his own room, Hanor was not in the mood for company. After the incredible events earlier, he still could not accept the old lady had lain down to die. Rays of love for her were still pulsing. Living such a lonely existence, if Balkorn was to be believed, at least her suffering was over.

Saddened but fascinated, he was still bemused by her statements. Declaring he would have to choose between Tardoc and a place called the *Pool of Lights*, moreover, who or what was this *Maker* he was supposed to be helping? ‘*You must go or all might be lost*’ she had urged. Shuddering at its possible implications, he had never given failure much thought, just getting on with it instead. Frustrated that his companions were no longer in the Irdahills either, what was he and Balkorn to do next? Lacking answers, the walls to his room seemed two parts duller, a shadow settling across his purpose.

Undercover of a Woodell Tree, Tarmon and the remaining members of the group made camp. On the horizon, jutting peaks of the Treman Mountains were just visible through the haze. A long way off, Tardoc was another couple of turn’s run beyond that. Shattered from a hard day’s lope, questions haunted every thought as night closed in.

“A large Nassap Loe for me,” Hallen teased through the aches. Putting the loss of his Kyboe behind him, he clasped Kifter by the shoulders. Refusing to be drawn to what happened to Tarmon that morning, what he did not like was Casvern Tarn’s resultant attitude, his comments suggesting mistrust.

“Will that be with greens my dear Hite?” bantered the Fife. Lighting the fire, Kifter had qualms about Tarmon’s episode, but trusted their leader would explain when ready.

“Of course,” jostled Hallen, slumping to the ground. “With a snippet of spice in the stirring if you will.”

“It would bring shame on my name if I were to forget such a thing.”

Dusk arriving, there was just enough time to cook something hot. Exhausted, the atmosphere tight, tiredness added to the pressures of failure.

“Kifter...!” Raldama hissed, pointing at a nearby bush.

A small Rasser seemed intrigued by the fire, poking its head out from under the small bush. The Fifanian was quick to act.

“How are you coping, Bane?” Tarmon asked, catching the boy before slumber did. Satisfied after eating Kifter’s flavoured Rasser, aware of everyone’s desire to know what happened earlier, the Tardanian needed to check something first.

“I... I... am managing,” Bane replied, forced to look up just to stay awake.

“The loss of Hanor must be especially hard for you.”

“Now is not a good time to talk,” Greema protested at their leader’s insensitivity. Preferring to know what happened at dawn, this was just another distraction.

Signalling for patience, Tarmon asked again. “Bane...?”

“Er... yes, it is,” Bane said, feeling awkward. Greema was right, he was not in the mood. Monitoring the boy’s detachment over recent turns, and not just since Hanor’s disappearance, Tarmon’s encounter that morning was behind this enquiry. “Trauma generates many ills, and talking about it can ease our troubles.”

Just wanting to go to sleep and hide from all the destructive thoughts, Bane could not see past the next moment let alone other issues. Missing Hanor, and with Hayla's obvious interest in Casvern Tarn, there was nothing left to live for. Self-condemnation was again his companion. If he had reacted as he should have then things could have been different. Too frightened to go to Hanor when that beast had struck, if he had, Hanor may not have been taken. A weak argument, but one to reinforce the grey mood, yawning, he could barely keep his eyes open.

"You need to listen to your own advice," Tarn interjected, still waiting for Tarmon's account of what happened to him.

Again, the Tardanian encouraged patience. "Have you felt anything strange, Bane..., or found your thoughts drifting?"

Grumbling his displeasure at such an unusual question, but Greema permitted the young man to speak.

Unexpected, the question triggered a sour glance at Hayla, betraying Bane's feelings. So easy to blame her for much of this turmoil, throughout the turn he had wanted to call out to the *Voice* and plead for his fortunes to return. Too frightened to do so, what a wreck he was. "Not really," he lied, wanting to be left alone to his sulking.

Taken aback at the boy's temporary glare at Hayla, was jealousy his problem? "Have you experienced a presence of any kind, feelings that are unnatural?"

"What do you mean?" Bane's thoughts went blurry as if caught out. Protective of his sanity, discussing the *Voice* would be admitting he had lost his mind. Wanting to believe the *Voice* might be able to help him, irrelevant how selfish that was, he just wanted this to end and go home.

"It is difficult to describe, Bane," Tarmon apologised. "But... sometimes thoughts and feelings can seem as though they are not your own."

"Are you influencing him with your own madness?" Greema said, disliking this.

"The wind carries many voices," Tarmon said, undeterred. "Some tempt us away from ourselves. Believe me, I know."

"Is that what happened this morning?" Tarn was quick to ask.

"An evil presence came at me earlier, a presence that I believe was *Gorl-darl*."

"I find that very hard to believe," Greema rejected the notion.

Casvern Tarn however, had no problem with it. "What did *he* want that deserves so much secrecy?"

Pausing long enough to take stock of what he was prepared to reveal, having shared the details with Shanene as soon as she had awoken, her assurance that she had not been contacted had appeased Tarmon for a time. Nevertheless, it still concerned him how vulnerable she was, even though her powers far exceeded his own. "*He* likes challenges." "Challenges...!" The Grovian struggled to contain the laughter.

"You may laugh Greema, but with respect, your views have little value here. The truth is, *he* pried into my personal life, gaining great satisfaction at the intrusion. You would not want to experience such an invasion, for your weakness does it reveal. I am sorry for not talking sooner, but it shook me, and I knew not how to deal with it."

"Forgive me too, Tarmon," Tarn said, at fault for the underlying hostility generated during their journey. "I was insensitive. I just know what our enemy is capable of."

"And you fear Bane might be under such influences?" Hallen asked.

"I am just trying to help," Tarmon said. "This method of attack needs guarding against."

Hoping Bane would reassure them he was fine, but when looking at the boy, Tarmon sighed. He had fallen asleep. Chin resting on his chest, Greema laid him down.

"I did tell you this was not the time," the Grove warned, pleased everything was out in the open.

"Sometimes..., we need to be sure before commenting," Tarmon said, ending the debate.

A gentle shake on the shoulder roused Hanor, surprised to see the hesitant gaze of Lunar staring back. "What is it?"

The room appeared lighter as if dawn had entered this strange realm at last. Hungry, a tray of bulbs and roots were on the floor beside him, so too a cup of water.

"*Eats..., eats..., yes?*" the little fellow encouraged bending down.

Sensing more to Lunar now, Hanor reached for the food. "What short-turn of day is it?"

"*Its is ofs the mornings aboves,*" the little fellow answered. Timid at what to say, the young man had caused another stir amongst the Shavani Folk. "*Yours friends Balkorns is ups ands looks ats ours homes.*"

Still aggrieved by what he had witnessed with the old lady, a strong urge to get out of this underground world and head for Tardoc prompted the need for his gilth pouch. "I have to see Rinar."

"*Theys woulds likes to sees you too..., Hanors ofs Mansons,*" Lunar said, as if troubled.

"Why...?"

Irritable, the small fellow glanced behind at the entrance for listeners. Confident they were on their own, "*Hows dids you knows... abouts the mad ones, the olds ladys?*"

"What do you mean?"

"*She comes to you ins lakes. Hows do you knows she woulds? Whys dids she treats you likes she dids?*"

Presuming he thought he had special powers, the reality was less dramatic. "I treated her as a person. When I saw her, I realised she was no different to us. Behind her outer form, she is like me and you."

"*Buts... she likes you so muchs?*"

"Do you like me, Lunar?"

The question startled him. "*Yes..., I likes you. Buts... I nots understands you.*"

"I do not understand myself sometimes," he laughed.

The small fellow looked down at the plate of food, thoughtful. "*You weres so... braves.*"

The comment stopped Hanor from eating, curious. For someone so mature in seasons, to be afraid seemed unbecoming. A rush of insight explained why. "Your people have spent too long down here. It is not a healthy way to live. Every new encounter creates fear that leaves you hesitant and directionless. You struggle to deal with them. The safe walls you have constructed around yourselves are as much a prison as they are a barrier for your protection. These are beginning to crumble, and believe it or not... that is a good thing."

Peering up and around at the chamber walls, Lunar understood. For so long his people had kept themselves apart from life above ground, choosing to carry out their work without complaint. Now, he could see the fear such isolation generated.

Hanor interrupted his troubled thoughts. "In the past, would your people have helped Balkorn and me like you did?"

A pang of shame flickered across his aged, pale features. *“Ours peoples... works towards balancing the energies of The Freelands. We used to consider ourselves important, too important to get involved with peoples above grounds. It is only lately that some of us have felt the need to help. Some still do not want to... but many do. It is why your arrival has caused much debate.”* Looking away in disgrace, he was not proud of how his brethren had behaved of late.

Hanor smiled. “At least your people are trying to wake up.”

“Wakes... ups?”

“To be part of life here in The Freelands.”

“We want too, but do not like making mistakes.”

“I do not know anyone who likes to get things wrong,” Hanor said, appreciating why these people continued to dither. “But if fear stalls you, then you might as well stay down here and rot. Sometimes, the most thrilling parts to life are when we just get on with it. In some ways, you are not too dissimilar to me, Lunar. Your heart is trying to break out but your fears pin you back.”

Finishing his plate of food, Hanor left his tense friend to work it out. Planting seed thoughts would permit Lunar to come to his own conclusions, hoping there might be a leader in the making. “It is time your people gave me back my gilth pouch so me and Balkorn can be on our way.”

Halfway along the main hall of the Shavani Realm, Hanor halted, pleased to see his big Baltian friend sitting on the floor inside the entrance to one of many cave-like chambers. Leaning against the wall, he was talking to someone further in. Laughing and in high spirits, Hanor was glad to see it. Strolling over, Lunar huffed when having to follow. The young man from Manson hoped his big friend was well enough to get going.

“How are you this morning?” Balkorn asked, without even looking.

“You are as observant as you are wise,” Hanor said, reaching the entryway and peering in. The chamber was long, narrow and well lit. A small figure stood by a grooved wall populated with scrolls and books searching for something.

“This is... Seary of the Doon,” the Balt introduced the Shavani.

“Nice to meet you,” Hanor said, noting she was a female, and aged like most of these people. Wondering why there was no one of normal parenting age here, and no children either, he had no idea how these people came to be.

“I have heard much about you..., Hanor of Mansons,” Seary said, holding an ancient looking document. *“You and Balkorn here have been a blessing.”*

“We did not expect this,” Hanor said. The urge to move was strong.

“Seary has been explaining her people’s history,” Balkorn said, unrushed, unlike his young counterpart.

“That sounds interesting, how are *you* feeling?” he asked, getting straight to it.

Reading his intentions, “I am ready when you are.”

Relieved his companion looked well, Hanor only had the gilth pouch to retrieve and then they could get started. The fact they had no Kyboes or supplies was secondary, opting to live off the land if the Shavani were unwilling to help.

“Balkorn was just asking... what the Pools of Lights was,” Seary said, glancing up from the page.

Intrigued only because the old lady had mentioned it, “What is *it*?”

"Its is a sacreds places... unders the Tremans Mountains."

"And what is so special about this *Pool*?"

Raising an eyebrow, *"Powers of the mountains... collects ins the Pools. Verys strongs... ands verys brights. Prettys beyonds words ands symbols. Somes heres woulds nots likes you to go theres."*

"Why would I want to?"

"Powers likes whats is ins you is theres," Seary said, pointing at his chest.

"Where is this *Pool* in the Treman Mountains?"

Before she answered, Rinar of the Doon, Forar and Weemel - one of the healers of Balkorn, approached. Others he did not know were with them. On a mission, Rinar appeared stern, holding the staff proud to establish his authority over the others. No sign of his gilth pouch anywhere, at least Hanor would not have to go look for them. More Shavani stood and watched from the upper levels at the unfolding drama.

Rinar stopped a few paces in front. *"We haves beens waitings fors yours awakenings,"* he said, stalling when the big Baltian rose like a mountain. *"We seeks to knows whats you intends to chooses?"*

Supposing he was talking about Tardoc and the *Pool of Lights*, quick witted, Hanor made the most of it. "Give me my gilth pouch and then I will tell you."

Mutters swept the hall, still not understanding the potential powers surrounding this young man.

"We cans nots do thats easilys. Such powers nots goods to be lets looses ins The Freelands."

"By a mere boy you mean?" Hanor snapped a little too sharp.

Getting used to the unpredictable nature of the young man, Rinar just needed to know what he was going to do. *"Powers likes these... we works withs ins smalls moderations. Whats comes froms insides the pouchs is beyonds evens whats we uses. We senses its historys ands its potentials..., yet we do nots knows whats things this is ors whys."*

"Do you not sense the power of creation in *it*?" Hanor fired back, disregarding their timid reaction. "Did you not listen to my tale of what such powers achieved? *It* seeks not to burn... but to lighten, to bring goodness and unity to the world. I am a mere vessel to which the *powers* flow through. When I attacked the *Nyshifters* I actually failed. The desire to do harm blocks the *powers* from igniting." Steadying himself, this had been building for a long time. "Listen to me! I am not the intelligence behind the *power*!"

He did not mean to shout, but he had to find a way to get through. Unsurprised by their cowering, he lowered his voice. Speculating this *Pool of Lights* was precious to them, like the lake was to the old lady, there was so much potential in them it hurt.

"We intend to go to Tardoc," he said, indicating Balkorn. "That was where we were heading before the attack. I am hoping our companions have gone there too. I am not going to this *Pool of Lights*. I saw lights in the lake of the old Lady, but that is all. What we seek is at Tardoc." Reaching the crunch point, the silence was thick as if the very walls were listening. "I implore you to give me back the pouch, and trust that the *Powers* only flow if my motives are pure. That *Stone* has a purpose, and it is with me not you." Ending, Hanor thought he had run out of frustration, the ensuing silence awkward.

"Gives hims... the pouchs," a familiar but unexpected voice broke the quite.

Disbelieving it, Hanor was speechless as the committed figure of Lunar stood at his side. Touched that he was daring to make a stand, Rinar looked horrified, gasps of disbelief hissing around the cavern.

“Gives him the bags... ors you wills haves me to deals withs,” Lunar said, stepping beyond his limits to see wisdom triumph. Raising a hand when Rinar was about to speak, his message was a medicine they had to hear. *“We fears too muchs ands dithers ins debates agains ands agains. We talks ands talks ands does nothings. Is this whats we wants? Where’s wisdoms ins hesitancys and delays? Manys ofs you dids nots wants to helps Balkorns ands Hanors heres fors fears ofs theirs influences. Buts we dids... because its was the rights things to do. Nows we ares faceds withs thats calls agains... buts whats wills we decides?”* Like a man on a mission for the Sacred, he challenged Rinar. *“Thats pouchs does nots belongs to us, gives its backs.”*

Pride binding him, Rinar stood his ground. Concealed inside his gown, the gilth pouch and its contents remained a mystery, failing to unravel it. Respecting much of what had been said, but he was terrified of those *powers* being abused. Even though Hanor had proven to be of extraordinary character and worthy of the Sacred’s blessing, his decision to go to Tardoc and not the *Pool of Lights* would appease many but not all. Lunar’s outburst reflected the growing numbers of Shavani willing to do more against the evil.

About to reach for the pouch, he stalled, another doubt whispering in. What if Hanor changed his mind? What if his curiosity got the better of him and he went to the *Pool of Lights*? If he was not as true as he thought he was then much damage could result. Leaving only one option, he would have to go with them. A trip to the *Pool of Lights* was a seasonal trip anyway, to go early was reasonable under such tight conditions.

Reaching inside his gown for the pouch, mutterings of anguish flushed the hall. Its smooth texture hid well the mystery inside. Holding it tight, Lunar was right, *it* did not belong to them, *it* belonged to no one and everyone.

“You go... to Tardocs?” he asked, needing reassurance.

Hanor nodded, keeping his gaze even.

“The Pools ofs Lights... is ins the sames directions as Tardocs, ands somes ofs us haves to goes to the Pools. Cans we joins you ands parts ats the appointeds times? You go to Tardocs..., we goes to Pools ofs Lights?” Holding the pouch as a bargaining tool, murmurs of acceptance from the doubters approved of his request.

“If you give me the gilth pouch, I would welcome your company. You seem to forget that we are on the same side.” Surprised at the offer, but if it meant them rising out of this underground hole, then who was he to say no. Wondering why they feared he might go to the *Pool*, he just wanted to find his friends and the fourth *Pillar of Life*. Recalling the power of the rod and how it had manipulated the soil, could they use it to help get him inside the city, if it was still standing that is? *“Rinar, you are welcome to come,”* he said, at last receiving the pouch.

Catching her breath when looking into the fountain, Shanene protected her thoughts from Tarmon knowing his response. Grotesque features of those carrying fire-torches at Selmor’s borders were alarming, counting over a hundred damnable Gorls. Summoning oils to rise within the trees to saturate any fires to come, but would it be enough? A direct result of her beloved Tarmon’s brief encounter with *Gorl-darl*, she had not foreseen this. Staring into the waters at her feet, this was awful.

Concentrating on the large walled archway in front, Rinar and the others got ready to move. Gathered towards one end of the main cavern, a crowd of Shavani Folk waited to see them off. Banging his staff three times on the floor, the ensuing chant held great power. Vibrating through the rock, the translucent *Orb* burst into a flame of white light. Settling as it had prior to their journey to see the old lady, Hanor waited for the force field to encompass their small group. Comforted that Balkorn was standing behind, so too the brave Lunar and his close friend Emnee, Forar and Lennan were in front alongside another Shavani called Miln of the Doon. Persuaded to travel this way, even though he longed for sunshine and the soft splatters of rain on his face, the threats running rampant above ground had convinced Hanor this was the wisest way. Viewing the stars would have to wait for another time.

Doubts about Balkorn's readiness had only been partially allayed by the determined Balt. Attempting to chain Balkorn to a promise that he would say if he was tiring, but the big fellow had rejected his plea. Just pledging to give his all, it was not what Hanor had wanted to hear. Guilty himself for being over keen to get going, he could only pray his friend would last.

Relieved when Rinar set off, the wall giving way like water as the invisible energy field softened the rock, the other Shavani nearby did not wave or cheer, staring as if they were just going for a stroll through the hills. Lacking emotional affection towards each other, sad to see, but Hanor had already given up on trying to figure them out. Missing his companions, Bane most of all, a hug from his mother would not be misplaced. Once again in the hands of others more capable, Hanor reached inside his jacket to the gilth pouch - the fifth time since regaining it from his uneasy hosts. Still unsure if the *Stone* worked, at least the enemy could not sneak up on them and put it to the test. Presuming they would eventually pass beneath the High-bridge and its aggressive occupants, the more he considered it, the more he approved of travelling like this. Now all he had to do was convince these people to take him inside Tardoc to find the fourth *Pillar of Life*.

Chapter 10 : Carnage at the High-bridge

“What shall we do?” Kifter asked the rest of the group, suspicious of the setting.

Crouching behind a line of bushes across from the High-bridge, tracks from the Hunter meant *it* had crossed and was heading for Tardoc, concluding *it* was after the next *Pillar of Life*. Towards the latter parts of the fourth turn since the disappearance of Hanor and Balkorn, they were tired and not up for this. Through sporadic cloud, a peachy sun cast shadows across the undulating terrain. *Nyshifters* had not been heard, a strange reprieve considering their enemy knew of their whereabouts.

Expecting movement ahead, but all seemed quiet. Bodies lay near the entrance to the bridge as if slaughtered. More were across the river. A few were on the hilltop, adding further consternations to what had happened here. If they were Dortians, who had killed them, not the Hunter surely? Not much cover beyond this line of bush, if Dortians were still here they would be seen. Swimming across the Rapone River was equally bleak, especially with Boverns in the area.

“Can your lady friend check if it safe?” Hayla said to the kneeling Tarmon. Getting no response, their leader appeared to be in a trance like before.

Waiting for his beloved Shanene to respond, Tarmon knew something was wrong. Quiet all morning, when prompting her, she had asked him to concentrate on his own task and not worry. What was she protecting him from?

“Shanene..., what is it?” he asked in the privacy of his own thoughts. She could hear him, detecting tiny pulses of hurt running through her. “What is happening?” The immediate problem of the bridge was secondary.

“*I... am sorry,*” she finally answered, distressed.

“What are you hiding from me? What is going on?” Desperate to stay composed for her sake, another pause pained him.

“*Some have come... with fire,*” she whispered.

Swells in his heart urged him to go to her. “How bad is it?”

“*We have had fires in the past, but... not so many.*”

“How many?” he needed to know, ignoring the fact Hayla was trying to talk to him.

“*At least seventy,*” she said, wavering.

“Seventy!” One concern crossed his mind. “Is it *him*?”

Her pause spoke louder than words. “*I will... be all right.*”

“What can we do?” he asked, furious. “What about your garden, can they burn that too?”

Another pause before answering, “*The forces of Selmor are unpredictable when faced with extremities, I do not know how it will cope.*”

“Can you not stay in the garden?”

“*I do not know if it will be enough. There is much rotting wood inside Selmor since my deliverance, so it is difficult to say. I saturated the first few trees with oils which helped but now... there are too many.*” Every blaze felt like needles in her skin.

Vaguely aware of Kifter darting down the slope to the bridge, the fact Hayla was still trying to talk to him did not matter. Tarmon’s concerns were only for his beloved. If the garden survived then Selmor could grow again with her at its heart. He did not want to think of any other outcome. “Curse you *Gorl-darl,*” he spat the words aloud, surprising his companions. Even worse, she began closing down their mental link to protect him

from her pain. Enabling him to focus on his own tasks instead, it was the last thing he wanted. “No...!” he called, but to no avail. Her final words sung to him before she broke off their union.

“I love you.”

“What is he doing?” Tarmon asked, retracting from despair. Forcing his troubles aside, Kifter was crouching at a small bush halfway between them and the bridge.

Hayla and the others were still troubled their leader had not responded to their pleas. His curse and tearful expression meant something serious was up, but what?

“Are you all right?” Hayla posed, worried about the hint of sadness in his eyes. “Did you not hear us?”

“I am sorry, it will not happen again,” Tarmon replied. Not offering an explanation, the reason was too painful to address.

Monitoring Kifter scurry down and across to the first watchtower, the Fife checked the first dead body lying near the base of the raised roadway. Surprised when their friend beckoned them to follow, keeping low, they did as ordered. Kifter climbed up onto the main road of the bridge, stopping again when observing two more bodies just in front of the main towers. Soon disappearing between the two huge gates pinned back to the walls, where was he going?

Hissing when approaching the first dead body, to their relief it was a Dortian. Face down, unclear how he died, they crept up to the wall supporting the main road of the bridge. Climbing up the sturdy handrail lining its edge, the two dead Dortians on the road lay in pools of blood, dark and cold.

“Do you see the hole?” Raldama indicated. Only one creature was capable of inflicting such damage, the beast’s horn putting an end to both.

“Makes you question what we will do when we catch up with *it*,” Greema said, uneasy.

“All things have a weakness,” Casvern Tarn said, trying to stay upbeat.

Hayla gasped, pointing along the length of the bridge. Littered with lifeless bodies, all had fallen to the same fate as those at their feet. Two Kyboes had also been struck. Defying explanation when making their way forward, blood spattered across walls and the main doorways to the towers was of cruel design. A smaller wall atop curving stairs to the lower level was also painted by blotches of red, a wretched victim lying nearby. It was a massacre.

“Where is he?” Hallen groaned, trusting his Fifanian friend was below.

Hissing for quiet, “I can hear voices,” Tarmon whispered, preparing for an attack.

Coming from the curving stairwell, to their relief, the familiar sound of Kifter could be heard, but it was not his bronzed face they saw first. A young Dortian male ascended the stairs, hands tied behind his back. Kifter peered from behind like a conquering hero, sword at the ready.

“We have a surprise,” the Fife beamed. “Look what I found hiding in a cupboard.”

The young Dortian was trembling. Unfitting for such a fierce looking character, he was not much smaller than the Hite. Deep-set, dark eyes stared from beneath its helmet, familiar curving horns jutting from each side.

“Do you speak...?” Hallen said, clipping him around the head and tugging on one of his horns.

“Hey...! There is no need for that,” Hayla snapped, supported by Greema and Raldama. Bewildered by their response, “Are you serious...?” Nothing more than an animal, he deserved it. “You would not say that if he had a blade in his hand.”

“But he does not have one,” Greema stated.

“Then give him one,” Hallen urged. “Then see how he behaves.”

“He does not look the fighting type,” Hayla said, sensing mildness in the young Dortian.

“Give him a blade, and we will see,” the Hite repeated, glaring at their prisoner.

The Dortian looked down, his life in the balance. Dressed in the same black-grey attire with swirls of faded gold, his lower lip twitched, the dread apparent.

“See...!” Hayla exclaimed at his distress. “This is not a fighter.”

“Let us get rid of him before he becomes one.” Hallen’s displeasure was obvious. “Why are you defending him?”

“He was whimpering in a cupboard downstairs,” Kifter said, still holding him. “He has probably been there since that monster attacked.”

“Is there anyone else?” Raldama looked to the wide steps leading down.

“No..., just nine dead bodies,” the Fife replied. “They may be the first corpses this one has ever seen.”

The Dortian seemed to catch his meaning.

“Do you understand... what he is saying?” Hayla asked. Uncertain of their dialogue, she had never met one before.

Dark piercing eyes swept the group, unsure if it would be wise to speak. “We are taught... tongues of men... from... early age,” he said, nervous.

His voice sounded similar to Balkorn’s, rough and raspy, but there was a softness suggesting intelligence and sincerity. This was no animal.

“What are you doing invading these lands?” Hallen growled.

The Dortian cowered, expecting to be struck again.

Tarmon put aside concerns for Shanene to deal with it. “Is there anyone else here?”

Receiving only a shrug, “Is that because you do not know or do not want to say?”

Scared of the Hite, the Dort gulped. “I... I do not... know.”

“I searched the lower deck,” Kifter said. “There is no one else.”

“We should find somewhere less exposed to continue this,” Tarmon said, opting for caution, signalling for Kifter to lead them across the bridge.

“What do you propose we do with him?” Hallen was aghast they were taking him prisoner. “You are not going to let him live are you?” Left standing on his own as the others made their way, “This is outrageous!”

Avoiding the bodies, the smell pungent, the beast’s horn had inflicted terrible damage. This should have been them, so why had they been left alive at that camp?

“I see my opinion still does not have any worth,” Hallen moaned, catching up.

No one responded, searching the other end of the bridge for movement. Tense, their prisoner cooperated with every prompt. Reaching and passing through the other set of gates, more bodies were scattered, familiar markings of a dreadful slaughter. Some were amongst trees and bushes, and even up on the hillside. The massacre was extensive. Why, was the obvious question. Beneficial to their own path, but a nagging doubt remained. They were actually hunting the monster that did this.

Their prisoner kept quiet and seemed just as shocked as they were. Long dark shapes they had seen from the other side were bodies, broken and bloodied. Trying to flee, but brutally hunted down by that *thing*, a chill on the wind echoed their plight.

Climbing the rise, following the meandering tracks of the beast, reaching the first level to where the ground evened out for a period, only the odd corpse now lined the way. Pleased at the outcome, Hallen and Casvern Tarn did nothing to hide their satisfaction. Concerned only for when they caught up with the creature, no doubt ending up dead as well, it did not dampen their spirits.

For the remainder of the turn, they followed the beast's trail leading away from the main road. Settling back to *its* purpose, heading in the general direction of Tardoc, mountains loomed ahead. Re-fastening their prisoner's hands in front so he could run faster, their position on the rise was too open to question their captive now. Many would-be hunters might be lurking in these parts.

Crossing a wide but low stream running down from the mountains, they picked the trail up on the other side. Kifter judged the beast had passed this way early yester-turn, and was angling slightly north and not to Tardoc. Long and gradual, the hill took an age to climb. To their left, the sun hovered above the horizon, reds and peaches lighting up the dusk.

"We will run for as long as we can," Tarmon ordered, knowing once they stopped, he would sit and fret over his beloved Shanene.

Dropping below the horizon, the sun cast deep shadows, lines of red tinged cloud scratching across the sky. The trail turned again, heading for the northern side of the mountains rather than Tardoc. What was *it* up to?

Obedient, the young Dortian was determined not to upset his new masters. Only when they stopped for the night did any resistance occur.

"No..., not good. Trust..., you trust... yes?"

But it was too late. Unsympathetic, Hallen had to make his feelings known. Binding him to one of two small trees they were camping under, not everyone approved.

"He is not an animal," Hayla scorned.

"You will thank me for treating him so," Hallen said, undeterred.

Laying his mat a short way from where the Dortian sat, what he would give to see him try to escape. Ignoring the magnificent views across the lower plane, with its deep patches of green, yellow and purples where sunlight still managed to cast its rays, the irate Hite turned to confront his companions. "Can anyone tell me why we have brought *it* with us?"

"To know *him* is to know our enemy," Tarmon said, sitting down. Still waiting for confirmation from Shanene, this was difficult but necessary. "I do not slaughter without good reason."

"Try telling that to his people," Hallen snorted. "Do you think they would have let us cross the bridge? No, it would have been us lying face down in the dirt."

"This is dangerous territory," Kifter warned, suspecting Tarmon might end up infuriating the Hite enough for a sharp blade to fly in the Dortian's direction. "It can be a fine line between good and evil. Ask yourself Hallen, what are our motives here?"

"If his motives were honourable," Hallen fired. "He would not be invading our lands."

“True,” Kifter agreed. “But until we give him the freedom to speak, we can only assume they are evil. There may be other reasons.”

“As if he is going to tell us what they are.”

“Give him a chance and we will see for ourselves,” the Fife stated. Respecting the difficulty his friend was having, if Hallen chose to take the Dortian’s life, he doubted anyone could stop him.

Leaning closer, Hallen looked long and hard at the petrified Dortian. Light failing, casting eyes into thick shadow, the young fellow no longer appeared quite so innocent, tempting him to finish this. Grabbing the lad’s jaw, expecting that flicker of evil to prove his killer instinct, but no such glimmer occurred. Leaving the Hite no choice but to give him a chance, he pulled the strip of material from his mouth.

“What are your people doing here?” he challenged. There was no mistaking the tone. Stretching his mouth, the young captive had not drunk for nearly two turns of the day. Daring not to ask for water, he tried to reply as best he could. “There be different... meanings... why people... here,” he said, coughing from the dryness of his throat.

“What do you mean?” Hallen asked, adopting the position of chief interrogator.

Darting a quick look at the others, the lad’s heart pounded for dear life. “Some... come for... reward. Others... forced to... without choice.”

“Without choice...!” Hallen found that hard to believe. “Everyone has a choice..., even you,” he said, poking his chest.

“You... not understand... our ways,” the Dortian defended. “Our leaders... teach... strong and mighty. No more... soft ways... no..., no more. Teach words, yes..., of knowledge, of language... but only for assault.”

“Assault...?” Kifter said this time. “You mean this invasion?”

“Yes..., this is... so.”

“But you used to trade with our people?” Tarmon said, recalling Dortians at Tarden when he was very young.

“We are... teached... no more trade,” he continued. Just following his instincts, he did not want to be part of this. “New teachers... come... teach new ways. Hard ways...,” he paused, searching for the right words. “Pleasure not good..., teach, no good pleasure... for us... here in north. Must go... south.”

“Do you mean... there is little pleasure for you in the north so you have come south to get it?” Hayla said, weighing his words.

“Yes... and... no,” he managed, seeking again the correct meaning. “I need not pleasures... here in south. My pleasure... reading..., in writing..., yes? No need... rich of south... like others.”

“You..., and others like you, do not even want to be here?” Hayla was astonished.

The lad nodded. “No fight..., no me,” he said, not daring to look at Hallen. “Others too..., yes..., no fight.”

“Then why did you not stay at home?” Hallen asked, disbelieving his companions might be falling for this trick of innocence.

“Frightened... also.”

“What do you mean?” the Hite grimaced, irritated by this exchange.

“They beat family.” Glistening eyes showed the pain. “Many times..., yes..., many times.” Lowering his head, not wanting them to see him cry, it was not the Dortian way.

Sensing the compassion amongst the others, Hallen still could not believe this. “Are you telling us your leaders forced you to come?”

The lad looked up, dark eyes cagey beneath a heavy brow. Slow and careful, he nodded. Bigger than all except Hallen, but his reactions were that of an intelligent young person caught up in someone else’s battle.

“Why do I not trust you then?” the Hite contested.

“You not... like me.”

“You are right there,” the Hite scoffed, unaffected by his appeal.

“But... you not... know me.”

“I do not want to get to know you either.”

“Why... not?”

Leaning right into him, Hallen growled. “Because your people have invaded our lands!” Swallowing hard, “I not... want your... lands.”

“Then I suggest you and your people leave these parts forever.”

The warning stopped the young Dortian. “You... not let... me go.”

“Because I do not believe you would leave. You would return and slay us in the night.”

“I die... hand of teacher..., I die... hand of you.” Sadness passed over the young Dortian.

No matter what he did, he was to be killed anyway, .

“Will your teachers kill you if you go back?” Kifter asked, disturbed.

“Here...,” he said, motioning with his head northwards. “There..., no matter..., dead.”

“Are your teachers not here in the south?” Tarmon tried. This was a revelation.

“No..., not here,” he said. “Come when... victorious, when... their *Master*... orders.”

“They will come when The Freelands has been defeated..., and when the *Dark One* orders them to?”

“Dark... One?”

“*Gorl-darl*,” Kifter said, but the name meant nothing to him. “Master,” he conceded, deducing they were talking about the same person.

“Come... victorious..., come... ordered..., yes, yes... so.”

Detecting no deception with what had been shared, all except Hallen thought it incredible.

“Are you falling for this...?” the Hite hammered, dismayed. Reaching over, he grabbed the lad’s helmet again. “You believe him?”

“Take your hands off!” Hayla warned, standing, aiming her sword at the Hite’s head.

“Let him go!”

Hallen’s grip remained tight, searching her intentions through the half-light. Dismissing Kifter’s glare, he brushed her sword away, letting go of the prisoner. “Do not do that again, Hayla,” he warned, sitting back.

Ensuring her companion was not about to do anything rash, Hayla sheathed her sword. Beside her, Casvern Tarn and Greema refastened their weapons.

“You deal with him then,” Hallen griped. In a huff, he got up and walked out to clear his head. “The air smells foul around here.”

Strained, the silence felt awkward. What were they to do with the Dortian?

Hayla broke the deadlock. “What do you think we should do with you?”

Pausing, he was watching the Hite. “My... name... Rorsal... of Dizan... err... Valley.”

His politeness took the others by surprise.

“And my name is... Hayla of Manter,” she said, responding to him. “We live a world apart from each other..., do you know that?”

“You... read?” Rorsal asked.

She nodded. “Sometimes.”

“Live... not so... apart.” Braving a careful smile for the first time, it helped.

Approving of this amiable Dortian, “He is not a fighter,” Hayla said, confident he was no threat.

“What should we do with you?” Kifter repeated the question.

The dark young fellow looked at them curious, the whites of his eyes glinting like precious stars. “Can... go... with you,” he said, causing a stir.

“Go with us?” Raldama exclaimed, undecided as to why. “There are many who feel just as Hallen does. It would be unwise.”

“You... hunt... err...?” Unable to think of the word, Rorsal growled and mimicked a monster.

Kifter’s searching of the ground and pointing to the occasional large footprint was how he knew. They could hardly deny it.

“What is it to you...?” The Fife said.

“Might... come back..., it kill,” the Dortian said, afraid when peering out into the dark.

“Not... good.”

“What do you think we will do when we find *it*?” Tarmon asked, intrigued.

Rorsal made a swishing sound of a cutting knife. “Kill... yes...? You... kill?”

“Do you know where that creature came from?”

The young Dortian thought about it. “Comes... out north. Teachers’ *Master*... makes *it*.”

“But their *Master* is who you are fighting for, which means *he* is *your* Master,” Tarn said.

“Not so... no... not so. Teachers... yes..., *his*. Not Rorsal..., not Dortians. Tricked... many... tricked.”

“What do you mean?” Greema asked, quietly fascinated. The fact his home was under attack meant he had little patience for this strange fellow. Nevertheless, some details did deserve respect. Willing to aid Hayla earlier was not for this Dortian, but an excuse to shut the Hite up. Tolerating each other, but at times like this, old hates were quick to rise.

“People come... rewards..., yes? Tricked... yes..., very tricked,” Rorsal explained, eyes wide and hopeful. “Read..., yes..., me read. Others... no..., no read..., so tricked. Me know truth... Tardania..., read, yes?” Squeezing his lips tight, he continued. “No speak... yes, no speak..., bash..., no speak.”

“Some were tricked into coming here?” Hayla said, piecing it together. “For the riches of the south, but you were not because you have read about Tardania. They forced you to keep quiet?” The impact was shocking.

“Others... read... too..., yes? More read... like me..., yes?”

“There are others in the same position.” Tarn queried. No Dortians had invaded Mandurin, but he sounded genuine.

Rorsal looked down, sombre. “Some read..., dead..., yes? Teachers bash. Use power..., yes.” A scraping noise sounded like a great storm. “Power..., yes...? Light..., whoosh.”

No one could deny his sincerity, not even Hallen. This conjured up the possibilities of a people either forced or tempted into war.

“How long has this been going on?” Hayla asked, sympathetic.

Sighing, Rorsal held his nerve. “Seasons..., many seasons... thirty, so... yes.”

Approximately the time their relationship with Tardania had ended, it was plausible.

Whilst the group pondered the details, Bane, who had been sitting listening, took his turn. Wanting to ask the Dortian since first seeing him, he leant forward from behind Casvern Tarn. "Did you see that creature with someone like me?" Quick to understand why they were chasing the beast, Rorsal could not lie. "Not... me." "Because he was too scared cowering in that hole," Hallen cut in, cold and unconvinced by his manner. "Whilst his animal friends were being destroyed." "Will you listen to yourself, Hallen," Kifter snapped, losing his temper. "Stop your sulking so that we can get to the bottom of this!"

Not often did his small friend get riled, but the outburst succeeded in tempering Hallen. Conceding Rorsal was far more sensitive than he would have supposed, he still could not see him as anything but the enemy. Sitting down, the flustered Hite stared out into the darkness, emerging stars losing their shine this night.

Bane sat back, hopes dashed. Avoiding the ongoing argument, without Hanor, it meant little anyway. Tuning out to what else was said, he lay back on his mat, exhausted and lonely like never before. No idea how long he could carry on like this, a tempting reminder of the *Voice* swept in, promising another option if he would only but call.

"What he has said about his people being forced does reflect that carnage back at the bridge," Greema said, giving the prisoner some credit. "Why else would *Gorl-darl* be happy to slaughter them?"

"A good point," Tarn agreed. "It does suggest trickery."

Rorsal agreed. "Much... trickery..., yes."

"We still cannot take him with us," Hallen piped up behind them. "Whether he is friendly or not. We should either let him go or... finish him off."

"We need to sleep on this," Tarmon decreed. To kill him was unacceptable. "Does anyone else have anything to add?" No one did. "Then let us eat and rest." Still disturbed that his beloved Shanene had not contacted him, a long night this would be.

Chapter 11 : Caught by the Wings of Power

A large open glade was ideal to make camp for Tarden's determined Forces. The end of the fourth turn since leaving the security of their treasured home, the journey was slow and laborious due to the many travelling on foot. Another two turns before arriving at the Five Passes, it would take another after that to reach Tardoc. Small-canopied fires were set in their hundreds, lining the rim of the glade. Keeping undercover of trees, *Nyshifters* were still possible even this far from the Tardanian border. Murmurs hummed as if the trees themselves were purring to a new beat. Tired, the setting was perfect for taletellers to share dazzling stories.

Sitting around their fire, members of the Hisian-set conversed about what was to come. Caldon and a group of senior Commanders talked battle plans nearby. Admiring his efforts since setting out, Brandor had seen Caldon drop back to mingle with his troops on many occasions. Sometimes running to enable two others to ride his mount, it gained much respect that needed no words. Such affectionate concerns were on display again when making camp. Talking confidently and with passion, he had lifted many sombre hearts. Indecisions of recent times had faded for the Tardanian, his worth now apparent.

Staring through the dark at the empty glade, Brandor enjoyed this time of the evening. Just above the treetops, the first moon cast a silvery sheen across wild-grass and bush. Peaceful and hypnotic to any fanciful mind, many eyes peered out onto that open space imagining what nightmares were to come.

Hader's voice broke the din. "Shall we merge?" he urged, grinning at Brandor's glazy look. "I think you already have," he joked. "We must make the most of these quiet times," Brandor mused.

Their merging was now a regular exercise each evening, perplexing those around them. Generating unity and simmering underlying issues, including Rinn's Ileng Power, the benefits were priceless. Settling into position around the fire, mentally they extended out to each other, visualising themselves at the central point above the flames. Joining as one mind with one purpose, time stood still in that short interval.

Perched high on a branch, the Nyshifter was curious of the orange tinge glowing in the distance through the trees. The arrival of that force was unexpected. Since that explosive conflict with the Hisian-set and the Yarmi Folk, its wounds had hampered its movements, struggling just to get this far. Unable to break loose through the upper reaches of the forest, confined to its lower branches, it had spent many nights travelling until resting here just before dawn. Seeing the sun shine on that open space earlier meant freedom was at hand.

Hungry and eager to get back to do the Master's bidding, it was time to move. Creeping along the huge branch, its huge frame did not impede the ability to move stealthily when required. Blustery, the coarse wind ensured rustles and creaks of this densely leaved canopy concealed its movements. Edging forward, when the thick branch groaned from its weight, like a nimble creature, it leapt through and down onto the next huge tree trunk. A short sharp scraping sound the only noise escaping, it crawled up to find the next branch, edging nearer to the awaiting camp.

Careful, a lone individual on watch at the foot of the next tree was something to savour. Steady, the same pattern of progress followed. Wings pulled taut to its back,

black-pit eyes examined its prey. Easing along the branch and stopping when it creaked, it would not fair well to get trapped here, vines and nets could entangle its wings. Getting ready to move, it would feed well this night.

Sitting near the foot of a Woodell tree, Valorn scanned the darkness, only the hissing treetops above moving. Appreciating this rest, the turn had been strenuous, taking up this watch for the next two short-turns. Difficult to stay awake, a slight scraping sound in front caught his ear. Uncertain what it was, periodic clinks from the camp behind assured him there was no threat this far from Tardoc. Putting it off as foraging wildlife, he left them to it.

Yawning, eager for sleep, another scraping clawing sound came, but this time from above. Louder, he stood and searched for the guilty animal. Abbans were renowned for hunting just after dark. Six legged with small sharp claws, they could give a nasty bite if hungry. Small, the winged creatures usually darted around the treetops after berries or small animals, but nothing was discernible amongst the leafy branches. Taking a last look before conceding, he sat down again, exhaustion beckoning.

Hidden by deep shadow, the Nyshifter waited on the opposite side of the tree before proceeding. Turning upside down, it crawled along the mighty trunk towards its unsuspecting prey. Easing around the curvature of the tree, impressive claws clung to the bark as if creeping along the ground. Scrawny but powerful arms and legs strained with every carefully placed clasp. The eerie silence forewarned danger was lurking this dark night. Halting just above its doomed victim, it checked to ensure no one was in the vicinity. They were alone. The din from the camp behind was beginning to quieten, leaving it to feed in peace. Reaching out, its huge claw the size of a small man's chest closed in.

Suspecting something afoot, the Nyshifter hissed when the figure peered up. Transforming from comfort to terror, a clasping claw caught the whimper before it escaped. Inspecting the surrounding area that all was clear, the creature turned and crawled back into the foliage above, its struggling victim falling limp.

“What is it you do there, Brandor?” Caldon asked, curious of the eight old men coming out of their trance. The past three nights, he had missed their unworldly activities. “We call it *merging of the mind*,” the Dai-laman replied, any description falling short of the experience.

“But what do you do exactly?” Caldon wanted details. Sitting with Ginnel, his number two, and a couple of Commanders, it was a fascination shared by all. A few from adjoining campfires listened in.

Respecting his curiosity, if there was one thing Brandor enjoyed, it was sharing insights about the mysteries of life. “Do you ever imagine being in another place?”

Surprised by the question, Caldon shrugged. “Er... sometimes.”

“And these other places..., how real are they to you?”

“Not real at all.”

“Tell me of a particular place you sometimes think about,” Brandor requested. Dry smiles from his colleagues flickered.

“What the Deba Chamber is like inside.”

“That is a good start,” Brandor commended him. “There are one or two here who share the same thoughts. What do you think it is like inside?”

“Like a cave perhaps.”

“Good answer. But what if you really focused, do you think you could picture it?”

“No..., how could I?”

“You never will if you give up so quickly.”

“I could try but... that does not mean it would be right.”

“You know what stepping stones are?”

Caldon wondered if he was being played with. “Yes..., of course.”

“And what are they used for?”

“Are you teasing me?”

“Just answer my questions..., and you will answer your own.”

Unsure where he was going with this, he answered anyway. “To get across something.”

“Getting back to the Deba Chamber,” the wise figure said, respecting the Tard’s confusion and anyone else who was listening. “To imagine something is the first step to melding minds like we do. Projecting one’s mind is the beginning of a whole new world. Do you see your thoughts or dreams as real?”

“No..., of course not.”

“But... what if I said your thoughts are real just like you are?”

“I would say you have done too many of those mind merges,” he laughed.

“Let me tell you that the average person’s thoughts are real, but because there is no willpower behind them, they soon fade. Those who have a strong enough *will* can energise their thoughts and actually bring them to life.”

“I doubt if I could, my imagination is not that good.”

“Like I said, it is a stepping stone. When one first picks up a sword, you have to train hard before you can master it.”

“So, if I train my mind, I might be able to imagine what the Deba Chamber is like?”

“If your *will* is focused enough, the Deba Chamber will come to you.”

“That sounds hard to believe,” he contested.

“So again... you give up,” Brandor shrugged. “It is why there are not many Masters.”

“Caldon likes to keep things simple,” Ginnel explained with a grin.

“Life is simple and perplexing,” Hader said nearby. “And the *inner worlds* are no different.”

“I do enjoy a good dream,” Caldon admitted, thoughtful.

“Learn to focus on them,” Brandor urged. “And they may become real.”

“I dream of riding across The Freelands where the only turmoil is the wind on my face and the churning of the ground as I move.”

“All you have to do to make that dream real is build it,” Brandor explained.

“It will take more than just me to manage that.”

“If others embrace it, then the dream will get empowered,” Brandor promised. “Share your dream amongst your people, and it will grow.”

“Brandor speaks truly,” Rinn said from the other side of the fire. “Everything starts as a single thought. It is a matter of whose thoughts become reality. Do you want your dream to be real or *Gorl-darl’s*? *He* is one person, and you are many, who has the most power?”

“We are no match for *him*,” Caldon rejected the idea.

“There is that negative attitude again,” Brandor stated, unsurprised. “*Gorl-darl* is not attacking Tardoc personally is *he*?”

“Then who is?” Ginnel was confused by the statement.

“You will not find *Gorl-darl* bashing down gates.”

“I see now, *his* Forces do the work for *him*.”

“*He* is powerful and cunning,” Brandor reasoned. “But... could *he* achieve what *he* has without *his* forces?”

“No.”

“Dortians are part of this invasion, and what about in the east..., the Perns? *Gorl-darl* is relying on many to create *his* dream.”

“Especially those *Nyshifters*,” a Tard from an adjoining fire spat.

“Precisely,” Brandor granted. “*He* achieves much due to the enormous numbers *he* has drawn to himself. It is a tool by which dreams are fulfilled. I will ask again, who has the greatest power to fulfil their dreams, *him* on *his* own or you collectively?”

“*He* is not alone though,” Ginnel queried. “There are many who share *his* dream or they would not be fighting.”

“Many who follow *Gorl-darl* do not share *his* dream,” Rinn responded this time. “For they do not know what it is. *He* uses them for *his* own ends. We, who are opposing him, have to create a dream to counter it. Picture how we want this world to be, and by thinking about it, you give it power to materialise. The power of imagination can fire your will to succeed, but you have to do it with all your heart and mind.”

“Such thinking bypasses fear and doubt,” Whis added. “If you doubt, it will shatter and a greater mind will overpower it.”

“*Gorl-darl's*... you mean?” Ginnel said, understanding even though it was still hard to believe. “And you think we could do that?”

“It is not important what *we* think,” Sharn responded. “But what *you* do.”

“But cannot *you* share in that dream?” Caldon asked.

“We already do,” Brandor assured him. “But... is there enough will in us to outshine *Gorl-darl's*? Are we prepared to build that reality and stop *him* from building *his*?”

“Like resisting this invasion and fighting back,” Ginnel said.

“Exactly, and more,” Brandor said. “Complacency can be just as destructive. If we defeat *him*, emptiness will replace it if we do not create something in its place. Building a dream takes a lot of work and attention, and to live in peace we must ensure we eradicate suffering. Let us build it but keep on top of it.”

“Like our skills with the blade you mean?” Ginnel said, liking the proposal. “If we do not practice, we will become blunt like a stone.”

“Very good,” Brandor approved.

“This is a new way of thinking,” Caldon said, uncertain of its possibilities.

“Your Masters at Tarden are more than aware of it.”

“Why have they not told us then?”

“How many of your people seek to know the deeper Mysteries of Life?”

Both Tardanians shrugged. “Not many.”

“And why is that?”

“There is too much to understand,” Caldon admitted.

“To enjoy life fully, one needs to be dynamic and purposeful. Tackling the deeper Mysteries is like picking up a blade for the first time. You are clumsy and cannot see

yourself mastering it. Yet, with patience and perseverance, comprehension will rise. Then... what your Masters are capable of, so too will you."

"This is a long way from the original question," Caldon noted.

"When visualising ourselves in the middle, a merging takes place. What we have said should help you start to understand just how powerful your thoughts are. Realising this, limitations of the body fall and you become free."

"When in the mood, I am quite fascinated by it all," Caldon said.

"Change your mood to one of a decision to seek, and the door to these mysteries will slide open. Curiosity is a healthy trait. When this is over and your reality is created, seek further, you will not be disappointed." He was an exceptional Tardanian, and Brandor liked him very much. Leaving Caldon to his musings, Brandor lay down, promising to start teaching again once this was all over.

Finishing its meal, replenished, the Nyshifter made its move. Gone was the orange tinge of many firesides, slumber befalling the camp. Strains from its wounds remained a problem, enough to be cautious. Easing out onto the large branch, it edged towards that open space. Rustles amongst the leaves merged with the noise of the wind. Leaping down and across to the next trunk, the Nyshifter crawled back up to the canopy to stay out of sight. Stronger now, moving by stealth, it stopped at any unexpected sound.

Bodies now lay asleep below like corpses, oblivious to its passing. Tens turned to hundreds as it made its way forward. Another leap and scraping sound, it climbed again.

Tired but alert, Finall still could not sleep. Running for over half a turn, his mind was whirling at what the future held. Leaving his love at home, would he ever see her again? Sighing, he stared up at the darkness above. One of many Seekers here, picking out branches above kept his vision keen. It did not help him sleep but at least passed the time. About to roll over and rest, something substantial moved through the shadows above. Certain it was not tired eyes playing tricks, another sharp movement reinforced suspicions, rustling leaves accompanying the shadow. Far from small, there was nothing in these parts to what it might be. Keeping still, what was it? A creaking branch and rustling of leaves did not prepare him for the terror leaping under the curtain of night.

Chilling, the desperate call from the southern end of the glade slashed through the silence. Other cries echoed the first as if a terrible horror had descended. People sat up, the commotion intensifying, declaring something hideous was afoot.

Scrambling to their feet, Brandor and the rest of the Hisian-set were alarmed by the fracas. Rushing out onto the glade, they searched but could not see the cause, too many calls blurring any sense to it. Pitch darkness amplified the dread.

Streaming onto the grassy area, scores were pointing at the terror behind. Summoning a ball of light, Brandor sent it above the throngs so people could see. Penetrating the tree line, the light's glow helped stricken Tards stumbling in the dark, the orb lighting the whole area. Resultant yells were desperate, the panic widespread.

Unexpected, a lone piercing shrill shrieked like a monster scorned. Recognising that sound, Sharn was the first to break the lull and ran to help. The others followed, dismayed a *Nyshifter* was inside the woods. Numbers grew on the grass clearing, more shrills splitting the night. The orb blazed its light, but where was the *Nyshifter*?

Huge and menacing, a black frame dropped to the ground a short distance inside the tree line. Twice the height of the scared onlookers, spreading wings wide, more frantic cries ensued when the *orb* burnt out. To their horror, the monster started to run and turn, scooping up anyone in *its* way. Some were hurled whilst others cut down by *its* merciless claws. Leaping from place to place, *it* was too quick to catch. Calls for vines went unheeded. Too engrossed to react, lives were lost due to hesitation.

Caldon ordered shooters to be used, but hundreds of darts were ineffective against such tempered skin. Preying on those too near to get out of *its* ferocious way, the *Nyshifter* had only one thing on *its* mind - escape.

Firing a ray of sizzling red and blue light, Sharn was the first Dai-laman to act. Arcing and crackling, the strike found its mark. Shrieking at the source of the fiery powers, the *Nyshifter* leapt up onto a tree to avoid the next one. Relishing the commotion, such agility was breathtaking. Lurching again, *it* dropped to the edge of the clearing. Scores of Tards fell whilst trying to flee. Many were cast aside as black penetrative eyes glared down at the lone Dai-laman. Enduring his fiery powers, the searing heat was nothing compared to the *Master's*. Screeching again, other members of the Hisian-set rushed forward but were not quick enough. A swift step and jump, *it* clinched Sharn with a mighty claw. Huge wings opened lifting *it* into the air along with *its* captive. Shrieking victorious, the other Dai-lamen did not attack for fear of hitting their companion. Wings heaved, climbing higher to that longed for freedom.

Certain of escape, it was short-lived, the air about the Nyshifter thickening like water. Pressures increased as the beatings of its enormous wings slowed, getting harder to fly. Convinced an invisible hand was pulling it back, to its horror, it stopped in midair. Stuck fast, its wings would not flap, unable to retract them for protection. Writhing to get free, but the invisible power held firm. Screeching to its Master for salvation, it tried to see below to pinpoint the cause, but its enormous elongated head would not turn. Desperation changed when wails turned to whimpers at what this meant.

Standing away from the rest of the horrified onlookers, Rinn held the vile *Nyshifter*, the *Ileng Powers* energising his will. Freezing every limb to ensure Sharn would not be harmed, voices around him meant nothing. Imploring faces drew near, but all that mattered was the *Nyshifter* and his *Ileng Power*. So much control, even over an impressive creature like this, to reject such capabilities was wrong. Mastery of the *Ileng Power* was vital if he was to rid The Freelands of such monsters. Glorifying his name, who would not welcome peace across these beaten lands?

Visualising the *Nyshifter's* giant claws gripping his companion, he started prising them open. Helpless to stop it, the creature wailed in protest. Pulling back the final claw, Sharn fell to the ground in a heap, leaving Rinn free to do as he wished with the beast.

Some went to check on the unconscious Dai-laman, but Brandor stayed close, pleading for restraint. Respecting his call, but his colleague did not understand, Rinn had work to do that could not wait. Engrossed by the grim setting, in his mind he began squeezing the *Nyshifter*. Empowered by a mere thought, he squeezed, a heart draining shrill echoing into the night. A monster in the throes of death, Rinn started crumpling *it* like a piece of tainted paper. Snaps and crunches between the wails were horrific, the

huge body jerking in midair. Shocking everyone, snaps cracked with a twisted purpose. Many covered ears and closed eyes, leaving a lone Dai-laman to dish out his justice.

One last despairing wail escaped before the broken body fell silent. An abomination polluting the heavens, Rinn was in no rush to finish it. Ensuring *Gorl-darl* knew of the power he now possessed, with a final smirk of victory, Rinn sent the broken body crashing to the ground. Crumpled and misshapen, the Dai-laman promised all *Gorl-darl's* monsters would experience the same fate.

Bathed in moonlight, no cheers erupted around the glade and no cries of jubilation exploded in delight. Fear flickered, wondering what other monster was amongst them. The extreme show of indiscriminate killing touched all. Even for such a wretched beast as a *Nyshifter*, it was difficult to believe what happened. The mood remained sombre, tending to the dead and wounded.

Heading back to his mat to lie down, Rinn left the others to stare after him. Fiery and never so alive, he needed to calm down. There was no turning back now.

“What are we to do with him?” Hader asked, somewhat fascinated by the silhouetted carcass of the *Nyshifter*.

Now the storm of this creature's intrusion had calmed, the glade was empty and the quiet eerie. Many had come over to look at the despicable wretch, cheers eventually sweeping the camp at *its* violent death. One less monster to contend with, not all had seen *its* destruction, but they had certainly heard *it*. With the dead and wounded taken care of, the silence was solemn and atmospheric.

Sore but well, Sharn was just thankful to have survived. Respecting his companions' concerns, he was not in a strong position to question Rinn now. Tralle and Sorlam were sitting at the fire next to the oldest Dai-laman coming to terms with it as well.

“It is as I feared,” Brandor warned. “He is incapable of controlling those powers.” Wiping his brow, spats of blood covered his tunic from tending the wounded.

“He was in enough control to make sure I was freed,” Sharn said, inspecting the knotted corpse. Stunned by the developments, it had happened so quickly.

“Control for now,” Brandor grumbled, disbelieving it.

“It means one less *Nyshifter*,” Whis said, drawn to *its* long narrow head. Nearly the size of man, black pit-eyes were the size of his hands. Empty of life and purpose, *its* disfigured jaws revealed a black limp tongue and sharp dagger-like teeth, worthy souvenirs for any hunter. Pungent, the stench was nauseating. “Will *Gorl-darl* send another one after *it*?”

“What was *it* doing in the trees?” Bronn said, puzzled.

“Waiting for us perhaps,” Whis offered.

“On *its* own?” Hader thought it unlikely.

At the edge of the glade, many were gawping their way through the twilight, the whole camp in shock. Brandor could not shift Rinn's glazed expression when in the throes of power.

“If Rinn continues to use that *Ileng Power...*, it will consume him,” Brandor said, worried.

“He did not hear any of us,” Whis agreed.

“I have to admit... that power is astonishing,” Bronn said, unashamed. “We need to use *it*... but fear *its* dominance.”

“If a person is not willing to put down a tool for the sake of good sense,” Brandor said, disliking the dilemma the more he dwelt on it. “It is not safe to be harnessed. If this continues, a new monster will emerge.”

“How can we stop him?” Bronn asked. “*It* is his to use. We cannot take it away.”

“Threatening him with expulsion from the group will not do either,” Hader said. “Can you imagine him out in the wilderness on his own?”

“Rinn means well,” Brandor said, the silvery moonlight glistening off his forehead. “But his heart is not pure enough. Did you see his eyes just after he released Sharn, the power blazing through them? No, I believe he is incapable of retaining control.”

“Yes, Rinn is a good man,” Hader agreed. “Why are you so certain *it* will corrupt him?”

“A person’s beliefs can influence their perspective, even if good-natured,” Brandor said. “We may decide control is justified if it means a peaceful existence, with the young in particular, but to what degree is that control used and for how long?”

“He might use extreme measures just to see this war won, you mean?” Sharn proposed.

“Is that not a temptation for all?” Brandor said. “Would we not like to erase all evil?”

“And you think Rinn could rip up anything that stands in our way?” Sharn posed, seeing it as unlikely. “The Dortians and Perns are part of this invasion, do you suppose he might rid The Freelands of an entire race if he deemed it necessary?”

“Power through corrupted eyes is capable of the most heinous of crimes,” Brandor said. “*Gorl-darl* is proof enough, and what we have witnessed this night is of the same ruthlessness. This is why I have had grave reservations from the start.”

“It makes you ask why was he granted access in the first place,” Sharn wondered.

“It was a temptation of a higher sort,” Hader said, looking down again at the buckled body. Rejecting the temptation along with Brandor, but Rinn’s intense desires to find something significant to fight *Gorl-darl* was his undoing.

“Perhaps one of us ought to get close to him,” Bronn posed.

“I doubt he trusts even Sorlam or Tralle,” Whis stated. “So what chance do we have?”

Tralle and Sorlam were lying down too, the evening’s events catching up on them. Many of the fires had died down, so too the mood.

“Someone has to speak to him,” Brandor said. Joys of their mind-merge earlier had gone. No one was eager to approach Rinn.

“I will try,” Hader offered, not relishing the idea. Their relationship had always been respectful, but of late, had turned flat. Now he could see why.

“I will curb my tongue until you do,” Brandor promised. Heading back to their camp, he left the giant corpse where it lay.

Chapter 12 : Unexpected Friendship

“Do you care to talk?” Kifter invited Tarmon, both sitting gazing up at the stars.

Taking up their watch, it was well past half-turn of night. The camp was quiet, so too Rorsal, who remained tied against the tree with chin flopped on his chest.

Burdened, Tarmon had still not heard from Shanene. Torn, he shared the basics with his Fifanian friend, the only person here he could really trust. Explaining the many fires now ablaze across Selmor, he looked down and across the dark plane in case he could see the sorry sight, but no torchlight polluted the darkness. Hoping for rain, this was terrible.

“I am sorry,” Kifter said after a respectful pause. Saddened, his friend had hidden it well since the bridge. Little to say, just being there was sometimes enough.

Dreamy, the silence seemed a world away from the troubles about them. Tardoc was over a turn’s run from here, surprised they could not hear the invasion. Thoughts turned to their prisoner.

“What shall we do with Rorsal?” Tarmon asked, resting heavy hands on bent knees.

“We should let him go,” Kifter said, already considering it.

“Hallen will not permit us to do that,” the Tard said, agreeing in principle.

“I am sure an opportunity will arise,” Kifter said, sighing at his big friend’s sometimes overbearing outlook. “What do you make of Rorsal’s confession?”

“Sounds plausible.”

“It paints a different picture.”

“Many at Tarden have tried to unravel the mystery, now it sounds quite obvious.”

“Those Gurls at the Five Passes did appear to be leading those Dortians.”

“They did,” the Tard accepted. “It will still not appease our large Hitorian though.”

“But we do agree..., Rorsal should go free?”

“Yes..., and so do most of the others.”

Kifter started chuckling.

“What are you laughing at?”

“I cannot believe Rorsal wants to actually come with us. Of all the madness.”

“Let us pray there are more like him,” Tarmon dared to hope.

Waking with a start from his distressing nightmare, Rorsal searched the darkness for the horned monster before realising where he was, heart racing from the scare. Calming down, his neck ached. Instinctive, he reached up to sooth the pain, but his hands stayed bound around the tree. Surprised to discover they were not tight, he wriggled them, catching his breath when one hand slipped free. Still dark, nobody seemed to be moving. The one on watch called Greema was asleep, and the slender one with sharp eyes and a trim beard sat further away staring out into the night. Tempted to run, the luxury of freedom was enticing.

Checking the big Hite a short way off, he seemed to be asleep. Would he get away with it? A shot of fear stayed him. Weighing up what to do, the idea of that creature out there terrified him. Carefully, the Dortian slid his hand back into the bonds and tried to get to sleep.

Closing the cracks of his eyes, Hallen huffed, disappointed Rorsal was not an opportunist.

Slowing, Hanor and the others watched as the ground peeled back like the skinning of a piece of fruit. Walking for what felt like an age, these Shavani Folk were a hardy breed. Setting a brisk pace from the start, they had not eased until now. Emerging into a wide cave, when the force field dissipated, the smell of spicy minerals was strong. Setting his staff ablaze, Rinar shed light around the cave, checking everything was in order. Much smaller than the Shavani Hall, minute crystals lining the sharp, charcoal walls sparkled from the invading light. Dry and cool, the smooth ground bumped, suggesting water ran through here to collect in the small dark pool to their right. Access could not be gained from outside, promising a secure night. Heading this way purposely, Rinar seemed familiar with the place.

“Are we staying here for long?” Hanor asked, tired.

“*We sleeps heres untils we ares readys to moves,*” Rinar decreed.

“What *is* this place?”

“*Theres ares manys ofs these places throughouts The Freelands,*” Forar explained, sitting down on a bump of stone. “*We comes heres when we go to the Pools of Lights.*”

Desiring to know more about the place, he had not talked much whilst travelling in case he distracted Rinar. “Why is this *Pool of Lights* so special?”

Hesitant at what to disclose, Lunar answered, his outburst earlier granting him the courage to speak his mind. “*Its is a places ofs powers ands beauties.*” Disregarding Rinar and Miln of the Doon’s glare, there was no need for secrecy. “*Naturals powers ands energies ares alives theres. Its is wheres the waters ins the orbs comes froms.*” Indicating Rinar’s staff, his compatriot was displeased about sharing such secrets.

“*We needs nots tells alls ofs whats we ares abouts,*” Rinar warned. “*We sees Hanors and Balkorns as friends, buts nots alls shoulds be saids.*”

“*Hanors and Balkorns knows things whichs theys woulds prefers nots to speaks,*” Miln agreed with their leader.

“Openness is a good way to form trust,” Hanor said. “Secrets are necessary against those who might wish to do you harm.”

“*Peoples do harms evens whens theys do nots intends to,*” Rinar said, still cautious.

Always suspecting mischief rather than look for the good in people, Hanor considered how much of Rinar’s self-protecting attitude stifled his people. Pleased that Balkorn was managing, he found a place off to one side to sit down and eat his rations. At least he would sleep well.

“Were you not tempted?” Hallen hissed the next morning when checking Rorsal. Pulling his bonds tight again, the big Hite crouched in front, hostile. “You will not get far this turn,” he warned, dismissing the pulses of his own conscience. “None of your kind will survive this war. Perhaps it would have been better if you had died with your animal friends back at the bridge.”

“Why... do this?” the Dortian pleaded.

“You represent your kind, and you were ready to kill. I take no prisoners.” Detecting the others watching, Hallen rubbed Rorsal’s head as if in play, but there was no cheer inside.

Disheartened, the Dortian wondered if he should have taken the chance during the night. When the woman approached, he could not see a way out of this.

“How are you Rorsal?” Hayla asked, bending down to him. Lowering her tone, “Did he threaten you?”

He shrugged, not wishing to fuel the situation. “I... not like... him.”

Hayla had no idea what had got into the Hitorian. “Stay close to me, do you understand?”

Rorsal nodded. Caught between options, but fear of that horned beast far surpassed anything Hallen could manage. He did not want to stay or go. Thankful when she freed his bonds, her smile suggested she did care. “You... nice.”

“You nice too, Rorsal,” she said, giving him a hand up.

Hundreds went to look at the dead *Nyshifter* when dawn broke, murmurs of concern mingling with bouts of cheer at what had happened. With daylight, the enormous creature appeared less threatening. Bones protruded at obscure angles, Rinn’s devastating powers working from inside. Beaten as if by a mighty hammer, even *its* long powerful head was disjointed, making many wince.

Caldon was troubled by the damage done. Nineteen Tardanians had perished, and twice that severely injured. Insisting they return to Tarden, the whole scenario was a blow as much as a blessing, unable to celebrate. Surprised the man Rinn had not even inspected the foul monster, Caldton had spent much of his watch musing over the old man’s actions. Such devastation left him questioning whether it was wise to seek greater knowledge as he supposed. Brandor’s displeasure at the man was what worried him.

Ordering the camp to move, the atmosphere woeful, Caldton just hoped the Hisian-set knew what they were doing.

The trail veered northwards to Kifter’s puzzlement. “*It* is definitely heading to the northern side of these mountains.”

Straining their necks, the rock face in front climbed to the clouds and beyond. Thick clouds meant *Nyshifters*. Tensions high, they set off up the slope to help fend off the chill whipping in on the breeze. Crossing a wide strip of trodden grass to which another large force from the north had passed in the thousands, Kifter did not take long to pick up the beast’s trail on the other side. Still oblivious to how they were to overcome *it*, their present course just seemed the right thing to do. Steadily climbing up the gradual incline for most of the morning, a shrill call from Tardoc meant *Nyshifters* were in the vicinity. Even though they were nearing the other side of the mountain chain, there was nothing to stop one of the vile creatures inspecting the area. Only a few scattered Woodell trees could be used to hide under, hardly comforting against such terror.

“It may snow before the turn is out,” Kifter predicted, the group sitting on a ridge, at last reaching the base of the first mountain.

Enjoying the view the way they had just come, a mash of colours stretched right across The Freelands. Down across to their left, a green carpet of trees ran to as far as the eye could see, merging into the northern horizon. Sipping rationed water, the run was gruelling. Perplexed as to why the creature’s trail headed for a small groove in the mountainside that ran ahead and upwards, an obvious channel created by rainwater, it was wide enough to climb. Expecting the groans when ordering everyone to move, joints were already stiffening.

“You do not intend to camp on the mountain do you?” Hallen queried the prospect.

"I used to climb these when I was young," Tarmon decreed. "We will be fine." Well into the after-turns, there was still no word from Shanene. Calling her meant nothing if she insisted on keeping her mind closed. Hoping Kifter's prediction of snow might boon well, all he could do was wait.

"Where does the track lead to?" Greema asked, catching what rest he could.

"A chain of plateaus high up on the mountainside," the Tard said, eager to get going. Appreciating their efforts, he could hardly force them on. "The plateaus are large and the scene worthy of the climb."

"Why is that creature taking them up there?" Bane asked, meaning Hanor and Balkorn.

"I do not know," Tarmon said, thinking along similar lines. "One of the plateaus sits above Spike Ridge, which is a small mountain chain with Tardoc at its end. Perhaps *it* intends to enter the City along that impossible route."

"Does *it* really intend to use Hanor to get the fourth *Pillar*?" Bane said, needing to know. Putting aside the grim mood, he missed Hanor immensely. To be carried this far was unthinkable.

Noting how watchful Rorsal was, Tarmon was wary of mentioning the *Pillars of Life*. Sincere as the young Dortian was, some people had a natural talent for extruding information from the hardest of individuals, and this young fellow knew a few back home. The same threat remained for those still at Mandurin. The fact Casvern Tarn had come with them left a potential bitterness that might be used against them. Praying it would not be so, caution was still necessary. "I cannot say what *its* intentions are."

"I hope they are coping," Bane finished, the grey mood returning.

The further they travelled, the less Tarmon believed Balkorn was with them. The size of his wound was too severe to have lasted this long. No blood had been discovered either supporting that conclusion. Agreeing with Kifter, the big Baltian had probably been dumped somewhere out of the way. Why was a question without an answer.

"Let us go," the Tardanian ordered. "Unless you want to camp on the track?"

Allowing a moaning Hallen to follow Kifter and Raldama, Tarmon waited for the others to move. Catching Rorsal's arm, "You need go no further," he whispered.

The Dortian looked at him, and then at those heading up towards the narrow strip in the mountainside. Frowning, he had not expected this. "Not... go? Not... understand."

Kifter reached the shallow gully, and Tarn went next with Hallen close behind. Tarmon was glad the big Hite seemed wrapped up in his own grumblings to notice them. "You need not worry about Hallen now," the Tard assured the young Dortian. "Our path is treacherous, and I would rather you stay here than fall at the hands of a clumsy Hite."

Glancing behind and then to the side, the long slope to their right ran down to the line of trees at its base. Doubtful, Rorsal stalled. "Where... beast?"

"*It* went up there," Tarmon pointed to where they were heading. "You have nothing to fear. *Its* purpose is of a different kind. Those at the High-bridge got in *its* way."

Caught between two desires, "Fright..., very fright," Rorsal said. "Fright also... *Teachers*."

Not expecting this, Tarmon had presumed he would seize the opportunity. Freedom from the angry Hite was in itself a worthy prize. What scars did he have to not want to go home? "You have a family?" he asked, glancing up to make sure Hallen had not noticed their loitering. There was nowhere else to hide to discuss this.

Sadness etched Rorsal's coarse features. "Taken from... home. Not... know where." Wanting to shake him, but respecting the loss, it mirrored Tarmon's sense of lack. "You have to go now, do you hear me? You will not survive if you stay with us. We are going to Tardoc, the very place your people are attacking. If Hallen does not get you, there are many at Tardoc who will." Seizing his arm, "You must go!" Peering up at the line of individuals climbing the channel, if it was not for the Hite there would be no doubt for Rorsal. Troubles at Tardoc were not a concern either. "Me go... with you."

"Are you a fool?" Tarmon exclaimed, voice rising. "You are throwing your life away." "Not throw..., find... life," Rorsal said, confusing the Tardanian.

"What do you mean?"

"You... friends," he said, pointing at him and the others.

"Friends...?" Tarmon was stunned. Whatever was going through his mind? "We are on opposite sides?" Hayla stopped to investigate, so Tarmon signalled for her to proceed. Turning back, to his horror, Rorsal released his arm and headed for the track.

"You must go home," he tried, but it was no good.

"No...", Rorsal protested, rejecting the chance to escape. "Not go. Stay with... friends." Needing to stop him, "We are not your friends..., we are your enemies. Your people have made war with us."

"Not Rorsal... no, not Rorsal... make war." Big brown eyes implored the Tardanian to agree. The Dortian was captivated by their ways, freedom chiming with everything they did or said. Unlike his homeland, the *Teachers* had destroyed everything good. Even if he was only to last another turn, he had never felt so free. "Make... friends..., Rorsal make... friends."

Confounded, Tarmon could do no more, the young Dortian beaming wide as he made his way after the others. Defeated, throwing his arms up, "Go on then, if you so choose."

"Me thank... Tarmon."

Just hearing his name touched the Tardanian. Just like the Legend of Tarkon and his love for Shoona, this young fellow was crossing the boundaries too. Extending a hand even where it was not welcomed, it inspired him for what the Dortian was doing. "I will have to keep Hallen and countless others away from you," Tarmon said, disbelieving it. Rorsal did not hear him, already chasing up after the others.

"Rinn...!" Hader called, motioning for his companion to join him away from Sorlam and Tralle. Brandor, Whis and Bronn were riding in front, so too Sharn, who was talking to Ginnel - Caldon's Second in Command. Taking this opportunity to talk, Tarden's forces were recouping from a long run through the morning. Many Tardanians who had ridden alongside the Dai-lamen beforehand now kept their distance. Dropping back, Rinn knew what to expect.

"How are you coping?" Hader asked, careful of how to begin.

"Shall we cut the pleasantries and get round to what you want to know?" Rinn said, raising an eyebrow.

"It is understandable for me to be cautious."

"Worried I might be sensitive?" Rinn posed, peering around at those nearby. A commanding wall of resistance, Tarden's Forces had certainly been stimulated.

"Are you not then?"

“I am taking the wise path and staying quiet after last night.”

“And what of last night?”

“I am still coming to terms with it.”

“That was a terrible reaction, even if necessary.”

“There is much to consider.”

“Do you intend to share your conclusions?” Hader asked, needing details.

“Have you not already come to your own?”

‘*As sharp as always,*’ Hader thought, shrugging. “We have to look at the implications and what affect it will have on you and the rest of us.”

“And you fear for me... of course?”

“Melding minds has brought us closer to each other. Can you blame us?”

“No..., I do sympathise. The dangers involved are extraordinary. I know that more than the rest of you. It is in my blood the *Forces* flow.”

“We fear those *Forces* will consume you.”

“I use the *Ileng Power* only when the need arises,” Rinn said, being truthful. “No more manipulations like I did with Brandor. I could use *it* to my advantage, but casual motives would be my undoing.”

A flicker of hope that perhaps his companion was on top of this after all, his answers were rational. “What about when the *Powers* surge, you seem to lose yourself?”

“Detachment does take place, however, my purpose remains true. Even when I held that *Nyshifter*, my foremost concerns were for Sharn’s safety before I did anything. Therefore, using the *Ileng Power* is acceptable to me.”

“A necessary evil to ensure dangers are eradicated?”

“Look at the times I have used *it*?” Rinn invited. “At Boverns Crossing, the Yarmi Folk, and... last night.”

“What if you succumb to manipulation like you did with Brandor?”

“We learn from our mistakes,” he said, not shying away. “Due to that misdemeanour, I now see the dangers of *its* abuse.” Rinn genuinely wanted to reassure everyone. “I only intend to use the *Ileng Power* as a tool against our foes in emergencies.”

“I want to believe you are strong enough to withstand the temptations. We know how subtle they can be.”

“The pulses are there, but I will deal with them,” Rinn promised.

“You do sound confident,” Hader said, unsure.

“Am I arrogant?” Rinn asked. Caldon raised an arm in front, signalling for them to move out. “I think not. Look at the results. Remember, without *it*, we would not even be here.” Reaching across, he patted Hader’s arm. “We cannot control everything.” Tardanians nearby pushed forward. Braving a smile, Rinn urged his Kyboe on.

Speculating whether any good had come from the conversation, Hader did feel better, even if only marginally. Pursing his lips, what could he do about it anyway?

Hiking up the narrow gully, the drop to their right was steep. Sloping away, most of the group did not like heights, Bane especially. Barely enough room for one person to tread, it seemed easier from lower down. A cold blustery wind snipped their ears, relieved it was not a gale. Much of the spectacular view was missed, too focused on the channel to take it in. Loose stones were another problem, causing the occasional slip. A long way down, their progress was slow but steady.

“Where is this plateau, I am exhausted?” Hallen called from near the front.

Climbing for two short-turns, shadows were getting darker. Resting his foot on a lip of stone, the others were coming up behind, waiting for a response from Tarmon at the rear. Wondering why the Dortian had a grin on his face, the Hite’s anger had eased, still astonished he was with them.

“It is not far,” Tarmon assured him, catching his breath. “Where it sweeps around to the left ahead, it levels out. A large niche in the rock is where we can rest for the night. It will be a good spot to keep out of sight of *Nyshifters* as well.”

Hesitating, Hallen cast Rorsal a questioning look. Tempted to suspend animosities for now, catching his eye, the young fellow did not turn away, proving he had nothing to hide. Grumping when Tarn urged the Hite on, he continued up the channel, unsure what to make of it.

Just as promised, the opening appeared in front, concealed from both scouring eyes above as well as the choppy wind. Cloaked in shadow, at its rear, a wide ledge appeared hard but at least safe. Enough space to sleep even though there was nowhere to hide if the enemy came trudging up the track, it would have to do.

“You can see *its* mark here,” Kifter said, bending to the ground. Running his fingers around a distinct oversized footprint in the gravel, only Tarn, Raldama and Tarmon had the care to enquire, the others slouching to the ground.

“How long ago did *it* pass?” Tarn asked. The track rose and then disappeared around to their left.

“Early yester-turn,” the Fife said, checking the next footprint. The wedge shaped alcove meant he could not see far in either direction, daring a guess to where *it* could be now.

Fortunately for them, a quick-thinking Raldama had gathered a few sticks at the foot of the mountain for this moment. Arranging a neat pile ready for the Fife to weave his magic, they needed warming up. “A mouthful of brew each will help, Kifter.”

“Tis but a small pot..., but a worthy mouthful it will be,” the Fife promised, lifting the small container of spices from his bag before setting to work. Alarmed when Hallen’s big boot nearly destroyed the delicate fire, “Be careful my oaf of a friend.”

Trying to clear an area suitable for his enormous frame, “My feet need plenty of room,” Hallen chirped, his earlier disgruntlement passing. Sitting at the opposite end of the ledge to Rorsal, he did not trust himself to get too close.

Passing the hot medicine around, groans of satisfaction swept the ledge as Kifter’s brew was passed along. Just enough to make a difference, the relief was welcomed by all.

“I am now ready to die in peace,” Hallen joked, tempted to drink the last mouthful. Sitting next to him, Bane waited just as impatiently as the Hite had a moment before. “Leave more for those who are still growing,” the lad said, finishing the drink.

“I like it when you are with us, young Bane,” Hallen said, patting him on the back. “Too many thoughts can stop a person from doing that which he dreams.” Lying back on his mat, cupping hands behind his head, “There are only one or two places I would rather be other than stuck halfway up a mountain!”

“Worse places too,” Rorsal said, surprising everyone with his boldness.

Hallen ignored him for fear of a loose tongue turning sharp.

“There are places all of us would rather be,” Tarmon said, giving nothing away about Shanene’s dilemma. “But we have to do this.”

“Hanor would love to be here,” Bane said. Eating some quaner, a welling inside tried to ambush the restful setting, but he held his nerve.

“And Balkorn,” Greema said, the Baltian needing a mention.

A quiet thought extended to their missing companions. No one believed Balkorn was alive, even if unwilling to admit it. Eating meagre portions, Hayla and Casvern Tarn shared theirs with the Dortian.

Deserving respect, their loss mirrored Dorsal’s. Most of his family and friends had been well versed in books covertly handed around by those moving in their circle. Betrayed to the *Teaches* by a friend, it was why many had been separated and sent south with the invasion. Wanting to know more about these people, there was something about them Dorsal liked very much. “Who is... Hanor... and Balkorn?”

“Friends of ours,” Hayla answered, mindful of what could be shared. “They were taken by the same monster who attacked the bridge.”

“Bad thing..., bad,” Rorsal said, appalled by *its* ferocity.

Groaning, Hallen could not believe the Dortian now seemed to be a part of the group. Rorsal’s people were invaders not friends! Conceding he might have liked him if not for the war, but how could the Dortian sit with his enemies? Was he a traitor to his own kind? That alone suggested mistrust. Peering down to where the ground dropped on the other side of the track, at least he no longer wanted to kill him.

Conversations continued, talking about Rorsal’s home and what it was like. Warming to him, Tarmon’s announcement about his refusal to leave earlier surprised all.

“But we are fighting your people, Rorsal?” Hayla said, bemused. “Does that not alarm you?”

“You fight... *Teachers*. You see Dortians... but not real Dortians. Tricked... yes, forced... yes..., but not... real Dortians... before *Teachers* come.”

“Could you not have resisted?” Tarn asked, disbelieving an entire race could be bludgeoned or tricked into war.

“Power..., much power,” Rorsal said, making that explosive sound again. “Dortians... very strong..., but not... white fire... no..? Scared... fire... yes? Very... scared.”

“They used harmful magic on your people?” Hayla queried.

He did not know the word but repeated the actions. “Hot... fire..., hands...,” he made a crackling sound. “Burn people... bad. Dead..., people dead... yes?”

Touching their hearts by his absorbing manner, darkness finally descended on the narrow alcove. The fire went out, relying on the tall gap in the mountainside to grant a secondary light. No moons were out this night, only blistering clouds with a biting chill. Protected from the cold coming up from the south, thin mats kept the damp out. Most were asleep when the sharp blizzard struck, but no flake descended on that shelter spot.

Chapter 13 : Surviving the Flames

“They have camped at The Centre Vale for three turns now,” Manon said to Lorvanon, both High-men staring north from Manter’s huge outer wall.

Dusk arriving, lanterns were lit whilst they discussed why the Northern Hordes had camped just north of the ancient riverbed running between Grovia and Tardania.

“There is no sense to it,” Lorvanon said. Relieved to see people at last gathering here at Manter, but with so many packed into one place, desires to get on with the conflict were understandable. Fifteen hundred Baltians had arrived that morning, and counting two thousand Fifes and twelve hundred Hites, room and resources were running out.

“Is it advantageous to stay here?” Manon asked, eager to leave. As huge as Manter was, accommodating an extra seven thousand overnight, plus Cropping Villagers from as far as Muelly, staying here had become a logistical nightmare.

“Maybe not,” Lorvanon said, wary of committing for another reason. “They already outnumber us two to one. I fear just how large the enemy is.”

“These battlements will give us a slight advantage, but they can only hold so many. What will you do if they send fire over the walls? Where will your women and children go?”

Discussing all options, including that one, but Lorvanon was waiting for something, an impression declaring when it was the right time to move. “I know,” he said, half-hoping the Hisian-set might come to aid them. A fanciful idea, he had never encountered war before, and to act when so many lives depended on it was far harder than imagined. Leaders from the numerous races had their own views, but like the hub of a wheel, Manter was the main player in this. There were more willing to fight from Manter than the combined numbers sent from other regions. More should have come.

Sighing, their encounter with the *Pillar of Life* deep underground had lost its spark too, *its* purpose irrelevant. Relaying the details to Manon, his son Hanor attaining the miraculous, it had lifted his friend after the loss of his other son, Nole. Now though, he wondered why Manon was so eager to face the enemy. Fighting his own demons perhaps, no matter the reason, there was no room for error.

Thuds of heavy boots alerted them to Nabban of Itab bounding up to the wide rampart. Huge, the charismatic High-hite was as colourful as he was loud. Long wavy fair hair fell about formidable shoulders.

“Here you are!” Nabban boomed. “My feet are weary from searching for you two. I thought you may have scampered off with a lady friend,” he beamed. “Are we moving out tomorrow then, for it is time we set ourselves to work?”

“We were just deciding,” Manon replied.

“Doubts and more doubts.” The High-hite shook his shaggy head. “It can be a destroyer of the brave.”

Both men respected the truth of it.

“Risp, our Fifanian commander... and Minorl our Baltian friend, agree with me that we should meet them out on the planes,” Nabban continued. “Not enough space here. It will be a slaughter once they get over these walls.”

Pulling his cloak tight, a chill shivered through High-man Lorvanon. A sharp wind picked up threatening a gale. This was his hardest decision yet. “Let us make final preparations tomorrow and leave for the Vale the turn after that.”

“Well chosen,” Nabban agreed. “And this night, much merriment will we have. There is plenty of Sasta for all to delight in.”

Neither Lorvanon or Manon were in the mood. Following the exuberant Hite, the first stings of snow pricked their skin. So much to do, only bad weather could now hamper their course.

“I wonder how Hanor is coping,” Bane said to Kifter, both staring out from their rocky shelter on the mountainside.

On guard, sleet and snow lashing down made the sky quiver as if alive. A faint rustling from far below meant trees were receiving its blistery sting.

Sensitive for the lad, Bane had been a virtual recluse of late. Understandable considering Hanor’s abduction, it was good to see him back to his normal self. “Hanor is a good survivor,” Kifter returned, rubbing his hands to keep warm. “We must have faith that he is well and managing.”

“Do you think that creature would hurt him?” Bane’s urgent question reflected the guilt for not aiding his friend when he had the chance. Too scared, he had lost count how many times he had promised to be at his side.

“If the *Pillars of Life* are what *it* seeks, *it* cannot afford to,” the Fife said, assuring his listener as best he could. “Power is drawn to power, and is why *Gorl-darl* could not resist. *He* will have to treat Hanor well to get what *he* wants.”

A slim hope Bane had to embrace, there was no shifting the emptiness inside. Thinking about the other pressing issue, feelings for Hayla were still strong, petty jealousies harassing him. The fact she was happy to lay next to Casvern Tarn hurt. Needing to avoid moody ponderings, “We will win this war?” he asked through the darkness, already doubting it.

“If people like you and me continue fighting, then... yes.”

Just then, five animals shuffled around the corner to escape the icy downpour higher up, making the two jump. Halting when seeing them and their sleeping friends, they were as surprised as the two lookouts. Waist high with long droopy ears, the creatures stood for a time judging the risk. Certain they were safe, the five continued along the track. Skipping by them and around to the other side of the alcove, they disappeared around the bend, heading down to the forest.

“What were they?” Bane asked, heart still racing.

“Mountain Foarns.” Kifter said, surprised to see them at this late short-turn.

“I have never heard of them,” Bane said, glad to see the back of them.

“They live in caves throughout this mountain chain,” the Fife explained. “Their tracks run all over the place,” he chuckled. “We startled them.”

“They seemed harmless enough.”

“They have a vicious kick if threatened.”

“Shame we could not use them to give us a lift,” the lad toyed, not looking forward to tomorrow’s climb.

“If not for them, we would not be climbing as easily as we are,” Kifter added, insightful as ever. “They descend to the trees to feed on needle-seeds to enrich their diet.”

Sighing at their simple existence, just following natural instincts, Bane wanted the same, no more emotional upheavals. Tempted to tell his Fifanian friend about the *Voice*,

he was too ashamed to say anything. Even though the Tardanian had warned against it after his weird encounter with *Gorl-darl*, he could not believe anyone so powerful would be interested in a moping fool like him. Facing up to the wider truth, there was another reason why he did not want to discuss the *Voice*. Promising *it* could change the future, proving that with his separation from Hayla, it was only a matter of time before desires for her would demand he plead for *it* to return. A dreadful notion, but to tell Kifter now would end that option. Guessing their response, to keep away no matter what the source, but the urge for Hayla was too strong.

Wretched and alone, selfishness enveloped him like a fever. Distant echoes of a *Nyshifter* made the darkness even more frightful, so too the future.

Waiting for Rinar standing by the wall, Hanor and Balkorn were thankful just to be resting in another underground cave. The third period of walking of the next turn, time seemed lost down here without sun or moonlight to guide them. Weary, Hanor was beginning to worry about Balkorn. Trying to conceal his suffering, but the Baltian's grey eyes gave him away. Not as well as hoped, pushing through the pain so as not to be a burden, Rinar had picked up on it too, trying to distract them by promising a view above ground after their light meal.

Standing straight as was his custom, Rinar incanted words of power, the atmosphere electrifying. Streams of yellowy white light flashed from the *orb* in conjunction to his throaty invocation. Fascinating, the sparkly light converged on an area just short of the cave wall. Shimmering, a golden-yellow mist at the centre started whirling in a circular motion. Uttering another obscure sound, more splinters of light ignited from the *orb*, intensifying the expanding disc shape. A dark void formed at its centre. Arcing strands of yellowy white light span at its edge, shapes forming in the middle. As if peering out from inside a cave, silhouettes solidified, condensing into a blurry image.

At first, they thought it was daytime, but on closer inspection, the fuzziness was a blizzard. Coating the surrounding landscape in a sheet of snow, it was night-time. From their vantage point, it appeared bitterly cold. Hard to imagine the blistering weather right above them, hiding under a tree or bush would grant little protection. Low undulations of the terrain meant they were coming to the end of the Irda Hills.

Uttering another word, the view moved in a slow circle like an observer turning their head. Scanning the rest of the territory for movement, only snow-covered bush and tree dotted the area. No one was in the vicinity. Mirroring Shanene's *Garden of Selmor*, it was far less welcoming. Completing the turn to the original view, they were in the area on their own. Satisfied, Rinar retracted its sizzling rays, the picture dissipating. Considering where their companions might be amongst the stinging storm, Hanor leant back against a boulder, this place comforting by comparison.

"*Colds!*" Lunar said, shivering at the prospect of living up there. "*Buts excitings!*" "Playing in the snow can be very exciting," Hanor said, not in the mood for idle talk. Missing his friends, he prayed for their safety.

"*The Shavani People shoulds explores mores aboves grounds.*"

Hanor could only agree. "Perhaps you will be an inspiration to your brethren, Lunar."

Unsure about that, the little fellow felt nervous. "*Jitters..., lots of jitters.*"

“My people would be enthralled by the Shavani Folk,” Balkorn said. “When this evil is dealt with, it would mean a great deal to me if you were to visit Baltiar.” Conscious of his own fate, it did not matter that he would not be there. His Sage would be delighted. Self-conscious, the idea shocked Lunar, but when the whirling in his stomach passed, he could see the attraction. *“Yes..., I would like that.”*

“Lunar has become braver indeeds,” Forar said. *“Let us hope it is contagious.”*

“Just keep an open mind,” Hanor urged. “Sooner or later, desires to do it will come.”

“You are giving us advice?” Miln questioned.

“Sorry, it has become a bit of a habit of late.”

Wanting these people get excited about life, this world had so much to offer other than cowering in one’s worries. Their blinkered view was suffocating, always bowing negatively to fresh ideas. How many Shavani did what they did because others decided for them? Lunar was trying to break out from that mindset, but people like Rinar and Miln were resisting. Frightened of change, potentially, they could achieve so much.

Miln’s remark was enough to quieten Hanor. Tiredness seizing its opportunity to strike, he lay down on the cool stone, the roof of the cave the last thing he saw.

“Tarmon my love!” the soft voice called through the shadows of a fretful slumber. Unsure if he was dreaming, it was still dark, Tarmon’s eyes flicking open.

“Light of my life, can you hear me?”

Sitting up, disbelieving Shanene was talking to him, “Is that you my beloved?” Careful in case it was a dream, warm impressions stirred his heart. “How are you?”

“The forest has absorbed a mighty blow..., but it still stands.”

“Has the danger gone?” Tarmon’s mind was racing.

“I am safe now.” She paused, her pain crossing the distance between them. So close to losing it all, *“I never want to be apart from you again.”*

“No matter what is happening to the other,” he agreed. “I wanted to be there with you.”

“I made a mistake, Tarmon.” Saddened but joyful, relief coated every word. *“I was trying to protect you.”*

“I know.”

“And cut myself off from the very reason I now live.”

Unity returning, “It is pointless living if we are apart. When you are ready, you can share what happened. How did you manage to stop it?” Sensing her smile, “What is it?”

“I am glad you managed to sleep,” she replied, the sharp blizzard ripping across The Freelands forming in his mind.

Between the two sides of the cleft, he could not tell. “We are sheltered here.”

“The winds were fierce and the flakes biting. The fire had little chance against such a natural foe. I was able to saturate the trees now Selmor has been reduced in size.”

Losing nearly half its original size to the blaze, Tarmon gasped at its ferociousness, “And you survived that?”

“My powers were tested, but all is not grim. Where the old burns away, the new flourishes. Much has to be renewed, I just did not think it would be so quick. This has saved much work for me.”

“I would prefer you to have done it in your own time.”

“So do I.”

“Let us sleep this night, two hearts as one.”

“And every other night.”

Leaving the safety of the alcove, the extent of last night’s snow was apparent as Tarmon and the group headed up the next stage of the track. Reflecting up to their high position, the whiteness below was as if The Freelands had been washed clean. Clear and blue, the vibrant sky concealed all evidence of the snowstorm’s passing. Crisp and invigorating, the scene was breathtaking. Pants huffed into the morning chill. Large swathes on this side of the mountain chain were clear, the speed and angle of the blizzard too fast and low.

“We will reach a break in the mountains and cross over to the other side during the afterturns,” Tarmon promised from the front. “Be careful of icy patches.”

Hallen noticed a spring to the Tard’s step. “He seems happy,” he whispered to Kifter.

“He has found something he lost.”

“What did he lose?”

“Something which you have yet to discover,” the Fife teased, smirking.

Puzzled, Hallen left it, more concerned about the drop to the side than the Tardanian’s behaviour.

Proceeding where the Mountain Foarns had made their way down during the night, the trail was clear of any other intruders. Hugging the mountainside with its ragged curves and intermittent overhangs, the track evened out occasionally only to lurch in other areas. Appreciating the warmth of a rising sun, not until the heat added to the toil did they wish for clouds. Melting the snow on the trees far below, by the late afterturns, there was nothing to show for it. Only Tarmon knew the impact it had had on a certain person across the planes.

Trudging on, shadows were welcomed when the beating sun arced over and beyond the mountaintops above. Sweaty brows and straining limbs demanded frequent rest. Travelling deeper into Tardania, a cleaving of the mountains ahead meant they were nearly there. Doubts about what they would do when finding the beast seeped in, nervous anticipation fuelling every step.

Levelling out, the track widened, so too the gap in the mountains. Curving around to a stony rise, it was the last barrier to the Flat Planes beyond. Dusty red and yellow bush seemed strange this high up. Warm rays of the sun beamed through the gap in the mountains, daring them to continue.

Standing at the base of the small rise, Tarmon waited for his companions, the track showing the creature had come this way. If *it* was on the other side, a fitting place it would be to make a final stand, the view breathtaking. Bleary faces drew close.

Cautious, Tarmon climbed the last few strides to check on what was lurking over the top. Scanning for the monster, Kifter was at his side, leaving the others waiting below. Sloping down to the flat smooth stone of the plateau below, bushes had taken root but nothing else. Where was it? Much wider than it was long, the flat plateau showed no signs of where *it* could be.

“I do not detect *it* anywhere,” Kifter said, to the Tard’s agreement.

Relieved yet disappointed, drawing swords, Tarmon turned to the others. “We cannot see *it*... but we know *it* might be there. Stay quiet and do not get distracted by the view. We can enjoy that once we know it is safe.”

Skittering down the short incline onto the stony plateau, bright and breezy, the sun was just above distant mountains on the other side of the huge basin. Checking for clues, the others joined them, Rorsal and Bane at the rear. Bushes and rocky outcrops were untouched, so too the smooth stone. Windswept and washed clean, the creature's trail had disappeared.

Extending their search to the perimeters of the plateau, expecting tracks along the numerous trails used by Mountain Foarns, but there was nothing. A few rocky ledges seemed too high up for such a fearsome creature to hide, not that it needed to. Dreading what that meant, if invisible, *it* could still be here!

Rechecking the area, when the immediate danger eased, they were drawn to the spectacular view. Lasting but a moment, their wonder was dashed at the horrendous scenes out towards the centre of The Flat Planes.

Down to their right, the lesser mountain chain of Spike Ridge stretched out to where Tardoc stood tall and elegant like a lady of stone at its end in the distance. Dominant towers spiked the sky like rods of power. Built to last, that enchanted place was in sore distress. Too far away to see individuals, but the invading force shimmered in the sunlight like a rippling pool of black tar. Surrounding Tardoc, lines of smoke stained the peachy sky.

Forgetting why they were here, hurting for the beleaguered City and its defenders, it was the same at Mandurin. Expecting Tardoc to be under siege, but not like this. No sound could be heard and no gleeful expression could be seen. Many of Rorsal's people were down there, but he was as aggrieved as the others.

"How long until the upper regions fall too?" Hallen said. Some of the lower sections had been overrun.

"Not long," Casvern Tarn said, familiar with the onslaught.

Hayla patted his arm. Nearby, Bane said nothing.

"And you say some of your brethren do not wish to fight?" Hallen glared at Rorsal.

"Hate it... hate hurt," the Dortian said.

"Pity others do not feel like you!"

From their vantage point, a narrow trail ran down and away to their right, heading towards Spike Ridge. Lengthy, the jutting mountain range ran into the back end of the City, only the towers climbing higher. Entering this way appeared suicidal, but the urge to do something remained.

"We cannot just stand here," Greema groaned. Grovan was in a similar situation. "We must do something."

"Do not forget why we are here," Tarmon advised. Considering what Hanor could have done if they had gone to Tardoc when he first suggested it, indestructible *powers* flowing through the *Stone* would have surely prevented this?

"What do we do then?" the Grove asked.

"We have to find that beast," Kifter said, answering for the Tardanian. Turning away from the ugly invasion, he hoped they had missed something.

Sunset a short way off, the outlook was not promising, the others following his lead and checking the empty plateau again

“Hanor...!” Bane bellowed, startling everyone. “Hanor..., where are you?” Unsure what to expect when he got here, the fact his best friend was still missing was too much. If he did not shout, his heart would burst.

“Remember what else might be here,” Tarmon warned, sympathetic to his distress.

Slumping to the ground, Bane rubbed grimy hands over a tired face. Crushed, he had nothing left to give. Body aching, who could comfort him now? Wanting to scream and go home, Balkorn had advised about trying to make the most of now and leave the past to its rightful place, but that was hard when every fibre of his being was lamenting. If he could, he would lie down and not wake up.

Sensing someone approach, looking between fingers at the dusty boots of Hayla, his heart raced. Daring to look up, her soft features were kind, seeking to help. Wanting to hug her and release pent up feelings, it hurt to know her affections were for Tarn.

“Are you all right Bane?” a male voice said from behind.

Dizzy, he turned to see Casvern Tarn approach and stand beside Hayla as if worried for him. In slow motion, Tarn’s hand rose and rested on Hayla’s back. Stabbing his heart, he looked away for fear of revealing what he felt. Smarter than he, she knew what a yearning heart looked like.

Bending down, Hayla put her hand on his shoulder. “Is it that bad, Bane?”

Apprehensive, half-hoping she could see the frailty of his inner world, did she know how much he loved her? Holding back the tears, he was too exhausted to move.

“Hanor will be fine..., you will see,” she said, trying to be sincere.

Tortured, the shock slapped him across the face - she had no idea what he felt for her. Guilt-ridden, he could not even bring himself to believe his friend was alive. Thinking of nothing but Hayla, shameful, he should have been taken not Hanor. Curling on his side into a ball, tears ran from pitiful eyes. By keeping them shut, he could deny the world had its problems and how much she meant to him.

“There are no signs of *it* passing beyond this plateau,” Kifter repeated earlier findings, approaching the others who stood watchful at the centre. Checking all three trails, two to the left and one to the right, but there was nothing to prove where *it* had gone.

“Perhaps *it* has jumped,” Greema offered, disbelieving it. The front edge of the plateau had a sheer drop for hundreds of hand-spans.

“Why would *it* come all this way just to jump?” Raldama queried.

“I agree,” Tarn said, glancing behind at Bane. Doubting the lad’s reactions were solely for the loss of a friend, sensing rivalry at a hundred paces, he could tell the boy had strong feelings for Hayla. Not disclosing it to her, he still had to play his own hand. Amazed as much as he was aghast, what a cavernous adventure this trip was turning out to be.

Sun dropping behind the mountains on the far side of this basin, they tried savouring the spectacular view whilst they could. Difficult with that black splotch of evil surrounding Tardoc, a cool breeze meant the night was to be cold. Unwise to camp out here on the ledge, Kifter indicated there was a cave down to their right large enough to hide in. Pointing to other caves along Spike Ridge, tempted to believe Hanor may have been placed in one, they could only hope.

A piercing shrill through the dark wrenched everyone from slumber, Tarmon hissing for silence. Terrible and chill, the *Nyshifter* circled above the plateau up to their left, *its* black form visible against the backdrop of stars and thick band of silvery cloud on the horizon. Huddling at the rear of the small cave, did *it* know where they were? No way out, the group sat and waited.

Daring to skitter across to the entrance, Kifter pinpointed the *Nyshifter*, another shriek rendering the air as if *it* was calling to something on the plateau. Daring to hope *it* could see the beast, he ducked back when *it* descended and landed on the edge of the plateau. Cast in pale moonlight, the *Nyshifter's* pitch black eyes scoured the area, shivers running through the observer. When the creature looked the other way, the Fife stepped out hoping to see the Hunter somewhere above. Searching the rock face, he could not see *it*, ducking inside again when the *Nyshifter* turned back.

Hallen and Tarmon crept forward, curious, but a frantic Fifanian ordered them to stop. Just then, the *Nyshifter* whirled and leapt from the plateau. Spreading wings with a twisted grace, *it* swooped down and around a final time before heading off towards Tardoc, *its* terrifying presence staining the atmosphere.

“Keep quiet,” Kifter hissed when the others moved forward. “If the Hunter is close, *it* might not know we are here.” Peering around again, there was nothing to suggest anything was up there. Cautious when checking further up the mountainside, threats of more *Nyshifters* swooping through the gap kept them on edge. Long periods passed but nothing changed. Shrieks of terror echoed in the distance when the *Nyshifter* reached Tardoc.

“I suggest we wait until the morning,” the Fife said, returning to his mat. “Apart from examining the plateau, there is little we can do.”

“That was close,” Hallen said, relieved.

“Get what rest you can,” Tarmon directed. “Tomorrow will be another hard turn.”

Chapter 14 : Cruel are the Rays of the Sun

Tensions were high but hopeful, dawn a short way off. Brandor and Sharn were mounted alongside Ginnel - Caldon's second in command, and twenty other Tardanians waiting to move. Caldon and the remaining members of the Hisian-set were ready nearby with six thousand Tardanians.

Peering through bush and tree at the thin line of figures working their way along the ridge on the mountainside opposite, their plan was to ambush the Dortians guarding the huge blockade that had been built across the Five Passes. Constructed recently to cut off Tarden's attempts to aid Tardoc, the heavy fortification would be difficult to breach.

If all six thousand were to charge now, the strip of land between the trees and the barricade would grant the defenders plenty of time to prepare, and the short road up to the barrier would mean heavy casualties. Attacking before dawn did run the risk of *Nyshifters* coming, but thick clouds that had formed during the night meant the foul creatures were likely even when day broke. Hoping the element of surprise would offset the dangers, Brandor was more worried about Rinn using his *Ileng Powers* than anything else.

Forty Tardanians had crossed the plain to the mountains earlier, keeping out of sight of the Dortians around to their right. Finally returning along the ledge lining the length of these mountains, fortunately for them the natural ridge was just above the barricade. Now waiting for Pim to reach a secure position above the defenders, Brandor's small band then intended to move as a decoy. Hoping to distract the Dortians before attacking from above, Caldon and Tarden's Force would then charge once the battle was underway.

Gasping, one of Pim's group slipped, murmurs humming through the trees. Sliding a short distance, they expected someone to appear at the barricade, but to their relief, no one did. Only a stone's throw from their objective, the others dropped a vine to the stranded Tard silhouetted against the chalky rock. Easy prey for a *Nyshifter*, they lifted him to safety.

Not delaying, the group continued along the ridge. Reaching the gap above the Pass, one stepped back and waved for them to proceed.

Turning to those with him, "Do not tremble," Ginnel growled, spurring his mount on.

Breaking from the cover of trees, there were no calls of defiance or threatening gestures, which was part of the plan. No blades or shooters were visible, pretending to be innocent travellers instead.

Reaching halfway across the plane, figures appeared above the wooden ramparts to investigate. A few soon turned to thirty. Purposeful, their companions up on the ridge signalled for them to continue. Encouraged, this was maddening.

Ginnel rode at the head with Brandor and Sharn close behind. Surprised at just how large the blockade was, Woodell trees had been hewn and dragged with great effort up the slope and set in place. Many heads lined it, watchful of the approaching group. Above them, Pim waved them on, proving their plan might work.

Slowing when nearing the base of the slope, the small group of riders stopped. As feared, there was no way through other than over the barrier. At a disadvantage, many would have fallen if the entire force had charged. Shadowy occupants at the barrier conferred at what to do. Ginnel seized the initiative.

“Who has set up this wall across the Five Passes?” he yelled, but nobody seemed eager to respond. “What are Dortians doing here in Tardania?” he challenged, pretending they had no idea what this was about.

At last, a scrawny figure climbed on top of the wooden barrier, scrutinising the newcomers. “*You seek to pass?*” it whined, cackling between gritted teeth. “*So early, what be your reason?*”

Ginnel had never seen a Gorl this close before. All skin and bone, a dark oily green sheen glistened off blackened skin from fire-torches behind and to the side. “We seek to go to Tardoc. Why is this barrier here?”

“*Where you been recent times?*” the Gorl sneered.

“We travel much and seek to know what is happening across The Freelands,” he said, waiting for Pim to make his move up on the ridge.

Quick to share bitter news, “*We of the northern regions have come to claim bounty of south. Our Master willed it.*”

“What do you mean... *claim?*” Ginnel said, as if shocked. “Share or trade, but not *claim.*”

“*We not share anything.*”

“You are invaders then?” Ginnel said, feigning disgust.

Others from their small group mirrored his actions. Some Dortians got weapons ready, which only meant one thing. Armed with slingers, a snappy contraption firing star-shaped stones, Pim and his small band got ready to counter it.

“Tarden will not stand for this..., nor Tardoc.”

Another round of laughter from the barrier burst asunder, the Gorl reacting as though at last believing they were just travellers. “*Tardoc not last long, it destroyed as we speak. You want to look?*”

Before Ginnel could answer, a whizzing sound was followed by a searing pain in his left shoulder. The Gorl seated on the barrier cursed the fool who had fired. Turning as if to apologise, but it was too late. Clicks from above the defenders reigned down, hitting the leading Gorl and those alongside. Realising it was a trap, Dortians fired back at Pim’s group who ducked behind several overhangs and a couple of sturdy rocks. Fired weapons hissed and clicked, darts and slinging stones exchanging at a blistering pace. Numbers fell on both sides.

Brandor and Sharn summoned a charge of energy. White and yellow, they hurled the powers against the barrier. Fiery energies scorched the defenders as more came from further along the pass, wailing at the commotion. More than a hundred Dortians and a score of Gorls stood defiant, confident they could hold out. Blinded by another blast of energy, wounds were severe as more lives were lost.

Deafening to those at the Pass, a mighty roar exploded from the trees as if Tardania had sprung to life in her own defence. A great flood of bodies spewed across the plane, some defenders fleeing at the sight. Others dug in, the lust for blood strong. Slinging stones and darts zipped back and forth, the number of dead and wounded rising. Cries of anger blended with whimpers of despair, the laughter of before gone.

Sharn blasted the wooden barrier again, splitting the wood with explosive energies. Oil from fallen torches ignited, a sheet of fire catching hold of a few unsuspecting defenders. Intensities increased, the two Dai-lamen intent on destroying the blockade. Raging fires lit up the predawn sky, an orange gleam in bloodshot eyes.

Crashing like the tide, the sea of bodies reached the slope and started up towards the damaged barrier. Some were taken down by the diminishing defenders, but not enough to stop the rampage. Shot at from above and below, the enemy faltered.

Verging on victory, an unexpected shrill sliced through the rumbling cries of war. Swooping along the Five Passes from Tardoc, a *Nyshifter* seized two Tardanians that had managed to climb the ramparts. Soaring into the darkness, the two were dropped, falling into the trees beyond. Expecting this attack, *its* dramatic arrival spurred on the score of defenders remaining. Others from along the pass postponed their flight, hoping success was now theirs.

The rest of the Hisian-set reached Brandor and Sharn, a protective field of energy protecting them from slinging stones. Searching for their age-old enemy, they were not so frightened with Rinn close by. Flames spread across the wooden structure barring their way, stepping back from the raging heat. Those up on the ridge continued firing where they could, but the searing flames forced them back onto the ledge.

“Look out...!” Pim cried to those with him, pointing at the winged monster hugging the mountainside behind. Ducking just as vicious claws clutched at thin air, the *Nyshifter* soared up and out, flashes of red, blue and white lightening from seven Dai-lamen scorching *it*. Crazy like a wild beast, the *Nyshifter* returned, inviting their efforts again. Scorching lights crackled, but could not penetrate *its* toughened hide. Shrieks cut the pitch of night, terrifying those below.

Surging along the Five Passes and through the burning flames at the barricade, the next swooping action took down a line of Tardanians at the centre of the arriving mass. Picking two despairing souls and hurling them to the ground, shrills of pleasure pierced the predawn setting. Circling around, unconcerned by the Hisian-set, their blazing fires could not harm *it*, such was their folly.

“This is impossible,” Sharn cried, the vile creature bursting through the flames and scratching another line into the main body of the Tardanian Force. Not rising until clutching someone, the Dai-lamen were helpless as *it* picked up anyone at will. Whatever charges they sent, there was no reducing *its* ferocity. Striking repeatedly, but *it* did not waver. Dortians returned to defend the pass, adding to the problem. Pim’s group slid down the mountainside to escape when *it* came again. Clipping one, bowling him over like a falling rock, at the bottom the battered figure was stunned but alive.

“What are we to do?” Whis called, after another failed strike.

“Lives are being lost,” Brorn called, surprised Rinn remained motionless.

Possessing great power, their colleague was waiting for an invite to use the *Ileng Power*, especially from Hader and Brandor. Aware of the risk, the two Dai-lamen refused to make that commitment. Granting permission would mean no turning back. Rinn would not accept a yes now and then be expected to curb it later. Tralle and Sorlam’s views were already known.

“What are you waiting for?” Tralle barked at both Dai-lamen, disbelieving the delay.

“Is your pride so fierce that you will let this entire gathering fall?”

Brandor glared at him, but did not reply, suspecting what was to come would be far graver than this.

Ablaze behind, the barrier was now a wall of fire. Dortians and Gorls were on the other side preparing for a final defence.

“You have my consent,” Hader decreed, another round of cries escaping from the plane below, promising more Tards would not see the morrow. Unwilling to watch the slaughter proceed unabated, another shrill accompanied more death, a deep gash of bodies appearing over to the left of Tarden’s Forces.

“Brandor!” Caldon called from the base of the slope. “You must do something.”

Condemning him for this massacre, Brandor still could not condone the usage of the *Ileng Power*. Rinn remained detached, avoiding eye contact. The oldest Dai-laman did not have to argue his point, everyone was doing it for him. Another attack by the *Nyshifter* finally persuaded Brandor to agree. “I do not like you using that *power*, but if you must..., then use *it* wisely.”

Respecting the warning, Rinn concurred and turned to where the *Nyshifter* was preparing for another dive above the trees across the plane. The arrival of dawn lit up its enormous frame, tempted to punish *it* for the torment caused here. Who would argue if he did? Scrutinising his motives, the *Ileng Power* could overwhelm him if not careful.

Concentrating, Rinn closed his eyes and focused on the *Nyshifter’s* position through his mind’s eye. Satisfied with his motives, this had to be done quickly to justify the severe outpouring of power. Refusing to make the same mistakes *Gorl-darl* had, their adversary had been caught out by his destructive intent. Without the sincerity to do good and serve others, the ramifications of using such *powers* were terrible.

Opening his eyes, the *Nyshifter* was heading straight at them. Low and menacing, *it* picked up another Tard, preparing to hurl him at the Dai-lamen. Cruelty pulsing *its* blackened heart, reaching the slope, *it* did not expect what was to come.

Dark green in colour, a mist appeared around the *Nyshifter*, halting *its* flight. Suspended, *its* head and wings could move but nothing else. Flapping as if caught in a trap, *its* shrill seemed half-hearted as if shocked. Thousands wanted to cheer but refrained, overawed by the powers involved. Just glad *its* dreadful antics had been brought to heel, those underneath were quick to catch the Tardanian that was released from *its* clutches. Screeching at the cause, the beast struggled again but without result.

Convinced the creature was about to be destroyed, those not witnessing the death of the *Nyshifter* at the glade were now about to see for themselves a monster undone. Shaken as many were on that occasion, familiarity smoothed the edges that such horrors contained. *Its* demise was all that mattered.

Wailing, the Nyshifter sensed its end was near. Condensing, the green mist closed about it in an unforgiving embrace. Glimpsing the power’s source as the illumined mist closed in, the lone Dai-laman stared up without remorse, his power absolute.

Filling the surrounding sky with a green haze, Rinn did not want anyone to see what he had to do. Traces of lust urged him to rip the creature apart in a frenzied display of ruthless power but he held out. Sweat pouring, the strain evident, only now could he appreciate the scale of the *Ileng Power*.

Determined to do this right, Rinn willed the misty prison to rise, helpless wails of the *Nyshifter* understandable. Passing beyond the mountaintops, necks strained, mesmerised

by the unfolding drama. Disappearing from view when passing through the thick blanket of cloud, Rinn closed his eyes to watch in his mind. Following *its* ascent, the *Nyshifter* screeched again but seemed as confused as everyone else. The sky was getting brighter with each sorry moment.

Unable to see beyond the green veil, passing from the security of night with its protective darkness, the Nyshifter knew day had arrived in these upper regions. Pointless struggling against the otherworldly grip, the mist stopped climbing, the stillness unnerving. Expecting an attack, but nothing came. Instead, the surrounding mist began dissipating, the brightness increasing. Understanding what was happening, terror fuelled its wail, wings and head flapping against the bondage. Moving as if on a turntable, the creature rotated towards the north-east, dread increasing as the vapour continued to thin. On the precipice of life, the last drops of haze were its final hope. The blanket of cloud was far below, a landscape to which it would no longer venture. Shrilling again as the layer continued thinning, its skin started smouldering, hardened flesh blistering.

Shaking when the surrounding vapour dissolved, hot rays of the early morning sun torched it without mercy. Unable to free itself from the invisible clutches, the sun was an abomination, sizzling as if cooked alive. Scolding tempers of the Master were nothing compared to this. Wails reached a crescendo before ending dramatically, its life washing away in a trail of smoke.

Taking up their watch, Hayla and Casvern Tarn sat just inside the jagged arch of the cave. Relying on a couple of low bushes to grant them cover from the cold breeze, the two were becoming good friends.

Just as dawn broke, their watch was disturbed by a distant cry. Harrowing and desperate, it sounded like a *Nyshifter*, but the call lacked the callousness they had come to expect. Unsure what to make of it, a last pitched squeal came across Spike Ridge from the far end of the basin Wailing as if evil had finally been beaten by a greater power, the noise ceased, the eerie silence just as disturbing for the two on watch.

Pulling the charred blockade to the ground, ash and red hot embers plumed skywards. Keen to get going, Caldon was unsurprised to see the enemy flee after the *Nyshifter's* chilling end. What had become of *its* body nobody knew, the Dai-laman involved saying nothing on the matter. Unable to comprehend these fantastic encounters, Brandor still seemed disturbed by the event, so too his companions. Focusing instead on Tardoc, ordering the injured to return to Tarden, many would fall later this turn. Pleased Ginnel's wounds were not as serious as first feared, refusing to allow the injury to impede his purpose, his desires to continue could only be admired.

Crashing down the slope, the last section of the hefty barrier fell, clearing the entrance to the Five Passes. Supporting their success, clouds separated, dissolving under the rays of a guilty sun. Spirits lifted, sensing success on the horizon.

Riding into the shadowy mountain pass, anticipation ran with every pounding foot and defiant call. Splitting into lines of two's and three's, the large Tardanian Force made its way along the Five Passes. Some walked the higher parts whilst most of the riders kept to the lower roads. Two deep gullies ran to either side of the central craggy pass. Outcrops of rock and the odd scattered bush added colour and shape to this barren region.

The winding pass was long but not arduous. Expectancies forced back the cold, especially when the first few reached the end. Opening up, the Flat Planes beyond came into view. Shadows from The Treman Mountains stretched across the wide band of land, and in the far distance, the small spike of Tardoc was just visible. Fields to the left and right had been trampled or stripped of their yield to feed the ravenous invaders. Further out, crops had simply been abandoned, the Croppers returning to the safety of their ancient home. Too far to see what devastation had struck the City, they could only hope it had not yet fallen.

“What are we to do next?” Greema asked, the group stirring for the morning.

Cloaked in shadow, the surrounding area looked magnetic this early. Across the top of Spike Ridge, the far end of this basin was bathed in a fine mist. In front, a defiant Tardoc stood in the distance, refusing to give up after another night of rampaging. The planes directly below were silent.

Standing at the edge of the cave, Tarmon was waiting for Kifter and Raldama to return. “Let us see if anything has changed,” he replied to the Grovian’s question. Checking to where the two had disappeared, he jumped when four Mountain Foarns came trotting down from the plateau. Cutting back into the cave, “We have guests.”

Four animals reached the opening and hesitated. Sniffing the air for danger, they did not linger, scuttling off along the trail, down and across towards Spike Ridge.

“My stomach is telling me they would make a hearty meal,” Hallen said, hungry. Tarmon chuckled. “You would do better to eat your boots than try their tough meat.”

“You would be surprised what I can eat,” the Hite said with a grin.

“They are not frightened of people because we savour them not.”

“Curious creatures,” Tarn said,

“Funny..., me like... funny,” Rorsal said from the rear.

“We are getting used to strange creatures around here,” Hallen said, the young Dortian’s comment a timely reminder of his presence.

“Is your tongue always sharp?” Hayla rebuked, disliking his attitude already.

“Taste it and see!”

“Enough of that!” Tarmon barked from the entrance. Relieved to see Kifter heading their way, “What news?”

“Nothing,” Kifter said, looking to where the Foarns were now working their way onto Spike Ridge. “Only those scoundrels,” he said, indicating the animals. “Made us jump.”

Strolling around the perimeter of the plateau, the group had run out of answers. The fact that *Nyshifter* had landed there last night was incredible. No markings showed where *it* had stood, the smooth rock erasing any evidence. Shadows across the planes started contracting, clouds breaking apart above. Frustrated, a decision had to be made.

“Has *it* gone to Tardoc?” Raldama asked from the edge of the plateau. *It* could not have jumped. “Perhaps that *Nyshifter* carried *it*.”

“That is about as believable as it gets,” Greema agreed.

“That *Nyshifter* was looking at something last night,” Kifter said, gazing back at the rising mountains to either side of the plateau. Apart from a couple of ledges higher up, there was nowhere for *it* to hide, but why would *it*? If carried down to the lower regions, why had *it* come this way in the first place?

“Did anyone hear that *Nyshifter* at dawn?” Hayla asked, the memory vivid.
“Yes,” Kifter said, troubled by the details.
“It sounded... different.”
“Distressed..., I know.”
“A *Nyshifter* in pain,” Raldama said, intrigued. “That is something I would like to hear again.” The death of the one at Muelly an instant reminder.
“From the western end of this basin,” the Fife said, searching across that way earlier for what had happened.
“Perhaps *it* tried to take Hanor from that beast?” Greema suggested.
“I doubt it. There is only one place our friend has been taken,” Tarmon said, indicating the battered City of Tardoc and the last *Pillar of Life*.
“Then that is the way we must go,” Hayla concluded.

Peering down and across at Spike Ridge, just discernable through the morning shadows, four Foarns made their way along a narrow track. Numerous caves lined the route, the creatures entering the fifth one.

“You are not serious!” Hallen scoffed, convinced it was even more precarious than their climb here.

“That *thing* must have gone to Tardoc. What else would you suggest, go back?”

“What about those other trails, where do they lead?” the Hite posed.

To their left, two tracks disappeared around an outcrop of rock. One’s descent was quite sharp whilst the other gradual.

“The upper route goes nowhere but straight, the lower takes us halfway back along The Treman Mountains before it reaches the planes below,” Kifter explained. “Getting inside Tardoc would then be a problem.”

“And you think we can enter along that ridge?”

“Spike Ridge runs up to Tardoc,” Tarmon said. “There are no entrances, but vines can be dropped from the walls if we convince them who we are.”

“As simple as that...!” Hallen said, unconvinced.

“It will not be easy,” Tarmon affirmed, warming to the idea. “If it was, I am sure those invaders would have tried it.”

“And what of Rorsal?” the big Hite added, presuming they would be seen as traitors.

“If willing, our young friend could encourage his rampant brethren to stop their attack.”

Hallen could not help but laugh. “You are kidding?”

“If there *are* others like him, there is a chance.”

Unimpressed by the timid looking Dortian, Hallen shook his head in disgust. “I do not see a strong leader there, I see a dead one.”

“Enough,” Kifter snapped. “We need level heads not snide comments.”

Grumping as was his way of late, Hallen kept quiet.

“It does not look too difficult,” Tarn said. “Those animals managed it easy enough.”

“The trail is hazardous,” Tarmon confessed. “And disappears at the other end, but we can do this.”

“How long will it take to reach Tardoc if we try?” Greema tried, warming to it.

“We can reach it by nightfall.”

“I would rather go that way than in a disguise,” Bane said, close by.

Surprised but glad to see the lad involved and his distress gone, his point was a good one. “I agree Bane. It is less risky and a little more palatable.”

Skittering across to the edge of the plateau, something caught Kifter’s eye. Leaping up onto a bulge of rock, he peered out over Spike Ridge.

“What is it?” Tarmon called, worried by his reaction.

“Look...!” the Fife pointed to the western end of the Treman Basin.

Over Spike Ridge to the where the Five Passes split the mountain range, the mist had cleared revealing a large force spewing down from between the mountains. Unsure who it was, but the early signs were promising. Oozing out like a broken dam, hundreds turned to thousands, the mass charging towards Tardoc.

Reluctant to say for fear of being mistaken, Kifter’s keen gaze picked out mounted riders at the front. A tingle ran down his spine. “Tarden has come to the aid of Tardoc.” Murmurs of doubt turned to cheers of jubilation.

“Indeed they have,” Tarmon said, amazed by the new developments.

Unconcerned, the Hunter watched them go. Standing on the small ledge above the plateau like a cast of rock, it was waiting for the next pulse of power. Detached from the issues of this land, its sole purpose was to do the Master’s bidding.

Chapter 15 : Perils of War

“This is outrageous!” Hallen exclaimed, unsteady as they filed along the narrow track.

The severe drop to their left was far steeper and less forgiving than initially thought. Dizzy spells were frequent, relegating the early cheers of Tarden’s arrival to the past. Needing to get to Tardoc as quick as possible, doubts now crept in. Loose rock and stone demanded they focus on every step, the odd wild-bush used for support. Clusters of stone cascading down the steep slope warned against complacency and Tardoc did not seem to be getting any closer.

Stopping briefly at every cave to rest, it was gruelling work. Whenever the sun broke through the clouds, its beating rays held no compassion. Fools embarking on an impossible quest, this was no less senseless than the other escapades. Led by a determined Tardanian, pockets of rest did not last long. Bumping along this giant wave of rock, the narrow track rose and fell. Groans of displeasure were as common as gulps of water. Fatigue of another kind emerged, hopes and fears for the future getting lost on that tiny ledge. Only Kifter and Tarmon appeared at ease. Their light frames skipping along the track, the going got harder as promised.

Pausing to wait for the others, Tarmon could hardly contain the excitement. Tarden had come, which meant his beloved home had not fallen and Brandor’s journey had been successful. He just hoped the Maloree and High-tard Drola issue had been sorted.

“What are you grinning at?” Greema protested, thinking the Tard was mocking him. “Hope of course.”

“We need more than that to survive this,” the Grove grimaced, reaching for a bush when another pile of loose rock shot out from underfoot. “This is another decision I have regrets about.”

“You bring honour to yourself and your people, Greema.”

The Grove was unimpressed

“We will stop again at the next cave,” the Tard assured him, setting off along the depleting track.

Sloping, the trail ran down towards a sizable hole, but to the group’s dismay, it was not big enough to rest in. Struggling for another short-turn before the next suitable cave was found, grunts of relief beneath tired eyes were expected. Eating meagre rations, they still had a long way to go. Reaching halfway, a definite din was now audible, the sounds of turmoil at Tardoc. Doubts surfaced, a stark warning to reconsider what they were getting into. Clouds gathered again. To get stranded this far up with *Nyshifters* abroad would be just their luck.

“No doubt you wish you had chosen to flee when Tarmon gave you the chance?” Hallen asked Rorsal, who was sitting across from him.

Considering his comment, the Dortian disagreed. “Much... free... up here... than home.”

“This is hardly freedom,” the Hite snorted, more at the circumstances than the young fellow. Slipping more times than he could remember, twice he had come close to his end.

“Free to... talk..., free to... laugh..., free to... cry,” the Dortian added.

“Free to cry more like,” the Hite huffed. “Why do we keep putting ourselves in these ridiculous situations?”

“You love... freedom..., that... why,” Rorsal said, respectful. The longer he spent with these people, the more convinced of their goodness he became. Even the big Hitorian showed how much he cared by his passion.

Eyes narrowing, Hallen stared at Rorsal. “You do not sound like a Dortian.”

“Some... Dortians... like me..., yes? You trust... Dortians... like me?” Not all of his people had turned to brutal ways.

“You *are* unique,” the Hite chuckled. No matter how much growling he did, the Dortian seemed unperturbed. To smile after enduring his Hitorian abuse, the least he could do was respect him.

“You... friend...? Me like... friend.”

Doubting he could take such a monumental leap, Hallen managed to grin. “I look forward to the end of this war..., then we will see.”

Rorsal agreed, uncomplaining when Tarmon ordered them to move.

Late into the after-turns, Caldon ordered a reprieve before the final push. A dim quiet settled across Tarden’s Forces, assessing what was to come. Up ahead, the dark mass of evil invading these precious lands drew closer, individuals just discernable. Doubt could seep in during these awkward periods, so Caldon started singing an old Tardanian song known to his troops. Mustering the resilience to succeed, the tune took hold as thousands began singing, a chant promising victory. An echo from the walls of Tardoc soared in response, the song firing hopes for the defenders and unrest amongst the invaders.

*From the Light of a Tardanian heart
Springs the will to succeed
With an ache to be free
Comes the united cry of Tardania.*

*Through storms and blizzards we rise
With purpose fixed and true
Through love we do move
Comes the united cry of Tardania.*

The short song was repeated, a banner of defiance. Motivating everyone to make that extra effort, Caldon used it to lead them into battle. Raising his arm to increase their speed, hearts and minds reached a rhythmic high. Pounding of Kyboe feet and those on foot intermingled with clinks of those about to descend into war. Keen sight picked out apprehensive features of the enemy on which to aim. Shooters held ready, so too swords and hunting darts, the pace gathered. Ducking behind broad necks of their mounts for protection, their thick hides would soak up the first wave of slinging stones.

Spreading out to strengthen the first attack, Brandor and the Hisian-set waited for their time to strike. The whites of their enemy’s eyes stared back, ready for the impact. Within a stone’s throw, a call went up from the enemy’s ranks, slinging stones filling the air. Sharp and star-shaped, the stones cut into the Force from Tarden, thin darts firing in return. Scores on both sides lurched and fell, the battle underway.

“Now...!” Brandor ordered his comrades, summoning powers to influence the proceedings.

Small balls of blistering white fire shot forward into the awaiting mass. Potent lights against this cunning darkness, each shooting flame sizzled, the air sparking when passing over the front line. Exploding further in, red, blue and yellow streams of electric charge sent countless defenders into panic. Scorching pains threw many to the ground writhing in agony. Abhorrent but necessary, more balls of energy were released with astonishing effectiveness.

Opposing Forces clashed in a wave of bodies and steel. Most of the invaders were on foot, but their large frames were sturdy and not easy to move. Driving deep, Caldon and Ginnel led their troops on. Snarling features scowled, Tarden’s Forces gaining in confidence when more fiery balls exploded in front. The melee was ruthless, death resulting at every turn.

Difficult not to get distracted by the awful scenes ahead, the noise of war increased as the small group on Spike Ridge edged on through the after-turns. Individuals were now discernable in and outside of the bloodied City. Growls of terror reached those strangers scratching along near the crest of the lesser mountain chain. Small siege mechanisms lay dormant far below, the success of breaching the lower sections of Tardoc the reason. High walls set between huge wedges of rock showed clear signs of war, some broken and bloodstained. On the upper levels, buildings spread right across both sides of Spike Ridge. Elegant pillars of stone were ornately fashioned and still untouched by the mass of evil. A once prominent mountain, now lost to the skilful manipulations of stonecutters and builders, verandas of leisure had been converted to watchtowers, so too straight-sided buildings of fine construct. Dwarfed only by the surging towers alongside, seven pillars of stone rose proud from hewn rock at their base. Two of the enormous columns had substantial chambers halfway down, bulging as if skewed by a rod of stone through their middle. Those higher up kept shooting at the marauding Horde below. Wary, Tarmon knew it was a graven risk to approach the stricken City from their direction, especially with Rorsal present, but there was no going back.

Difficult to move on the uneven rocks, the track had disappeared long ago, trusting recently acquired experience to maintain their footing. Carnage below and in front heightened senses, postponing exhaustion. Dortians were fighting alongside Gorls, the wretched creatures no different to those at Mandurin.

Ashamed and disgusted, “Not... fight... please..., not... fight,” Rorsal implored.

Unlike Mandurin, the buildings were not being pulled to the ground. Death to its inhabitants seemed to be the objective, wretched Gorls dragging the dead out to the camp to feed. No Dortian shared the same despicable appetites. Conquering this splendid City was what they sought, just as the Teachers had promised.

Shrieks of delight erupted when another level was breached. Only when a great chorus of song from the other side of the City boomed did many of those at the forefront stall, especially when those defending added to its call. Followed by a resounding roar like a rushing storm, a collective clatter of weapons rose above the din, those invading this side of the City questioning what monster could make such a terrible sound. Only the small collection of people high up on the mountainside knew its source.

Encouraging them on, Tarmon saw the short distance left as tricky but manageable. Careful, Tardoc appeared less daunting now its freedom was about to be won. Thickening clouds coating the sky were not enough to dampen spirits, a few thin patches of blue keeping *Nyshifters* at bay. Debris still frequently shingled down the mountainside. To fall now would be a travesty. Barely a few throws of a stone from the City's dominant walls, those guarding them were staring down through decorative trees to the lower regions rather than out at Spike Ridge.

Thick and sturdy, the high wall running down the mountainside was a daunting barrier for any would-be attacker. Steep slopes secured its effectiveness, the invaders not even attempting to scale it such was its acuteness. Confident they just might succeed, the main Meeting Chamber of Tardoc dominated the upper regions, decorative windows and dusty, bricked walls were untouched by war. Safeguarded by lower battlements, built to counter anyone mad enough to try the path they now walked, they were nearly there.

Voices on the jutting walls started yelling, spotting the band out on the ridge. More people appeared, conferring at what to do.

"We are going to make it," Hallen chimed, the short distance left levelling out. "And may I never set foot on a mountain again," Greema shared the Hite's relief.

Lifting his arm to salute them, but Tarmon was too late. Completing the hard part, hisses whipped by them, an unexpected yelp calling from the rear of their line.

"No...!" Hayla screamed in horror.

Dismayed, young Rorsal slumped back on the mountainside with three darts protruding from his chest. Shocked and in pain, his mouth moved but no sound came.

"We are friends," Tarmon called to those on the wall. "It is I..., Tarmon of Tarden, we come in aid of your cause." Holding the palm of his hand out in the Tardocian fashion, calls swept along the walls seeking someone of authority.

Slipping by Raldama and Greema, Tarmon reached the young Dortian who was struggling to breathe. Tear-filled, Hayla was at his side nursing him, but his condition looked bleak. Shooting darts were lethal, and to receive three was grave indeed. Blood trickling, twisted barbs meant serious internal damage, sealing his fate.

Chiding himself, Tarmon should have expected this. "Rorsal..., my dear friend," he said, the glazed expression revealing the boy's shock. "Rorsal...!"

"Hurts... so... much," the Dortian said, grimacing. Disbelieving three short shafts were protruding from his chest, "Me... not... fight!"

"I know, Rorsal," Tarmon tried to comfort him. "But they do not know that. I am so sorry."

A lurching pain jabbed him, dizziness sweeping in. "Like... freedom..., yes?" He coughed, adding to the hurt.

"Yes, you *are* free," Hallen said, bending down. Only now could he appreciate the treasure this Dortian was.

"Like... friend..., like all..., yes?" Face knotting again, his chest seemed to be on fire.

"You have shown us how to respect all people," the Hite said, guilt already blaming him.

Vines were lowered from the walls, but the group's concerns were for their dying friend. The severity of the wounds meant he would not last long.

"Can we not get him inside?" Greema urged, vines lowering from the walls.

Moving him would just add to the suffering Tarmon knew. The darts had reached deep, which was their purpose. Pulling back the headdress made of tiny ringlets of steel, thick black matted hair had lost its shine the moment the Dortian had embarked on this doomed journey south. Deep-set eyes flicked back and forth, grimacing when another shooting pain coursed through his chest. A soft gasp for air was Rorsal's last moment before his life force left his bloodied body.

Happening so quick, they were in shock. Warming to Rorsal's gentle ways, he was the opposite of his destructive brethren below. Standing under the watchful gaze of the enemy, they were too high up to be reached by them. This grim moment proved how diabolical war was. A potential leader had been slaughtered, praying there were others like Rorsal who would help free their people from the *Teachers*.

Covering Rorsal up where he lay with large rocks, it was unfitting to just leave him out in the open. Roars from the other side of the City lost their spark, another saga coming to a sad end. Missing Hanor and Balkorn, exhaustion claimed them.

Intense fighting continued after sunset. Caldon, Ginnel, and members of the Hisian-set, along with thousands from Tarden were determined to put an end to this invasion. Lines of crackling red, yellow and green lights periodically flared through the shadows of grim fighting. Physical limitations meant only so much energy could be summoned, but eight Dai-lamen did what they could, preventing many lives being lost to the sword.

Refraining from using the *Ileng Power*, Rinn relied on previous knowledge to fend off assailants, temptations to sweep the area clean of their foe hounding his efforts. Catching Brandor staring at him on numerous occasions, checking he was not about to do anything cataclysmic, such actions would bring about a returning force that would undo him. The *Ileng Power* could only be used when there was no other choice.

Unrelenting, the slaughter of hundreds turned to thousands. Half-expecting the two moons to rise covered in blood, when they did appear through broken cloud, they cast their silvery glow upon the field of carnage without affection.

Too many shadows slowed the fighting, but it did not stop, too much at stake to back off now. Terrible cries merged as if the Flat Planes were dying under the weight of butchery. Slinging stones and darts were less frequent in the dark, the fight turning to blades and knives. Blood and sweat stained this once idyllic setting, struggling senses clogged by the rancid atmosphere.

Staying close to Rinn, Brandor had a plan, deciding to blaze a way through to Tardoc. Intending to cleave the enemy forces in half, the rest of the Hisian-set were right behind, along with Ginnel and a now wounded Caldon. Those holding command over the Dortians seemed helpless to stop their electrifying power. Cut down by blistering bolts of crackling red and blue fiery light, the plan was working.

Thrilled the battle was going their way, to their horror, two *Nyshifters* arrived. Heart-wrenching shrills pierced tender ears long before *their* silhouettes were spotted in the moonlit sky. For those from Tarden, *they* no longer posed a real threat thanks to Rinn. Swooping and diving amongst islands of cloud, *they* seemed in no hurry to join the battle. Lights throughout the upper regions of Tardoc were put out, the people inside the City still unaware of the creatures' mortality.

Tuning into the *Nyshifters'* calls, Brandor could detect a different tone. Captivating as much as it was haunting, they could not believe it when Gorks to their left and right barked different orders. Growls simmered, so too the attacks. The noise of fighting lessened, leaving many staggered by what was going on.

Reacting like a tide going out, hundreds just turned and followed the *Nyshifters* towards the open end of the Treman Basin. Ordering this monstrous Horde to leave, where were they going? A low hum of disquiet replaced the angry sounds of war.

Hundreds crossed in front of the Hisian-set, Brandor and Rinn suspicious of such a drastic change of direction. Eerie, but where was the logic? Many of those leaving seemed to lack that lust for conflict. Pockets of fighting continued in other areas, but they too settled. Obeying the new instructions, a short gap between the opposing forces became a no man's land. For so many to retreat meant mischief was at hand. Tempted to charge, but Caldor did not want to lose anymore lives. What could drive *Gork-darl* to order this new course?

Watching from the highest tower of Tardoc, High-tard Polon was suspicious of the turnaround. For thirty turns of the day they had endured the presence of this evil menace, and to be over this quickly generated natural caution. Thankful to Tarden's Forces and the blazing powers of the Hisian-set, if this was the end then a miracle it was.

Shuddering when another shrill pierced the darkness, *Nyshifters* roused fears of the worst kind. Searching the night sky for answers to this mystery, none came. Hundreds were heading for the open end of the Treman Basin, so where was the treachery?

Puzzled by the arrival of Tarmon and his mixed band of companions, that was another troubling issue. Mentioning a hideous monster had attacked them and taken the one called Hanor, no such beast had entered Tardoc he was quite sure. Convinced this morning that defeat was inevitable, he could not help but search for the trickery. Needing to see Brandor before resting, a sharp exhalation did not reflect the extent of his relief.

Chapter 16 : Do you Trust Me?

Dismounting in what was once an enclosure set in rock, Brandor was saddened by the dire setting. Buildings were still standing but showed serious signs of war, blood and ash the most common. Reaching the lowest tier of Tardoc, some outbuildings higher up were on fire, so too bushes and trees. Most of the City was cut out of stone and impermeable to the ravenous flames, yet the dreadful carnage delayed any deserved celebrations. Many from Tarden entered the ravaged home of the Tardocians, smiles greeting their brethren of ancient times. Tears in the half-light were of joy, hugging strangers with gratitude. Fire-torches were set on the walls to push back the dark, realising their nightmare was at an end.

Passing through a large ornate archway, Brandor chuckled, surprised to see Hallen and Greema together. "Who would have believed it, a Hite and Grove side by side." "My respect for Hites has returned," Greema commended his big Hitorian companion. Joining in the fight here at Tardoc before the arrival of the two *Nyshifters*, twice they had saved each other from fatal blows.

"And I will sit this night and share Sasta with my short companion, if he is willing that is," the Hite beamed, amazed this was happening. "Did you scare them off?"

"Just me and a few others," Brandor grinned. No idea what *Gorl-darl* was up to, he gave no further thought to it. "And where are the others?" he asked, just as Hayla and a slender looking fellow strolled down the narrow walkway. "Need I ask more?" he joked, receiving Hayla's rushing embrace.

"Am I glad to see *you*, Brandor?" she said, looking behind to where other aged men were approaching. "Are these your colleagues?"

Introducing them, Brandor was pleased to see Raldama and Bane. Kifter called from a higher rampart and made his way down. More Tardocians gathered to welcome the newcomers, especially intrigued by the eight old men. But it was Hanor that Brandor wanted to see, trusting he was with Tarmon. Exchanging small talk, Caldor was there with a wounded leg, and Ginnel, holding his shoulder. Filling the lower regions, hundreds grew to thousands.

"Brandor...!" a familiar call came from behind the many bodies celebrating.

Making their way through the throngs, the Dai-Laman was glad to see Tarmon and High-tard Polon striding down the steps from the bloodstained hall. Occupants of this battered City started cheering their Leader. Looking beyond the two, Brandor still could not see Hanor. Catching a glimpse in Kifter's eye, detecting hesitation, there was something wrong. Waiting for the two prominent Tardanians to make their way through the melee, a flicker in Tarmon's gaze matched the Fife's. Brandor managed a tame smile.

"It is good to see you both," the Dai-laman decreed, gathering them in. Through the din of jubilant victors, Brandor looked straight at Tarmon. "Where is Hanor?"

Festivities became secondary, only a vital few knowing the significance of the question. Collecting himself, Tarmon took full responsibility.

"We do not know."

Shocking the older man, it took a moment to accept what he had said. "You do not know?" Brandor's gladness dissolved. Glaring at the guilty Bane, he had relied on him to keep close to Hanor as a good friend should.

The hubbub of noise continued around them, the relief too strong to worry about the small troubled gathering at its centre.

“We were attacked by a horned beast,” Tarmon defended, expecting Brandor’s reaction.

“Attacked?” the Dai-laman urged, impatient. Refraining from reading his thoughts, this was not the time or place.

“Yes, and we think *it* took Hanor... and maybe Balkorn.”

“Is he still alive?” Brandor demanded, the *Sacred’s* plans at stake.

“We think so,” Kifter said, prepared for the Dai-laman’s wrath. “The episode is even more mysterious than when the Yarmorians took him.”

“No good talking here,” High-tard Polon cut in. “Come, I will find you somewhere private.”

Motioning for them to follow, he passed through the large crowd of celebrants and headed back to the upper levels. What was going on here?

“Slaughtered those at the High-bridge you say?” Rinn said, discussing Tarmon’s epic tale in the highest hall of Tardoc with fellow members of the Hisian-set, Polon and the group. Fascinated by the horned creature, the oldest Dai-laman could only admire *Gorl-darl’s* unpredictability. It was difficult to judge what *he* might do next.

“I cannot work out how your companions back at the camp just disappeared,” Hader said, thinking about nothing else. “We are talking about powers of a higher sort here.”

“The same with that creature,” Brandor said, troubled at just how powerful *Gorl-darl* had become. A disappearing beast was the last thing he needed. Disturbed by what happened to Balkorn, his head started to hurt. Going around in circles seeking answers, they had been here for a couple of short-turns and were still no further forward. Tired from recent demands, there was no clear way forward.

“There is plenty to consider this night,” Rinn said. Too many yawns around the hall were undermining the discussion. “We have seen much this turn, and much more is yet to be shared. Sleep can help clarify issues.”

“True,” Hader agreed, standing to stretch his back.

“But what about Hanor?” a young voice cried from the end of the room. Bane had waited all this time for action. “You cannot leave him out there!”

Rising, Brandor went to the distraught lad. “There are too many conflicting possibilities,” he said, patting his shoulder. “We all want to find Hanor and Balkorn.”

“But *you* cannot sleep without knowing where he is,” Bane said, pent up emotions dragging him down. Pulling away from Brandor, he did not need affection. Letting his friend down repeatedly, this was the worst yet. “I will not leave him alone out there.”

“Neither shall we,” the Dai-laman tried soothing him. Surprised how calm he was about the loss, now the shock was out, Brandor did not feel the same fear he had at Tarden. Trusting the *Sacred* on this, it was out of his hands. “We will look again at first light, I promise. Be strong for Hanor, he may need you when we find him.”

Snivelling, Bane could barely speak. Desperate to hold Hayla, yet she was the last person he needed when swamped with guilt. Sliding down the wall like a wounded animal, a tempting thought chimed before exhaustion claimed him. *‘The Voice could help!’*

Reflecting on what Tarmon had disclosed, Brandor and Rinn stood talking at the end of the corridor of elegant design. Staring out the curving window, they could see both

ends of the Treman Basin. The open side where that horde had departed, and the cut in the mountain chain to their right where Rinn had disposed of the second *Nyshifter*.

“Why do you think that beast took Hanor?” Rinn asked, still amazed how the creature had disappeared.

“I am not surprised *Gorl-darl* has conjured up something so hideous,” Brandor replied, hoping the creature was not inside Tardoc as Tarmon thought. “*He* must know about the *Pillars of Life*.”

“And wants the last one for himself?”

“Seems reasonable.”

Down on the lower levels, the slow process of identification and mourning was underway, so too the clean up. Out in the fields, shadowy figures were searching for the Tardanian dead. Others had the unsavoury work of gathering the carcasses of their foe into large piles for burning. Not wanting to wake up to an atrocious sight in the morning, it was now nearly half-turn of the night.

“Power is a strange phenomenon,” Rinn said, reminded of his own struggles during the battle below. “It grants life, and yet... is the very thing that can destroy it.”

“Like your *Ileng Power*?”

“That... especially.”

“You did well to contain *it* down there,” Brandor commended him.

“It was not easy.”

“I thought we were going to lose you to *it*,” Brandor admitted, still disliking the fact *it* was there to be used.

“I am over the worst part,” Rinn said, *its* subtle presence peculiar. Suspecting *its* power will be used in the distant future when the people of The Freelands’ had advanced to a less hostile state, getting a glimpse of what that would be like enthralled him. “I now believe this *Ileng Power*... is in the hands of a child.”

Approving, Brandor could see Rinn was no longer concentrating on the potential contained within the dynamic powers, but was taking responsibility for the damage *it* could do instead. Respecting his companion, *it* still terrified him.

Sitting miserably huddled inside a large storage cupboard, Bane’s eyes hurt from the tears. Needing solitude just to survive, calming down since his outburst earlier, despair was still but a thought away. Guilt-ridden for being here and not out looking for Hanor, he felt pathetic. Irate that Brandor and the others had no idea where his friend was, how else was he to dig himself out of this misery?

Pulling the blanket he had found on a shelf about him, the darkness was comforting. Angry at how Hayla was affecting him, focusing on the loss of Hanor was still not enough to simmer straying thoughts. Watching her fight earlier from the higher levels, the fact Casvern Tarn had been at her side only made the longings stronger. Ordered by Hallen to stay out the way, even after dropping a heavy stone bowl on top of a Dortian’s head he had felt far from brave. Nauseous at the resultant pool of dark blood, youthful dreams about being a brave warrior had all been dashed in that revolting incident. Hayla’s approval had not helped, cursing his uselessness.

Tempted to scream, he wondered if anyone would hear. Finding this cupboard in an isolated part of Tardoc, the peace he sought would still not come. Entertaining for pity’s sake one sweet fantasy about living with Hayla after this war was over, it summed up his

wretchedness. Strolling into the sunset holding hands, only when a clang further down the hall snapped him from his stupor did the fantasy end.

Frustrated, tempting whispers about the *Voice* reminded him about other options. Calling only for his trust, *it* had promised his relationship to Hayla would fall apart. Altering the future like *it* had said, what else could *it* do? “*Unless you beseech me to come again,*” *it* had demanded before leaving. Doubting the offer still stood after all that had happened, he toyed with the idea of asking *it* to return. Weighing the benefits; even though his love for Hayla was strong, the one person he wanted to see again was Hanor. Could *it* return his best friend? It did seem ridiculous. But the more he thought about it, reservations started losing their edge, desperation the cause.

“To beseech *it*,” he mused, dipping his nose into the musty blanket. Clicking his tongue like a beating drum, his heart was pumping, warning against what he was proposing to do. Tapping his finger, resistance disappearing, who could blame him for not seeking help? Making up his mind that it was just for Hanor, he made the call.

“Are you... there?” he managed, the darkness about him closing in. Searching his thoughts, hoping *it* might spring to life, but nothing came. “Are you there?” he thought, attempting to think louder if that was possible. Again nothing. Images of Hayla and Hanor flashed before him, desires for them supporting his next effort. “Will you speak to me?” he tried, but the silence of the room seemed untouched by his appeal. Wondering whether to give up, a timely reminder came. “*Beseech!*”

Unsure if it was a memory or the actual *Voice*, the fact *it* wanted him to plead touched a nerve. All the same, another rush of hope caressed his purpose. Yearning for the two to be returned without harm, Hayla as his lady and Hanor as a friend, nothing could be simpler. Doubting his efforts were needy enough, the thought of *it* not answering was frightening. “Please... help me.”

“*Louder!*”

The word caressed him, heart pounding again. Was it the *Voice*? “Please..., I really need your help.”

“*Again,*” the whisper urged.

“I really mean it,” Bane said, uncertain if he was speaking out loud or not. “Please..., I am desperate. I... I need you to return my friends to me. I will do anything...” Catching his breath at that last statement, what if *it* asked him to do something terrible?

“*Trust... me?*”

Nervous, Bane was certain the *Voice* was responding. “Trust...?” The word carried great depth. Could he trust *it*? What was he prepared to do to save Hanor and have Hayla as his lady? Almost anything, except take his own life or kill a friend. The rewards outweighed the risk so he crossed the line. “Yes, I will trust you.”

A long pause ensued, waiting for the flowing words to fill his mind. Just as doubts swept in, he received an answer.

“*I have been waiting for you, Bane,*” the *Voice* said, smooth as was *its* tendency.

“Have... y-you?” he stuttered, fearful that this was real.

“*I said before that I know your destiny, did I not?*”

“Er... y-yes... you did. I... d-did not... believe you.”

“*But now you do?*”

“I... I am still unsure about this,” he admitted, feeble.

“Trust is a sign of strength. Did I not retract my support for your relationship with Hayla?”

“You... did.”

“I need you to trust me for us to be of use to each other. You seek Hayla and Hanor, is that not a fair exchange?”

Explaining it like that, it appeared a trivial thing to ask. What could his destiny be that held such worth? Always in Hanor’s shadow, had everyone got it wrong? The idea seemed absurd, especially after what his friend had been through. “What is my destiny?” he asked, still under wraps of his own thoughts. Weird as this was, alarms no longer rang.

“If I can change the future, I can also change your destiny. Your destiny is to play a large part in the outcome of The Freelands fate. Walk away now..., and you will miss the chance to create a New Dawn for this world.”

“And what New Dawn is that?”

“Is there Darkness in The Freelands?”

“Yes...”

“Do you want to be rid of It?”

“Yes?”

“Then fulfil your destiny by helping to end this war.”

The notion of impacting events was staggering. How was it possible? Before he could ask anything else, the *Voice* spoke again.

“Trust is what I seek, and you will have what you want. I need to be sure you will not let us both down.”

Reaching the crucial point, if the *Voice* did not keep *its* word then he would not have to remain loyal to his own. Straightforward enough, he dared one more question before agreeing. “Who will get what they want first?”

“YOU!”

Shaking him to the bone, dealing with powers far greater than he could possibly imagine, if his needs were to be met first then he had nothing to lose. Nervous yet excited, refraining from enquiring who he was dealing with, to do so might jeopardise the promise just made. If the two people he loved were to be returned, then there was no doubting the *Voice*’s power. “I will trust you... if you keep your word.”

“Good.”

Gasping when the *presence* left the small cupboard, Bane was glad there were no mirrors present, ashamed for giving in so easily. Disbelieving the *Voice* had enough power to deliver the impossible anyway, had he made contact with the *Sacred*? Whoever *it* was, he had not sensed any evil. Unimaginable power, yes, but nothing he should be worried about. Pulling his blanket up, a shudder ran through him.

Chapter 17 : Two Paths

“Why is it getting hotter?” Hanor asked, struggling from the gruelling walk.

Losing track of where in The Freelands they might be, they had been travelling for so long he wondered if they had already passed Tardania. Appreciating how much they had relied on their Kyboes, even with the brisk pace this journey was taking forever.

“We ares approachings the ancients Vales Rivers,” Rinar said over his shoulder.

“I have never heard of the Vale River,” Hanor said, half-expecting the soil and rock passing around them to turn to fire.

“It is now dry,” Balkorn said from behind. “Our records show that a river used to run across The Freelands but dried up a very long time ago.”

“Balkorns speaks trulys,” Forar agreed. *“A shifts ins the grounds has causeds the hots rivers to rises.”*

“Hot river?”

“Deeps downs... the grounds is hots ands is liquids,” Emnee said, walking next to Lunar. *“Sometimes its rises, sometimes its falls.”*

“Rivers of fires,” Lunar added, excited.

“That does not sound appealing,” Hanor said, trying to picture it.

“Cans be... scarys!”

“Where are we exactly?” Hanor asked, hoping they were near to Tardoc. He still needed to find a way to persuade them to go to the Tardanian City.

“We ares nears the rivers calleds... Rapones,” Rinar explained.

Taking his word for it, Hanor was about to mention about them helping him when Rinar halted.

“What is it?” Hanor asked, startled when the little fellow raised a hand for silence.

“Its appears manys ares ons the moves aboves grounds,” Rinar said, an eerie tone to his voice.

“Who is on the move?” Thoughts about his friends were obvious.

Tapping his staff and incanting words of power, the rotating yellow mist solidified at the front of the cocoon. Expecting a snowy setting, instead, black shadowy shapes appeared. Hundreds of hideous figures filled the circular field of fiery energy. Bloodstained but resilient, Hanor recognised Dortian features as well as frenzied Gorls. Their numbers just kept coming. What were they doing here? Had they already destroyed Tardoc? If above ground now, they would not have stood a chance.

Retracting the orb’s projection, Rinn and the other Shavani looked ashamed. Until Hanor and Balkorn had arrived into their covert underworld, such images had not held much weight, but denial could no longer protect them.

“Theres is a caves ups aheads,” Rinar said, not wishing to debate what they had seen. *“We wills stops theres.”* Turning, he set off.

Walking for a short-turn since observing the horrible images of life above ground, Hanor was exhausted. Expecting to stumble on a fiery liquid, he only hoped this moving cocoon would shield them from its flames if they did. Thirsty, rationing their water, if only they could rest a while. Balkorn looked even worse but did not complain.

Rinar slowed, trusting they had arrived at a cave. The fact it was sweltering did not matter, Hanor just wanted to rest. Their guide appeared tentative as if something was wrong. Advancing carefully, the other Shavani seemed equally troubled. Watching the front wall, they gasped when it parted. A bright orange glow surprised everyone. Scorching, a wave of heat rushed in like a burning light. Checking there was no immediate danger, Rinar walked forward, expecting the worst. Deep orange and red shades flickered off the curving walls of their cocoon. Something ahead was moving, a low rushing sound reinforcing that possibility.

More of the surrounding earth retracted, the fiery light intensifying. Entering a large illuminated cave, they stopped on a narrow plinth of rock, horrified by the deep ravine crossing their path. The cave floor had fallen into the molten river below.

Understanding what a river of fire now looked like, the searing heat warned Hanor of the dangers. Patches of thin grey crust lay across the top of the slow moving stream of lava. A magical but daunting sight, flashes of flame jetted up. The young man from Manson forgot about his fatigue, in awe of the setting.

"We needs to finds somewheres to rests this days," Miln said, breaking the spell. *"We cannots stays heres."*

"I do nots knows whys this is likes this," Rinar said, uneasy.

"Movements ofs energies haves beens greats ofs lates," Lennan said. *"Its is naturals to expects this."*

"I thought you said you have seen this before?" Hanor asked, disliking their tone.

"Yes..., but nots heres," Miln explained, worried.

Deep rumbles in the earth groaned, dislodging a small lump of bumpy rock from the cave ceiling. Falling into the fiery depths, it hissed when absorbed by the lava below, prompting them to move.

"Theres is anothers caves... ons the others sides ofs the rivers," Rinar declared. Igniting the power of the staff, another rumble got them moving. *"Its is a littles highers ups,"* he said, heading left.

"How far is it?" Hanor asked, joints aching. A slim smile from the Balt was forced, grey eyes unable to conceal inner pains. "We have to stop soon!"

"Nots too fars," Rinar promised.

Huffing, Hanor did not need this. "I am looking forward to our parting," he said under his breath.

"Be patient with them," Balkorn said alongside, leaving the cavern behind. "They carry much upon their small shoulders."

"What do you mean?"

"They work with energies of the ground to stabilise forces that this world receives from elsewhere in the Universe. Their concerns are not of the human kind but of a planetary sort. They feel that if their work is not done, then there will be no life in The Freelands."

"How do you know this?"

"Seary of the Doon explained much about their duties as a people," Balkorn said, his low voice vibrating with purpose. "More than our guides here are willing to share."

The Shavani were as frustrating as they were fascinating. Simple but intelligent, childish but aged beyond normal standards, he was drawn to them even if he did not want to be.

"They can be annoying sometimes."

“We are all annoying at times.”

“Are you saying I annoy you, Balkorn?” he played.

Managing a slight grin, the Baltian concentrated on the front end of this moving shell, the stabbing pains getting stronger. Poisons from the original strike seemed to be running rampant. He had not given the original healing enough time, and travelling like this was picking it apart. Even though wisdom was declaring he should rest, they could not afford to. Time was precious. Doomed to his fate, he would meet that challenge with passion to make his unborn son proud.

Relieved when the heat faded, granting some respite, but Hanor was still not happy. Grey and bleary eyed, Balkorn was not well and refused to stop. Assurances given prior to leaving the Shavani underworld now looked empty.

“How far is the next cave?” Hanor asked, trying to keep his temper.

“*Verys soon,*” Rinar pledged. “*We ares unders... the Rapone Rivers.*”

Disliking the way Balkorn was walking, lacking strength and vitality, “We will be there soon,” Hanor promised, but his friend did not acknowledge he had heard. “Balkorn...!”

“I will be... all right!” he said, the momentum of putting one foot in front of the other keeping him going.

“*Theres soon,*” Lunar repeated the staff-bearer.

Holding the Baltian’s hand, it was cold again just like in that room after the attack. Anxious, his large companion did not even respond to the touch. Chiding himself for coming so soon, when his friend coughed, Hanor longed to help.

Clearing his throat of blood, Balkorn was fading. Vague thoughts about his unborn son hung before him like a beacon of light, urging him to complete the task. Disorientated, he did not notice the front of the capsule peel back and coolness fill the space about them. Led to sit on a cold bare surface, he lay down like a hapless animal. Closing his eyes, the suffering stopped.

“*He is nots wells...*,” Emnee said, standing over the sleeping Baltian with the others. Crouching and holding his friend’s chill hand, Hanor could not respond. Too tired to get angry, he just hoped his companion would come out of this after some rest. “We should have stopped sooner,” he said, more to himself than anyone.

“*Onlys ins caves cans we rests,*” Miln of the Doon explained, but it fell on deaf ears. “*Nots rests ins fields ofs energies. Nots goods... nots healthys to stops.*”

Drained, Hanor felt he would be betraying his friend if he were to rest. “Can you not do anything for him?”

“*We ares nots healers,*” Forar apologised. “*Healers tunes ins to Highers Worlds to gains theirs powers. Ours works is nots ofs thats kinds.*”

Disbelieving how quickly this had come on, they had been coping even though the journey was long. “Do you have any potions to give him?”

Awkward, the Shavani did not want to say.

“Well...?” Hanor snapped. “Do you have some or not?”

Wary of where this might lead, Rinar turned away from the others and went to sit down on a bulge of rock. Lunar plucked up the courage to speak.

“*The waters ins the orbs woulds helps hims,*” he said, peering doubtfully across at Rinar. “*Buts... its cannots be takens outs.*”

“Do you not have any other water like it?” he said, encouraged that all might not be lost.

“*We have no water here,*” Lunar said, regretful.

“Did you not bring any?” Willing to break the *orb* if necessary, if there was an opening to this cave, they would just have to risk the last parts of their journey above ground.

Lunar kept an eye on Rinar, expecting a sharp retort. “*Where is the water coming from?*”

Irrelevant to Hanor, he needed the water now. “Could you not get some? Balkorn is... dying.”

The resultant hush was heavy, a lone tear rolling down Hanor’s cheek. Peering through the bodies to where Rinar sat with the staff, temptation ordered him to break the *orb* and use its valuable fluid to heal his companion.

“Is not life more important than a staff?” he asked, standing.

Backing away, the Shavani picked up on his intentions.

“*This staff is not to be touched,*” Rinar warned, standing on the rock to add height where there was none.

“It is made of glass,” he said, moving towards the small fellow. “You can make another one. Does not Balkorn mean anything to you?” Tears gone, Hanor felt compelled to do this for compassion’s sake. “He will not last through the night.”

Shock glared back from the Shavani. What he intended was sacrilege.

“*You know no water... what are your sayings,*” Forar said, protective of Rinar.

Supporting him, the others closed ranks to shield their leader, at last uniting as one.

“*This is no good, Hanor,*” Lunar beseeched.

Taller and stronger, he was no real match for them combined. Halting a few paces short, “My friend is dying. Look at him,” he ordered, the broken figure lying limp on the floor behind. Tactfully adjusting his tone, “If that water can help, then it is right that we use it.” His tenderness unsettled them.

“*With rests,*” Forar said. “*He should get better.*”

“What if he does not? Will you care?”

Frustrated by their aloofness, tempted to lunge for the staff, but deep down, this was not right. If it was not for these people, Balkorn would not be alive anyway. Emotions surging like a flood of pain, more tears rolled. Burdened, he returned to his sleeping companion and lay down beside him. Sighing but not wanting to give up hope, Balkorn’s life was no longer in his hands. Mutterings from the Shavani behind were immaterial.

“I am worried about him,” Hayla said to Kifter, walking along a curving corridor on the upper levels of Tardoc.

Expecting Bane to show at some point during the morning, when he had not, she was left to doubt if he was here at all. Upset the previous evening, when Hallen had tried moving him, Bane had pushed him away and stormed off. Now passing midday, she was worried in case he had left Tardoc and headed back for that camp where Hanor and Balkorn had disappeared. Doubting it, but she had to be sure. Searching with Kifter, he was far better at looking than she.

Twisted iron oil lamps and a sweet scented aroma made the atmosphere warm amongst so much smooth rock. Untainted by the invasion, so too the level above, Tardoc was full of creative character. Peering out whenever reaching a large window, they

checked hallways and side chambers. Surprised how large the City was, even this high up, it was a maze of a place. Asking Tardocians if they had seen a curly haired young man recently, but no one had. Tardoc's prominent towers were the most likely place for a skulking juvenile to hide. Up high and out of the way, splendid views would perhaps alleviate some of the hurt. Three of the lower towers had been overrun and burnt out, intending to look in the next one.

Entering a wide hallway, dusty golden beams of sunlight crossed the enchanting room from left to right, enhancing sparkled patterns on both ceiling and wall. At the end of the corridor, a double stairway rose to the next level, one of numerous entrances to the third tallest tower of Tardoc. Perched between the two was a short set of steps descending to a pair of sizeable arched doors at their base.

"We have not tried there," Hayla said, pointing to the elaborate doors below.
"It will not hurt to look," Kifter agreed.

Squinting at the sudden flood of light, Bane covered his eyes to ease the glare. Groaning at the disturbance, he knew not what short-turn of the day it was or his location. Disorientated, only when that recognizable scent and soft compassionate voice spoke did his heart leap. Rubbing his eyes, Hayla bent down to hug him, a whispering thought reminding him of the promise made during the night. Disregarding it, just to feel her embrace was all that mattered.

"I have been worried about you," Hayla said, leaning back to look at Bane's ragged features. Guilty for not giving him much time since Mandurin, the arrival of Casvern Tarn had unbalanced her more than she realised. Bane's periodic moods did not help, not wanting to intervene without invite.

"I..., I have been... under a bit of strain lately," Bane said, appreciating them coming. Grateful to see Kifter, his companions did care.

"You have to learn to talk more," Kifter ordered, rubbing his head.

"I have to learn to sleep in more comfortable surroundings too," he joked, feeling stiff.

"Come on," Hayla said, holding her hand out. "Let us get you cleaned up."

"I need some fresh air," he said, astonished this was real.

Not jumping to any conclusions at what that *Voice* had promised, her presence though did speak for itself. If the *Voice* had made this happen, then who else could it be other than the *Sacred*? Heartened, it felt like climbing out of a pit of darkness.

Waking with a start, Hanor sat bolt upright. Certain he was supposed to be worried about something, he looked around, desperate for what it might be. Adjusting to the faint light, Balkorn sat propped against the cave wall nearby.

"Balkorn...!" he called, skittering across to him. After the Baltian's close brush with death, for him to be up was incredible. "How are you?"

Grey and lacking vitality, he managed a grin. "A little better," he said, not moving for fear of another sharp internal stab. "I have eaten..., which has helped."

"I thought you were going to..., " Hanor did not finish, not needing to.

"I know," Balkorn said, affectionate. "Our guides told me of your upset."

Astounded he wanted to break the orb, the others were sitting a short way off. Embarrassed, "I... am sorry," he said, aggrieved.

Lunar and Forar came over. Looking for Rinar, the staff-bearer was across the other side of a sizeable pool as if to keep out of his way to protect the *orb*.

"*We have been talking,*" Lunar said, an air of excitement to his voice. "*Talks much about what you say lasts nights. Balkorns is still very poorly, and needs help.*" Checking with Forar that they still agreed on their decision, he continued. "*You come with us... to Pools of Lights, and Balkorns can be healed..., yes?*"

Unexpected, the invitation caught Hanor by surprise. "Go to... the Pool of Lights? But we need to go to Tardoc."

Balkorn said nothing, leaving the decision to him.

"*Tardoc not good for Balkorns,*" Lunar said, surprised by his reaction. "*He is very ill..., very bad ways, like you say. You come with us..., yes?*"

Hanor's mind was in a spin at the proposal. "I thought Rinar did not want us to go." The lone figure across the pool seemed in no hurry to return.

"*We talk...,*" Lunar said. "*We all decide... you should come. Rinar not want to at first... but your passion touches even him. You come, yes?*"

Sitting back, Hanor could not think straight. Detouring away from the fourth *Pillar of Life* was awful. Lives were dependant on his success. Hoping Tardoc was now free from that horde, he had still not asked them to help him look. Pressured to answer, the old lady of the lake's warning about his life or death decision was now here. One route said failure, the other meant success. Respecting her enough for it to be real, the choice was harder than he thought. Desiring Balkorn to be well, but could he afford the detour when countless others were dying?

"How strong are you feeling?" he asked his friend, unwilling to decide.

"I can... walk," Balkorn replied, in no hurry to stand.

"What do you think we should do?"

"That choice... is yours alone. You must think of the many and not just the one."

Mirroring his own thoughts, affections for the big Balt stalled him. "How far is this *Pool of Lights*?" he asked, turning to the Shavani.

"*We will reach it... before the end of this turn,*" Forar said.

Hanor felt sick. Wanting to see Balkorn healed, but the *Pillars of Life* were of a different order. Agreeing that the many should come before the one, if they were to go to Tardoc, surely the Masters could heal him? But what if they were dead?

"How far is Tardoc?" he asked, avoiding the watchful but silent Baltian's gaze.

"*With Balkorns as he is..., its will takes you over two turns,*" Forar said, confused as to why he was enquiring. "*Lasts nights... you wanted Balkorns to heal. Why have you changed your mind?*"

Proving the Shavani had no idea about the immensity of Hanor's dilemma, "*You will fail or you will succeed,*" she had said. The thought of making a monumental error paralysed him. Respecting now the burdens of the Shavani, if their role meant life might not exist here in The Freelands if they got it wrong, he could appreciate their indecision. Sighing, he still could not decide. Cupping head in hands, tensions remained. Failure or success. Why could he not just choose and be done with it? Was he prepared to sacrifice Balkorn? But the old lady had said he was helping the *Maker*, whoever that was. Did that mean others were waiting for his decision too? If so, why were they not helping him?

Emptying his mind of worry, Hanor sat in silence, forcing his chatting mind to be quiet. Whatever thought arose next he would follow. Closing his eyes to focus, now that

he had made a commitment to his method of decision-making, a gentle peace felt comforting.

What Hanor did not expect to see was himself sitting on that mound by Freemans Lake when Brandor had first triggered the *light* in his heart. Concentrating on what Brandor did, a glimmer of understanding formed through the mists of doubt. Should he follow what he *presumed* to be right, or take the other path instead, and head boldly into the unknown? Tardoc represented the known, and the *Pool of Lights* the unknown.

Frustrated when no further insights came, picturing the *Sphere of Power* beneath Tardoc's foundations, a timely wince from his companion was enough to seal their fate. Hanor could not leave his friend to die a lingering death. If going to the *Pool of Lights* was the wrong choice, then it was the *Sacred's* fault for not making his path clear. Rejecting the safer route for the unknown, his mind was made up.

"We had better get going to this *Pool*," he said, happy now he had decided.

Overwhelmed, Balkorn could not believe it. Putting off the work of the *Sacred* just for him went beyond everything he had come to know. Wounded due to his own failings, he was unworthy of a second chance. About to question the error, he refrained. It would only prompt another round of discord for the young man. Respect touched him to the point of tears. If healed as the Shavani promised, he could face his destiny with great glory rather than rot in failure.

Standing proud, the internal injuries severe, Balkorn was defiant. "I am willing... if you are."

"Do you feel that?" Wenda asked, elated.

Crissy and Meth - two other female Masters of Tardoc, agreed. Sharn and Rinn were perplexed at what they meant. Not before long though, they too could sense the subtle energies filtering through the walls.

"Our Yarmorian friends are busy at work," Crissy approved.

Faint but heartening, the delicate waves radiating right across The Freelands were uplifting. Containing positive energies to dispel the darkness of doubt and fear, it would help many who were at present fearful of the future. Most people would not detect the energies. Nevertheless, a definite shift in their thoughts would permit courage to withstand the onslaught of evil.

"Let us hope it cannot be countered," Sharn said, returning to the book he was reading. Searching for further understanding about Brandor's *Wall of Power*, the Masters here had still not worked out the foundations on which it could be created.

"It is enriching," Meth said.

"The Forces of Light are fighting back," Wenda affirmed.

"Ah..., this is interesting," Rinn said, not looking up from the book he was reading.

"What is?" Crissy went to his side.

Checking before responding, the old Dai-laman was confident of the implications. "I have found the reason why the mental connection has not been established with Tarden." Catching everyone's attention, they waited for him to explain.

The Dai-laman flicked back a page to begin. "We know there are two opposing poles that permeate life, manifesting as hot and cold, night and day, light and darkness."

"Big and small..., up and down," Wenda added, understanding the principle.

"The ancient lore calls it... the *Law of Duality*," Rinn continued.

“Without it..., life as we know it would not exist,” Wenda agreed.
“Reactions occur when energies interchange,” Rinn continued. “This is because positive and negative charges are present in all things. This is what we have been overlooking.”
“Please explain,” Meth invited, liking the glint in her new friend’s eyes.
“When the Masters have been mind merging and projecting your attention towards Tarden, you have not considered this basic law. Your numbers are wrong.”
“What do you mean?”
“You need three males and three females to make each unit, balancing the positive and negative charge.”
Struck as if by lightning, those in the room could hardly believe it.
“Three males and three females,” Wenda beamed, believing the formula just might work.
Word soon spread like wildfire.

Tending to the wounded in one of numerous Healing Chambers of Tardoc, Bane felt better and less self-absorbed. There was something magical about focusing on others rather than just himself. Joyful, the peace enabled him to act more freely. Only when alone did the dark storms of an unsettled mind grow. Working with Hayla and Greema, being of use boosted him throughout the after-turns. The fact he was in close proximity to Hayla did not activate the moods either. Just happy to be here doing whatever he could.

“I wish I could feel like this all the time,” Bane said, sitting alongside Hayla on a narrow porch outside the chamber.

Cut into the mountain, deep blue grey columns of lined stone supported an overhang of rock. Stylish and refined, an arched outlet led to a worn pathway heading for the Eating Hall. Taking a short break from tending to the wounded, it was warm and relaxing. The beating sun drifted towards the horizon away to their right, the soft breeze refreshing.

“You are at your best when you are like this,” Hayla said, pleased for him.
After the intensities of recent times, the change was remarkable. “Strange how our thoughts can become so destructive,” Bane said. Rising from his high-backed seat, he looked over the low balcony wall lined with shrubs. Relishing the fresh air, the view was spectacular this high up. He did feel good. “If there was music, I would gladly dance the last parts of the turn away.”

“Do you dance then?” she asked, not having much time to learn herself. Too focused on her training, many of her friends could glide across the floor.

“Are you asking?” he teased, glad there was no attachment to it. Whether she said yes or no, it did not matter, nothing could spoil the serenity.

Declining, “I prefer to just close my eyes and listen,” she said, doing just that, resting her head on the back of the chair.

Watching her, Bane started giggling like a youth.

“Why are you laughing?” she asked, peering through half-opened eyes.

Humming in a world of his own, “This is so beautiful.” Out in the fields, Tardocians were tidying up, no doubt equally happy to be free. “I feel mischievous.” Liberated from obsessive yearnings for Hayla, he chuckled again, enjoying the freedom.

“You *are* mad,” she said, through closed eyes.

“I would be willing to dance with *Gorl-darl* if it meant no more dark moods,” Bane said, resting a foot on the low rock wall. Wondering if the *Voice* had influenced things for this to happen, it did seem likely.

“Hmm...,” she murmured in a blissful state of rest.

Blonde hair falling to her shoulders, Bane had to admit how delightful she was. Feeling brave and without emotional attachments, he stepped across to where she was lolling. Careful not to cast a shadow, a devious grin appeared. Uninvited, he bent down and kissed her on the lips. Quite naturally, her lips moved to his without really knowing what she was doing. When realising something was touching her mouth, she reached up against her assailant, but it was too late.

Opening her eyes, Bane swayed away as if dancing with an invisible partner. “Bane!” she barked, unsure how to react.

Humming louder, he continued swirling, carefree and contented. Heading out through the archway onto the pathway chiselled into the mountainside, he continued to hum, triumphant. “And so I dance... and sing..., move and sway...,” he chimed, cutting back inside the porch. Gliding up to her before moving away again, nothing could touch him.

“That was uncalled for,” she said, trying to be angry.

“Love... is everywhere,” he sang as if in a trance. Playfully bumping into the wall of the Healing Chamber, he grinned at her determination to remain cross. In a musical voice he continued. “And even if... she likes me no more..., at least I have a treasure forever.” Touching his lips, he shrugged and started swaying again.

“What has come over you?” she asked, coarse words losing their edge. Acting without a care was quite alluring even though there was no real attraction. Prancing about worked upon her annoyance. Closing her eyes to regain control, it had shocked her more than anything. Daring to peek at the rascal, the last thing she needed was a doting fool.

Gazing over the balcony, Bane looked back at her and shrugged. “We do strange things when we feel like this,” he smirked. “I will carry your kiss forever.”

“Do not do that again, Bane!” she warned. The annoyance had gone but the repercussions were what worried her.

“Come here,” he asked, calming down.

Peering through half-closed eyes, he was looking over the side as if spotting something lower down. Suspicious, considering whether to duck back inside the Healing Chamber, “What is it?”

“Come..., come,” he urged. She would miss it if she did not hurry.

With a huff, she joined him, keeping a short space between them. Something drastic would result if he was up to no good. Searching between the bushes at their feet to where he pointed, a group of Tardocians were clearing large lumps of stone from a collapsed building. Carefully done as if something valuable was underneath, a dusty, bloodstained figure was found and lifted from the debris. Small, frail and barely alive, it was a young Tardanian female. Another round of calls and they moved more lumps of rock. This time, a young Tardanian male was lifted free. About Bane’s age, they were laid on soft bedding and checked by healers. Semi-conscious, their hands reached out and held each other’s, a sign of love. A touching moment, it brought a certain young man from Manson back to his senses.

“I am sorry... for what I did,” Bane apologised, watching as the two were taken away. “But life is precious. I wanted to kiss you because... I felt happy and free. And what better way to experience it than with a person you care about.” Turning to her, “I *am* sorry, Hayla, because of how it upset you.” Grinning at the memory, “I will admit though..., it *is* a treasure to me. Do not worry, I will not become obsessed either, I am just glad to be alive.”

For the first time, Hayla could see maturity in the young man. Facing up to his actions, resentment passed. Hesitating at how to respond, she threw caution to the wind and hugged him as a friend should. Missing the closeness they had developed prior to Mandurin, she was not after romance, but companionship would benefit both. No longer looking at an infatuated boy, Bane was growing up at last.

Chapter 18 : Precious Waters

Rounds of congratulations swept the great hall, the Masters' efforts at last rewarded. Rinn's discovery that three male and three female Masters had to merge minds was the balancing factor required to make it work. Mentally stretching across to Tarden as a group, they had found the treed City and entered. Even though the Masters there were yet to discover the technique, the first mental stone had at last been laid. Dispatching riders, not just to Tarden, but to the other major Cities as well, everyone was as relieved as they were thrilled.

Beckoning Kifter over, Hallen sipped the warm broth that had been made by Tardoc's fine cooks. The people here were trying to get life back to normal. No sign of that monstrous *horde* returning, they were starting to believe it was finally over.

"Are we hungry?" Kifter said, indicating his friend's empty plate. Seated in one of three large Eating Halls, it was early, encouraged to see so many Tardocians up already. Another turn of rebuilding, the din was low but odd rounds of laughter proved hope was in the air again. Surprised by Hallen's sombre look, "What is it?"

Rocking an empty wooden bowl, thoughts about Rorsal kept nipping the Hite. Reminding him of his cruel attitude towards the young Dortian, the hate he had felt was bad enough, but the fact he had tempted him into escaping so he could cut him down was what hurt. But why was this hounding him now? "I have been... thinking," he said, sniffing and scratching his nose.

"That explains the mood," Kifter tried to tease. "Hites are not supposed to think before half-turn of the day."

"I feel guilty over Rorsal," he said, unimpressed by his friend's efforts to cheer him up.

"You did give him a rough time," Kifter said, candid.

"I should be excused for reacting as I did considering we are at war."

"That is why you feel like you do. Your response went further than what was necessary. You were nasty. The rest of us could see it but you could not. If you are still standing by your original reaction, then you are not looking close enough at what you did back there."

"I thought you were on my side."

"I am..., that is why I speak the truth."

Rorsal reminded Hallen of Hanor to a degree. Simple with sensitive motives, he imbued a charm and intelligence that deserved respect. His own short-sightedness had been willing to destroy that which it did not comprehend. "Fighting Dortians here in Tardoc for a time helped convince me that none of Rorsal's people were good natured like he said."

"That good can be covered when in hostile situations," the Fife responded. "If Rorsal had been amongst his people, would he not have had to defended himself? Kill or be killed."

"I did not see many like Rorsal the other evening."

"When passions fire, we do not notice such sensitivities."

"True... but it would have helped if I had."

"Someone like Rorsal would not have been at the front of battle but out in the fields."

"I did not see any out there either," the Hite grumped.

"Until you are willing to look for the good in people, your anger will remain," the Fife said, waving Casvern Tarn and Greema to join them, both entering the Eating Hall.

Heaving a sigh, at least Hallen felt a trace better now he had talked about it.

“We need to stop,” Hanor demanded, Balkorn’s condition deteriorating enough to force the issue. Walking for over half a turn, periodic rests were insufficient to keep the Balt’s internal injuries calm. The greyness of yester-turn had returned.

“*Its is onyls a shorts-turns froms heres,*” Rinar said, halting again. “*Rests... fors a shorts whiles. We needs you theres alives.*”

Anger subsiding, it hurt Hanor to see Balkorn grimace in pain, clutching his side when sitting down. “We will be there soon.”

Apologetic, Balkorn was not so agreeable. “You do not need... to do this, Hanor.”

“Of course I do.”

“Tardoc... is not too far from here,” the Baltian continued, the poisons burning. “*The Pillars of Life...* should be your priority.”

“My priority is you.” Hanor was having none of it. “I do not abandon my friends.”

Relying on vague insights about his fate, Balkorn had not foreseen this. A mouthful of water from the young man was appreciated, admiring his loyalty. “Your parents... would be proud of you.”

“I need to know how bad it is,” Hanor said, the complement irrelevant. “I will not have you struggle on just to die when we get there.”

The silent Shavani did not want to see him stumble at the end either.

Rising above his pride, Balkorn conceded how serious it was. “It... is not good,” he said, holding his abdomen where that dreadful horn had pierced him. “But... I do not intend to bow out before my time is ready,” he said, managing a slim smile.

“We will stay here for as long as necessary,” Hanor said, warning Rinar in particular.

“*You ares verys carings, Hanors,*” Emnee said, taking special notice of everything he did and said. “*You treats hims likes he is familys.*”

“He is family,” Hanor said, affectionate of his dependable companion. The Baltian’s dominating presence, even in this state, still gave him a sense of security. Squirming when Balkorn coughed, a thin line of red blood seeped from the corner of his mouth. He wished he could carry him like he had been when tired.

“I am... ready to move,” Balkorn said getting up, determined to reach the *Pool of Lights*. His legs felt stronger and the bouts of dizziness had gone. “If we march..., I can concentrate on walking like a beating drum.”

“If you struggle..., you will tell me,” Hanor demanded.

“I will,” he promised.

“*You ares verys braves..., Balkorns,*” Lunar encouraged. “*Me nots likes pains.*”

“You can carry me if you want to,” Balkorn managed to tease.

The look of shock crossing the little fellow’s face was a treasure, Hanor and Balkorn chuckling at his innocence.

“Do not make me laugh..., it hurts,” the Baltian said, a short stab sharp.

“You do not know what humour is... do you Lunar?” Hanor posed when he eventually realised it was a joke.

“*You teaches thats to me too..., yes?*”

“I would do anything to get your people laughing.”

Rinar returned to the front of the cocoon to start, uninterested in the humour.

Forcing the pace, Balkorn stared straight ahead as if denying his injuries, every stride a step closer to healing. Blessed with this opportunity to save himself from disgrace, he was not going to let Hanor down again. Biting from the inside, the shooting pains were frequent as if every muscle was being torn apart strand by sensitive strand. The poisons from that horned beast had clearly survived the healing of the Shavani and were fighting back to his demise. Keeping steady, he did not even consider whether the *Pool of Lights* would actually work. Trusting those around him, he just kept going.

Marching alongside, Hanor could hardly breathe, anxious about the Baltian stumbling and not getting up. That trickle of blood meant severe internal injuries. Glances from Lunar and the others were equally concerned. Just thankful they had come this way, Balkorn would not have made it to Tardoc. The *Pool of Lights* was his final hope.

“Are we there?” Hanor beseeched, travelling for what seemed like an age since they last stopped. They must be close.

“*We ares unders the mountains,*” the Staff-Bearer declared, decelerating so as not to destabilise the area.

Alerted to the change of speed, Balkorn was snapped back to reality and his struggle. Floodgates opening, the hot liquid of his illness rushed to his heart, burning like a flame. Clutching his chest, he let out a terrible roar, the pain too much.

“Balkorn!” Hanor cried, horrified when the Baltian lunged to the side as if pierced by a blade.

Caught in the throes of an explosive hurt, Balkorn could not contain the searing pressures of the internal foe.

“Where is it?” Hanor yelled at Rinar, panicking.

Numb, Rinar stood staring along with the others, only moving when Balkorn lurched forward gasping for air. Wary of unsettling the tender energies inside the mountains, for once, he gave in to pressure and pressed ahead, Balkorn’s life ebbing away.

Peeling back, they arrived at the cavern as the black area in front expanded. Another gargle of pain prompted Hanor to steady Balkorn, but his companion was too heavy. Falling right past him and thudding against the wall, a gash to the side of his head trickled blood. Keeping out of the staggering Baltian’s way, the Shavani stalled at indecision.

“*This ways Balkorns,*” Lunar urged, calling from the front of their travelling chamber. Now large enough to pass through, Rinar was clear of the opening, so too Forar and Lennan with the others following.

“Balkorn! Through the gap,” Hanor directed, the Baltian resting against the curving wall.

As though a giant hand had released him at last, Balkorn stumbled towards the opening. This was his final chance. Unaware of the surroundings, he charged half-blinded by the torrent of pain scorching through his body. Growling a final pitch of defence, the sparkling grey walls of the enormous crystal cavern went unnoticed, so too everyone’s cry for him to stop. Clutching his chest, he turned and buckled, faltering across deep veins of rock lining the ground. Oblivious to the vast pool in front, he tumbled and fell right in. Ice cold waters snatched away his consciousness. Body going limp, all was dark.

“Balkorn...!” Hanor yelled, distraught the Baltian was floating on the water face down. “Help me..., we have got to save him,” he called behind, taking off his overcoat.

Jumping into the chilly depths to his waist, his friend could not breathe whilst submerged. Treading across to roll him over, the lakebed disappeared. A good swimmer from countless turns by Freemans Lake, the enormous bulk was difficult to move. Struggling to roll Balkorn, he managed it and started pulling him to the side. Spluttering in the cold, too pumped up on saving his dying companion to worry about it, he looked behind to see if any help was coming. Horrified, Rinar was holding his staff across in front of the other Shavani as a barrier. Disbelief stole away his composure.

“Rinar...! Do you want us both to die?” he screamed, echoing around the cavern. Gaining courage, Lunar ducked beneath the staff and ran to the pool’s edge. The Staff-Bearer was soon at his side trying to force him back.

About to shriek in disgust, a mouthful of water silenced Hanor, struggling to catch his breath. Spitting some out, a portion was swallowed, the frantic young man gasping for air. Caught up in the drama of their toil, it took a moment to notice the inner change. Subtle at first but growing, stirrings in his chest ignited as if the *Stone of Tarkon* had sprung to life. Smooth sensations in his heart were flowing in harmony with the water. Calming down from the distress of their dilemma, he had no idea what was happening. *Light* flowing up from his heart settled his frantic mood. Relaxing as a result, he found it easier to swim with the unconscious Baltian towards the low bank. Steadily done, the peace was wonderful, his foot resting on the bed of the underground lake. Caught between the urgency to save Balkorn and this new development, Lunar tried to help.

“*Heres... Hanors,*” the little fellow said, fending off Rinar’s attempts to stop him. “*Lunar..., this is nots rights,*” Rinar shouted, his whole world being undone. “*The Waters ares sacreds.*”

“*Lifes is sacreds too,*” Lunar fired, seizing hold of the unconscious figure. The sheer size of the Baltian meant it was impossible to get him out without help. Turning to the others, “*Helps us.*”

Locked by inner conflicts, the other Shavani stood staring, stunned at this violation. These precious waters held powers of the *Sacred*. Touching them was sacrilege. Only the *orb* at the end of Rinar’s staff was ritually immersed. Now corrupted by Hanor and Balkorn, shock would not let them move.

Crouching in the water supporting his friend’s enormous body, Hanor started drifting into a dreamlike state, unable to ground himself properly. Somehow, movements in his heart had been activated by the icy water. Difficult to concentrate on Balkorn’s needs, vaguely aware that he had to resuscitate the Baltian, but that motivating push would not come. Their dismal plight seemed irrelevant, playing the part in the fantastic book of life. Twinkles of sparkling points of light throughout the cavern added to the dreamy outlook. Unsure if Balkorn was breathing, it seemed inappropriate to care.

Jerky shakes of the body drew him back to the present, splutters breaking through the clouds of harmony. His friend was alive, alerting him to why he was here.

“Balkorn...?” Hanor said, piercing the fullness enveloping his heart. About to ask how he was, a rush of invisible *light* burst from the core of his being in response to an unseen power below the lake’s surface.

"Emnee..., helps me," Lunar called, struggling with the weight of Balkorn's arm. Regaining his senses, the Baltian was still too ill to help himself. "We musts helps," Emnee implored Rinar, not wanting to betray their new friend. "The waters ares nots fors us to touchs," Rinar said, adamant he was right. "Lunar has rejecteds ours ways fors the ways ofs peoples aboves grounds." "I do nots wants Balkorns to dies," she tried. Lunar's efforts were futile on his own. "Rinar is rights," Miln agreed. "If we touchs thems... thens we pollutes its also." "If Balkorn dies, he wills rots ins theres," Emnee said, the point registering sharply with her elders. "Sometimes we settles fors the lessers evils." Detouring around his staff, what she said was true. "We musts gets hims outs ofs theres!" Forar said, joining her along with Lennan. Rinar and Miln had little choice if the *Pool of Lights* was to recover to its pure state. "I nots likes this," Rinar said, invoking the powers of the rod. Standing at the water's edge, he held the staff with its glowing orb above the disorientated Baltian. Lightening his weight, he lifted the dazed figure onto the bank and lay him on his side. "Comes... Hanors," Lunar called, expecting the young man from Manson to climb out of the water. Stalling instead when looking at him, he seemed to be in a trance. "Hanors...! Ares you... alls rights?"

Bathed in brilliance, Hanor was too captivated by the sparkling lightshow to hear him, tiny crystals in the cavern walls twinkling as if alive. Awareness altering, his companions on the bank were glowing with an otherworldly shine, their auras beautiful. Yellows, greens and blues, with flashes of crimson and the deepest of purples glowed. A reflection of their state of consciousness, they looked glorious. Shadows when first arriving were gone, every niche glistening in light. His heart was ablaze!

Consciousness expanding, it was the same each time he had drawn close to a *Pillar of Life*. Making the right decision to come here, the old lady's prediction was correct. If he had gone to Tardoc, he would have searched for the fourth *Pillar* but not found it because it was here in these waters.

Hidden powers increased the longer he stood there, so too his alertness. The unity in his heart was already seeking to merge with that sunken treasure below. Growing in maturity and power, his control of the circumstances was vital. In his mind's eye the rushing stream of *white fire* from his chest kept surging down into the water. The first encounter with the *Pillar* at Manter was superseded by the second two. Preparing him for something substantial, but what he could not yet see.

Gaining in confidence and power over his supernormal condition, Hanor became aware of the slouching figure of Balkorn on the poolside. Climbing out, he checked him over. Holding the inner *fires* in check, his resilience to that attraction which had seen Aider Nash fall at Mandurin was getting stronger. Balkorn's aura started changing from dull blues and greys of his illness to the more vibrant yellows and greens of a healthy individual. Knowing why, the waters he had unconsciously swallowed were healing him. In no rush to move, Hanor waited, on the verge of amalgamating with the *One Great Life of the Universe*. Putting aside his individuality to release the immense powers trapped in these waters, it was necessary for their World to progress.

Eyes blinking open, Balkorn took a few moments to gain his bearings, propping himself up on one arm. Rousing as if from a terrible nightmare, when looking at Hanor,

the Baltian marvelled at the change. His young counterpart was exuding that vitality he had seen at Mandurin, but even more so here. Soft and radiant, Hanor's skin appeared unblemished by recent struggles, coated by a surreal sheen. Forgetting how close to death he had come, Balkorn could not take his eyes from the young man. Pure of heart, in that moment, Balkorn knew the fourth *Pillar of Life* was nearby. Hanor was radiating that all encompassing *power* as part of himself. Amazed at his own healing, he left him to follow his own course. Who could understand the wonders of the *Sacred*?

"*This is whats we means,*" Lunar said, drawing the two away from the exchange. Pointing to Hanor's chest, the other Shavani stared on in reverent silence. "*Its is whats we wonders ats ands neededs to knows whys... ands hows.*"

Their regular contact with such *powers* was why they could sense the same in Hanor just as the Freeloaver had. When Lunar had first appeared inside his room, he had registered those finer forces in that manifestation. Ensuring him he would be safe with these people, but their contact with the *Sacred* was small compared to what was now rushing forth. "*The Sacred* have an agenda," he said, insightful. "I am here to help fulfil that. This is a natural process that occurs in the life of any *Planetary Being*. It does not need to be feared." Getting a real sense for who and what the *Maker* was, the old lady had been right about that too.

"*We feels the powers pulls ons us... heres,*" Forar said, restless, something they had never experienced before. Tapping his chest, the others agreed. "*Whys is this so?*"

"*The Sacred* seek to unite with the deeper aspects of your being. Your physical bodies do not vibrate at the right frequency yet, so you are not ready to merge."

"*Whys do you vibrates likes you does?*" Lennan asked, marvelling at Hanor's gentle, glowing radiance, his whole being supercharged.

Pulses to merge were getting stronger, but Hanor managed to stand firm to say what was necessary. "Fear is a frictional force that slows down your vibration. Unconditional love is free flowing and therefore increases it. Your service to The Freelands is admirable... but your fears match that, so what do you gain? The *white fires* you sense in me dissolves evil and separation. *Darkness* has no real power over *light*. Only when *light* permits itself to be covered does *darkness* reign. Fear is one such cover."

"*This is boths wondrous ands terribles,*" Emnee decreed, her dark eyes hesitant.

"*Parts ofs me wants to runs ands hides,*" Lennan admitted. "*Buts... I wants to embraces its. I wants to swims ins these waters buts I fears I wills nots gets outs.*"

"*It is beckoning you home.*"

"*Its is,*" Miln agreed. "*Buts fears warns thats its shoulds nots be dones.*"

"Facing up to fears is what neutralises them. When you hide as your people have for many seasons, you create a shadow that surrounds you. This prevents freedom to flow and covers the *light* that is in you. Create less fear and face those you presently have, and you will be free. Your circumstances then will not hold you to bondage."

In Hanor's mind, the *white fires* were still rushing forth from his heart into the pool towards the hidden *Pillar of Life*. Burning away concerns, he respected their reservations but had little time for them. Checking Balkorn was well, he turned and dropped into the chilly waters. Wading out, Hanor started swimming when the lakebed gave way.

Satisfied he was far enough out, he took an unrushed breath and sank below the waterline. On the bank, the others were in shock, perplexed by what was happening.

Tranquil, Hanor was pulled down by the magnetic forces flowing through him. Without struggle, just gliding with every stroke, there was no urge to breathe. Descending into the sparkly depths, crystal lights on rocky walls flickered like guiding beacons, caring not how deep he was going. No pressures built up in his chest and no bulging of the ears pressurised him. Sweeping down as if belonging here, clear waters were pure, untouched by the fiery powers visible in his mind's eye. Dark and distant, the object of his heightened desire came into view. Mirroring the other *Pillars*, the clarity of the water enhanced the intensity of the moment.

Streaming sparks of life shooting out from that eternal core were like the other *Pillars*. Sweeping down to *its* suspended position in the water, the bottom of the lake was nowhere to be seen. Hovering in *its* own vacuum of time and space, it mattered not if earth, wind or fire encompassed *It*. Self-containing, and without need for outside order, *it* was a gateway whereby the radiant energies of the *Sacred* could extend into this lower realm. Vibrant and powerful, nothing of this physical world could survive inside that magnetic field. The spherical shape of the invisible wall of energy protected the outer world from the intensity of *its* internal vibration. If he was not energised and transfigured, he too would dissipate.

Tiny lines of bubbles rising to the surface proved the surrounding waters were heating up. Approaching the *Orb of Power*, mirroring the liquefying of rock and mud around the other three *Pillars of Life*, it was a natural reaction to such unworldly forces. His presence, and the *powers* flowing through him were the cause.

At the perimeter of *its* glistening shell, by the power of will, Hanor slowed until he stopped at *its* edge. *White fires* of his heart surged unabated, disappearing into the depths of that *Eternal Point* at the centre. Travelling into another dimension, those pure Forces were returning to their Source. Just like the tiny sparks of life he could now see rushing out from that timeless *Point*, they too would one-day return just as everything did. The presence of Oneness could be felt even before entering. No longer requiring the lesser elements of oxygen, his entire frame was buzzing in tune to *it*.

Reaching out, the casing of energised liquid was hotter than fire. Empowered, the shell ensured balance remained in the region. No life other than the *Sphere* existed in these precious waters; no tiny creature or plant could cope with the creative powers involved. Scorched clean by his own transfiguration, no microbe joined him in his passage to eternity.

Easing a hand forward, it pierced the outer shell like dipping into a well of hot water. Energies inside caressed him, immersing himself completely. Passing the outer protective sheathe, the electric atmosphere held him in check as if floating in an invisible liquid. Familiar with the encounter, Hanor's awareness was incredible. Focusing on the *Sphere's* magnetic centrepiece, how so much life could emerge from a tiny point of light was beyond even him.

This one *Pillar* was a minute replica of a greater energy centre on a universal scale, and yet a larger version of the *Eternal Point* that was at the centre of his own being. If he could remove the other layers to his existence, the only thing left would be something like this.

Undaunted by the greater levels of understanding, millions of sparks raced right through him, keen to experience life in this heavier realm. Descending into this denser world was how the *One Great Life* could experience itself through everyone and everything.

Surrounding the precious *Point* with an unhurried hand, he could stay here forever and no one would be the wiser. But that was not his purpose. Forces flowing from his heart reminded him of a wider picture. Without word or thought, the impression was patient but strong. Cupping a hand around the central *Spot*, slowly he closed his hand to embrace all.

Suspended in the Eternal Now - that state of mind beyond time and space, Hanor became aware of the whole Universe at once. Existing in a myriad of forms, he was part of the One Great Life. Separate and unique, he was nowhere and yet everywhere, no one and yet everyone. A Divine Paradox, difficult to imagine in an ordinary sense, Hanor basked in that magnificent experience, forgetting worldly troubles in that instant.

Chapter 19 : Symbol of Great Power

Standing at the edge of the underground lake, bubbles broke the surface of the dark mirror-like waters. Immense *forces* below were again tempting Balkorn to jump in just as the other *Pillars* had. Pulls on his heart were powerful. Beside him, the Shavani Folk were finding the impulses equally hard to resist. Hot and tense, time clicked by, losing track of how long Hanor had been in the water. A sudden surge of power from beneath the water sent the Shavani sprawling. Hanor must have reached the *Pillar*!

“*Thats... was anothers ones,*” Lunar decreed, steadying himself. Only now were they sure of Hanor’s genuineness.

“*He has beens touches bys the Sacreds,*” Miln said, astounded.

Fragments of crystal lining the cavern walls lost the edge to their sparkle.

“*Buts... whats does this means?*” Forar asked, overwhelmed by its implications.

An unexpected splash alarmed the Shavani even more. Jumping into the lake, the big Baltian took a deep breath and plunged underwater.

“*Whats is he doings?*” Miln cried, the Baltian violating their traditions and values. This place was sacred.

Discussing details about what they should do next, Hoon - one of Tardoc’s Commanders, was in no hurry to pursue that monstrous *horde*. “Many here are just not ready to face that evil again,” he said, a few others agreeing.

Brandor and other members of the Hisian-set disagreed. Meeting in the highest Chamber of Tardoc, only the towers reaching higher, five Masters sat alongside High-tard Polon considering what they should do. Tarmon and the group were more concerned about the loss of Hanor and Balkorn.

“We came to Tardoc’s aid,” Caldor spoke next on behalf of Tarden. “Out of kinship. There were some at Tarden who were against it, but we came because it was the right thing to do. We now face a similar situation. Should we leave other nations to fend for themselves against such evil? We are all a part of The Freelands, sharing the same hopes and dreams. If we do not help, it will be as though Tarden never came to Tardoc.”

Mature words punched the room with power. Some nodded, whilst others took a moment before agreeing. Some did not react.

“Fine talk,” Hoon said. “But if an arm is wounded like we are here at Tardoc, how can you expect it to fight?”

“Would you not still use it to fight your enemy if you had to?” Ginnel said.

Hoon huffed, unconvinced.

“What of this young fellow Hanor and the *Pillars of Life*?” the Master Hin posed to Brandor, changing direction. One of the six who had mentally reached Tarden, it was an important issue that still had to be addressed.

About to answer, Brandor stopped, sensing an alteration in the atmosphere. Hairs on his arms rose at what was about to descend on their gathering. Before he could conclude what it was, a phenomenal force rushed through the Chamber, staggering those sensitive to the flood of power. The Masters and the rest of the Hisian-set reacted as he did. Faint and virtually invisible, the red tinge of potent energy dwarfed anything experienced

before. Throwing senses into disarray, some held their heads whilst others were bent to the knee. Overpowered, all they could do was wait for it to pass.

Others gathered in that High Chamber less sensitive still felt the subtle vibrations. An electrical charge energised overwrought senses, fuelling suspicion. Perplexed, what was going on? Others in the room recognised the implications, Tarmon's group especially. Too incredible to believe, only one source could be so explosive.

"Is it... what I think it is?" Tarmon called above the commotion.

"The *Pillar of Life* has been found!" Rinn proclaimed.

"How...?" Hallen was dumbstruck.

"It is clear Hanor must still be alive," Brandor said, too excited to sit down.

"Alive...! How can...?" Greema did not finish the question. Sitting alongside Bane, the lad looked dazed. "Are you all right?"

"I..., I... cannot believe...", Bane stuttered, too shocked to comment.

"That *force* was similar to the one at Mandurin," Casvern Tarn noted.

Going to a window on the southern edge of the chamber, Brandor peered out full of wonder. "It came from that direction," he said, pointing to the Treman Mountains in the distance between two dominating towers. A fine drizzle outside showed no sign of that *force's* passing, covering those distant mountains in a thin grey veil.

"How did he get there?" Tarmon asked.

"If Hanor *is* across there," Kifter said through the hubbub of voices. "He will need our help." Deducing that horned creature had used Hanor to gain the fourth *Pillar of Life*, it was enough to alert them to action.

No shrills of delight echoed around the Mountains of Orbaddon this time, the atmosphere tight and hesitant. Reflecting on that tremendous pulse of energy, Gori-darl had not anticipated the scale of it. Desiring such powers to see his vision completed and revenge satisfied, everything was drawing to an enthralling climax. Entering uncharted territory, the risks involved heightened his pleasure.

Expecting Hanor to be limp similar to Mandurin, Balkorn judged the brave young man would drown if not found. Diving into the depths, it was no longer so chill, wide powerful sweeps pulling him down through the shadowy waters. The healing powers of the water energised him as if he had never suffered his original wounds. Pressures increasing the further he descended, how far down Hanor went down he did not know. Time running out, the need for air getting stronger, wide glaring eyes searched the shadows. Where was he? Needing air fast, he half-choked when a silhouette appeared below. Plunging with all his might, stretching his own limitations, Balkorn reached the drifting figure of Hanor. In the dim light, the boy was unconscious. Open eyed, but there was no sign of life. Impelled to climb, lungs on fire, the Baltian seized the limp boy and headed for the surface. Dreading the worst, the wilted figure moved without resistance.

Exploding from the depths like rocks ejected from an active volcano, Balkorn's gasp for air shook those standing by the waterside. Panting for dear life, the cool air filled his lungs with a bite. Lifting the sagging Hanor up in hope that he too would breathe, but

there was nothing. Pulling his young charge to the shore, the Shavani waited, muttering concern. Hauling Hanor onto the bank, he was still not moving.

“Is he... bads?” Lunar asked. There were no signs of life.

“He nots breathes,” Emnee said at his side, protesting when the enormous Baltian climbed from the water and brushed them aside.

Rolling Hanor over onto his front, Balkorn pressed his back, pushing forward as if to get water out of a stubborn bag. Following the procedure he had been taught when young, he rolled Hanor back and started breathing into his mouth.

“Whats is he doings?” Forar asked.

No one answered, the Shavani staring on in revulsion.

Patient, Balkorn continued, rolling Hanor over onto his front again. Repeating the pressing action before turning him back with tender swiftness, a jolt in the Hanor’s stomach ejected water from his mouth, spluttering for air.

“He is... alives!” Lennan was amazed at the miracle. *“Balkorns gives hims lifes!”*

Resting back on his heels, Balkorn’s relief was understandable. Waiting for his young friend to stop coughing, “How are you?” he asked, resting a hand on his shoulder. Taking a while to settle, “What... happened?” Hanor said, looking up at those gathered around him. Returning to this world after unifying with the *Universal Life*, a natural gulp for air had filled his lungs with water. Attempting to swim and climb, but the shock had stripped him of that fight. “I nearly... drowned!”

“You are alive now,” Balkorn said, not adding to the drama. “That is reason to be grateful.”

A rush of emotion swept Hanor across to embrace his big friend like a father. No longer fearing death, but the fact the Balkorn had saved him meant the Baltian was healed and his work here in The Freelands could continue until the end. “Thank you!”

Bursting through one of Tardoc’s main exits, Brandor, Tarmon and the others charged down the long sloping causeway and out into the misty grey afterturns. Members of the Hisian-set followed, eager to learn more about the unique young man called Hanor. Riding like hasty brethren missing family members, they had to get there as soon as possible if Hanor was to survive that horned beast. Borrowing Kyboes, it seemed strange for Tarmon’s group after their long run to Tardoc. Hopes merged with trepidation.

“Why not come with us to Tardoc?” Hanor asked Lunar, getting ready to leave the *Pool of Lights*.

Rinar had already declared they were heading back home, still shocked by the astonishing outcome here. Dazed as if his entire belief system had been trampled on, their Leader’s tone warned there was to be no compromise. Shaken by the events, the others stood to one side silent and watchful. The fact a miracle had happened here seemed irrelevant, secondary to their traditions. Wanting them to come to Tardoc and hopefully meet his companions, only Lunar and Emnee appeared remotely interested in how he was and what it all meant. He was asking a great deal of the little fellow.

“Its woulds be nices to go withs you, Hanors,” Lunar said, keeping his voice low when peering across at the others. *“I ams nots strongs enoughs yet... to goes,”* he whispered, protective of this admittance. *“Too muchs to thinks abouts.”*

Disappointed but realistic, “I know it is hard for you, and I respect your decision, but please do not allow shadows to cover the freedom that has started to shine in you.”

“*There is so much I want to ask,*” the small figure said, indecisive.

“Then come with us and I will answer what I can,” Hanor urged, a glimmer of courage attempting to break free from the false house of security surrounding these people.

Ashamed by the ignorance of his people, their sense of superiority had been dashed by this young man. Modest and passionate, he had shown them how to really care. Rinar and Miln would be quite happy to see him go, fearing the new lease of life in Lunar. Inspired by Hanor, he could never go back to his shrivelling ways. Those like Rinar would not help his people in the long term. Needing to laugh and be free, he could not abandon his people to the dominance of authority.

“*You have your paths... and I have mine,*” he said, confident he had made the right decision. “*But... I would like to ask you one thing before you go.*”

Encouraged that his decision was one of purpose, even so, the fact he was not going to Tardoc carried its own regret. “What do you want to know?”

“*What are the Sacred likes... up close?*”

Surprised at the change of direction, Hanor liked the little fellow’s simplicity. “*They are intelligent, loving and powerful.*”

“*I like that,*” Lunar said, warming to the idea. “*I like that a great deal.*”

“Good.” Uninvited, Hanor hugged Lunar. He was going to miss him. “One turn of day, you will find out what *they* are like just like everyone else.”

“*I like that too,*” Lunar said, saddened when Rinar invoked the powers of the orb.

“*Will we see each other again?*” he asked, the force field surrounding them.

Moving into the mountainside, the energy field forced back the rock. Heading up towards the world above, the angle of ascent suggested Rinar wanted this over with.

“We will always be close, especially in here,” Hanor said, pointing to his heart. “I would like to thank your people for all you have done for us.”

“*And I thank you, Hanor of Mansons.*”

Hissing sounds of the Shavani Folk’s departure back underground filled the darkness. Undeterred by the drizzly rain, Hanor and Balkorn were cold and damp after their encounter at the *Pool of Lights*, yet invigorated to breathe the cool night air. Spending such a long time underground, feeling the damp breeze was a joy. Unsure what short-turn of the night it was, mountains soared behind. Nothing was moving, the region murky and coated by shadow. No longer secure in that cocoon of energy, they were now open to attack from creatures of the night rather than the stubborn sort they had experienced of late. Lush wild-grass hid all evidence of the Shavani Folk’s passing.

“Which way...?” Hanor asked, breaking the quiet.

Balkorn pointed out to their left. “Tardoc should be that way. This is the southern edge of the Treman Mountains.”

“Your judgement is better than mine,” Hanor said, so grateful his friend was here. “How are you feeling?”

“Those waters have worked wonders.”

Drinking from that concealed channel of water with Tarmon, Kifter, Hallen and Bane what seemed like an age ago, Hanor laughed at the irony.

“Care to share your mirth,” the Baltian invited, surprised at his reaction.

Where the mountains ended through the dimness, “We passed right by there to get to Manter,” he said, pointing. “And tasted some of that water that has healed you.” To come full circle was astonishing.

“Shall we go?” Balkorn urged, not one to reminisce in such exposed conditions.

Swift like a shooting breeze, Brandor edged ahead of the others. Travel hardened, even those of the Hisian-set could not keep up with the bounding strides of Tunder. Wet from the fine rain, the coolness was refreshing. Angling left, he was confident where the epicentre was located. Incredible energies contained within the Southern Mountains made sense for the fourth *Pillar* to have been situated there. Searching the lower regions of Tardoc earlier for where *it* could be, he chuckled at the folly.

Checking on the others behind, large gaps broke the thin line of bodies, stretching all the way back to Hallen in the distance. Riding on a poor Kyboe that was unused to the Hite’s extra size, Brandor dared a grin at the sorry spectacle. Concerned for Hanor, preparing to do battle with that horned beast, nothing would give him greater pleasure than killing yet another of *Gorl-darl’s* monstrosities.

Riding for over two short-turns, darkness fell as the mountains drew close. Long shadowy strips concealed any entry points, searching for caves that would grant access. Only a few used by Foarns were visible, too high for his liking.

Reaching the base of the mountains, all was quiet in the dark. Pulling Tunder up, the Dai-laman had no idea where to start. Steep sides and hardened rock would not be easy to breach. About to summon a ball of light, frantic calls from behind alerted him. Whilst dark, it was difficult to make out the problem. Half-expecting a *Nyshifter* to attack through the thick blanket of cloud, but nothing came. Even more startled when some of them headed east away from his position, Sharn pointed in the same direction.

A slight undulation of the ground prevented Brandor from seeing what they could. When cheers broke through the darkness, Brandor had presumed Hanor was still trapped inside this mountain range. Pulses of excitement spurred him to action.

Kifter, Tarmon and Bane were the first to arrive, celebrating the return of their two companions. For Hanor to be here so soon after attaining the fourth *Pillar of Life* was astonishing, and to see Balkorn as well was beyond the most creative of hopes. Questions went amiss, the swiftness of the moment stealing away the ability to explain.

Pulling up, Brandor was stunned to silence. What manner of events had happened here? Tempted to ask, but the location was far from suitable for tale telling. Saving them from the barrage of questions, this was a miracle. “Let us get back to Tardoc,” he ordered, trusting there was much to share. “It is cold and wet. I am sure our two friends could do with a hot drink and warm fire.” Brandor’s kindness glinted through watery eyes. “Come Hanor, you can ride with me. I for one will permit you the time to recuperate.”

Unassuming, Hanor accepted his offer.

Exhausted, Hanor stared out across the terrain to where he had obtained the fourth *Pillar of Life*. The rain had gone, leaving patchy clouds in its place. Silvery beams of moonlight now shone on the southern tip of that distant Mountain range. Trying to judge where Lunar and the Shavani were, their covert world would never be the same.

Standing alone on one of many trim balconies populating the upper regions of Tardoc, he was recovering after telling his story to the sizeable gathering earlier. Listening to the remarkable endeavours of his companions, especially the part about the Dortian called Rorsal, it gave him hope that The Freelands would heal. The same courage used in battle would be required to seal the darkness of vengeance. They had little choice if they intended to survive this mauling.

Pondering the attainment of the fourth *Pillar*, a tiny revelation added insight to the many questions. Grasping that *Eternal Point* at the centre of each *Sphere of Power* released energies into the Cosmos. As if freeing an imprisoned animal chained for too long, vague notions of what it meant caressed him, but full comprehension would not stretch any further. Skating around the truth, he was not ready for the entire revelation.

Confounded by the scale of it, footsteps behind ushered him back to the present. Unsurprised to see Bane approaching, without a word they hugged each other, pleased to be together again.

Wiping a tear, “I did not want to go to sleep without talking to you,” Bane said, snuffling through half smiles and a sense of foolishness. Low as he had been a couple of nights ago, he was shocked at how quickly circumstances had changed. Indebted to the *Voice* for returning Hanor and Hayla to him, he did not want to think about its implications and what he might have to do. Just grateful, if it was the *Sacred* then he could only marvel. “I thought you were dead.”

“I know,” Hanor said, compassionate.

“I wish... Nole was here,” Bane said. Sensitive in so many areas, even thoughts about his parents squeezed in.

“So do I,” Hanor said, missing his brother too. The fact Nole was alive in the *higher realms* was not the same. His parents too seemed far away. “I am sure he is keeping an eye on us,” he said, believing it true.

Earlier celebrations had simmered. “What have we got ourselves into?” Bane said.

“You always dreamt of adventures,” Hanor reminded him.

“The dreamy types are far less painful, and I have still not got the girl.”

“The journey has not ended yet,” Hanor said, patting his shoulder. “You and Hayla would make the perfect couple.”

Bane’s features dropped. “Do you not have feelings for her?”

“I have lots of feelings,” Hanor decreed. “But... I am not up to getting the girl this time. Any desires for that have left me.”

“Those *Pillars of Life* have caused that.”

Transforming his desires to a more caring sort, Hanor just longed to see The Freelands free and for people to start reaching their fullest potential.

“You *have* changed, Hanor, which frightens me. I am not sure it is good for you.”

“There is no darkness in the changes. Whatever happens, I will stay true to myself.”

Hanor accepted that this exchange was all they really had in common nowadays. Separated by untold powers, his closest companion would never comprehend such *forces* whilst wrapped up in his own world. Outgoing and opinionated, Bane had changed more than he would probably care to admit. “I am glad I am not alone.”

“And I am glad too,” Bane said, the idea too ridiculous to consider. “I keep trying to look after you but... you keep slipping through my fingers.”

“Yet..., we are still here together,” Hanor said. “Perhaps we are destined to go right to the end whether we like it or not.”

“Some might call me an itch,” Bane kidded. Surprised when the same feelings of well-being returned, similar to when kissing Hayla. “Do you feel that?”

“I do,” Hanor said, trying to decipher what they were. The future appeared a little less daunting. “Maybe it is the *Sacred* helping to lift our Spirits.”

Thoughts about the *Voice* were a cold reminder of the secret pact Bane had made. Wondering if he should say something, Hanor’s yawn put him off. “Maybe.”

Satisfied with their efforts, Evearn of the Mesa Clan was recuperating on the third level of Tarden. Substantial forces released by her brethren was the second wave of loving energy to counteract the fear generated by the present evil. Connected to the four Clans back in Yarmoria, channelling the streaming powers did come at a price, but the benefits were worth the sacrifice. The next session was at dusk tomorrow, making the most of this quiet time.

Scaling the outer wall of Tardoc, the Hunter leapt the short distance to the stone floor. Arriving from along Spike Ridge just before dawn, no one knew of its arrival. Finding a niche in which to keep its invisible bulk out of the way of any straying individuals, it waited for the signal from its Master to move.

“After recent developments, we should leave soon,” Caldon - Master of Tarden’s forces said to the small group gathered at first light in the highest tower of Tardoc. Brandor, Polon, the female Master Wenda and Sharn stood on the balcony peering out across the scorched landscape considering what to do next.

“I do not want a chasing game,” Polon said, unconvinced they should go.

“Tarmon says the northern horde has amassed right across The Centre Vale,” Sharn reminded them.

“Most of our people would want to hear reports from our Seekers,” Master Wenda said, not doubting Tarmon herself.

“Where is this Centre Vale... and what is *it*?” Caldon asked, not recognising the name.

“A region out on the planes that has unusual magnetic qualities,” Sharn replied, spending many turns in the area studying when it had been a river.

“Why stop there?”

“Who knows what *Gorl-darl* is up to,” Sharn said, frustrated by the irregular patterns to which their old adversary was moving.

“How is the link with Tarden going?” Sharn asked Wenda about the *Wall of Power*.

“Our messengers will not arrive until tomorrow,” she said, just as eager for the connection to be made.

“And what about reaching Manter?” The chain of power will stretch in both directions.

“I sent riders yester-turn,” Polon explained, still unsure about the whole affair.

“If that *force* stays where it is, the *Wall of Power* will be too far south,” Sharn said, seeing it as a possible problem.

“We should be able to move *it* once the energy field has stabilised and is *ensouled* by the *Greater Life Form*,” Wenda clarified.

“Surely it will take a great deal of understanding to achieve such control?”

“Do you have any other ideas?”

“I was just thinking aloud.”

“Your reservations have merit,” Brandor proclaimed, drumming his fingers on the ledge, building up to a revelation of his own.

“What do you mean?”

Across the open end of the Treman Basin, Brandor imagined that central beam of *light* at the centre of The Freelands. “Somewhere in that direction,” he reasoned, seeing it now as factual. “Is the fifth and final *Pillar of Life*.”

Through gasps of wonder, Polon questioned the statement. “Another one! Do you know where?”

“Probably where our enemy has drawn *his* defence,” the Dai-Laman offered. If that *was* the case, how much more did *Gorl-darl* know?

“Is this a ploy to get us chasing after that *horde*?” Polon contested, needing to know facts.

“I would prefer the fifth one to be out there in the middle of your fields, but such is not the case.”

Respecting the point, “This is difficult.”

“I believe the fifth one *is* at The Centre Vale,” Brandor continued. “If *it* is, then Sharn is right, the *Wall of Power* will be too far south to protect us.”

“You are definitely going then?” Polon was still not happy. “What if you are wrong?”

“You have heard where the four *Pillars of Life* were located?” Brandor questioned.

“I have,” Polon said. Located at the four ancient Cities of The Freelands, he could not see the relevance. “What has that got to do with the fifth?”

Wenda interjected to soften growing hostilities, understanding why Sharn and Brandor thought it was in that direction. “There is a powerful symbol involved here,” she said, amazed at the possibilities. “Four outer points... like this,” she said, bending to draw four dots on the dusty floor tiles in the shape of a diamond. “And one in the middle. This is a creative symbol that attracts energies from the Cosmos. It enables maximum force to penetrate the central point because the outer four stabilise the inner. This is one of the most powerful arrangements we know.”

“I have heard you talk about symbols before..., and I respect that,” Polon said, allaying frustrations for the time being. “But on such a scale seems improbable.”

“To us, maybe. But what dimensions do the *Unseen* work with?”

“We are talking about half the size of The Freelands, can symbols be so large?”

“Keep an open mind on this,” Brandor said, sympathising with the High-tard. Always with his people in mind, to move on a detail as strange as this would be hard for any leader. Nevertheless, those who worked with the *Finer Arts* needed nothing more to prove it. The rest of the Masters would agree, surprised he had not recognised it before.

Respecting Wenda, the impact that fourth *Pillar* had on the Masters and members of the Hisian-set in the chamber below left the High-tard with little room to move.

“We must do whatever it takes to ensure peace,” Polon said, giving in after some consideration. “And you have my trust.”

“What shall we do about the *Wall*?” Sharn asked, returning to the issue.

“There could be another way,” Wenda said, thoughtful.

“You have our undivided attention,” Brandor said, warming to her dedication.

“Six Masters will have to go with you,” she posed, the others missing her point. “Three male and three female Masters should travel to The Centre Vale.”

Brandor beamed at the proposal. “Can that be really done?”

“If the Masters can stay focused under pressure, yes.”

“It would shorten the distance between Tardoc and Grovan,” Brandor said, certain it could work.

“The Masters at Manter will be displeased,” Wenda noted.

“All Masters will eventually get involved,” Brandor said. “We cannot expect the same individuals to endure the demands such a force might need.”

“Does that mean the Hisian-set can get involved too?” Sharn hoped. Experiencing the consciousness of a *Higher Being* was a concept barely imaginable.

“There is nothing to stop anyone who is capable joining in,” Brandor revealed. “If this new *Life Form* is a thing of the future, then a new dawn is upon us.”

“Does this mean we are leaving?” Caldon wanted to know.

“The sooner the better,” Brandor said, heading for the stairs.

Chapter 20 : Invisible Monster

“Is Hanor awake?” Tarmon asked Kifter, the Fifanian joining him on the balcony. Enjoying the warmth of the sun swooning between patchy clouds, it was midmorning and there was still no sign of the young man. Taking a break from helping with the clear up, the people of Tardoc were busy cleaning up the remnants of war.

“Not yet,” the Fife said, leaning on the rock wall.

“It is hard to believe he is still alive,” the Tardanian said.

“The Shavani Folk sound fascinating.”

“I had never heard of them.”

“Even we of the Hisian-set did not know they existed,” came a voice from behind, the Dai-laman Rinn joining them on the balcony.

“That *is* surprising,” Kifter said.

“We do not know everything,” he grinned, savouring this suntrap.

Told that this man held great power and had destroyed two *Nyshifters*, Brandor had also expressed reservations about Rinn’s *Ileng Power* and for them to be wary of it.

“Balkorn said they are servants to these realms,” Tarmon said, the Baltian respectful of the little people.

“Are we not all servants?” Rinn asked.

“Not usually,” Kifter admitted, spending most of his life living it to the full.

“What are you doing now then?” the Dai-laman posed, peering across the scorched terrain.

“Fighting for our survival,” the Fife said.

“Notice you said *our*? If you are willing to defend those less able, are you not servants?”

“At Tarden, we see service as a great honour,” Tarmon approved. “The *One Life* that serves our City and its people is the ultimate kind of service.”

“It is indeed,” Rinn agreed.

“Some might say we are just looking after our own skins,” Kifter said.

“There is nothing wrong in looking out for yourself. It is just a question of how large you see yourself to be.”

“What do you mean?”

Spending so long away from ordinary folk, Rinn missed interactions like this. “Would you defend us if we could not manage it ourselves?”

Kifter’s eyebrows lowered at his direction. “Of course, as would most people.”

“Is that not service? Helping is a form of service. If a person cannot manage a task by themselves, it is only right for you to help if you can. People associate service with sacrifice or slaving to a higher authority, but true service is aiding those less able or less fortunate than you. The Shavani Folk serve The Freelands and do it willingly. When a person reaches that level of development, a great joy leaps in their heart.”

“Do you mean those fighting this war will experience a greater fulfilment when it ends than those who do little to help?”

“I do. Being part of something that benefits all reaps untold rewards.”

“It would be easier if everyone was a part of this,” the Fife said. Many Fifanians were at this moment in Alehouses tricking their way to their next meal or bout of pleasure.

“People’s sensitivities are working on different levels,” Rinn explained. Indulging in the past himself whilst others were fighting or suffering, he refrained from condemning anyone. “Sometimes people just need a good prod to get them moving.”

“I like the idea of serving my friends and The Freelands,” Kifter agreed.

“Serving others does not mean doing things that they themselves can do. This only encourages laziness. If a person is capable of doing something, they should be left alone until they do it.”

“Sounds obvious when explained like that,” Tarmon said, thoughtful.

“You two are no different to the Shavani Folk. They serve by working with Cosmic Energies, you serve by fighting to keep this world free so life may be lived as it should be. Are you not all serving the same purpose?”

Laughing, “You are quite a marvel, Rinn, and you remind me of Brandor.”

“I have had a few disagreements with Brandor in my time,” the old Dai-laman admitted with a grin. “But we do seek to fulfil the same dream.”

The two did not doubt him for a moment.

“This will help keep me in shape,” Hallen said, lifting another fallen boulder onto the back of a low, sturdy wagon. Helping Hayla, Casvern Tarn and Raldama clear away a pile of rubble, two Tardocians appreciated their help.

“Light work for you,” Larea, the Tardocian female said, managing one half the size.

“He just likes to impress,” Hayla teased, shovelling what was once a small elaborate wall.

“We could do with a few more Hites to help us with this rebuilding,” Affin, Larea’s partner said, sombre when picking up a small headless statue of a Fliryn. “Great work will be required to get this place back to its original state.”

“I keep telling him to be grateful for being alive,” Larea apologised for his mood.

“Mandurin has suffered more, and look at me,” Casvern Tarn beamed. “Life must go on.”

“I know,” Affin acknowledged, throwing the broken ornament onto the wagon. Finding the head to the original piece, “I just hope they do not come back.”

“To stop them coming back, perhaps you should go after them,” Hallen said, heaving another lump onto the wooden carriage. “They will not rest until all are overcome.”

“To think their forebears used to trade with us,” Affin said, confused as to what had gone wrong with the Dortians.

“I am sure those times will return,” Hayla said, hoping there were more like Rorsal.

“I cannot see many here receiving them.”

Saddened by the admission, even though understanding it, Hayla wondered if The Freelands would ever recover.

“Hallen!” a familiar voice called from above. Peering down, Kifter signalled for them to move. “Brandor wants to speak to us now.”

“But this work has made me hungry,” the big Hite said, wanting his fill.

“It will have to wait.”

“Alas, our great master calls,” Hallen joked, dropping the last boulder onto the wagon. Two Kyboes at the front were unimpressed by his escape. “Do not look at me, handsome Hites are always in demand. You will have to continue your poor lives without me.”

Saying their goodbyes, the climb they now faced seemed even more challenging than the clear up.

“Could we not have the meeting down here?” the Hite huffed, reaching one of five tunnels rising up to the next level.

Ramps and stairs cut inside the mountain enabled Tardocians to move from one level to the next. Kifter stood smirking at the top.

“They do like their stairs here,” Casvern Tarn agreed, legs aching from recent demands.

Reaching the Meeting Hall, two intricate doors pulled back to the walls permitted Hallen’s mumbling voice to echo at having to climb so many stairs. Disapproving heads turned when Kifter and the small group entered the chamber of fine wooden pillars and panels of grandeur. Brandor stood alongside High-tard Polon and members of the Hisian-set at the centre as well as a few of Tardoc’s Masters. Others of similar standing were dismissive of the new arrivals.

“They were clearing rubble on the lower levels,” Kifter said, hoping their selfless efforts might excuse them for being late.

“Perhaps if Kyboes could fly your journey here would have been less strenuous,” Brandor glared at Hallen.

Shrugging, it was not the time for his usual Hitorian reply.

Greema entered with Hanor and Balkorn.

“How are you, Hanor?” Brandor asked, greeting their young companion.

“Good,” he said, smiling when Bane came over and stood at his side. Body still humming as if struck by an invisible musician, the affects of that *Pillar of Life* felt blissful and serene. Difficult to remain grounded, control over what he was experiencing was getting stronger and the understanding clearer.

“It will not be easy,” Brandor said, needing to clarify a few points when Polon finished explaining what had been decided earlier. “But... the fifth and final *Pillar* is at The Centre Vale. The *Wall of Power* we intend to create to protect us will stretch right across The Freelands from Tarden to Rovot. Hanor here,” he said, resting an arm around the lad’s shoulders. “Is our secret weapon. Whatever reasons lie behind his extraordinary involvement, we can only aim towards accomplishing that purpose.”

“Are you certain that *Horde* has not moved south?” Caldon asked, still not understanding why they had halted where they had.

Tarmon answered the question. “They are still there, but I am pleased to announce a sizeable force has left Manter to face them.”

Above the clang of voices discussing the disclosure, “How many?” Hoon, one of Tardoc’s Commanders wanted to know.

Tarmon answered with Shanene’s estimation. “Nearly fifteen thousand.”

“That is a lot of people,” Ginnel - Tarden’s second in command said, encouraged.

“The Freelands has responded to meet this dark threat,” Caldon approved.

“How many of the enemy are there?” Hoon was direct.

Tarmon could not hide behind edgy eyes. “Twice that and growing.”

Disturbing numbers, but Brandor was in no mood to falter. “War always brings horrors,” he began but stopped, a biting chill shuddering through him. About to insist the doors be closed, but the atmosphere changed for the worse as if *Gorl-darl* himself had entered. Others in the room noticed the difference too. About to mention it, he was too late.

Sudden and piercing, Rinn's shriek shook everyone from their discussion. Eyes wide at the explosion of pain in his chest, his whole frame seemed to be on fire. Oozing from a gaping hole, blood covered the front of his tunic, an invisible object jutting proud. Claspng the mighty horn, Rinn tried to prise free so he could breathe but could not move. Blood dripped around and down the horn, defining its invisible shape. Too dazed to respond with his *Ileng Power*, he could not breathe, internal organs shattered by the protruding object. Poisons seeping into his body were rampant, nullifying his limbs and any resistance. Straining through dying eyes, aged features contorted in despair and denial. Wanting to do so much to help save The Freelands, but all hopes had been dashed by their cunning adversary. Rinn's last breath was but a whimper.

Triumphant, the Hunter lifted the lifeless body impaled on its horn into the air. Ensuring all present could see the power of its Master, it tossed its mighty head and flung the corpse against the wall with a dull thud. Invisible, focusing on the remaining members of the Hisian-set, they too were to suffer the same glorious fate.

Those of the group knew exactly what it was. Attacking Hanor and then Balkorn, disbelief that *it* was here turned to fury when the limp Rinn hit the wall and fell to the ground dead. Those who had a blade prepared to strike.

Tralle, another Dai-Laman, was the next pitiful victim. Struck by a mighty lunge, the ferocity was staggering, the monster pinning him to the wall opposite Rinn. The dead Dai-laman dropped to the floor when a fiery bolt from Sharn scolded the invisible beast. Atmosphere electrifying, more lines of energy from the other wielders of power fired. To their dismay, their searing efforts exploded at the wall, sparks coating their lifeless companion. The creature was not there!

Some fled the chamber, terrified of what was to follow, but most stayed. This beast could not be left to run rampant through this already ravaged City. Wary of unleashing more fiery bolts with so many present, Brandor and the Masters along with those left of the Hisian-set were as vulnerable as the rest.

Hoon was the next victim, falling to the invisible hand of a mighty blow. In response, two of his aids flashed their steal at thin air, falling foul of the monster themselves. So quick, it was hard to pinpoint the creature's movements. Frantic, pointing at any slight movement, but no one could be sure.

Standing behind Brandor, Hanor was appalled at the bodies piling up. Shielded by Balkorn, High-tard Polon stood alongside. Hallen, Kifter and Hayla were protecting Bane close by. Wanting to see what *it* looked like, where was the prowling beast?

A blistering fiery white bolt from a sharp-eyed Brandor, swiftly supported by Sharn, caught the invisible beast. A fluctuation in the atmosphere was enough to give away *its* position at the centre of the panelled hall. Streams of fiery light scratched at the monstrous figure, hints of blue and red revealing *its* daunting size. Bolts from Hader and Meth intensified the impact, scolding the flesh of the abominable creature. Surprised that *it* did not run or seek to hide from the scorching pain, the outline of the beast seemed to stand tall as if relishing the pain, *its* shape defined by the sizzling lights. Crackles of electrifying power blazed, conflicting energies eventually eliminating the cloaking force.

Flickering, the beast solidified revealing *its* enormity. Descriptions from Tarmon did not prepare the others. Larger than a Hite, the enormous blackish grey horn was a horror to be avoided. Sitting proud on the crown of *its* huge block of a head, it drove terror into those looking on. *Gorl-darl* seemed to be staring from behind *its* ruthless eyes.

Defiant amongst the blistering fiery bolts, *it* lunged at Sorlam. Stricken, the Dai-laman was too slow, his charge of energy not enough to stop *it*. Catching hold of Sorlam around the neck with huge clawed hands, crackles of reds and yellows coursing down the monster's arms from the struggling Dai-laman did little to help, doing his utmost to fight back. Shrieking through grim lips, the pain was too much.

"Stop...!" Brandor bellowed, believing Sorlam would not survive another attack. Convinced the creature was up to something, there was a risk of *it* turning invisible again, but they were powerless whilst Sorlam still lived.

Holding the Dai-laman up for all to see, the Hunter's power was indisputable. Moving to the centre of the chamber, dominating the proceedings, it roared, shaking those present. Obeying its Master, it turned, provocative, ensuring the suffering lasted.

Mind racing, Brandor was sickened by the malicious display of power, certain there had to be a way. Sorlam was barely moving, the grip around his throat cutting off his air supply. Occasional struggles meant there was life but not much. Cursing *Gorl-darl*, the dramatic circumstances took another twist.

Responding to the need, Balkorn ran, and using his slender staff, propelled himself at the spiked back of the monster. Destiny spurring him to action, it was time to make that difference. Foreseeing this through visions enhanced by his Sage, he cared not for retaliation at the wounds received before. Fate had promised this.

A clash of titans, the Baltian's huge frame crashed into the beast like a falling mountain. Knocking *it* off balance, Sorlam went flying, ending in a crumpled heap by the wall. Locking into each other, the Hunter had been weakened by the fiery energies. Grappling with the swiftness of a Fliryn, Balkorn ducked and twisted, rolling around his huge adversary with cunning and skill. Straining every muscle, shifting position, his arms locked around the monster's thick neck from behind. Using his weight, he leaned back, pulling the creature with him. Crashing onto the elaborate wooden floor, the double row of tiny spikes on its back jabbed him but he held on. Growling to reinforce his efforts, rigid legs pinned *its* arms down. Squeezing *its* locked arms, the pain was excruciating. Enduring harsh training and endless struggles to be the best of his nation, this had to work, Hanor's life depending on it. That alone sustained him for that short desperate moment. Black and ominous, the horn hovered in front of his straining eyes, avoiding it whenever the beast moved *its* head.

Jolting when a blistering stab exploded in his side, the creature managed to reach around and dig a clawed hand into his side, the pain unbearable. *Its* other hand did the same as if to gouge out his internals. Lying on his back, he still held firm the beast's neck that lay on top of his weakened position. Through deteriorating sight, the scowling figure of Hallen towered over their position. Using his sword to cut the creature, *it* still did not get up such was *its* power. Faltering, Balkorn could not breathe, shock numbing his senses. Barely maintaining his grip, his joints had locked, pinning the creature long enough to matter.

“He is dying!” Greema was aggrieved at what Balkorn was suffering. Forcing *its* huge hands inside the Baltian, the Hunter seemed untroubled by the blows cutting *its* flesh from Hallen and the others. “We cannot let this thing live,” Raldama rallied, but their efforts were not cutting deep enough. Withdrawing a bloodied sword from *its* side, “This is impossible!” “Can anyone not help?” Hayla called, hoping Brandor could do something to stop *it*. The creature seemed to delight in the suffering. “What about the *Stone of Tarkon*?” Hallen’s plea was lost amongst the furore. “Hanor! Use the *Stone*.”

Through watery eyes, Balkorn stared at the lone figure of Hanor emerging through the blurs of activity. A comforting presence amongst the horrors, everything began to ease like the receding of a flood. Cries from those nearby faded, so too the strife. Shooting stabs in his sides from the creature’s burrowing lessened as if nullified by an invisible force. Radiant when looking at Hanor, it was him and yet it was not. Captivating the beleaguered Baltian, it was like viewing Hanor in *spirit* form. Trauma dissipating, replaced by a wonderful peace, the relief was blissful. Dying to this world, Balkorn’s fate was sealed.

“The horn!” Hanor said, returning to his everyday self after the otherworldly connection to Balkorn.

Only Hayla heard him. “What did you say?”

“*It* gains *its* power through the horn,” he said, the last rays of life fading from his Baltian friend. A lone tear rolled down his cheek.

“Of course,” Sharn agreed. “It is how *Gorl-darl* controls *it*.”

Kifter made the connection too. Finding the skeleton of that Great White Freelover, its horn of power had been missing. The *Dark One* had planned this all along. “Hallen! Cut off the horn.”

Just as the mighty creature freed itself from the dead Baltian, a flashing sword of steel whipped up and around in one cleaving motion, the cold chinking sound final.

Thrashing around on the floor, the creature lost all sense of direction without the horn of power. Arms and legs shaking, *its* body vibrated on the ground as if gone mad. Gurgling sounds replaced that once formidable roar. Jolting, the wretched creature buckled a final time before death claimed it. A haunting silence stole away any jubilation such was the carnage this awful turn.

Chapter 21 : Hitorian Disgust

Joining the many mourners atop the highest level of Tardoc, Tarmon's group were saddened at the hypnotising flames of the funeral pyre blustering in the late evening wind. Six had lost their lives during the attack, Balkorn one of them. Relieved the creature had not claimed even more lives, loved ones were here amongst the gathered onlookers. Word spreading through the City about the Hunter's assault, the *evil one* had struck at the heart of the defenders, meaning peace was far from assured.

"This should get people moving," Casvern Tarn said to Tarmon, both gazing over the stone balcony at the small fire outside the City's walls.

Dragged through the levels earlier, taken and then dumped on a makeshift pile of broken debris beyond the City's walls, the Tardocians had not dithered, fearful of the Hunter returning to life. No one could blame them for reacting so decisively. Hundreds now lining the lower levels were watching that lone fire burn. Anger brimming beneath the surface promised action was to follow.

"I think so too," Tarmon had to agree, responding to the initial comment.

"How is Hanor?" Tarn asked, the young man standing with Bane at the end of the balcony. Why had he not used the *Stone* to save Balkorn?

"He has not said much," Tarmon replied, not even looking. Dissatisfied, it was a feeling shared by all. During the attack, Hanor had let the Baltian die, not even attempting to use the *Heart of Tarkon*. That was the difficult part. Why not? Hallen had already vent his fury at the boy, Kifter and Hayla leading him away to calm down. Even so, his frustrations mirrored theirs, not understanding Hanor's lack of response.

"I am so angry," Hallen growled, leaning on the balcony wall. Everyone was in earshot, Hanor included, but he was not in the mood for niceties. The fact they had lost a companion riled him. "Such a waste," he grumped, Kifter waiting alongside. "I cannot believe Hanor just stood there like a spectator. Can you believe that? How can we trust him now, not knowing what he will or will not do?"

"I do not have an answer," Kifter had to admit. Further along the balcony, Hanor was facing the other way. Earlier, the boy had seemed distant and was unwilling to explain himself. Wiping the odd tear to show he was hurting, the mystery of his detachment during those final moments did not make sense. "We must remember the wider picture."

"Wider picture?" Hallen scoffed. "You mean... the muck surrounding the great *Unseen* and *their* tremendous powers? Do not upset me any further."

"Whether we like it or not, we have to put this behind us. A evil has descended on our world that needs addressing."

"I know the dangers," Hallen grimaced at the predicament. "But someone has to account for this. Hanor should have destroyed *it* without Balkorn even going near. I have this," he said, holding the hilt of his sword. "This can be relied upon, *he* cannot." Indicating Hanor, he wanted to stay angry for Balkorn, the Baltian deserving more. People might also listen and lessons get learnt.

"We do not know what he is going through," Kifter said, expecting answers somewhere amongst the madness. "Those *powers* Hanor uses may very well be destabilising him. There may also be other reasons behind his silence."

"I just need to know where I stand and who is with me. Is that too much to ask?"

“You have never given much time to what Hanor is undergoing.”

“What good is the *Stone* if it only reacts when we least expect it?”

It was a good point, but Kifter had to believe there was more. Leaving the Hite to his grumblings, he was just glad the creature was dead.

“I asked for you all to gather here so we can clear the air to what took place yesterday,” Brandor said, entering the enclosed glass terrace along with High-tard Polon. Protected from the wind and threat of rain, a few regulars were talking at the other end, leaving him free to speak to Tarmon and the group.

“There is someone here who needs to explain himself,” Hallen grunted, meaning Hanor. The lad did not look up. “That is... if he has not lost his tongue.”

“Let us keep this civil,” Kifter warned, disapproving of his friend’s tone.

Hoping a good night’s sleep may have calmed the issue, Brandor respected the fact that it had not. Balkorn’s death had left a gaping void, so too Rinn and Tralle. This would take a long time to get over.

“Balkorn knew he was going to die,” a lone voice exclaimed, everyone turning to who had said it.

A sharp knife of truth to cut through the disgruntlement, everyone was astounded by Hanor’s statement.

“What do you mean *he knew*?” Greema asked, as sceptical as everyone else.

“His Sage told him,” Hanor revealed, traces of that moving encounter still present in his heart.

“So you say,” Hallen grumped, believing Hanor was just using it as an excuse.

“The Baltian people are noble,” Hanor continued, disregarding the Hite’s comment. “And for those whose motives are free from lower passions, they can see traces of the future. Balkorn called them Sages, and they are wise and have insights that we do not. It was through his Sage that Balkorn was made aware of his fate. He did not know when or where, only that it was to be final. Balkorn was honoured to represent his people, and nothing could have persuaded him from the task. He valued this journey more than life itself, more than his yet to be born son.”

A shocking explanation, it seemed too much to believe at first. But the more the group considered it, the more they were willing to accept it, even Hallen. Dignified as the Baltian was, how could he carry such a burden and do what he did?

“That does not surprise me,” Tarmon finally said, breaking the respective silence.

“How can someone know of their own death and still carry on?” Greema said, in awe.

“Even I was not aware of that,” Brandor admitted, looking to Hanor. “How long have you known?”

“Just before he died, I was able to draw close to him. Balkorn knew his end was at hand and the work finished.”

“How can you say his work was finished?” Hallen snorted, not accepting death had any victory. “How much more could he have done if he was still alive?” Such nonsense riled him. “There is no glory in death.”

“That depends on how you have lived your life,” Raldama said. Appreciating Hanor could probably answer better than he, but Hallen’s gripes were getting tiresome. “You have seen more than most, Hallen, and yet you are determined not to look any further than your own sword. You have seen the *Pillars of Life* and the *Heart of Tarkon*, why do

you insist this physical world is so precious and final? I cannot think of a better way to die than saving your friends. Are you denying the *Realms of the Soul* exist?"

"They may exist, I am just protesting about the weirdness of it. Nothing justifies why there is so much suffering."

"Raldama is talking about remaining open to new possibilities," Casvern Tarn said. "We do not always have to fear what we do not understand."

"This has deviated from Hanor's original explanation," Tarmon said, old arguments about to resurface. "Hanor is giving us the answers we wanted to hear."

"He still has not said why he did not use the *Stone*." The Hite was not letting Hanor off so easily. "How could he just stand there when Balkorn was dying?"

"Balkorn seemed peaceful at the end," High-tard Polon said, convinced those last moments were tranquil. Even some of the Masters had noticed the change.

"The more at peace a person is," Hanor said, sincere. "The easier it is to let go of the body. Balkorn did not suffer as much as you may think. There is a cut off point to pain when one leaves this world."

"That looked excruciating to me," Hallen disagreed.

"Only for a while."

"Your confidence frightens me young man," the Hite said, dismissive.

"Because he speaks the truth," Raldama said, trusting Hanor's word. "Let us just hope our Baltian friend is at last resting."

Everyone agreed.

Needing time to reflect on Hanor's disclosure and the outcome, Brandor decided enough had been said. "Consider what has been addressed here, and in your own time you will come to terms with it. No one will be completely satisfied, but it will have to do. Tomorrow we head for The Centre Vale, so get what rest you can. The road ahead is still thwart with danger." As was his way, he left with High-tard Polon.

Late in the after-turns, thick grey clouds had threatened rain for most of the turn but had refused to fall. Bored of playing the popular Tardocian game called jenti, there was only so many times Hanor and Bane could try and align the wooden symbols with the stones on the narrow piece of wood. Interacting with the locals had been limiting too. Finding solace at the top of Tardoc's fourth tower, it helped ease the tension of leaving in morning.

"I am not looking forward to tomorrow," Bane said, tired of all the travelling.

"It could be the final push," Hanor said, sensing it to be true. Cold and blustery so high up, at least the splendid view made up for it. Since his explanations earlier about Balkorn's final moments, the warmth in Hanor's heart had lessened, wondering why. Thinking about his home and parents, life would never be the same again for any of them. Doubting he would be able to explain all the extraordinary events, he could not see anything beyond this journey.

"This is so unreal," Bane said, sighing. Worried that the *Voice* might return and seek payment for what *it* had done for him, he hoped his best friend's connections with the *Sacred* might protect him if he had made a mistake. "H...how... do... the *Sacred* contact you?" Bane stuttered, trying to act natural but failing.

Surprised by the question, "That is unlike you to ask."

"It is reasonable considering how much we have been through."

“A fair comment,” Hanor conceded, not wanting to break the blissful silence.

“I... I just... wanted to know what it is like.”

“I am glad you used the word *know*,” Hanor said, trying to pinpoint a way to describe the miraculous that Bane could understand. “We become more aware of things as we get older, and my experiences are about becoming more conscious of *them* rather than anything specific. The wisdom rises from that increased awareness.”

“You do not hear voices then?” Bane asked, not strong enough to just blurt it out.

Hanor was unsure what his friend was after. “Our minds can fill with chattering voices but... the awareness reaches deeper. Have you experienced something similar then?”

The crunching moment finally here, “I am not sure,” Bane answered, still doubting it was real. Talking about how low he had got was difficult, especially now they had grown so far apart. “Do... *they*... do miracles?”

“Yes, but... *they* are bound by restrictions just like we are.”

“What do you mean?” Bane asked, wanting to believe the *Voice* was *them*.

“Can you fly?” Hanor asked, to his friend’s confusion.

“Of course not.”

“There are reasons why you cannot,” Hanor explained. “Natural laws restrict what we can do.”

“That is obvious.”

“It is no different for *them*. Just as you set things in motion and have to deal with the consequences, so do *they*. A miracle to us will not be to them because they have greater understanding of how life works.”

“Why do *they* not just get rid of this evil like Hallen says?”

“What we see as evil might not be seen in the same context for *them*. We lived a life of leisure up until Brandor arrived. When I went away to be trained by Rainer, I was convinced his methods were abusive. Only now I can see the good he did for me.”

“But he did not kill you?”

“It felt like it,” Hanor grinned, the pains memorable. “What have you experienced?”

“Do *they*... answer prayers if a person really needs help?” he tried, not ready to reveal all.

“If you have tried your best and can do no more, then yes, prayers can be answered... if there is room to do so.”

“What do you mean... *room to do so*?”

“We do not always see the long term effect of what we do. It may seem great at first but in the long term might not be. There are other reasons that may restrict *them*.”

“Like what?”

“What if your desire conflicts with what somebody else does not want? Who has the right to have their prayer answered? You may seek something that is beneficial to you but is not beneficial to somebody else. I doubt your prayer would be delivered if that were the case. Have you been praying then?”

Unable to see why he should be embarrassed about asking *higher powers* for help as he did, most people would have done the same. “Does that surprise you?” he asked, delaying the ultimate answer.

Hanor grinned. “I am just glad you are receptive to such possibilities after what we have been through. Experiencing miraculous powers is one thing, to accept such forces have an interest in us is far more difficult.”

Approving of his friend's explanations, even though he still lacked an answer to whom or what the *Voice* was, it was a step in the right direction. At least there was a slight chance it was *them*. Too proud to admit how desperate he got, he was just glad to have his friend back.

"What is it you prayed for?" Hanor asked.

Putting an arm around his shoulders, "I can only say... my prayer was answered, in more ways than one." Beaming through the doubt, the fact Hayla had been part of that prayer did not need sharing. "Yes..., my prayers were answered."

Warming to his friend's relief, it was obvious what Bane had prayed for. Sometimes, it took an answered prayer for someone to expand their view of life.

Higher than the tallest mountain, Hanor sat at the edge of a giant stone disk peering down at The Freelands below. Cast in shadow, the pain of those suffering pulled at him, longing for them to be healed. From his vantage point, he could see the aid they needed was not of the physical kind. Incredible forces surrounding the planet had to be balanced before they could be released to bring order to the world.

Standing at the centre of the ancient stone disk, a fiery beam of light burst upwards from where he had sat a moment before. Another on the opposite side erupted into the heavens with greater intensity. Another to his left and a fourth to his right exploded into the night sky. Resonating in conjunction to their power, his heart was on fire, wanting to unite with the outer four columns of light.

Undaunted by the magnificent spectacle, they started rotating around his position as if he was the hub of a giant wheel. Slow at first, their speed increased and amplified their power. Drawn to the white fires of his heart, they started to close in, his body charged by the heightened energies. Unthreatened by the enclosing conditions, when reaching a certain point, the four spinning columns of light came no closer. Waiting for something to happen before they could merge, there was one more obstacle that had to be faced, the darkest one of them all.

Chapter 22 : Battle on many Fronts

Reaching the top of the rise, High-man Lorvanon pulled his mount up, horrified at the terrible sight before him. Seekers had already forewarned of what was to come, but nothing compared to seeing it for himself. Low and gradual, the decline of the terrain ran down to a recess stretching from left to right and climbed again the other side to a wide bank that was far from empty. Spanning for as far as they could see in either direction, black and monstrous, thousands clutched the hillside like a blotch of evil. Scores of campfires were burning the last remnants of tree or brush in the vicinity. Wildlife had all been caught or fled. Heart dropping at the scale of the enemy, Lorvanon could not believe it. Whatever madness could drive such hate?

“We must keep our nerve,” Rosa-Tor decreed alongside.

Further along, High-man Manon and his troops stopped atop the next low hillock, equally appalled. Beyond them, Nabban joined the line, the High-hite too far away to register his response. Risp the Fifanian Leader, and Minorl, the Baltian completed the wide defensive line to his left. The din of thousands rumbled the area, dread blending with courage as the two sides squared up to each other. Many of those on the other side of the low valley began chanting, baying in frenzy at their arrival. Heckling in a twist of delight, Lorvanon knew this was just what *Gorl-darl* wanted - to see blood run and fill this ancient riverbed.

Just past half-turn of the day, even the sun hid behind pockets of cloud, fearful of what was to come. An expanse of lush wild-grass and scattered rocks lay between the two forces, a trailing memory of more peaceful times. Light and breezy, the wind brushing down from the north carried the scent and sound of their wretched foe. Grotesque, small knee-high wretches sat on the shoulders of huge great monsters larger than a Hite. Such breeding was most unnatural.

Composing a pounding heart, Lorvanon considered their next step. Tempted to charge to unsettle the invaders, Rosa-Tor was following the same line of thinking.

“Shall we get this over with?”

Before he could respond, Nabban, the High-hite seized the moment. Bold, the huge figure raised his sword and hollered his defiance. Responding to that battle cry, calls to fight swept along the line of defenders, The Freelands at last rising to the challenge. Surging like a tidal flood, the High-man of Manter joined in, the impassioned wave finalising with a round of bellows from Minorl and his Baltian troops at the other end. The roar of thousands was heartening, dissolving the doubts. Following Nabban’s lead, Lorvanon charged, urging his men to follow.

Apprehensive before finally ridding himself of hesitation, High-man Manon’s desire to succeed replaced secondary fears. Inspired by his brave son, Hanor, he directed his troops forward, surging into battle for freedom’s sake.

Descending the hillside towards the ruined High-bridge, disquiet fell across Tardania’s Forces. Seekers had reported the mindless destruction, but the waste seemed doubly hard. Crumpled towers on either side of the river and patchy half-standing walls upon its deck warranted caution. There appeared to be no structural damage to the foundations, which was fortunate with so many seeking to cross. No Dortians or Gorls

were lurking amongst the debris either. The fact those who had guarded this place had been slaughtered fired the need for justice.

Brandor and High-tard Polon were the first to cross the rubble-ridden bridge. Large chunks of stone were scattered across the way, so too broken statues and ornamental stands. Tardania's thousands followed, secure in the knowledge that masterful builders of old had constructed this bridge well, permitting vast numbers to cross.

Leaving the disturbing scene, the pace increased. Those on foot interchanged with those riding, a familiar pattern ensuring steady progress. Every outcrop of rock or clump of tree and bush was searched. With so many Seekers from Tardoc and Tarden, it was unlikely they would stumble into an ambush.

Evening approaching, the threat of *Nyshifters* increased. Without Rinn and his *Ileng Power*, the foul creatures were once again a serious problem. An obvious topic of discussion when stopping that night, it was difficult to get to sleep.

"Do you think *Nyshifters* know Rinn was killed?" Sharn asked, getting ready to merge minds with those left of the Hisian-set and the four Masters who were here from Tardoc. Sef was the only male Master, the other three female. Excited to have been chosen with Hader to make up the six who were to mentally link back to Tardoc, they needed all of the mental practice they could get if they were to succeed.

"It was no accident he was singled out first," Bronn answered, checking his Kyboe before sitting on his mat.

"*Gorl-darl* knows of it," Whis said, starting his slow breathing exercises.

"Then we must be extra vigilant this night," Bronn warned.

A few pockets of stars were already dotting the growing darkness like bewildered observers from a distant place. The sun's sporadic appearances through the turn had kept the deadly creatures at bay, but with *Gorl-darl's* main force somewhere ahead, they would do well to get through tonight without disturbance.

Closing down outer senses, the group mentally reached towards the centre space above the fire. Unity returned, directing their collective purpose.

"They are at it again," Hallen huffed, annoyed by the low humming before all went quiet.

"I have heard that Brandor intends to take you back to the Sleep and keep you there until you are willing to listen to him," Casvern Tarn joked, receiving a few dry smiles.

"No thanks, I would rather go to Mandurin," the Hite said a little too sharply. "I am sorry, I did not mean it like that."

"I know, but if you mean to go, Mandurin will need builders after this is over."

"You go with Brandor then and I will take your place," Hallen offered, more upbeat now a couple of turns had passed since that shocking attack at Tardoc. Releasing frustrations earlier had helped too. Bursting into a nearby wood with sword ablaze, his yells of fury had scared the wildlife out onto the planes, many of which were now roasting over a fire. Kifter was busy preparing two rassers.

"I am happy with that," Tarn said, sipping some water.

"I will join you, Casvern," Caldor - Master of Tarden's Forces called from an adjacent fire. Sitting alongside High-tard Polon, Ginnel - his Second in Command and a number of others, the mood was relaxed. "I read about the Hisian-set when I was young, but have never seen their home. Quite a few will seek out their Grand Halls when this is over."

“They will,” Tarn agreed. Spending time with the Tardanian Leader at Tardoc, they had a lot in common. Invited to visit Tarden, he looked forward to seeing the treed City.

“It would be well for all to go,” Hanor added his own thoughts. “There are reasons why things happen like they do, good and bad. The more you know, the less scary it is.”

“If you start rambling again young Hanor,” Hallen warned, grinning. “Hites are known for hanging irritations upside down in trees,” he said, pointing to one a short way off.

“Like those robbers just before we met you at Ags Ole?” Hanor said, pleased the dark mood enveloping their group had passed.

“Talk sense and I will even share my Sasta the next time I get some.”

“You certainly know how to win people over,” Kifter teased.

“I am not even going to ask what they are doing there,” Hallen said, snorting at what Brandor and the others were up to.

“Merging minds,” Caldon said from the other ring, missing the Hite’s sarcasm.

“Am I doomed to this nonsense forever?” Hallen cried, feigning misery. “Please leave me alone!” Blubbering like a child, imploring the few stars visible to let him be, “I like my Sasta... and my food, my ladies and my freedom..., I need nothing else.”

Caldon thought the Hite most strange, shrugging when turning back to his group.

After the laughter settled, Kifter tutted. “You grow worse by the turn.”

“Hanor talks about the unfathomable,” Hallen said, cheerful. “I drink and talk well to the ladies, whilst you my friend, will leave this world knowing many appetites have been satisfied by your masterful cooking. Now then, is that food ready?”

“Your wish... I humbly obey.”

Fires simmering, the huge camp settled for the night. Countless eyes sparkling through the shadows were hesitant, straying thoughts replacing earlier conversations. Fear attempted to work its darkness upon the weak-minded and faint-hearted. In the far distance, faint shrieks could just be heard, *Nyshifters* taking to the air. Concerned murmurs were hushed, not wanting to draw attention their way. Pointless worrying about it, rest was more important if they were to endure the coming turns.

Connecting his *thumper* to another Gorl catapulted over Grovan’s second wall, Highgrove Fordain cursed this invasion. Not sleeping much over recent turns, his people had been stretched to the limits. Imperative they see him lead against this swelling tide of evil, many hearts were already broken. Tempering fears of how his son Orl was coping at Holen End, finally receiving word of their plight just before this *horde* had arrived, but they had heard nothing since. Desperate not to get sidetracked, trying to deal with those flying over the wall instead, the horrendous tactic was impossible to manage. Losing control of the outer regions of the City last night after repelling the enemy for twelve turns, his people were shattered and bloodstained. Clinging to a hope that help would come from somewhere, but there was nothing on the horizon to say it would come. Thick grey clouds meant *Nyshifters* would prolong their attack into the morning. This could not get any worse.

Caught in a momentary mood, behind him a cunning Gorl skittered over the wall, leering at its victim. Pouncing, the vicious Gor-up-sa bit into the shoulder of the Grovian Leader. Shrieking, Fordain crumpled to his knees, too exhausted to put up a fight. Already scarred with claw marks, but this one sunk deep. Believing it was his end, a

thudding impact broke the wretched creature's back. Dislodging it like a foul cloak, wincing, Fordain looked to see who had saved him.

"You need to rest," Keyster ordered. The Chief Grovian Structure Bearer did not wait for an answer, lifting his High-grove with ease.

Leaving the ramparts, Fordain was in no state to argue. If he did not rest now he would die this dark turn of day.

"No...!" Rainer cried, too late to save Manon to one of the larger, fouler Gorls. Pulled from his Kyboe, flailing arms and legs of his High-man disappeared amongst the throngs of bodies. To Rainer's dismay, the huge creature plunged on top of their stricken Leader. Swift for something so big, its glee was evident when standing. Grabbing hold of a foot, it started dragging the limp form away towards its camp, barging through those in its way.

Despicable creatures were cut down as Manson's Second in Command charged after it without care for his own life or his Kyboe's. Furious, the short distance seemed harder than wading through thick mud. Persevering, slashing as he went, he nearly faltered at the site of Manon trailing behind the foul beast. Either dead or unconscious, but Rainer had not the time to decide which.

Holding his sword with both hands, Rainer picked the exact point for his blow. Leaping from his Kyboe, he thrust the sword down between the Gorl's wide shoulder blades, the resultant roar encouraging him to thrust again but this time from below. Ducking under a huge sweeping arm, it left its midriff open. Others were there to help, fighting the monster and any others drawn to the beast's outrage. The fighting was tight but in their favour, soon putting an end to the vile wretch.

Lifting Manon to safety, Rainer could not believe it when two enormous Gorls came over and dragged the dead creature back to the hills to gorge on. "A force that feeds on itself will never survive," he grimaced, unsure if his close friend and Leader was still alive. It was not looking good. Manon was not a seasoned warrior and never would be. Too sensitive, his attempts to lead were admirable, inspiring those following him, but it was never enough. Hissing, he should have insisted Manon rest, but with dusk arriving, they had not expected another onslaught so soon. Manon had been exhausted but refused to stop. Surviving the previous turn's battle into the night, Rainer had promised to stay close to his High-man. But fighting so many, a gap had opened, leaving his Leader vulnerable. Now, with some of their troops having already fled, too overwhelmed by the awfulness of the enemy, how many more would leave at this grim news?

Pressing through the oncoming defenders, the battle was fierce. Lives were being lost with every sorry stride he took, but he could not rejoin them until he knew the fate of their High-man. Not looking forward to the next reprieve either, a pattern adopted by this marauding *horde*, they often retreated so they could feed on the dead. Discovering the enemy's feeding habits at first light that morning, they had expected to see a trail of bodies populating the shallow valley, but to their revulsion, many of the corpses had been cleared by their foe during the night. Reports of movements had been noted, but with no imminent attack, rest was insisted upon and the movers left alone. Disgust at dawn however, had fired them to act. Setting upon their gluttonous enemy whilst it fed or slept, gaining the upper hand for a time, but it had not lasted, their numbers too many.

Frustrated when the enemy had retreated by late morning, a method used to prolong the battle, indecision had resulted. Nabban - the High-hite had wanted to carry on fighting, but the majority insisted on respite for their troops.

Even so, that rest period had not lasted long. A large group of Gorls pushing forward from the rear of the enemy's camp had instigated this latest bout of fighting. Leading huge domed headed creatures with incredible power, the brave Hites had met that challenge. The ensuing battle, the worst yet, had set the whole valley alight with the roars of war and pains of death. Not stopping since, there was no sign of it ending either.

Finding a spot at the rear of their line, Rainer lay Manon down. Desperate and tired, he checked his friend over for signs of life.

"How is he?" someone asked from behind.

Rainer shook his head, saying nothing to the enquiring Rosa-Tor.

"This is worse than yester-turn," the man from Manter said, the battle intensifying. Resting along with his men whilst Lorvanon led the second defensive wave, Manter's Forces were split into two groups, one taking over when fatigue set in for the other. Initiating the manoeuvre himself to ensure all efforts were utilised, Rainer's men had not learnt the tactics and were suffering for it.

Wiping a tear, Rainer did not dally and went back to the fighting. Directing his wrath at their despicable foe, his troops needed him now more than ever.

Peering up at the first moon peeking over the northern horizon, Hanor could tell something terrible had happened. A sense of loss in his heart reinforced that impression.

"What is it?" Bane asked, his friend's manner altering in the firelight.

Not responding at first, Hanor was mystified by the feelings of hurt. "Many are suffering this night."

No idea how Hanor knew, Bane sighed, aware that war was but a night's sleep away. Told they would arrive at The Centre Vale during the after-turns of tomorrow, the growing darkness meant *Nyshifters* were imminent. Camp was made after a hard turn's march and the watch strengthened by members of the Hisian-set, but half-hearted laughs could not conceal inner anxieties of what was to come.

"We are ready," Hader said, returning with Sharn to sit in a ring alongside the four Tardocian Masters.

Attempting Brandor's *Wall of Power*, the first step was for the six to mentally link up with Tardoc. Relying on Sorlam, Whis and Bronn to keep watch for *Nyshifters*, Brandor waited with interest at how this was to unfold. Resisting the urge to be part of the six creating the *Wall of Power* he had envisioned, Hader and Sharn were the best qualified due to previous works undertaken. Even so, high hopes excited him at what they were about to try.

Many from the surrounding camp stared on through the twilight, disturbed by the bizarre rituals and preparations. No idea what was going on, most were happy to leave them to it.

The female Masters from Tardoc - Crissy, Meth and Wenda were already seated in a triangular formation. Sef, the other Master from Tardoc was waiting for Hader and Sharn to join him. Positioned between each female forming another triangle of male opposites, the male to female arrangement was necessary for the link to Tardoc to work. Trusting

Tarden had received word about this configuration, the prospect of linking mentally to their brethren was spine-tingling.

Low at first, a hum resonated between them, solemn for those listening in. Male and female vibrational sounds interweaved, mentally attuning to each other at the centre of the ring. Merging as one mind, they waited until the right note was hit before reaching out mentally towards Tardoc. Vibrations increasing in resonance, Brandor could feel the power generated by their focused attention. Detecting an invisible field of energy, it felt fantastic even for him. This was quite literally a dream fulfilled.

Releasing their mental projection when the collective note was attained, viewing it as if waiting for a shooting arrow to hit its target in the distance, Brandor held his breath. Thankful that no *Nyshifters* were present to upset the proceedings, optimism increased.

Time slowed, expectation the cause. When the humming sounds finally ended, Brandor knew it would be a while before the six fully came around. This was the critical point if *Nyshifters* were to disturb them. The mental turmoil could cause irreversible damage. Nevertheless, all six understood the risks and were prepared to do it. The potential of creating a *Wall of Power* and experiencing a larger *life form* was too tempting to dismiss.

Delighted smiles from Sharn and Hader were encouraging. “Were you successful?” Brandor asked Sef, the first to return to normality.

“Yes... and no,” the Tardocian Master said, rising from his seated position. “We reached Tardoc instantly, but they were not ready. It was the same with the Masters at Tarden.”

“That will be one of our main obstacles,” Brandor said, only mildly disappointed. “But the fact this worked with Hader and Whis is most pleasing.”

“They did well considering how little practice they have had,” Sef commended the two older men. “Initially, it is very demanding, but once the *greater life form* ensouls the link, it should become self-sustaining using us as mere body parts.”

“That is extraordinary,” Brandor said, congratulating Hader and Sharn, “Well done.”

“When can we do it again?” Sharn asked, beaming from the experience.

“As soon as possible I hope,” Hader said to Sef. “Words fail what we did.”

“We need to recover first,” Sef said, calming the situation. The Masters at Tardoc had already learned the hard way of trying again immediately. “Steady minds are more valuable than enthusiastic ones.” Without control, the right note would be difficult to hit.

The three female Masters were still seated talking amongst themselves. Brandor picked up on the point. “It is strange how the experience affects them differently.”

“It is,” Sef agreed. “They are on a spiritual high, much more than we are. If the *Evil One* was to turn up now, they would not be troubled in the slightest.”

“Good for them,” Brandor said, thankful that peace was possible for some.

“Wake up!” Rosa-Tor urged, shaking Lorvanon from his rest. “You must rise.”

Jerking up, the High-man instinctively reached for his sword thinking the enemy was already upon them. “What...! Where are they?” he asked, clambering to his feet.

“It is safe, the enemy is still on the other side of the Vale,” Rosa explained. Holding a torch, the orange glow revealed other concerns.

“Is it my turn already then?” he asked, believing he had only just closed his eyes.

“No. We have new developments that are a little difficult to explain.”

“Developments?” The High-man had no idea what short-turn of the night it was. “Show me.”

Leading the way, Rosa-Tor joined the growing numbers heading in the same direction. Word had spread, a low din rumbling through the onlookers lining the hillside. Without the noise of battle, Lorvanon had no idea what was going on. Breaking into a run, impatience getting the better of them, everyone seemed agitated. Reaching the Fifanian sector, Lorvanon stayed alert, trusting Rosa-Tor enough not to press him.

“He is through here, Rosa,” a Fifanian called, waiting for them.

Following their new guide, Lorvanon was unsure whether to be wary or excited. Unsteady reactions of those around him gave no indication to what was happening. Passing through the shorter figures from Fifania, a slight bulge in the ground in front prevented him from viewing the mystery. Forcing his way on, a narrow gap appeared.

At the brow of a slight hill, the far side of the low valley came into view, and to his dismay, the enemy with it. Like a huge blotch of black oil, it clung to the hillside, but the atmosphere seemed different, their lust for blood gone. What was everyone looking at?

Risp - the Commander of Fifania’s Forces bade him over. “Come..., come, what do you make of this?” he said, pointing down at the base of the ancient riverbed.

Expanding amongst the bloodied boulders of rock and wild-grass lining the lower parts of the Vale, clearly defined by huge torches placed by the defenders along the rim top, a black mist was materialising. The size of a small building, there was nothing to say what it was. No light shined inside and no bodies moved. Mesmerising, the High-man of Manter instantly suspected mischief.

Familiar shrieks alerted everyone to the arrival of *Nyshifters*. Expecting the creatures to dive in for the kill, swords were held ready, paltry weapons against such formidable beasts. Flapping wings buffeted the area, black menacing shadows against the starlit sky coming into view. Frantic calls from the defenders prepared for the worse, but no death and destruction followed. Five circled above the growing *Mist*, many cowering at what *they* might do.

Circling lower, the *Black Mist* was the focal point of *their* wretched attention. But what was the dark anomaly at the base of the Vale? A stone’s throw from their position, Lorvanon was confounded. Receiving word that High-man Manon had been killed earlier, and Nabban - the Hitorian Leader had taken a terrible wound, if decisions were to be made, he was in the right company. Risp however, seemed equally hesitant.

Undeterred by the *Dark Cloud*, two *Nyshifters* swooped along the Vale towards *it* as if about to attack. Flying between the opposing forces, *they* soared at the last moment as if in doubt to what *it* was. Captivating, only the crazy Gor-up-sa opposite bayed in frenzy. Erratic, the *Nyshifters*’ behaviour was as mystifying as the *Shadow*.

Shrieking *Nyshifters* wailing through the pitch of night caused many to look up from their slumber, Brandor included. Far off in the distance, something was wrong. Confident *they* were not getting any closer, he reflected on their achievement earlier to take his mind off what they would face tomorrow. Ecstatic that the Masters, Hader and Sharn had managed to connect mentally with Tardoc and Tarden, sharing minds on such a scale was incredible. Only mildly regretting that he was not included, nothing could dampen his spirits this night.

Breathing the cool night air, he looked east again when another bout of shrills echoed across The Freelands. Without Rinn, those creatures were again a cause for concern. As bad as that was, at least the *Ileng Power* was no longer an issue.

Chapter 23 : Safety in Numbers

Strolling along the riverbank, Bane basked peacefully in the midday sun, calm waters enhancing the idyllic setting. Fliryns singing in the blue heavens ushered him along on the harmony of their song. Water creatures splashing were a joy to watch, the warm breeze carrying the sweet scent of dinka flowers. This was wonderful.

The contentment did not last long however, something shadowy started tugging at the edge of his awareness. Looking up, a small dark cloud in the deep blue sky seemed intrusive, flustered that it was spoiling this tranquil place. A tightening sensation in his chest hurt, wrenching him from the heavenly state. Triggering a dramatic upheaval above, the lone dark cloud suddenly multiplied, expanding at an incredible rate. In a few heartbeats, it blotted out sun and sky.

Shivering, Bane was horrified when the serene river started fizzling and steaming. The ground jolted too, causing him to stagger. Cold and blustery, a strong gale replaced the gentle breeze, a chill of fear running through him. Fearful of the emerging storm, the river dried up, grass and bush dying amongst spikes of rock. Everything was changing.

Panic-stricken, weak words of help formed on quivering lips, but there was no one to hear him. Increasing in intensity and power, even when he shut his eyes the storm would not clear. Clouds churned up the atmosphere, their dark presence stalling the need to flee. But where could he go? Lost and desperate, he called out for help.

Hope fading when crackles of thunder and flashes of lightning split the sky, convinced he was going to die, but then the air in front where the river had flowed began to blur. Increasing in density and size, a black fog materialised, swelling into a dark cloud of great power. Detecting something familiar about it, everything settled down with its arrival, the wind losing its chill. Clouds thinned, their darkness less threatening. Dominating the setting, the black mist seemed lifeless, nothing moving inside. Fears easing, Bane had no idea what it was. Any respite was short-lived, a revelation filling his mind. His destiny lay inside the dark mist.

Distraught when sitting up, shadows of bushes nearby startled Bane as if the dream was still real. No one in the vicinity meant dawn was yet to arrive. Warming shivering hands, he was cold as if a deathlike sheath clung to his body. Trying to calm down, the potent dream had seemed so real. Another shudder ran through him, not wanting to go back to sleep.

“Are you ready for this?” Brandor asked Hanor, approaching the young man preparing his mount alongside a solemn looking Bane. Relieved dawn had arrived without disturbance, they would see war later this turn. How they were to find the final *Pillar of Life* he did not know, trusting a way would be found.

“I am not sure what to expect,” Hanor said, nervous. Sleeping well, but strong impressions of loss last night forewarned him of future troubles.

“Whatever we face,” the Dai-laman said. “We must do our best. Then nothing more could have been asked of us.”

“I suspect a few surprises on the horizon,” Raldama said, nearby.

“No doubt there will be,” Brandor agreed, wondering why Casvern Tarn appeared troubled. “What is it?”

“Why are you so happy when we are going into battle? Is it to do with what you did last night?” Tarn said, puzzled as why the Dai-lamen and Masters had celebrated on the eve of war.

“It has a great deal to do with it, and if you ride with me, I shall explain why.”

“That would be a great honour.”

“But most of us will die today!” Bane challenged, disliking the old man’s insensitivities. Respecting their fear, Brandor had only one thing to say. “We can be happy or sad, Bane, and still not change the outcome. Having a merry heart has its own rewards.”

“Even when people are killed?”

“No one ever dies. We just continue our journey in another place.”

Bane’s nightmare was affecting his judgement, but he did not feel it appropriate to be happy when others were suffering. “Not everyone is fortunate to think as you do.”

Clearly the young man was in the mood for calm reasoning, so Brandor left him to it. “Be brave this turn of the day and you will see the heavens smile down on you. Courage conquers the darkness of doubt.” Wishing them good luck, he went back to where the rest of the Hisian-set were preparing.

Bane huffed, having heard enough of that kind of talk to last a lifetime. Grey thoughts drifted back to that *Dark Cloud* in his dream and his connection to it. This was his last chance to ask someone about the *Voice*. With so many people close by, he did not have the courage to approach any of his companions.

Wiping sore eyes, High-tard Drola gazed out across the sea of trees to where the majority of his people had gone to aid Tardoc. The following turn since his beloved Maloree had died, he was still unable to bring himself to leave the security of his private chambers to tell anyone. Since Tarden’s Forces had left, he had ordered those trying to enter to leave him alone. Devastated by the loss of the one true love of his life, he was a broken Tardanian clinging to life. Missing the companionship he had once shared with Caldon, but he knew if his friend was here, he would bite him as well such was the refusal to accept what was real. Obsessed by Maloree, where had his pride and honour gone?

Dreading where this kind of thinking would lead him, guilt was preparing to strike. But he had won her hand fairly. Polon’s sloppiness had cost him victory. Old and tired, but the same argument kept stewing at the back of his mind. Refusing to accept he had betrayed his closest friend, something Maloree supported, but now she was gone, who was here to convince him otherwise? Ensnared by his own treachery, no matter where he looked he could only see disloyalty. Tormenting thoughts were getting stronger, tempted to jump if only he was courageous enough. Dropping to the floor, Drola wept, broken and desolate. Who could ever forgive him?

“They have retreated again,” Grasdon said, disbelieving it. Watching the enemy leave from Rovot’s high inner wall, his father would want to know. Talking to the Master Cossan, he just wanted to see an end to this war.

“It may give us time to complete the *Wall of Power*,” Cossan said, *Gorl-darl’s* tactics helping their cause.

Penetrating their defences repeatedly only to retract like a receding tide, dragging the dead with them, the traumatic tactic was draining. Wearing the defenders down, there

seemed to be no end to their numbers either. Streaming down from the Crystal Mountains, the Perns and Gorls seemed in no hurry to end this battle.

“Our defences will not survive another battering,” Grasdon said, angry at the Masters’ for refusing to help defend Rovot. Occasionally a couple of them would use their lightening powers, but nowhere near enough. That blasted *Wall of Power* they were trying to construct had become an obsession. It did not seem to matter that Rovot’s numbers were dwindling. “If you do not succeed soon, there will be no one left for your *Wall* to defend.”

“We are working as fast as we can,” Cossan promised, respecting his concern. They were so near but seemed to be missing a vital aspect to make it work.

“Cossan...!” A call from Lissa - a female Master came from below. “We are going to try something else.”

“Something else!” Grasdon said, losing hope they knew what they were doing.

“There are secrets to the Universe at the tip of your nose,” Cossan said over his shoulder, descending the curving stairs. “Never lose hope young man.”

Displeased when the Grovian Master reached the lower level and hurried across to the door, Grasdon could see no sense to it. So much suffering, he barely knew what was real anymore. Missing his brother, Hasdam, his father was struggling too. Twenty-three turns since that dreadful night, it still felt like yester-turn such was the pain.

Wincing from the wound to his arm, his father - High-grove of Rovot was heading down from the next level. Tired but resolute, an inspiration to his people, Grasdon pointed at the enemy. “The torment goes on!”

Confounded, Anser did not have an answer. “It does my son, and I know not why.”

Riding through the morning, Bane’s optimism had gone. After his nightmare and Hanor’s warning of what was to come, the mood was back. Edgy at what he had agreed with the *Voice*, that *dark cloud* in the dream seemed to be linked to *it*. Reminded of their agreement when looking at Hayla and Hanor riding in front, their reappearance had lost its sparkle too. Wondering if everything might have fallen into place without him bargaining the point, there was now no way of knowing. The fact was he was indebted to the *Voice*, and there was no way out of it. Longing for that peace he had felt at Tardoc when he had kissed Hayla, he doubted he would ever feel it again.

“*You will experience it again.*”

Almost falling off his Kyboe at the intensity of the *Voice*, *it* filled his mind as if standing alongside, *its* power unmistakable. Chest tightening, he was not brave enough to respond.

“*I said I can see your destiny,*” the *Voice* continued.

So loud and distinct, Bane feared the others might hear. Convinced *it* was connected to the *Cloud* in his dream, *it* had saved him from that storm just as *it* had when desperate in that cupboard. “I do not know what to say,” Bane thought, presuming the *Voice* could hear him. Heart pounding louder than the noise of their ride, he gulped at *its* reply.

“*Be ready..., your destiny is at hand.*”

Gasping when the *Presence* left as quickly as *it* had appeared, what had he got himself into? Shaking, reaching for his water skin, his throat was dry from shock.

“Are you all right, Bane?” Hayla asked, disliking how pale he looked when checking on him. Hanor did not like it either.

“Yes,” Bane lied, forcing a smile. “It is not every turn one goes into battle.”

Hayla let him be. "If you need to talk..., let me know."
Bane sighed, not knowing what way to turn.

At the brow of the next hill, Tardanian Seekers ducked low. Caldon and Polon raised an arm to slow their pace, proceeding at a walk. Expecting the sounds of battle, but there was nothing, the quiet eerie. Only the noise of panting Kyboes or whispered concerns hissed. Following the ancient dry riverbed of the Vale River, it was half way through the after-turns, expecting a horrifying sight when reaching the hilltop.

Two Seekers returned, each going to their respective Leader. Members of the quest, the Hisian-set and the Masters from Tardoc braced themselves.

"It looks like this is it," Hallen said, unsheathing his blade when Polon signalled for everyone to proceed at a cautious pace. "And about time too."

"Anything to make you happy," Kifter joked, hiding concerns about what was to come.

"There are a few beds I would rather be in," Hallen added, swinging his sword. "But whilst here, I might as well make good use of this."

"You will do just that, Hallen," Tarmon said to his left, Shanene forewarning him of what was over the rise. Caldon and Polon had declined his offer to guide them using Shanene and her fountain, preferring to use Seekers, but he was here if they needed him.

"I had a dream last night," Casvern Tarn said, drawing out his own keen blade. "I was having a merry dance with this." Running a finger along its edge, re-sharpened at Tardoc, it would not let him down.

"Swords are effective up close," Greema said, unfastening his weapon. "But at short distances..., nothing can touch a Grovian Thumper."

"Anyone can throw a bone," Hallen kidded, those at the front nearing the crest of the hill.

Apprehensive, Hanor sensed the end of this remarkable journey was nearing completion. The fifth and final *Pillar of Life* was somewhere close, perplexed how he was to find it. Putting concerns aside when The Centre Vale came into view, he had not anticipated the shear scale of the battlefield and the rank odour of death on the breeze.

Clambering screams above ground kept Aider Nash on edge, praying the entry to the tunnels would not be discovered. Hiding beneath the High-house of Mandurin when this second wave of evil had descended on their ravaged City just as Tarmon promised, it had been a mad rush to get the wounded down here. Bringing the few who had died as well, he had not wanted any of the dead to be fed on by the invaders. Nonn, Tooty Roe, and most of the abled men and women had left to join the southerners just as Casvern Tarn had advised, leaving only a few volunteers to stay and look after the wounded. Now huddled here like whimpering animals, they would not survive if found. Many of the wounded were too ill to move a considerable distance, barely managing the mad dash to get here. Nevertheless, at least they had a chance of riding this out. Rigged up to crumble when the door was sealed, the small room at the entrance no longer stood as it had, trusting the blockade was enough.

Hysterical cries of the enemy were dreadful, eager sounds suggesting they could detect something. Thuds and crashes meant creatures were near the entrance. Supplies in the other chambers were clearly not enough to distract the invaders. Imploring to be left alone so his companions could heal or at least die in peace, a scream from elsewhere was

to their fortune. Tempting those close by to investigate, scrambling noises and wild shrieks scuttled off and soon faded.

Wary of moving in case he was wrong, Aider Nash dared a sigh of relief. Some of his companions sniffled, upset how close that was. Tensions easing, Nash sat back against the cold tunnel wall believing they just might survive this.

“Look!” Bearn said, pointing out to their right.

One of forty Hites keeping watch on the eastern end of the invading *Horde*, they could hardly believe it. Out of sight of the enemy, a group of about fifty men and women were running along on the other side of the Vale heading their way. Halfway through the after-turns, this lengthy pause in the fighting was keeping everyone on edge, so too the beating sun. They had not expected this.

“And there too,” Dappen, another lookout said, pointing to a similar sized group further out. “Where are they from?”

“Keep your arm down,” Panorn hissed, amazed how both groups had avoided that black blotch of evil opposite. This was mad even by Hitorian standards. “We do not want to alert our foe.”

“There is another group,” Bearn said. A third collection of runners were just discernible between two distant hills before disappearing from view.

“What madness!” Clenam said, nervous they might be discovered.

Whoever they were, they looked tired and weather-beaten.

“There is close to two hundred,” Bearn estimated.

“Keep an eye on our enemy,” Panorn ordered, ascending a low hill at the rear.

Word spread amongst the Hites. The first group dipped into the shallow vale further along, wisely continuing south around a low hill so as not to give away their position. A considerable time passed before the next group followed the same route. Reappearing behind, the bedraggled looking group’s relief was understandable.

“Welcome friends,” Panorn boomed, striding down the mound to greet them. “What a surprise this is.”

Reaching the defenders, the men and few women were exhausted. “It is good to be here at last,” a gaunt looking man said, breathless. “We are... from Mandurin,” he panted, receiving a pouch of water. “My name is Nonn..., and this is Simman,” he said, indicating the sharp-eyed figure beside him. “We have been running...,”

“And hiding,” someone called from the rear.

“Yes...,” Nonn agreed. “Running and hiding for over six turns of the day.”

“We had to take a detour,” Simman, their only Seeker confessed.

“I heard that your City came under attack,” Panorn sympathised, presuming no one had survived.

“There is not much left,” Ararn Loor said, wiping his brow. “It is a shame we did not receive aid when we called for it.”

Interjecting, Nonn did not want underlying issues to spoil the fact they were here at all. “Many of our women and children have already come south. We survived the first attack but were unwilling to endure the second wave that is on its way. If we are to die..., we wanted it to be defending our families.”

“Women and children from Mandurin did arrive at Manter and are safe,” Panorn assured him, but he was more interested in the second wave that was to come. “Where do all these wretches come from,” he said, cursing at those across the Vale.

“It is like the mountains have spawned them from stone,” Nonn agreed.

Calming down, “I see you have travelled in small groups,” Panorn said, expecting the next batch to arrive shortly.

“Four groups set out from Mandurin,” Simman said, sombre. “But one was attacked two nights ago by *Nyshifters*.”

“There was no way to save them,” Nonn continued, the details distressing. “We are just thankful that we split as we did, otherwise all could have been lost.”

Just then, the other group jostled around the hillside, Gillen and Tooly Roe at its head.

“This should be a time for celebration,” Panorn said, more Hites heading their way to inspect the commotion. “But... we have our own woes to deal with,” he said, indicating the simmering enemy opposite.

“It is better to see them from here than the northern side,” Nonn grinned.

“I am sure it is,” Panorn laughed. Waiting for the final group to arrive, he asked what any Hite would to a traveller. “Are you hungry?”

Worried about the ominous black *Mist*, High-man Lorvanon sat discussing what to do with Nabban - the wounded High-hite, Risp - the Fifanian leader and Minorl - the Baltian, and numerous others of notable standing. The after-turns were drifting fast and the horde had still not attacked. Eerie looking, the *Mist* had grown to the size of a large dwelling before halting *its* expansion. Without lights or movement within, the onlookers had no idea what this meant.

After the *Nyshifters*' disappearance at dawn, they had expected something dreadful to happen. A burst of power or signal for the multitudes opposite to move for the final assault, but nothing had. The *Nyshifters*' respect for the *Mist* had been obvious. Low and wary, the din from their opposing numbers proved *its* presence demanded obedience even from them. Separating the warring factions, whenever the sun slipped out from behind patchy clouds, *its* dark vaporous coat soaked up its light. Lacking a solution, the line of defenders remained watchful along the Vale rim. Some were resting, whilst others sat stewing in tension.

“An attack will come once the sun goes down,” Nabban said, suspecting mischief.

“Probably,” Risp agreed, careful not to encourage the High-hite into action too soon.

“What do you think, Minorl?” Lorvanon invited, respecting the strength and wisdom of the Baltian Commander.

As was customary with Baltians, Minorl took his time to respond, the black *Mist* a deep mystery. The matt black coating of the *Cloud* seemed to be a shield against any mental probing, dulling his senses. “Who wants to lead who?” he said, thoughtful. “Shall we decide the future or allow them to? If we move, we must keep going until no one else confronts us. This stopping and starting prolongs the battle and feeds this *Darkness*.”

“What do you mean... *feeds this Darkness*?” Lorvanon asked.

“Do you feel the tension?” he asked, knowing they could. “It rises from the fear of the unknown, the future and death. It hovers over us like an invisible shadow,” he said,

looking up at the patchy clouds. “But... if one looks carefully from the heart, you will see it as a dark energy, and it is this that the *Dark One* feeds on.”

“Sounds peculiar,” Nabban said, unwilling to get his mind around it. He could see nothing but cloud and dismissed it as irrelevant. “It is madness to wait until nightfall. Fighting in the dark will only favour them.”

“A reasonable point,” Risp agreed. Their own numbers were dwindling with each attack.

Frustrated by the indecision, Lorvanon wished he had insisted the Masters of Manter come rather than stay behind to build Brandor’s *Wall of Power*. Missing their wisdom and power, they would have had a better understanding of this *Cloud* and therefore what to do. Even so, ordering people to fight was like sending them to their deaths.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Lorvanon stood when startled voices to their left alerted them to movement. Suspecting the decision to fight had been snatched by their foe, but the *Cloud* had not shifted and neither had the enemy. Some were on their feet however, pointing at distant hills. The view impeded by those close by, the noise intensified, those who could see starting to cheer.

“What is it?” Lorvanon needed to know. The miraculous arrival of Nonn and a few hundred from Mandurin had caused a stir but not like this.

Hoisted into the air by Minorl, the Baltian over a head higher than those around him, the High-man appreciated the lift, searching along the line of defenders for the cause. Nearly faltering at what was lining the hilltop beyond, a thick band of thousands seemed ready for war. Tardania had come to fight!

Chapter 24 : Grim News

A white orb of light sparked on the hill and headed towards the defenders. Captivated by its glow, it cut across their numbers and over the Vale towards the enemy. Purposeful and containing great power, the fizzling orb halted above the evil throng. Gorls beneath it scurried back, scared of its brilliance.

Cheers erupted when those on the hilltop headed down the slope, revealing the thousands who had come. There was no charging at the enemy, just composed minds to deal with the shadowy enigma. Lorvanon's heart leapt, spotting Brandor at the front.

Celebrations did not last long, murmurs of discontent forcing everyone to look at the dark *Mist*. A black arm was extending out from the *Cloud* towards the radiant orb. Thick and impenetrable like its host, its measured direction was a clear show of power. Brandor's orb was radiant, but the *Mist* seemed capable of soaking up the sun. Reaching and curving around the orb's position, the black arm expanded to encircle the ball. Dimming that life-giving light, groans swept the line of defenders when the last rays of light disappeared, taking their hopes with it.

Work complete, the mist retracted to its source, the Gorls opposite screeching in delight at the power of their Master. Frenzied, a sudden clap of thunder silenced the entire gathering. Shaking the ground, the heckles stopped, silencing the horde.

Doubting their next step, four Leaders knew not what to make of it, present methods insufficient against such colossal forces.

"If ever there was a face to be glad of, it is yours Brandor of the Sleep," High-Man Lorvanon beamed, hugging his old friend. Pleased members the Hisian-set were here too, he was now confident a way could be found to defeat this evil.

"It has been a long journey," Brandor said, greeting Nabban, Risp and Minorl as well, all of whom he knew. Ill affording to be delayed with pleasantries, that *Black Mist* was what mattered, coming to terms with *Gorl-darl's* astounding strength. The vision of that *Pillar of Light* being covered by that ooze of evil was here, the smothering his orb by that tentacle proof enough. Incredulous to think *Gorl-darl* might be inside the *Mist*, he rejected the idea of storming *it*. To do so would be to stray into *his* dark world. A *Cloud* that suffocated life, evil thoughts and terrible deeds somehow energised *it*.

"What do you make of *it*?" Sharn asked, standing alongside. Hader and the others joined them, inspecting the phenomenon in the later after-noon light.

Untroubled by that thunderclap, the black *Cloud* cloaking *Gorl-darl's* location was what worried Brandor. "We must tread carefully."

"How bad is this?" Risp asked, out of his depth here.

"If our foe is inside," Sharn said. "Then great power sits before us."

"Power is your domain," Nabban said, presuming the four slender Tardanians with them were of a similar kind.

"We must be patient," High-tard Polon urged, respecting the Hite's point.

"We have already decided to strike before dusk," Nabban explained, the decision about to be made before they arrived. "They are preparing for an attack when it gets dark."

"If you want to fight that lesser force, then please do," Sef - the Master from Tardoc said, indicating the thousands opposite. "But whilst you fight, do you wish for this greater evil to turn and strike you from behind?" Meaning the *Mist*, the point was not well received.

“So you say,” Nabban said, suspicious of how that was possible.

“I too have had to learn to wait,” Hallen said to his High-hite from the rear of the gathering. “It is not easy... but sometimes wise.”

Surprised a Hite was amongst this mixed band, Nabban could not place him. “As a Hite..., I respect your words,” he said, not dwelling on it. More concerned about what they were to do, delaying further aggravated him. His wounds were not helping either. “What options do we have?” he asked Brandor.

“That is what we are trying to discern,” Sorlam said, the High-hite impertinent.

Nabban scoffed at his candid remark.

“How long has it been like this?” Hader wanted to know, noting the battle-scars lining the Vale.

“This is the third time they have retreated,” Lorvanon said.

“And for the longest period,” Risp added. “They broke off just before that *Mist* arrived during the latter parts of the night. Nothing has happened since.”

“Hence why we should fight now,” Nabban repeated.

Sef - the Tardocian Master looked away, the High-hite’s attitude brutish. Fighting would have to be a last resort. After their successful mental link up to Tardoc and Tarden the previous evening, once they were satisfied it was safe for them to proceed here, to force the enemy back without another lost life was preferable.

“Be patient,” Hader said, in tune to Sef. “There could be other ways to deal with this.”

Another groan from the High-hite expressed his doubts.

Dusk approaching, the discussions continued, falling short of a committed course of action. Agitation increased, dreading the incoming night with its storm of evil. Individuals gathered into small groups, unable or unwilling to alleviate the problem. Rummaging through opinions, there was no clear way forward.

When Sharn, Hader and the four Masters from Tardoc broke away to start their work, it appeared a few, appreciating that at least something was being done.

Turning away from Rainer - Manson’s Second in Command, Hanor needed to be alone. Told of his father’s bravery and subsequent death, Hanor’s gladness at greeting people he knew was short-lived. Even though sensing the loss yester-evening, it was still a mighty blow. Reaching the frontline of defenders, he peered through the ranks at the evil *Mist* further down the slope. Wanting to blame *Gorl-darl* for his father’s death, but with so much heartache, to do so would not serve anyone.

Cutting back from the main line, he sought solitude. Conscious of the *evil presence* behind as he went, nauseated at being so near, *its* lack of life was unmistakable. Terrible powers were behind that *veil*. A portal to a Darker World, a desolate place without love or laughter, he felt woozy being so near. Surrounded by so many from differing races, he could see Balkorn in the Baltians’ beaming eyes and wide smiles. Missing his friend, he was exhausted from all of the emotional spoils.

Finding a spot near a large boulder, he sat down, trying not to think about his dead father and how his mother would cope. Pondering the *Stone of Tarkon* instead, he was no closer to discovering *its* purpose. Expecting the *light* in his heart to rise when so near to that *Mist*, but nothing had happened. Clearly having an agenda that had nothing to do with him, the fact the fifth *Pillar of Life* was nowhere obvious fuelled frustrations.

Reaching beneath his overcoat for the gilth pouch, its smoothness granted little comfort even with what it contained. Drained, he nodded off, giving up caring.

Whilst his seniors discussed plans, Bane's grim mood was stronger than ever, reinforced by the shock of seeing the *Mist* from his dreams in front. Far darker than he recalled, it was like knowing a frightful secret that he could not share. Walking away before he lost himself to the guilt at what he had agreed, he was a betrayer, a scoundrel conniving with the enemy just to satisfy lacklustre weaknesses. Treachery pounded him hard. Foolish to believe it was the *Sacred*, what would his companions say? Self-centred, the strained relationship with his parents was no different, always about him and what he wanted. What a wretch he was.

A brief window opened up, needing to speak to someone before it was too late. That goodwill feeling he had experienced at Tardoc calmed the inner storm enough to see a route of escape. Searching for Hayla, determined to do this, that urge was undermined when finding her talking to Casvern Tarn and some others from Mandurin. Wanting to drag her away to save him from himself, but his strength failed. Desires to talk faded as doubts returned with a bite. Too pathetic to rise above the despair, how could he tell her what he had done, bargaining just so he could be near her? He was as shallow as he was despicable.

Bodies rushing back and forth, he was barely noticed amongst the furore. The deep red sun hovering just above the horizon would grant no respite. Hanor was propped against a rock asleep, adding to the glumness. Wanting to scream, to say sorry a thousand times, tears welled. Failing his best friend repeatedly, he had failed Nole too.

Solemn, he made his way over, so dirty compared to Hanor who had shown nothing but strength to get this far. Understanding why the *Sacred* had not chosen him for the honour of attaining the *Pillars of Life*, he would have fallen at the first turn. Wiping a tear, he looked down at his lifelong companion full of woe. If he had Sasta, he would lose himself to it rather than put up with the self-pity. Laughing at that last thought, when everyone else was concerned about that invading force, he just wanted to escape the truth.

On the verge of despair, the *Voice* filled his mind, an insurmountable presence that dominated Bane's consciousness. Losing track of his surroundings, people rushing by made no sound, so consumed by the *Voice's* arrival was he. His body went numb and heavy, oblivious to Hanor at his feet.

"You must rest..., for your work is near."

As quickly as *it* came, *it* departed. Obeying the order, the pressures of guilt and despair dissolved, too numb to feel the nip of blame. Slumping to the ground, the *Voice* had saved him again, his grand destiny ushering him to sleep.

"How was the first attempt?" Brandor asked Sef, the six seated figures recouping from their merging of minds.

"Tardoc was not ready," the Master said, standing. "But we did detect something else."

"And what was that?" The Dai-laman was keen for good news.

The Master from Tardoc started walking to get his circulation going. "We sensed a mental projection from Rovot of all places."

"Rovot...! That *is* a surprise."

“It appears they have discovered the male to female combination that makes this possible. Just how quickly they can stabilise their efforts to make the link we will have to see.”

“I had not expected that at all,” Brandor said, excited. The half concealed sun on the horizon was losing its warmth, sending a prayer to energise everyone’s efforts, for the Masters at Rovot especially. “Can the *Wall of Power* reach Rovot if the Masters at Grovan fail to find the connection?”

“When stabilised, the mental will of each group should reach around the world, but we are at the infant stage with our mental projections. We do not have the time to develop the mental bridge Grovan would supply before the enemy overruns The Freelands.”

“That is a terrible shame,” Brandor said, disappointed. “We are so near!”

“We noticed another development too,” Sef declared, staring in the direction of the black *Mist*. Bodies were blocking their view but he could sense *its* presence. “Whilst in that heightened state..., we took a quick look at that *thing*.”

“What did you see?” Brandor asked, pleased Sharn and Hader were recovering quicker than last time.

“A mighty storm of evil without light and goodness.”

Shuddering at what that was like, “So what do you make of it?”

“Difficult to say but... if *it* wins, *it* will devour all of us and life itself if *it* could.”

“Strange how evil works,” the Dai-laman said, contemplating the subject many times. “It will destroy everything in *its* madness, including itself.”

“But... we got a glimpse of the *Force* that lies behind evil itself,” Sef continued. “*It* does not know itself as evil..., but exists as a natural negative energy that destroys everything in *its* wake. *It* has no other function.”

“That is astonishing,” Brandor had to admit. “Maybe you have glimpsed something significant from the *Higher Realms*.”

“But that is not all. That *Force* resides in each of us.”

“What do you mean?”

“At the core of every individual there is a *point of light* connected to the *Sacred*.”

“It is well documented and can be experienced by those with a pure heart,” Brandor agreed.

“Have you ever asked yourself what *its* opposite is?”

The question startled the Dai-laman. “It sounds so obvious now you speak of it.”

“It is this pulling *Force* within each of us that is a constant drag on our lives. It is there individually but also collectively.”

“Is that what is at the core of that *Cloud*?” Brandor posed, amazed at the complex structures sustaining life.

“There are vast amounts of *dark energy* in that *Mist*,” Sef explained. “I do not understand fully but that *energy* is there because it is somehow connected to us.”

Unable to see a link, Brandor could barely get his head around it. Seeking other details instead, “You did not get a glimpse of *Gorl-darl*’s intentions then?”

“I would ask who or what is the actual driving mind behind this invasion.”

“You mean... it is not *Gorl-darl*?”

“Something is empowering *him*.”

“But you did not see what?”

“No, but... I can sense *it*.”

“Perhaps your extra mental activities as a group has heightened your sensitivities.”

“You could be right,” the Tardocian Master acknowledged. So alert and vital since beginning this work, the changes could be in preparation for the incoming *entity* that was to ensoul the *Wall of Power*. The possibilities were endless.

“We have much to think about,” Brandor said, smiling at the gleam in Sharn’s eye. “And you should try again as soon as you are ready.”

Sef agreed.

Jolting upright, panic gripped Bane, forgetting where he was and why. Blurry eyes took a moment to focus.

“It is all right,” a familiar voice said nearby, trying to succour him.

Jerking around, through the half-light he could make out the shadowy face of Hanor. The sun had not long set, casting a deep red ambience across patchy clouds above. Nodding off after the visitation by the *Voice* earlier, *it* had saved him from losing his mind, unsure whether to be thankful or scared. “This is hard.”

“I know,” Hanor said. Observing Bane whilst asleep, they had come so far. Refraining from telling him about the loss of his father, Bane had enough to contend with. “I am sure the end is near.”

“I hope so,” Bane said, wishing it to be true.

Checking the direction of the black *Mist*, Bane felt a mixture of fear and wonder at the power the *Voice* had. Dispersing his turmoil just by *its* presence, for *it* to be the *evil one* seemed ludicrous. Powerful and intelligent, but there had been no evil. Turning back, Hanor was holding the gilth pouch under his overcoat, no doubt for medicinal reasons. Curiosity got the better of him. “Can I see your pouch?”

Startled by the unusual request, Hanor withdrew his hand as if caught out. “Er... why?”

Disliking the mistrusting reaction, “Do you not trust me?” Bane snapped, annoyed. “I just want to look at it.”

“Sorry, you took me by surprise,” Hanor said, keeping his hands in his lap, not needing this right now.

“The amount of times you hold it,” Bane said, finding a reason for the appeal. “It must help you feel better. I just want to touch it, is that too much to ask?”

Wary for some reason, Hanor disliked the suspicious feelings. “It does have a soothing quality,” he confessed. Deciding to put their friendship first, he lifted the rim of his coat so the pouch was in view. “No big deal,” he said, the thin grin unconvincing.

Reaching across to touch the pouch, it felt soft but not enough to warrant a fixation. Presuming it was because of the *Stone*, Bane was still flustered by his friend’s mistrust, testing him again. “Can I try it on?” he asked, angry when cagey eyes stared back through the half-light. “You do not trust me?”

Awkward, the last thing Hanor wanted was a conflict. Conceding that his friend had a right to be upset, Brandor’s warnings about getting too attached to the pouch echoed across the pages of time. Even though the *Stone of Tarkon* no longer had any real influence on things, *it* was still a treasure difficult to let go of. Regretting his response, Hanor reached behind and unfastened the chord. “Like I said..., it is no big deal,” he said, handing it across, the addictive tug unpleasant. Realising Bane was actually doing him a favour, he *was* too attached to it. “I *am* sorry, Bane,” he said, meaning it. When Bane tied it around his waist, that clinging urge tried crawling back, but Hanor was having none of it. “Go for a walk,” he insisted.

Surprised and softening at the request, Bane had no real need for it anyway and handed the pouch back. "It does not do much for me."

"We can be a funny lot sometimes," Hanor said, fastening it a little looser this time.

"I am slowly getting used to your weirdness," Bane teased.

"Shall we see what is going on with that *Mist*?" Hanor said, rising.

Hesitating, Bane was unsure if he wanted to get closer. Owing a huge debt, to not pay it was as scary as the qualms the *Voice* had got rid of. "Let us not get too close though."

Chapter 25 : Your Destiny is at Hand

Crouching at the rim of the Vale staring down at the black *Mist*, Brandor was no further forward in unravelling the mystery. Beacons blazing along the defenders' line fluttered in the breeze. Lighting up the area, only *Gorl-darl's* domain seemed untouchable by their glow. Not a flicker reflected off *its* clouded walls. Situated on a flat bed of rock, apart from absorbing his orb, the *Mist* had done nothing else since their arrival. Even with the six attempting to create his *Wall of Power*, there was no reaction from *its* occupant. On guard whilst the six attempted to link up with the other Cities again, Brandor was certain *Gorl-darl* could detect their work.

Shimmering black bodies across the other side of the Vale were indifferent as if that thunderclap earlier had neutralised their fierce hunger for bloodshed. Expecting *Nyshifters* with the coming of night, the longer they delayed the better chance they had of forming the *Wall* in time. Confused as to why the enemy had not swept the area clean by now, with the arrival of the Tardanian Force and the Hisian-set, Brandor could not help but think this was just what *Gorl-darl* wanted.

Sitting straight and contemplating the hidden forces energising this whole encounter, Brandor forgot about his surroundings and sought a revelation about what was really happening here. Tuning into subtle noises humming beneath this world, he offered questions to any *Greater Lives* that might be receptive to his plea. Concentrating on the black *Cloud*, the boundaries of ignorance started to lift. Consciousness expanding, details of what they faced began to unravel.

The *Mist* was granting the *Lower Realms* access to The Freelands, which was a stable environment by comparison. *Gorl-darl's* unhurried tactics were specific, designed to generate the terrible conditions required for the *Mist* to keep growing. The more fear their enemy could generate, the more the *Cloud* would expand. Consuming The Freelands would produce so much fear that the vibration of this World would slow to that of the *Lower Realms* where evil rules, and the two would begin to merge. Life here would sink to new depths never seen before. The fact people were here willing to fight was halting *its* expansion, but for how long?

Gorl-darl's Forces stretched far beyond what these good people could see, promising a long drawn out war. Dragging the fight out to maintain regular periods of fear and trembling, it was why Mandurin and Tardoc had not fallen quickly either. Eventually, these brave defenders would be weighed down by despair and lose the will to fight, resulting in the rapid expansion of the *Cloud*. Victory here would leave the southern regions open. The continued production of terror would complete the whole transition on a global scale. An alteration of this reality would transpire, and the two realms would become one. Evil creatures presently unable to gain access to this Upper World would materialise about them. No barriers would remain to separate the two Realms, and survival of the fittest would ensue.

The prospect seemed too incredible to believe. Cursing their enemy, but further insights were just as astonishing. *Gorl-darl* was not the main driving force behind this invasion like Sef had said. *He* was being used to bring about that ultimate Darkness. Obsessed with revenge against the Hisian-set, *he* was blind to the unbelievable powers involved. Intelligent and gifted, but *Gorl-darl* was a fool to think *he* could control those

powers, Brandor gasping at the naiveté of his foe. Daunted by the revelations, the whole plan was as terrible as it was brilliant.

Consciousness returning to normal, the *Mist* seemed darker than before, *its* presence a blotch on all that was good. Determined to make a stand, everyone had to be warned.

Returning from the *Mist*, everyone had been ordered to take what rest they could, Bane laying a short distance from Hanor pondering the *Voice* and the amazing impact *it* had had on his life. Undecided as to who *it* was, the situation would not be so bad if what he owed *it* was not so great. “What have I let myself in for?” he said, rolling on his side away from his best friend. Silhouettes of Hayla and Raldama were lying nearby quietly talking. A painful reminder of the promise made, he would do anything to get rid of the guilty feelings. Trying to sleep, he was exhausted but his mind was not. Anxieties buzzed with a life of their own, a punishment for causing so much duress over the last nineteen full seasons. Yawning, silhouettes around him moved with purpose, but he was in no mood to care. Eyes dry and heavy, he lay for what seemed like an age when without warning the mighty *presence* returned. Filling his poor beleaguered mind, he rolled onto his back, pinned to the ground by *its* dominating arrival. Overpowering, he dared not speak, praying *it* might go away.

“Your destiny is at hand.”

Potent words formed in Bane’s mind as if a giant was inside booming at him. Gulping, the *Voice* had come to collect the debt and he had nowhere to run. Doubting he could get up even if he dared, the *Presence* was too commanding to try. Stuttering thoughts tried forming an answer but words failed him.

“Why are you frightened?”

“I... I... had not expected... this,” he mumbled, dread attacking his resolve.

“You are no good to either of us if you are scared.”

“I... do not... understand,” Bane managed, trusting nobody could see how he looked in the dark. Hoping Tarmon or one of the others might come to his aid, such desires were seen by the intruder.

“I told you that without trust we are no good to each other. Do you remember?”

“Er... yes...,” his stuttering mind replied, still terrified.

“The reason I am so overpowering is because I am close. I am not interested in your fear, I want to see your courage.”

“I... have not got much... left.”

“Have I given you everything you wanted?”

Too frightened to respond, he did not need to answer.

“Why do you think you owe me something?”

A few patchy moonlit clouds seemed to be Bane’s only connection to the real world. Still pinned to the ground, this was no nightmare, he was completely under *its* control.

“Because... of what you... did for me.”

“All I want... is your trust.”

Receiving what he had must have taken an enormous amount of influence on *its* part, so who in their right mind would not want that debt repaid? “What you ask... does not... make sense.”

“Do you trust me?”

“I... I do not know... how to answer that.”

“Do I deserve it?”

Shocked by this surreal situation, how was this possible? “You have helped me... a great deal. Even when I was panicking earlier, you helped me when no other could.”

“Is that worthy of your trust?”

“You keep asking me that..., but I do not understand. Why do you want me to trust you?”

“Without courage and trust, your destiny will not be fulfilled.”

The word destiny reverberated through his mind like a struck gong, tempting him to believe he could make a difference. “I do not see... how my life is important.”

“That is why you do not have faith in me. You do not believe you have value... but I know what is before you. Do you want to fulfil that destiny or will you deny it and fade away?”

That last part summed up his life. Playing with the idea of contributing in a special way, a warning went off about who he was dealing with. The evil spoken of earlier by Brandor could not be detected, granting him some leeway. “Who... are you?”

“I will reveal myself to you... but not if you deny your destiny.”

“Are you... *Gorl-darl?*” he braved.

“I have no name. I am what I am... and will become what I choose to become.”

“It is hard... to think straight.”

“You seek a purpose to your life..., and it lies right here before you. Do you want me to leave or are you going to stand tall and follow what fate has apportioned you?”

“The trust you seek is not gained like this.”

“What must I do to earn your trust?” the Voice said, still composed. *“Shall I pull the heavens down just to prove myself? I have already moved mountains for you, show me someone who has earned it as I have.”*

There was nothing he could say, even his parents had often let him down. Hanor had chosen a higher path, and without Nole, that left only Hayla. Dominated by the *Voice*, he was frightened to say yes. “What is it you want me to do? You have earned some trust but... it is only natural to fear somebody of your stature.”

Startled when the *Voice* started laughing, Bane presumed *beings* of such calibre were beyond humour. There was no malice, which helped him feel a little easier.

“Will your fears prevent you from following your destiny or will you rise and do what I have foreseen you do?”

“What *will* I do?” Bane asked, nervous at what that could be.

“Nothing.. without trust.”

At the edge of something important, Bane was unsure if this was bait. If he did not like what *it* wanted him to do, he could always say no. “I trust you enough to listen to what you want.”

A short pause followed, but the burden of *its* presence did not ease.

“What I seek is... the gilth pouch.”

Pummelling Bane’s mind with a mighty thump, he could now see this whole interaction was one long build up to this. Stupid for falling for it, the shock kicked in. “You cannot expect me to get it for you?”

“Do you not think I could just come and take it?”

Powers increasing to prove *its* point. Bane did not doubt it. Taking stock of what was going on here, if *it* could retrieve the pouch anyway, why did *it* need him? Forgetting *it*

could read his thoughts, he did not know how to respond. Judging *it* to be *Gorl-darl*, clearly *he* wanted the gilth pouch so Hanor could not use it against *him*.

“*Do you believe that?*” the question came, reading his thoughts.

Trying to stay calm, Bane was out of his depth here. “What have I let myself in for?”

“*Is that your fears at work again?*”

“I cannot believe you expect me to do it?” Wanting to retract that last statement for fear of retribution, he did not expect the next statement.

“*Once again I will prove to you how much you can trust me.*”

Sceptical, Bane could not see himself changing his mind. “How...?”

“*I will tell you where the fifth Pillar of Life is.*”

Stumped again, Bane could tell the *Voice* was not lying. But why would *it* reveal such a detail, the *Pillars of Life* were far superior to the *Stone*? By telling Hanor and Brandor where the *Pillar* was, everyone would praise him for once. Even though they would not approve of the method by which the knowledge was attained, if the *Stone* had served its purpose, then what was the point in keeping it?

“Will you tell me where *it* is before I bring the gilth pouch, that is... if I can get it?” Doubting he could persuade his friend to part with it if he was awake, he would have to take it from him whilst asleep.

“*That is what I said.*”

This was unreal by any standards. “Where is *it* then?”

“*Do you notice how all of this giving is one way?*”

“Tell me where the *Pillar* is and then I will try and get the gilth pouch,” he said, surprised at his audacity.

“*That is what I want to see..., courage.*” After a short pause, “*IT IS RIGHT BENEATH ME.*”

The statement penetrated every fibre of Bane’s being. Astounded by the disclosure, it did make sense. The fact the black *Mist* had stayed there for over a turn, and so too the *Gorls*, did suggest *Gorl-darl* was waiting for something. “Below the *Mist* you mean?”

“*That is correct.*”

Confused, Bane needed to think straight. Given so much just so *he* could have the gilth pouch, *he* had to be after the *Stone*. Did *Gorl-darl* fear it or was *he* going to use *it* against them perhaps?

“*I cannot use its power.*”

Sensing again that he was being told the truth, this was happening too quickly. “But it will stop Hanor using *it* against you.”

“*If Hanor can, why does he not just use it?*”

A point many had asked, especially after the death of Balkorn, it was probably because he had failed when charging at those *Nyshifters*. Hanor had also mentioned the *Stone* could not be used as a weapon.

“*Why does the Light in the Stone not reveal itself through other means?*”

A good question, why did the *Sacred* permit so much suffering in the first place? As if slapped across the face, Bane confronted the *Voice*, waking up to reality. “But... *you* are the reason for all of this death and destruction.”

Expecting it, the *Voice*’s response was calm and assured. “*It is natural for you to view this invasion as evil..., but that is because your understanding is incomplete. Compare*

the indulgences of the south against the afflictions of those in the north and you would have a very different perspective. There has always been an imbalance of wealth and power, and I intend to change that. Selfishness will no longer thrive in this realm. I will replace it with a New Order, where obedience will bring balance long overdue. I must burn this world to create it anew. There is no evil in that.

“I just want the suffering to stop,” Bane said, emotions creeping into the equation.

“Does a mother give up halfway though childbirth because she cannot stand the pain? No, yet you do not see what I envision and so judge me even though your own guides are far from perfect. The Hisian-set speaks of freedom and peace..., and yet grew lazy and arrogant. Punishing a misguided young man from Mandurin long ago, who had been lured away from goodness, they inflicted grievous injuries without a care for his motives. I was shown what love is by the Yarmi Folk, but justice needs apportioning before my plan for this world can be completed. Extreme, yes, but sometimes justice has to be dealt with by severe penalties. What you see today will not be my world of tomorrow. I will return it to a far superior state than it is now.”

Tuning into *his* motives, the impressions upon Bane’s mind made the details much more compelling. Drawn into *Gorl-darl’s* reasoning, it was hard not to feel something towards *him*. “You are talking to the wrong person,” he said, feeble. “I just cannot condone killing on this scale.”

“When a fever ravages your body, do you despair when the tiny lives in that virus die? No, because you have been healed, you being the greater life. It is no different to what I am doing with The Freelands.”

“But The Freelands was not ill before your invasion.”

“You have seen things on your journey proving that life is not as it should be. There are too many arguments and conflicts, selfishness and greed. I am creating a new world that will change that.”

“I would not want to live in your world with your Gorls.”

“They have been created for a purpose and nothing more. Once this Realm is burned, a new life will replace it, where peace and justice reign. There will be no gluttony and laziness, no complacency and decadence. People will walk in sunlight along the riverbank and be thankful I was farsighted enough to do this.”

Drawn into *Gorl-darl’s* fantasy, he had experienced what that could be like in his dream. Caught up in that harmonised world, he wanted it more than anything. If that meant this world being purged then who was he to argue? Critical thoughts dissolved, *Gorl-darl’s* perfect world replacing them. Questions about the gilth pouch faded too. Pressures on his chest eased, *Gorl-darl’s* presence leaving. Darkness and shadow returned, so too a chill.

Sitting up in the dark, Bane checked on his companions, relieved they were asleep. No doubting what he had to do, he was convinced *Gorl-darl’s* vision could be accomplished, the horrors involved not touching his numbed senses. Even the location of the fifth *Pillar* no longer mattered. Edging over to the sleeping Hanor, the gilth pouch was not tied around his waist like normal. Not even questioning why, Bane just needed it. Fortunately for him, only part of the pouch was covered by his friend’s arm.

Retracting an extended hand when someone passed their group, the individual did not notice him in the dark. The low din of hundreds preparing for war ensured his activities were covered. Reaching for the pouch, any guilt was nullified before that spark of alarm could alert him to what he was doing. Clasp the bag, he lightly pulled, but the weight of Hanor's arm prevented it from moving. Daring to lift it, he pulled again, careful not to wake him. When the pouch came free, it left only the chord trapped under Hanor's body. Cursing, Bane tugged gently again, a grunt from his victim halting his devious movements. Nervous poundings of Bane's heart were not to be questioned. Satisfied Hanor had drifted off again, he pulled, satisfied when the chord pinged free. Tucking the pouch under his overcoat, he had to wait for two more men to pass before rising. Scurrying off towards the half-lit line of defenders on the Vale rim, he had done it.

Suspecting something amiss, Kifter got up just in time to spot the hurried movements of Bane leave their group. Heading for the Vale, his unusual behaviour alerted the Fife to investigate. Leaping over a sleeping Hallen, he followed the suspicious youngster. Cutting towards the front line, he had no idea what the boy was up to. Moody and unpredictable, Bane seemed to be holding something at his side. Concerned about losing him amongst the growing throngs, Kifter started running, the boy's hasty manner worrying. Skipping around those in his way, the Fife was horrified when Bane disappeared into the main line of bodies guarding the Vale's edge. "Stop that boy!" His call cracked the din. "Bane..., stop!" Hoping someone at the front might act, what was Bane up to?

Working his way through the thick line barring his way, Bane heard Kifter's call. He had been discovered! Determined, he pushed on, barging through a Fife and wrenching away from a large bearded fellow alongside. Bursting through the ranks, he stumbled at the sloping of the ground but regained his footing to avoid a fall. Running hard, passing a couple of large boulders, flickers of torches behind cast his shadow in front. Careful not to trip, a chorus of voices from those behind meant nothing to him. No amount of screaming would keep him from what he had to do. *Gorl-darl's* dream was now his own. Imperative he did not fail, the thick black *Cloud* loomed in front like a gateway to another world. Unfazed by *its* monstrous presence, the fear of yester-turn was gone, replaced by an obsessive urge to make this happen. Walking by that river on a sunlit day caressed his passions. Not even slowing, he disappeared into the black *Mist* without a care for his life.

Chapter 26 : Horrors in the Dark

Halting to catch his breath, Kifter could not believe it. Halfway down the slope, he cursed, not quick enough to stop Bane disappearing into *Cloud's* deep shadows. Guarded whispers of those on the rim were equally stunned by the lad's desertion. What could have driven Bane to enter? Supposing the *evil one* must have influenced the lad like *he* had Tarmon, this was terrible. Needing to find Hanor and Brandor, if they were to save their misguided friend, they had to act fast.

"Hanor...! get up," Tarmon ordered, shaking him.

Blinking, the Heir of Manson groaned. "What is it?" he asked, yawning.

"You had better come with me," the Tard said, seizing his arm to help him up. "Bane has done something foolish."

Searching to where his friend had laid, his mat was empty. Others from their group were on their feet at the disturbance.

"What has he done?" Hanor urged, heading in the direction of the black *Mist*. Halting, he was missing his gilth pouch. "I have left my pouch."

Waiting for his young charge to find it, Tarmon could ill afford the delay with so much going on.

"I cannot see it anywhere," Hanor exclaimed, Raldama and Greema helping him.

"It must be here," the Grove said, searching through the dark where Hanor had slept. "I thought it was around your waist?"

"It was... but I was getting too attached to it," Hanor said, disbelieving it had gone. Checking under their mats and covers, there was nothing. "It cannot have vanished!" The slight breeze could not have blown it away.

"I wonder if it has anything to do with Bane," Tarmon said, putting the pieces together.

"Why would he take it?" Hanor was getting worried.

"That question might be as difficult to answer as to why has he entered that *Cloud*?"

Disturbed, Brandor was still unable to comprehend Bane's actions. Joined by his colleagues of the Hisian-set, High-tard Polon and Leaders from the various Races, it was difficult to think straight with so many opinions. Why had Bane entered? To follow him into the *Cloud* below was too grave a risk for the sake of one person. Celebrating Hader, Sharn and the four Tardocian Masters' mental connection with Tardoc and Tarden prior to Kifter's horrifying news, he had not foreseen this.

"What is he up to?" Brandor growled at Hanor as the young man approached with Tarmon and the others, making their way through the line of defenders.

"We think he has taken Hanor's gilth pouch," Tarmon replied.

"Kifter said he thought Bane was carrying something," Brandor said, weaving the facts together. *Gorl-darl* clearly feared Hanor using the *Heart of Tarkon*, explaining why *his* forces had not attacked yet. Without the *Stone*, *Nyshifters* would have little to fear. "What has he done," the Dai-laman cursed. Too focused on the *Wall of Power*, he should have seen this dirty trick coming.

"He would not have done this willingly," Hanor defended. Bane would not have betrayed him without coercion.

Kifter arrived to check on the developments. "I am sorry, Hanor, I suspected something was wrong but did not consider it would go this far."

"Bane took the gilth pouch," Greema said. More people were working their way to the front to have a look at the *Cloud*.

"That is graven news," the Fife groaned, dreading the effects.

Lorvanon came across, appalled when told about the gilth pouch. It seemed only yester-turn that he had given the pouch to Hanor. "What do we do now?" the High-man of Manter asked.

"We must assume a strike is imminent," Brandor said, staring beyond the black *Cloud*. "Make sure your Forces are prepared."

"I will take care of it," Rosa-Tor promised, disappearing into the throngs behind.

"What could have possessed him?" Lorvanon asked, pained as if his own son had done it.

"We have to be ready," Brandor said, checking the *Cloud*, half-hoping a flare of white light might appear at *Gorl-darl's* expense.

Engulfed by darkness, the chilling drop in temperature burnt Bane's exposed skin like dry ice. Unable to see his hand before his face, he slowed to a walk before stopping. So certain of the conviction driving him, the deathlike cold was enough to rouse him from delirium. Fear crept in, the blackness alive as if breathing.

Fearful of what might attack, he yelped at a hissing sound to his left, its timely arrival reacting to his dismay. Turning away, a high-pitched squeal rushed at him from the opposite direction. Clutching the gilth pouch, its smooth texture granted no solace. Waiting for a light to guide him, he still wanted to do *Gorl-darl's* bidding. Other sounds and black shapes brushed up close, making him jump. Terror increasing, ducking at flying objects, obscure shapes reached up to grab him from the ground, panicking at what they could be. Whirling to avoid more shadowy attacks, he shouted for help, but the sound was deadened by the smothering atmosphere, so thick and enclosing.

Recalling the *Stone's* power, he reached into the pouch up to his shoulder. Searching the empty space, but the *Stone* was nowhere to be found. Dread intensified. Hysterical screams and bouts of gleeful laughter started hissing again, firing from every quarter. Covering his ravaged ears, "Get me out of here!"

A point of light appeared to Bane's right in response to his cry. Seizing the lifeline, he ran towards it as if his life depended on it. Even though the distance seemed too far to be part of this *Cloud*, expecting to burst out the other side, he ran hard, resolute on reaching it before he lost himself to this nightmare of a place. Gripping the pouch, the light grew like an unnatural dawn rushing at him. Entering an open area, the light dimmed as the blackness pushed back to grant him space. Relieved, no shrieks followed, he was safe at last. A dry throat felt raw.

Inspecting the open space, the black *Mist* surrounded the small cocoon, a deadly reminder of what he had just passed through. Underfoot, the grass was gone, a bumpy greyish rock was in its place. The size of a large room, he had not expected this. Catching his breath, he turned full circle, puzzled as to where he was.

Shock gripped him, dazed at what he had done. Gone was the dream of walking in a meadow by a sunlit river, replaced instead by a stinging reality that he had betrayed his best friend. Mocking his idiocy, the *Cloud* challenged him to leave if he dared. The

prospect of facing those dreadful noises again softened his will to flee. Whimpering, he was trapped!

“Where is your courage?”

The question filled Bane’s mind, recognising it to be the *Presence*. Confused by the dramatic change of events, he did not know whether to be relieved or angry. Tremors of fear pulsed when the cave like area expanded, pushing back the black *Cloud*. A small lone figure, hooded and still, came into view. Robed in grey with thick rustic patches of what looked like dry blood, Bane could not see *his* features but could feel the intensity of *his* gaze. A little smaller than himself, a lean frame beneath heavier outer garments suggested food was the last of his concerns.

“Your fears will destroy you if you are not careful,” the figure warned through the power of thought.

Numb at what to say, *Gorl-darl’s* slender form belied the potency of *his* power, enough to soften Bane’s straying temper. “I... I... cannot believe... this is real.”

“It is very real,” *Gorl-darl* said, using *his* mind again rather than talking.

Expecting the shadowy figure to be aged and bent, Bane was surprised *he* was quite the opposite, youthful even. “Have... I really... done this?” he asked, putting his hands behind his back to hide the proof of his shame.

“Is that for me?”

Before Bane could resist, the gilth pouch was ripped from his hands by an invisible force. Lurching after it, but he was not quick enough, *Gorl-darl’s* scrawny pale hand catching it.

“That does not belong to you,” he cried, a trace of his old self kicking in.

“Is that resistance?”

Conscious of *his* awesome power, fear tied Bane’s tongue, scared of what their enemy proposed to do.

Inquisitive of the pouch as if facing a puzzle, *“Very clever,”* *Gorl-darl’s* thoughts filled the chamber. *“But still based on a simple formula.”*

Presuming something drastic was about to happen, Bane needed to act. “You asked me to trust you,” he objected, daring to be brave. “Is this how you repay my trust?” Bane gulped when *Gorl-darl’s* glared at him from beneath his shadowy hood.

“You did not trust me or I would not have had to persuade you to come here.”

Confused, the dream had seemed very real. “Was that a lie then?” Bane questioned, horrified when *Gorl-darl* opened the pouch and peered inside.

“You may see me as evil but... I do not lie. A Creator works until the Plan is created. I have no need of deceit. I wanted you to bring it here of your own accord, but there were too many questions. There was enough interaction to warrant the effort though.”

“Interaction?”

“Do you not think so? I do enjoy interacting with others to see how they respond.”

“You play mind games,” Bane barked. Tarmon’s unsavoury experience with *him* was no different. Gasping when *Gorl-darl* dipped his slim, bony hand inside the pouch, Bane hoped *he* would not find the *Stone*. Relieved when *his* hand came out empty, at least he had not failed Hanor completely.

“Yes..., I do play games, and I did enquire after your Leader - Tarmon of Tarden. He is a very interesting character and so was his lady friend in Selmor.”

“It is evil to pry into people’s lives.”

“*Are you not interested in the way people live? Your memory suggests otherwise.*”

Gulping at the idea of his past being known, “You have not seen my past,” he accused, more out of hope than a belief.

“*Did you not spy on your mother and father?*”

Even though true, he had done it in a wild hope of understanding why his parents had rejected him as a son. Irrelevant now, anger simmered, wanting to lash out. Their foe was only a handful of steps away, wondering if he could be quick enough.

“*Good..., I like bravery.*”

Frustrated, forgetting his thoughts could be read, Bane was surprised when *Gorl-darl* held the gilth pouch out to him as if in a gesture of peace. Hidden eyes of the *Master of Evil* concealed *his* intent. Daring to step forward, Bane halted when the pouch started smoking. Sparking alight as if set on fire, the pouch started sizzling as streams of red, white and purple lights shot out in different directions. Glowing in a fiery white light, to his horror, the pouch began melting.

“No...!” Bane yelled, daring another step.

Forced back by the searing heat, the bag disintegrated. Fearing the *Heart of Tarkon* would be forever lost, Bane protected his eyes from the glare. *Gorl-darl’s* hand was aglow but *he* showed no signs of pain. Astounded when catching a glimpse of *his* face, Bane could not believe the cold, calculating gaze from beneath that heavy hood. Pale skinned, deep-set eyes stared at him before disappearing into the darkness of *his* hood when the light went out. Concerns for the lost pouch were replaced by this new revelation.

“You are... so... young,” Bane faltered. “You are not much older... than me!”

Strained in silence, coming to terms with what was now known, how was it possible? As if retaliating, a biting chill entered Bane’s body and wrapped around his heart. Convinced *Gorl-darl* was clutching it with an invisible hand, Bane froze, helpless against such penetrating powers. Was this the end?

Staring down and across at the *Mist*, Hanor’s inadequacy was heightening. Switching off to the discussions nearby going nowhere, he could only worry about Bane and what he must be going through. The *Mist* showed no signs of where his friend was. Emanating a sense of isolation and death, it was painful being so close.

Churning over what could be done, without the *Stone of Tarkon*, to enter would be no different than any other would-be rescuer. Hardly brave, but sitting here was tearing him apart. Watched closely by the others in case he did something rash, the longer he waited, the stronger the desires to act were. Mulling over what to do, time was running out. Presuming *Gorl-darl* would dispose of Bane once he had the pouch, why was Brandor and the others not doing anything?

Wrestling as the moments ticked by, ‘*Where had the bravery of yester-turn gone*’, he reasoned, trying to perk up. Bane needed help now not later. Enough to stall a whirling mind, he made his mind up.

Without looking to see who was watching, Hanor got up and just ran for the gap between the two sizable boulders acting like mute sentries to the *Mist*. Bursting from the muttering ranks, Brandor ordered the others to catch him but it was too late. Running hard, disquiet swept along the hilltop at what he was doing but he did not care. Darting

past the two rocks, people were chasing but not gaining. No time for apologies, he ran full speed into the *Cloud*, the orange torchlight behind blacking out. A biting chill cut at his flesh. All seemed unnaturally quiet and still.

Stopping short of the *Mist*, Hallen and Raldama cringed at where their two young counterparts had gone. Kifter and Tarmon arrived with the others from their group. Time was short, so the Hite reached out to test the *Mist*. Otherworldly groans vibrated the ground, a small patch of the *Black Vapour* mirroring his actions. Stretching to meet his hand, he snapped back, dismayed at what it was. A shiver ran through him, preferring an enemy of the physical sort. Concentrating on the dangers to Hanor to overcome the fear, he forced his hand through the protruding patch into the *Mist*. About to step inside, a great force gripped his arm. Panicking, he tried yanking it out.

“Something has got me!” he grimaced, digging heels into the damp earth. Leaning back and heaving hard, the biting grip tightened like a jaw around its prey. “This is serious!” he called, Raldama and the others grabbing hold.

Grunts turned to hollers, a fierce pain scorching Hallen like a freezing fire, numbing his trapped hand. Others came to help. Managing a couple of steps back, the whole side of the *Mist* bulged as if a hideous creature was on the other side. A loud growl rumbling from within confirmed there was. Hauling him back towards it, the force was too strong. Desperate, the seven holding him risked being pulled in too.

A yellow streak of lightening sizzled above their heads, hitting the *Mist* from the Vale’s rim. Another with a light blue hue matched the first. Suffering a great hurt, the creature behind the veil roared at the Hisian-set’s powers. More streaks of light struck the *Mist*, hitting back against this invasion. Expecting to lose his arm, Hallen nearly fainted when it was finally released. Sprawling back into a heap, blisters were quick to form on his hand.

Calling for more power, Brandor wanted to see an end to this evil, the ensuing lightshow as impressive as it was fierce. Lighting up everything except the *Mist*, their fiery powers were absorbed into *its* depths as if irrelevant.

Moving his fingers to get the blood circulating, Hallen jumped when the *Veil* expanded. “Kifter..., did you see that?”

Blazing multicoloured streaks of light kept striking the *Cloud*, the Fife shaken when the *Mist* moved towards them. “I did,” he said, fearing *it* might overwhelm them. Those nearby also witnessed the expansion. Only the Dai-lamen and Masters on the hill seemed oblivious to *its* growth.

“Brandor, stop! *It* is getting bigger,” Tarmon ordered, signalling for them to halt. Fiery lights stopping, they waited for the next expansion but none came. Relieved, everyone stepped back, aggrieved that Hanor and Bane were still inside.

Slowing after entering, the blackness and silence unnerved Hanor. Without stars or silvery moons to light his way, he did not dally, walking to where he concluded the middle should be. Expecting to arrive at the centre, he was baffled when no signs of it appeared. The *Mist* had not looked that big. Certain he should have been out the other side by now, this *Mist* seemed far from ordinary, the natural laws of time and space not functioning here as it should.

Rumbles of thunder above stalled his progress, stopping to investigate the cause. Unable to see anything, half-expecting the ground to shake like it had at Mandurin, as soon as he thought it the earth juddered as if responding to that expectation. Trying to stay calm and hold his nerve, the ground settled again. Wondering if Bane was lost in here, a body brushed by alerting him to someone close. “Bane...!” he tried, cautious of calling too loud. Responding to that cry, the body brushed in front again. Grabbing at thin air, “Bane..., is that you?” Considering if this bleak, timeless place may have condemned his friend to blindness, he followed where he thought Bane had gone, forgetting his original plan to keep straight. “Bane...!” he called again, trying louder this time. Unable to see anything, there seemed to be no end to this place. Frustrated when not finding his friend, he slowed, losing track of where he was.

Searching for anything vaguely visible in the dark, fears leapt ahead of him, a pitch-black silhouette appearing as a result. Small at first, it was difficult to tell how big it was or how far away. Praying it was not a huge monster, the shape grew in response to that loose fear. Desperate to stay composed, he noticed the link between fearful thoughts and what was appearing around him. Testing that theory, the huge *shadow* started bearing down on his position. Trying to convince himself that it was a reflection of his fears, Hanor closed his eyes but stood his ground. To run would merely add to *its* power. Focusing on the smooth beats of his heart instead, the deadly chill of the phantom passed right through him. Fading and returning to *its* own dark Realm, he opened his eyes once the icy thing had gone. Nothing was visible.

Hurting that Bane could be lost in here, in tune to those worries, a faint call was that of his lost companion. Wanting to believe it was him, “Bane...!” he yelled, waiting for an answer. Another faint call pinged through the darkness. Determined to find him, if mistaken, it was a price he was willing to pay. A few careful steps increased in speed, the urgency to help Bane magnifying. Another call came but it was no nearer. Running faster, concerns about the direction were forgotten, focusing only on his drifting friend. “Bane...! Where are you?”

Angry when further calls were still distant, convinced they should be getting closer, he did not want to believe it was self-induced. A final cry came and he had little choice but to accept the truth. The only way Bane could remain at such a distance was if he was running away from him.

Cursing at the surrounding *Mist*, now he was lost. “Fool...!” he chided at the blunder. This place was unbelievable. From outside, *it* looked no bigger than a regular dwelling, but inside, there was no end. There had to be another way. An urge to sit came so he sat cross-legged, pulses of trepidation churning at his vulnerable position. If something were to come, he would struggle to get up in time to escape.

Annoyed, that thought would draw something scary to him. Not having to wait long, rasping sounds like a boot scraping across loose gravel drew close. Shutting his eyes, trying to focus on his heart, the noise grew louder. Whatever was there sniffed the air as if preparing to attack. Compulsions to open his eyes were as strong as the impulse to run. Gaining courage that he had nothing to fear, he remained seated, hoping it was unreal like the *shadow* earlier. “Concentrate you fool!”

A flash of insight helped him understand that he had to see through the illusion energising this Lower World. Grim thought-forms reigned here and he had to lift his

mind out of the darkness. Fearful minds were keeping this domain alive. As real as it appeared, he had to overcome his fears if he was to overcome this soulless place.

Clasping his chest, Bane lurched to the left and stumbled to the ground. Shooting pains coursing through him were like needles of ice. Difficult to breathe, it felt as if *Gorl-darl* was trying to steal away his very soul.

“Why... are you... doing this?” he scowled, trying to sit up. *Gorl-darl* had turned his back on him, the hard rock cold like his captor.

“I said to you before that you must overcome your fears. I am not the one generating your pain, you are.”

“How can it be me?” Bane’s reaction was met with another vicious jab, this time on the left side.

“Your fear of me has created this illness that you now see as pain.”

“Illness!” he coughed, expecting blood on his lips. “This is not an illness, this is torture.”

“So it appears to you,” Gorl-darl said, his back still turned. “By convincing yourself it is an invading illness, you do not have to consider the fact that it is because of your poor state of mind. By denying illnesses are a result of your own weakness, your feeble egos are not bruised by that truth.”

“This is not because of me... but you,” Bane accused, lurching again in pain. “See...! I speak the truth and you punish me for it.”

“So your denial continues. You can stop that pain at any time, but only if you are willing to see the truth behind its cause. It is the same with most illnesses.”

“You are talking nonsense.”

“If what I say is untrue..., then watch how your body reacts to this.”

Gorl-darl turned, holding something in his pale bony hand. After destroying the gilth pouch, Bane felt a rush of sickness whirl when shown the black shiny pebble that he knew to be the *Heart of Tarkon*. Cramps in his stomach followed, forcing him into a ball, the pain severe.

“And now those fears have manifested in your stomach.”

The power of *Gorl-darl*’s thoughts were potent, filling Bane’s weak mind. Ashamed at what he had done, bringing that pouch here revealed the depth of his own selfishness. Betraying Hanor, none of the others would ever forgive him, especially Hayla. Relieved when the pain in his stomach lessened, he was not expecting any pity from the enemy.

“You still think I am inflicting that pain on you?”

Desperate not to lose himself to failure again, Bane was not falling for *his* lies. Hoping for inspiration to do something courageous, he tried standing but could not. Even though the pains in his chest and stomach had eased, his legs were numb. Attempting to get up, his lower half would not move.

“What...!” he stammered, reaching down to his legs. They felt like wood! Rubbing and then banging them with his fists, they stretched out in front as though they belonged to someone else. “This is not funny!” he said, glaring up at his foe. “What have you done to me? Why... can I not... move or feel my legs?”

“I have already told you but you do not believe me. That is your error... not mine.”

“You are not making sense.” Bane was getting frightened. “This is not because of me!”

“Is it not? Did I not say watch your feelings once you saw this?”

Holding out the *Stone of Tarkon*, Bane could not accept what he was implying. “You are doing this, not me! You have paralysed me, make me walk again!”

“You do not realise how powerful your fears are, especially if you permit them to take control of your life. I have already told you this, and now you have seen the proof.”

“Why has it not happened before then?” Bane spat, trying to keep the tears at bay. Pinching and lifting his legs, they were lifeless. “This is impossible.”

“What do you think this Mist is?”

Bane stopped blubbing for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“What gives it life?”

“You do.”

“I do not sustain it, Bane of Manson. You do.”

A pocket of truth amongst the fear, Bane still could not piece together what he was being told. What was this all about?

“This exists because of your selfishness and greed, your hate and your destructive ways. Not just you Bane, but everyone. It belongs to all of you because you have all contributed to its formation.”

“Why is it here then? It is evil like you are evil.”

Laughing, *Gorl-darl* found his mood simple but entertaining. *“Do you know what you become when you are greedy or selfish? You become this Mist. When you hate, this Mist grows. When you seek to kill... this Mist benefits.”*

“How has it come to be here then?”

“The boundary separating the two Realms has narrowed enough for it to cross. Selfishness here has reached such a level it punched a hole through from its own Realm. Now it seeks to consume this place; the Realm of its Creators.”

Covering his face, these concepts were too complex for Bane. Sensing truth to it, his extraordinary interactions with *Gorl-darl* had opened up a finer level of understanding between them. Due to that connection, he could detect any deception, just like *Gorl-darl* could when reading his own inadequate mind.

“That is good reasoning.”

“But... you are the one invading The Freelands, causing so much pain and death. How can you say we are the ones who have created this *Mist*?”

“I have revealed to you my plans, but you see war as a terrible evil that must be avoided at any cost. But when the people of The Freelands live so selfishly, it is only right that it should burn to make space for a new, dignified place to live. A place where there is no complacency and sluggishness, where there is a dynamic commitment to life and each other. Wars are necessary to bring about change. Pain becomes so acute that a shift in awareness alters people enough to start caring for each other. Look at the Nations that have joined to fight me. Have they not put aside their differences to defend this world?”

“You make it sound as though you are trying to save us from ourselves, but I find that hard to believe. You do not strike me as someone who cares.”

“My heart cares not for the present occupiers of this land but those in the future.”

“That is why you are slaughtering us now.” Bane stopped his protest, feeling sensations in his legs.

“Good, you are gaining courage.”

“My legs have nothing to do with courage,” Bane said, insulted by the suggestion.

“That is for you to examine and decide for yourself.”

“I have already decided and reject it flat.”

“That is to be expected. When we are angry, we do not think straight.”

Doubting he would get out of this alive anyway, Bane said whatever came to mind. “You expect me to believe all this when you are behind this invasion? You have killed thousands and destroyed cities. There is no justifying the suffering. If you had not invaded, Hanor would not have needed to get that *Stone* and the *Pillars of Life*. You have tricked me into bringing you the *Stone* to stop Hanor using *it* against you. I am surprised you can hold *it* considering *it* burnt one of your *Nyshifters*. I am no fool, your plan is impossible to achieve.”

“Have you finished?”

Wanting to say more but Bane saw it as pointless. His enemy was deluded and could not see reason.

“Do you believe fear is what lies behind me obtaining this?” he said, holding the *Stone*.

Daring to look, Bane’s legs were gaining in strength and feeling, still refusing to accept it had anything to do with him. Shrugging to the question, he wondered if it might be better to sit this out until he was done away with.

“And you believe I am scared of your friend Hanor using it on me? That is very interesting considering he is right behind you.”

Not about to be toyed with, only when the *Mist* drew back did Bane look. Amazed at how it was possible, Hanor came into view a few strides from where he sat. A trick like when trapped inside the *Mist*, he was having none of it. “Like I said, I am no fool.”

Chapter 27 : Planetary Dweller

Guarding against the *darkness* getting inside his mind, Hanor managed to focus on the gentle pulses of his heart instead of the invisible creature nearby. Still circling him, he knew it was a product of his own sensitive mind, a realisation necessary to shatter the illusion. Scraping the ground to reinforce *its* realism, it was from the Lower Realms where fears exist as basic thought forms. If accepting *it* to be real, then just like any nightmare, he would be vulnerable to *its* power.

Crunching sounds continued, encircling his seated position. Acting as if *it* knew what was at stake, *it* growled believing itself to be real and with great power. Not realising *it* had materialised because of him, he was also *its* doom. Gentle rhythms of his heart were Hanor's lifeline. The stronger his focus, the more detached he became. Fear was a natural part of life. An important ingredient for character building, it was why evil reigned periodically. Through trials, people had to overcome its bitter coldness. Illuminating his mind, the beast faded until it was gone for good.

Trickles of light started to lift the detached state he was in. As if climbing into a wagon, he felt the heavy presence of his body and the pounding of a relieved heart. Gone was the utter blackness, replaced by a subdued half-light that was all about him. Ensuring he was not dreaming, illusions were still likely. Surprised to find two people in front, this was a time for courage.

"Send it away," Bane ordered, refusing to look again until *Gorl-darl* had. The illusion of Hanor now had its eyes open and was looking around. "Very good," Bane mocked. "Do you expect me to believe that is really Hanor?"

"Bane...?" Hanor said, as if emerging from a fog. "Is... that you?"

The impostor stood and started towards him, Bane fuming at this sick joke. "This is not real, get rid of it." When the figure stopped, Bane risked a closer look, impressed by the illusion. An exact replica of Hanor, but why was it so intrigued by *Gorl-darl*?

"Are you okay?" the figure asked, catching Bane by surprise.

Just another deception, he started laughing. "This is convincing," Bane said, turning to *Gorl-darl*. Surprised the *Stone* was no longer on display, the *master of evil's* manner had changed too as if hesitant or respectful even. "What is...?" Bane said, but stalled. "This is not...?" Whirling, Bane's heart leapt, wanting to believe the impossible. Wary that it might still be a trap, "Hanor...?"

The Heir of Manson looked away from the cloaked figure. "Are you all right?" he asked, edging over.

Like a returning blow, Bane went to get up but struggled because of his deadened legs. "I cannot walk, *he* has paralysed me."

Crouching, Hanor was hesitant about the illusionary aspect of this place, but the glimmer in Bane's gaze meant he had found his friend at last. "What has *he* done?"

"I do not know," Bane replied, trying to get up again. "*He* thinks I have created this. *He* is trying to poison my mind. This *Mist* is evil just like *him*." Wanting to cry at what he had done to Hanor, he could never forgive himself. "I do not know... what to say," he said, sombre and ashamed. How could he tell him *Gorl-darl* had the *Heart of Tarkon*. "I am sorry." Since first setting out from Manson, Bane had been nothing but a passionate fool. Failing repeatedly, this latest dilemma was the worst of them all.

Unsurprised Bane did not have the gilth pouch, Hanor was just relieved to have found him, compassionate at what he must have been through. Whatever reason he had for doing it could not come between them now. Trusting their journey was to end here, Hanor took a few beats to savour the moment. *Gorl-darl* was watching them, but Hanor did not care when hugging his friend. “We all make mistakes.” Rising from his sobbing companion, Hanor waited for the hooded figure to speak.

Gorl-darl pulled a hand from behind his back and opened it, revealing the *Stone*. “*Is this what you are looking for?*”

Words forming in his mind alarmed Hanor at first. Imposing yet impressive, tales about *Gorl-darl* now seemed remote as if talking about someone else. Wondering why the black *Stone* in the palm of *his* pale bony hand had not blazed yet, Hanor sought a way out of this. “*It is not for someone like you to use,*” Hanor challenged, talking loud so Bane could hear. “*What do you want with it?*”

“*What makes you think I want it?*”

“*So I cannot use it.*”

“*Do you think I am ignorant of the Powers behind this Stone?*”

Not used to communicating mentally, Hanor kept guard about what he was thinking. “*That light would scorch you if it were to rise.*”

Laughing as though the idea was preposterous, “*Why would the light want to burn me?*”

“*Light dispels darkness. Has not your heart turned bad?*”

“*You speak like Bane, but all is not as it appears. Evil is in the eye of the beholder, but who owns the eye? Do you think I am frightened of you having this?*” He held up the lifeless *Stone*.

“*Why trick Bane into bringing it to you?*”

“*He will try to fill you with his lies,*” Bane warned through watery eyes.

“*Perhaps I have used this as bait.*”

“*What do you mean?*” Hanor was taken aback.

“*I wanted YOU not the Stone?*”

Confused, Hanor could see no reason for it. “*Why..., I am not much use to you?*”

Cackles of mirth startled both young men.

“*He is mad, do not pay attention to him,*” Bane warned, trying to get his legs moving. No good just wallowing in his failings, if he could stand and do what was right for once, then he just might salvage some self-respect.

“*The Freelands are to be cleansed of its filth and you are part of that cleansing process.*”

“*Cleansing...! I do not understand.*”

“*He says this war is about killing greedy and lazy people so his perfect world can replace it,*” Bane said. Each outburst of courage increased the feelings in his legs. Refusing to accept it had anything to do with his fears, he just wanted to fight for their freedom.

“*What has that got to do with me?*” Hanor asked. Unable to see *Gorl-darl's* features, the intensity of *his* gaze could still be felt.

“*Shall we find out?*”

Stretching *his* arms into the air, velvety sleeves rolled back revealing *Gorl-darl's* white skeletal arms. Such a slight frame wielding so much power was incredible. Using *his* vocals for the first time, a low rumble of strange sounds vibrated, charging the

atmosphere with *his* potent will. Unsure what *Gorl-darl* was doing, Hanor and Bane were tempted to make their escape through the *Mist*.

Between the Lower Realm of Darkness and the upper one called The Freelands, the Planetary Dweller heard the call. Using Darbin Forest as a portal, vibrations of The Freelands had slowed enough for it to move here for significant periods, the war ensuring that. Its servant had done well. Generating the right conditions for Dark Energy to materialise at The Centre Vale, it would be sufficient for what it intended. Rising like a vaporous cloud, the Dweller left the wood, creatures cowering at the scale of its evil.

“The enemy is in no hurry to attack,” Tarmon said to Brandor and High-tard Polon, indicating the mass of creatures on the opposite side of the Vale.

Huffing at what was going on here, Brandor was torn. Wanting to attack the *Cloud* to save Hanor, but *its* expansion earlier prevented such a fiery response. Half a short-turn since his disappearance, an attack would mean triggering an all out war, the commotion causing problems for his *Wall of Power*. Approaching a sustainable point in *its* mental construction, the calmer the conditions, the easier it would be for the six to succeed. High-hite Nabban was keen for war, but the *Wall* could save countless lives. Frustrated, Sef - one of the Masters of Tardoc approached through the wide band of defenders. Sharn and Hader were with him.

“Our next attempt should be sustainable,” Sef promised the Dai-laman, excited at another development. “The Masters at Grovan have established the male to female formation too. Their mental projection is weak but that will get stronger in due time.” “That is really encouraging,” an excited Brandor said, the timing critical. “Our mental link with Tardoc and Tarden has stabilised,” Sef explained, Hader and Sharn still beaming from the undertaking. “Rovot is getting stronger too.” “Your work is commendable,” High-tard Polon praised, pleased for them even though he did not fully understand what they were doing.

About to make his way back to the female Masters Crissy, Meth and Wenda, Sef looked west, a chill alarming him. Sensitive to the environment, he shivered at an approaching danger.

“What is it?” Brandor asked, presuming *Nyshifters* were the cause.

“I sense something too,” Hader said, Sharn agreeing.

“What is...,” not finishing the question, Sef’s face contorted in horror. Gasping for breath as though it were his last, a biting cold shook his nerve. Hader and Sharn started trembling, words replaced by mumbles of terror. Disturbed, Brandor searched the night sky, Whis, Bronn and the others doing the same. Echoes of despair whispered in on the breeze, the Dai-lamen now detecting the terrible *evil*.

“I can feel *it!*” Brandor decreed, age-old fears rising as if in twisted greeting to the advancing mass. Mirroring the *Mist* down to their right, but far more concentrated, they had little time to act as icy tentacles of *evil* were felt long before *it* arrived. Terror juddered the men of power into submission.

“What can you detect?” Tarmon asked, dismayed to see Brandor and his companions cower.

“Have they gone mad?” Hallen shouted, the Dai-lamen buckling like trees succumbing to an overbearing squall. Pressing hands upon tight chests, what was going on?

“What do you make of it, Kifter?” the Tardanian asked, Bronn trembling beside him.

“They recoil from something in the sky, but what I cannot tell,” the Fife said, unable to see anything.

Groans of anguish rumbled between grated teeth, Tarmon going to Brandor’s side. The lost *Souls* of *Tarkons Tomb* sprang to mind. “What do you see?” he asked, the Dai-laman squatting like a quivering animal. In the orange torchlight, his old friend’s eyes were closed as if concentrating, sweat pouring.

“Evil... beyond reckoning,” Brandor hissed, struggling to talk, veins pulsing his temples.

“Never felt such malice... and hate before!”

“What evil?” Not detecting anything, Tarmon shrugged at Raldama and Casvern Tarn.

Focusing on that inner point of stillness in his heart, the gateway to the *Sacred* and deeper understandings, it was all Brandor could do. But no help came and no revelation revealed what it was they could detect. Filling his mind and body, the sheer volume of *evil* seemed to be everywhere. Courage faltered, *its* daunting presence overpowering.

“*It* is... above us,” Brandor grimaced, fears magnifying a hundred fold. Whatever *it* was, *it* knew not love or light. A consuming energy gorging on everything, *its* biting coldness seemed to be inside him.

Tarmon did not know what to make of it. Sef - the Tardocian Master was now curled up into a ball on the ground. “What can we do to help?”

Brandor shook his head. “You cannot do... anything.” Shivering as if the very air was stained by evil, “*It*... is the opposite of... the *Sacred*.” Holding his head with both hands for protection, there was no end to *its* power.

“Why do we not sense *it*?”

“Your consciousness... is not ready to face such... *evil*.”

“Ready...? I do not understand.”

Hovering over their group for a short time, the *entity* descended towards the black *Mist*, Brandor picturing it in his mind’s eye. Settling on the *Cloud* like a mighty Fliryn on a nest, *it* waited before submerging, the terror easing when *it* disappeared.

Slumping to the ground, Brandor’s muscles relaxed, at last free. His companions slouched where they were, undone. Unsettling, murmurs from some onlookers were dismissive, the commotion irrational, but most just stared, worried at its implications. The Dai-lamen and the Master Sef were in no shape to explain themselves.

“This is not good,” Caldor - Master of Tarden’s Forces said, disliking it.

“The *Darkness* grows yet deeper,” High-tard Polon agreed.

Atmosphere electrifying, Hanor and Bane knew not what the bizarre sounds *Gorl-darl* was chanting meant but they could feel the power. Caught by indecision, the temptation to enter the *Mist* was strong but Bane could still not walk.

“I am... sorry,” Bane said, finding the nerve to apologise for what he had done. Even in his helpless state he did not deserve forgiveness.

Drawn from the strange invocations of their host, Hanor sighed, affectionate for his friend. Awful as this predicament was, the important thing was that they were together. Managing a smile, Hanor was more interested in finding a way out of this, certain their doom was not yet imminent.

Recalling what *Gorl-darl* had told him, Bane tugged on Hanor's overcoat, motioning for his friend to crouch. Ensuring their enemy was not paying attention, "I forgot to say, the fifth *Pillar of Life* is here!" he said, pleased to be of use again.

"The fifth *Pillar*?"

"Yes..., beneath us," Bane replied, unsure what good it could do them now. "*He* said *it* was, and I know *He* was telling me the truth because *he* made sure I knew."

Unexpected news, Hanor searched his heart for a connection but could not feel anything. Hoping to detect *it* under this bed of rock like he had at Grovan, he crouched to the ground as though dropping something. Pleading for his heart to react, when lying on his stomach, he concluded it was not to be. "Are you sure *he* did not trick you?" he asked. There was only so much shuffling on his stomach he was willing to do. Bane looked hurt at not being trusted again, but after the gilth pouch incident, Hanor was not falling for it. Not the time or place to get moody, "Yes, I am sure. *It* is here somewhere," Bane whispered, the bumpy stone he was sitting on showing no clues. "Perhaps you can try different areas while *he* is doing *his* thing."

Checking the robed figure on the other side of the clearing, Hanor had little choice but to try. Daring a step, he gazed up and around the imprisoning *Mist* as if inspecting a new building. Moving left, he could not afford to loiter. Ambling as though comfortable being here, he covered the area quite quickly but without luck. Stopping when the chanting ceased, he hurried back to Bane as if innocent of any wrongdoing.

"*Have you finished?*"

Powerful words filled both paltry minds, rooting the two boys rigid. Disappointed at not finding the *Pillar*, Hanor was still curious of *Gorl-darl*. Expecting a callous monster, instead *he* seemed quite respectful and tolerant. Shame *his* twisted perception was the cause of great suffering, Hanor still could not understand why they were here. "What do you want with us?"

"*It is fitting that you should know the whereabouts of the fifth Pillar of Life, as I would like to see it for myself. But I need to understand a few details first.*"

Unsurprised, *Gorl-darl* was not interested in Hanor, *he* was just after the *Pillar*. "What do you want to know?"

"*Contrary to what Bane or any of the Hisian-set may have you think, my growth in power is due to principles that are available to all and not because of an insane desire to destroy everything. Gaining knowledge about how life functions and the forces involved is not evil. You have had some experience of such powers, so should I deem you evil too? Bane has shared my vision for this world, and I would like to invite you to help build that future creation so it may blossom rather than decay like this present one.*"

"How can I make a difference? I do not have the knowledge you do."

"*Share with me what you have discovered about the Planetary Energy Centres, for they are the creative forces that have enabled life to exist on this planet in the first place.*"

"I do not think anything I say will be of use to you. When I draw near to each *Pillar*, it is like the Universe opens up to me as though it were mine to have and to experience."

"*Very good, those words hold great weight for me. Your statement suggests what I endeavour to do is permissible when viewed from a higher perspective.*"

"Are you concerned by what the *Sacred* think about your actions then?"

Laughing at the idea, *"I do not fear the Forces of Light. Their restrictions are not my restrictions. They know what I have envisioned has as much right to be realised as their own vision for this world."*

"I know who I would trust. Your way is cruel."

"There is One who is coming who would disagree with you. I am indebted to it, for when I was low of spirit, it came and gave me sustenance and a vision of the future. That future has now arrived just as we planned. Helping me where no other would, including those you call the Sacred, my return to The Freelands has given me great pleasure to witness its dramatic finale."

"Finale...! The war is not over yet," Hanor defended.

"Success here will leave The Freelands open for my work to continue."

"To be slaughtered you mean," Bane growled, surprised when more sensations tingled through his numb legs.

"Are you going to show me where the fifth *Pillar of Life* is then?" Hanor tried.

"In due time," Gorg-darl said, considering another possibility. Looking down at the Stone of Tarkon, he turned it over. "I am intrigued by this and would like to understand the energies involved."

"The Light of that Stone is a higher grade of energy than the forces used by people like you. It is a power that permeates life and cannot be exploited by dark hearts. People move between darkness and light, but light always dominates and uses the dark to know itself."

Respecting the points made, *Gorg-darl* was fascinated by him. *"You speak with great wisdom. However, different perceptions can interpret that Light differently. I am not as far away from the Light as you presume. I create and build like we are born to do. My methods are not as callous as you might deem them to be."*

"I can only judge what I see. Your objective is admirable but your methods are not. You cannot force people to live in harmony, that must rise from within them. You seek to change the outer circumstances, but that will fail if the inner is not changed first."

"When the crop fails it needs to be burned."

"Why do you think life has failed here in The Freelands? Are you sure your viewpoint has not been marred by your sufferings of the deep past? I have heard the tales. Maybe the failure you see around you is a reflection of your own shortfalls."

Bane shrunk back, his friend touching a nerve. Hanor however, remained steadfast, determined to say it as it was. The atmosphere grew tense.

Composed, *Gorg-darl's* reply was even. *"I learn from the past to move forward into the future. I plan and build that which I envision. The complacency I see in this Realm is vile. I seek order and harmony that this world will not know in its present direction. Discipline and a respect of life is lacking. I am determined to heal this world."*

"At the expense of free will?"

"Sometimes we have to sacrifice now to attain that which is currently beyond us. This," he said, holding out the Stone. *"Represents a power and knowledge that all should harness and understand. You say a dark heart cannot know such powers, but I say you are wrong. When the new world is born, where peace and order reign, then why should such powers be out of our reach?"*

"Because such powers contain a love that is unconditional, and what you are enforcing is the opposite of that love. Your new world will have forced conditions, and people will

want to break through those conditions. The selfishness you see should not be cut from the hearts of people, but understood and the narrow way of goodness taught.”

Gorl-darl started laughing. “*This is where my greater vision separates us. When people are unwilling to be taught, those Higher Powers you fondly speak of will do whatever it takes to stimulate them. Even if it means war.*”

“You are missing my point. Just as a child needs stimulating to do things that will benefit them in the long term, so do people. Life should be exciting, so we need wise leadership not an abusive hand that declares it knows best.”

“Life is exciting... but we cannot all be leaders.”

“Evolution leads each one of us to leadership, but will we lead by force or by loving guidance?”

Gorl-darl chuckled at this exchange. “*You are very intriguing, yet I know you will not be persuaded. Unfortunately, our discussion must end as my Guide has arrived.*”

Expecting someone to walk out from the misty curtain of evil, but no one did. Wanting to talk more, trusting their freedom would come through sound reasoning, but that chance ended. Surprised by the traces of tension in their host, Hanor wondered why.

“*My Guide does not have the restrictions of a physical body,*” *Gorl-darl* explained. Staring up at the ceiling of this *Mist*, “*You will get along perfectly.*”

Chapter 28 : Pale Justice

Reservations about getting involved with the supernatural appeared well-founded after what everyone had just witnessed. Tarmon was concerned for the Dai-lamen, Brandor especially. The Master Sef from Tardoc had gone to see how the three female Masters were coping, leaving many to question what had transpired.

“Care to explain what that was all about?” Hallen prompted, believing Brandor had recovered enough to talk.

Wiping his face as if that *evil* had stained it, Brandor was shattered, his body tingling from the encounter.

“Take your time,” Tarmon said, displeased by the Hite’s impatience.

“It is only right that I should speak,” Brandor said, peering cagily down and across at the black *Mist*. The *entity* had gone, disappearing into the *Cloud*. Reinforcing earlier insights that the Lower Realms were attempting to cross over into this upper one, Hanor and Bane’s survival now looked bleak.

“What are their chances now?” Hayla asked, thinking along the same lines. When that hideous monster had nearly taken Hallen shortly after Hanor had entered, after watching the Hisian-set react as they just did, how could she believe they might still be alive?

“There is always hope,” Tarmon said, sensitive to her concerns.

Explaining the little he knew about the new arrival in their midst, Brandor talked about the Lower Realms where evil ruled and its subsequent invasion of this one. Even Hallen listened to what he had to say. “That *entity* has changed everything,” the Dai-laman finished, drinking some water handed to him by Polon.

Before questions could be asked, a piercing shriek split the low din of thousands, everyone familiar with that chilling cry. Others of a similar pitch answered the first from differing parts of the night sky. Responding to the arrival of *Nyshifters*, a loud roar from the far embankment was deafening. Hesitant defenders froze, the fearsome creatures never failing to cut at the bravest of folk. At last gathering here at The Centre Vale, *their* timing could not have been worse.

“There are seven,” Kifter counted against the hazy backdrop of a silver moon.

One arrived and swooped over their heads along the main body of defenders, warning of what was to come. Ducking and quaking in muddied boots, no one ran. Fearful of being picked off, as one large body they had a better chance of surviving.

“What do you propose, Brandor?” Hallen quipped, preferring these beasts than the invisible one inside that *Mist* earlier.

Too many to protect, Brandor’s prime concern was the six who could build his *Wall of Power*. “Hader..., Sharn!” Brandor called. “Get back to your group and get that *Wall* up. Bronn and Sorlam, protect them. Whis, we must be accurate when *they* pass again.”

“*They* are collecting at the far end,” Kifter noted, the *Nyshifters* hovering at the Hitorian side of their defence line. “*They* are watching something.”

“Maybe more arrivals from Mandurin?” Casvern Tarn said, concerned his old friend Aider Nash was fleeing under *their* lethal gaze.

“*They* have definitely seen something,” Tarmon agreed.

Large fire-torches lit up the *Nyshifters*’ position, but the focus of *their* evil intent remained out of view by the numbers populating the undulating hillside.

“Another one is coming up from the south,” Kifter decreed.

The flapping shadow of a deadly creature could just be seen, acting as though *it* was toying with its prey. Dropping to the ground before climbing again, *it* screeched as if triumphant. More deadly creatures joined the attack, frenzied and bloodthirsty.

Kifter leapt on to Hallen’s shoulders to gain a better vantage point.

“What do you see?” Greema asked.

“There is something moving but the lay of the land is against us.” Dropping when a *Nyshifter* swooped out towards them, the creature arced skywards before returning to the point of attack. “I hold little hope for their survival.”

Summoning fiery white energies, Brandor sent the ball of light in that direction to aid whoever was fleeing. Igniting when reaching that area, cries from the Hitorians resulted as the *Nyshifters*’ target headed around the far end of their defensive line. Shrieks of glee from the black mass of *Gorl-darl*’s forces were sickening, their view of the spectacle better than those near the *Mist*.

“*They* are coming this way,” Kifter said, the creatures heading along the shallow valley between the two opposing forces.

Necks straining, people dared to step out onto the sloping embankment to get a better view oblivious to the approaching dangers. Anxious to know what *they* were attacking, nothing could survive this. Dreading what it meant, the *Nyshifters* kept coming.

“What... is it?” Hallen asked, seeing for the first time the animal in peril.

Other defenders groaned at the spectacle.

Climbing the Hite’s shoulders again, Kifter nearly lost his footing, alarmed by the bloodied beast struggling towards them. “This cannot be!”

“What creature is *it*?”

Through a gap, Brandor caught his breath at the horror. A couple of throws of a stone away, his heart lurched. Fire-torches on the hillside cast a grim light across the Vale, reflecting off the Great White Freeloaver as it ran for its life. Blood from deep gashes on it’s back and huge horned head poured. A brutal slaughter, it kept going but its strength was failing. Receiving strike after strike, the Freeloaver grunted, flashing its mighty horn each time a vicious claw tore at it. Deadly and hungry for the kill, diving *Nyshifters* filled the night sky with broad wings and piercing shrills of malice. Swooping in, one landed on its back, proud and defiant. Digging huge claws in, the Freeloaver bucked to unbalance *it*, sending it crashing to the ground. Blood-soaked amongst silvery patches of pale skin, the Freeloaver turned and embedded its horn into the side of the *Nyshifter*. Wailing as if in distorted pleasure, the monster seemed to welcome the pain. Set upon by the others, the Great White Freeloaver lumbered on, its power faltering fast.

Groans of torment moved those on the Vale rim. Too distraught to just stand and witness the slaughter, some ran out with blades flashing, but they did not last long. Anger swept along the line of defenders, but the order to stay their ground was made.

Desperate and forlorn, the animal seemed undaunted by the lifeless *Mist* barring its way. Whimpering with every heaving step, it would not survive this mauling. Only a short distance away, more shrieks rendered the air, the *Nyshifters* determined to kill the enchanted animal before it entered the *Mist*. The lust for blood was evident in every callous strike.

Four Gorls broke ranks to join in with the frenzied attack. Caught up by the nearest two *Nyshifters*, the creatures flew in an arc and back towards the main line of defenders, hurling the pitiful things into the wide band of onlookers. Warning *Gorl-darl's* force to remain obedient, the Freeloaver's death was theirs alone.

In unison with Whis, Brandor sent another ball of light towards the amassing creatures. This time, it blazed and sizzled the air with a fiery white light. Catching the *Nyshifters* unguarded, it was enough to grant the Freeloaver a few careful pants of rest. Not giving up to its injuries, a quiet hush fell across the valley. Swaggering the last few strides to where the heartless *Mist* waited, a final veil for its death, its helpless condition touched many. Wounds too graphic for it to survive, thousands watched it enter the *Cloud*. Fitting that its desperate condition should end out of sight of *Nyshifters*, even though the *Cloud* contained *its* own horrors, the animal would not last long enough to know the difference.

Disheartened, an era ending on this dark cold night, Brandor cursed their enemy. Rarely seen, the enchanted animals had been significant contributors to this Realm called The Freelands and would be missed. Both Freeloavers were now dead, and the diminishing hope that the New Age would be one of freedom saddened him. Taking a last bitter look at the *Mist* before turning away to see how Hader, Sef and the others were doing with that much-needed *Wall of Power*, victorious shrieks from *Nyshifters* high above added to the misery. Too busy basking in *their* success amongst the patchy clouds of a moonlight sky to worry about the heartache of an aged, worn out Dai-laman, this could not end soon enough.

Watchful of *Gorl-darl*, who stood staring at the ceiling to this shadowy space, Hanor and Bane waited, wary of what was to come.

"I... do not like... this," Bane said, still unable to get up.

Hanor could only agree, a nervous shiver heightening his sensitivity. About to question their foe about trying other avenues to fulfil *his* dream, a change in the atmosphere alerted Hanor to a returning menace. Sharp as if the cold season had condensed into this small cocoon, pants of breath added dimension to the sudden freezing conditions. Half-expecting snow to fall, Hanor gasped when the area above shimmered like vapour rising on a blistering turn of the day. Barely visible, a field of energy containing something ominous now dominated the *Mist*.

"Can you see *it*?" Hanor whispered, receiving a whimper in response. Bane's eyes were wide with horror. Alarmed at what *it* could be, layers to Hanor's vision peeled back revealing the hideousness he had seen once before. Fleeing Darbin Forest, this was the *entity* that had been there looking at him. Judders of fear coursed his body. Wanting to shy away and die, terror increased as the intensity of the *presence* drew closer. This time, he had nowhere to run. Shrinking back, his beleaguered mind whirled, the mass of evil surrounding them. Chilling spikes of fear worked inside him, cowering at *its* presence.

Gorl-darl seemed fixated, a student in awe of its Master. Standing at the edge of the open area, the *evil one* had lost that air of confidence, now just as insignificant as the rest of them when compared to *entities* of this scale. Involved without understanding the fullness of what this *thing* was, such malice knew not the sentiments of men. Pity for The Freelands's ancient enemy touched Hanor, disbelieving the naiveté of *Gorl-darl's*

actions. Powered by an incredible intellect, the need for revenge had blinded *him* to the risks. Too late now, there was no turning back.

“Our plan has arrived to its climax,” *Gorl-darl* said, using *his* voice.

Sounding like a young man and not one of ancient seasons, Hanor was most surprised. No immediate reply came, the *essence* above settling. Hanor felt *its* attention fall on him, the dread surrounding his heart tightening. Barely holding it together, a quivering Bane crawled to a bulge of rock for protection at the edge of the clearing. Emitting dark energies, even when shutting his eyes, Hanor could not dispel the fright encapsulating him. Time stood still, nullifying any connections to the outside world. As if a void had gained consciousness and was feeding on life, fear was *its* fodder, the meekness of man the harvest. Drawing people away from their creative potential with darkness and doubt, this was the epitome of evil, emanating the worst traits of every human heart.

Insights came as waves of comprehending help, but the terror would not lift. Inadequate, Hanor shuddered again with nowhere to turn. Composed when mastering the *Mist*, but this *entity* was real and not a figment of his imagination. Observing him, without the *Stone of Tarkon*, Hanor had nothing for protection except that tiny point of *light* vibrating subtly at the centre of his heart. He did not move when a nervous *Gorl-darl* spoke.

“Our vision never took us beyond this moment,” *he* said, again talking aloud. “What will happen...?” The question was abruptly cut short, replaced by shrieks of horror at the insufferable pain in his chest. “Arghh..., what is?” *he* growled through grated teeth.

Astounded, Hanor and Bane could not believe it. Overwhelmed by the *presence*, they had not expected an intruder to invade the dramatic situation. Lifting *Gorl-darl* into the air, their foe was helpless, the mighty horn protruding from his chest jutting and sharp. Touching the pointed object, *he* seemed shocked as if betrayed.

“No...!” *Gorl-darl* cried, the fiery powers of the horn burning inside. Writhing to escape, “No..., no,” *he* screamed, *his* dream of a perfect future slipping from *his* misguided hands.

Lifting the callous figure higher, the Great White Freealoaver was streaked in blood, half-dazed and barely able to stand. Horrendous wounds lining its shoulders and huge sections of its back were grisly. Surviving *Gorl-darl's* *Nyshifters* long enough to reach this chamber, Hanor did not know whether to cry or laugh such was the impact. Slow and gradual, the death of their enemy proved *his* mortality at last.

“Why... have you... let this happen?” *Gorl-darl* grimaced from *his* lofted position. Crying out to the *entity* above, struggles continued before daring to accept the terrible reality of *his* failure. “What... have I done?” *he* called, agonising from another flush of pain. Cursing for not taking measures to prevent this, as soon as *his* treacherous *guide* had arrived, *his* link to the outside world had been briefly severed due the scale of *its* being. That lack of foresight was about to cost *him* everything. Mind swirling as disorientation set in, any strength left was dripping into a large pool of blood on the ground. Gazing across at Hanor, pained by regret, they could have achieved so much together. Gripping the *Heart of Tarkon* as though *it* meant something to which *he* could not understand, a last rasping breath escaped before *Gorl-darl* slumped dead.

Hanor could not think straight, the Great White Freeloaver dropping its head now that its occupant was dead. Slender and limp, *Gorl-darl* slid off the enormous horn, a fitting end to the slayer of the Freeloaver's mate. Blood-soaked, darkening eyes of the animal seemed to recognise Hanor from that short confrontation they had had when the fires in his heart had blazed. Not fearing its presence, this was sad but inevitable.

Dropping to the ground next to *Gorl-darl*, the Great White Freeloaver snorted and laid its bulky head on the cold rock. Blinking periodically, it seemed at peace, unconcerned by the evil *presence* above. Tender, the enchanted creature exhaled for the last time and moved no more.

Shocked by the swift turnaround of events, Hanor and Bane just stared at the corpses, unsure what to do.

"*Their* call has changed," Kifter said, troubled by the lamenting cries of *Nyshifters*. Heads straining, *they* were flying in circles as if directionless and in mourning. No fiery passions directed *their* movements, only a wailing sense of loss. Thousands on the hilltops either side of The Vale just stared, puzzled.

"I am not sure if this is good or bad," Hayla said, the beasts circling without direction.

"There is unease across there too," Greema said, pointing towards the other embankment. Beyond the still dominant *Mist*, movement suggested something was afoot.

"It seems High-hite Nabban may get his war after all," Hallen said, holding the hilt of his sword for comfort.

"We must wait for word from Brandor," Tarmon said, glancing behind to where the *Dai-lamen* had gone. "If they are near to completing this *Wall* then we must be patient."

"I do not think those across the way are willing to wait," Hallen said, certain war was pending. *Misshapen* forms through the half-light seemed agitated. Time was running out.

"What do you make of it?" Whis asked, standing guard with his compatriots over the six figures attempting to make that sustainable mental link with Tarden, Tardoc, Grovan and Rovot. The winged creatures' unusual reaction was disconcerting.

"Something has happened," Brorn stated. Familiar with different animal sounds, he sided on caution, not desiring to lift hopes prematurely. "Something significant."

"But is it in our favour?" Sorlam asked, sickened by the nauseating sound.

"I dare not say."

Caught between the wails above and the six seated nearby, Brandor just wanted the *Wall of Power* completed so the vast *entity* waiting in the wings could ensoul and empower *it* for everyone's sake. Judging it was the only way to defeat that *horde* opposite and the enormous *entity* that had descended into the *Mist*, they were not out of this just because of a few wails. "Let us stay focused," he warned, keeping an eye on the six who were mentally tuning into the Masters from each City. The waiting was agonising.

Taking stock of their situation, Hanor and Bane still struggled with the fact *Gorl-darl* lay limp across the way beside the huge Freeloaver. Part of *his* face was showing, revealing the youthful features Bane had seen earlier. Gaunt eyes were the only sign of *his* mature seasons. Half-expecting *him* to get up and declare it was just a trick, numbness prevented a quick response at what to do.

Dreadful and chilling, the evil *essence* still permeated every part of the open space, promising they were far from free. Wanting to succour Bane that they were going to survive this, but there was no way of knowing. Certain the vast *entity* above was examining them, the two dead forms close by were a quick reminder of this *being's* power. Manipulating events, *it* was as clever as *it* was brutal.

Wondering how *it* communicated, a whispering thought entered Hanor's mind. "Maybe *it* does not know how to deal with you." Through the doubts, one thing Hanor was sure of was *Gorl-darl* had talked as though *it* understood what *he* was saying. Trusting *it* was no different now, courage strengthened his resolve.

"What... do you want?" he braved, not expecting much. Glancing nervously behind at Bane, his friend was still lost to the horror of *its* presence, clinging to the boulder for protection. Not even acknowledging he had heard him, Hanor accepted he was on his own to fight this battle. About to try again, he stopped and froze, the vast *entity* shifting *its* position slightly. Rotating as if to get a better view, fears heightened as if responding to the *evil* above. Breathing exercises did not have the desired affect as another bout of dread shuddered through him.

Floating like a suspended liquid, sometimes *it* virtually disappeared only to return more prominently as if breathing. Toying with the idea of what would happen if he and Bane were to make a run for it through the *Mist*, Hanor discarded the possibility, this *entity* existing in such dark conditions. Supposing this chamber was still part of The Freelands, he hoped whatever energies *Gorl-darl* had placed here to maintain it would last. He froze when a commanding voice filled his mind.

"What... is your purpose?"

Checking to see if Bane had heard it, his friend remained as lifeless as the weather-beaten rock he was clinging to. Relieved that *it* could talk, that was soon forgotten when *it* moved again. So overbearing, *it* felt like the misery of the whole world was encompassed within *it*. Dread rose again at what he was doing.

"I..., I seek... peace for The Freelands." Unsure why he said that, Hanor's mind ached from the invisible demands.

"What else do you seek?"

Deducing *it* knew about the *Pillar of Life*, *Gorl-darl* telling Bane *it* was somewhere beneath them, *it* seemed strange to hear such tame enquiries. Detecting that *it* was fascinated by him, the *entity* still seemed distant as if wary of touching a hot flame.

"Who... or what... are you?" he asked, trying to seize control over his faltering destiny. Wanting to run from the smothering fears, he caught the next thought, noticing a pattern. The pockets of fright came in waves, each attempt increasing in intensity as if trying to break through his resolve. Permitting the latest bout to pass, he waited for a reply.

"Do you not know me?"

Supposing *it* meant that frightful encounter by Darbin Forest, "I saw you once before, but I... do not know you."

"You do not understand."

Another pulse of fear shivered through Hanor, charging his body with dark energies from this extraordinary *entity*. Composed, the shuddering stopped. "Should I know you?"

Any answer was lost when the ground suddenly juddered, nearly bowling Hanor over. Squealing nearby, Bane hugged tight the small bulge of rock, burying his head into his arm. Sharp movements underfoot continued, convinced the *entity* was the cause as if instigating the tremors to test him.

More cracking and snapping sounds filled the enclosed space, fierce memories of Mandurin apparent. Shaking like tiny stones in the palm of a juggling hand, violent cracks and swishing sounds were that of cascading mud and rock. Unable to see, his view was obstructed by the motionless *vapour* surrounding them.

Gasping when the floor to their right dropped as if its foundations had given way, stepping back, a golden orange hue ignited from the gaping wound left in its place. Tremors continued, desperate to retain his balance. Down between the hard rock and the *Mist*, a familiar rushing noise was worrying. His trip with the Shavani Folk where that small cavern had collapsed into the river of molten liquid reminded him of the danger. Explaining the rivers of fire were rising, he feared they were about to wash over where they stood.

Another grating sound to his left, more mud and rock slid away, the orange glow increasing. Gulping when the carcass of the Great White Freelover started moving as if dragged by an invisible hand, it dropped down and away from view taking *Gorl-darl's* corpse with it. Putting to rest the lingering fear that *he* could return to life, it was little comfort, the fiery conditions getting worse. Too late when realising *Gorl-darl* still had the *Heart of Tarkon*, devastated, what could he do now without *its* protection? A potent symbol of the unconditional love of the *Sacred*, amongst the furore, insights flashed before him. It was not the *Stone* that mattered, but the purity of the human heart. Divine energies had fired each time he had drawn close to a *Pillar of Life*, but not because of the *Stone* but because of him.

Shocked by the revelation, it was irrelevant now, especially when another section of rock close by slid into the abyss. More stone tumbled leaving a golden rim lining the edge beneath the suspended *Mist*. Turning when Bane squealed, the ground behind his friend dropped leaving him close to the edge. Clinging to the same bulge of rock, tears lined Bane's sodden cheeks, his legs still heavy and incapable of getting up. Urging his friend to move, Hanor's cry was lost amongst the noise and desperation. About to go to Bane's aid, another violent shake of the ground sent him sprawling. Falling flat, he managed to scramble across to his stranded companion.

"Bane..., you must move!" he yelled, but his friend did not shift or acknowledge he had heard. Prising his arms from the rock was futile. Bane was rigid, determined to stay put. More rushing sounds could be heard. The golden band of light now encircled the entire area, leaving only a dark section along the northern edge. Watchful of the *entity*, where was the *Scared* now?

"Get back!" Tarmon hollered to his companions, the ground sliding from under them.

Scrambling away to safety, the many lining the Vale rim feared the whole region was about to collapse. Fretful when reaching a safer spot, large segments of earth kept trembling, buckling and then rolling into narrow chasms now running along the ancient riverbed. Slicing the earth, the shift in the landscape shook the thousands watching.

Ground splitting, a sudden emergence of fiery golden light lit up the area, the scene now as drastic as it was brutal.

“Maybe it will stretch right across the Vale,” Raldama prayed, amazed when another splinter of rock disappeared into the developing ravine below. Heading further back from the rift, their enemy moved too, scrambling over each other to make their escape across the wayside. “I fear Hanor and Bane are no more,” he said, sympathetic to Hayla who was in a tearful state. Putting an arm around her shoulders, the *Mist* seemed unaffected by the crumbling ground beneath it. What could they do to defeat *it*?

Standing well back from the original lip of the vale, now lost to the upheaval, the group did not want to leave. Mesmerised by the awesome powers of nature, it was terrible to behold when lives were being lost.

“The quakes are easing,” Kifter noted, checking the terrain. Most of the surrounding area had been affected. Coarse rock now lay where rich grass had once been. Stretching down towards the large wound in the earth in front, the resultant golden red glare looked inviting compared to the cold darkness of night. Volatile, the area kept rumbling, warning of the power it possessed. Spanning a few hundred paces in either direction, the darkened ground looked as though fire had scorched it.

Satisfied when the rumbles ended, the Fife skittered down the rocky slope towards the gaping ravine cut blatantly across them. Reaching it, the idea of Hanor and Bane stranded somewhere below pushed aside concerns for his own life. Estimating over half the ground underneath the *Mist* had fallen into the fiery lava, he had to believe they were still alive. Running from right to left, the lava flow was a hundred hand-spans below. Shielding his face, the heat was incredible. Scanning the rift for movement, but there was nothing other than steep unforgiving sides. Lighting up the night sky like a golden dawn, it emitted an illusory warmth that nobody could savour. Others braved the conditions, the red river swishing as if no power in the world could stop it.

Catching his breath, when Casvern Tarn, Tarmon and the others stood alongside, Kifter pointed down in front towards the enigmatic object hovering just above the lava flow. They had come so near to success. The fifth and final *Pillar of Life* was achingly close. Tender thoughts for Hanor added to the loss.

Chapter 29 : Dweller's Offer

Exhausted, Hanor glanced up, wary. Shakes in the ground had all but stopped, the resultant quiet abnormal. Only the hissing noise of a fiery river below promised life still went on. Sweating, he wiped his brow. Bane had not moved from his position nearby and was dangerously close to the edge, but it did not seem to bother him. Conscious that the dark energy above had not shifted, the *entity* remained silent but observant.

"What do you want?" Hanor called, defiant. Revelations about the *Stone* and his need to have a pure heart had gone, the desire to hold *it* returning. Annoyed when no answer came, "We are tired and want to leave this place," he tried. Coughing from a dry throat, the heat was stifling.

About to rise to his feet, a chilling wave of fear swept up from within sending a shiver right through Hanor's battered body. Convinced those pulses had an agenda, the *entity* again dominated the proceedings. Pathetic against a *being* so awful in power, hopelessness filtered through to his senses. The opposite of the *Sacred*, it was hard to grasp just how devoid of love this *thing* was.

Seeking a way out, Hanor's courage had to hold firm. Standing, taking stock of what had happened, they were now imprisoned on the large bed of rock. Most of the ground had disappeared leaving them perched on an island surrounded by a band of golden fiery light. All but one side had gone. The *Mist* seeming unaffected by the diminished terrain.

Fatigue hampered Hanor's desire to care, opting to leave Bane where he was whilst seeking sanity amongst the madness. Walking in a slow circle, his head hurt. Considering what *it* had said prior to the destruction, *it* had asked if he knew *it* as though he should. Drained, another shiver of fear spread like a disease. Letting it pass, concentration was imperative, his survival depending on it. Strands of terror however, tried unhinging any rational thoughts.

"I do not know you," he called.

The *entity* waited as another spell of fear shook the boy. "***Is that fear you feel because of me or you?***"

The words boomed in Hanor's mind. Temples aching, he had no idea where this might lead. "There is only one evil here."

"There is only one fear too."

Surprised by the answer, Hanor was suspicious of the shimmering field of energy as though there was more to *its* reply. "What do you mean?"

No answer came, only another round of terror. Getting used to the waves of dread, Hanor tried to approach the situation from another angle. Observing the fear rather than being consumed by it, he searched for the root cause. With nothing to suggest what he was actually frightened of, the scary sensations were like a collection of fears amassed into one dark force. As terrifying as each bout was, this understanding helped him cope.

"These fears come from you," he accused.

"Do you think the fears you see in me... are not your own too?"

"Some... but not all."

"The darkness you sense in me, where do you think it comes from?"

"Who can say where evil originates?" Hanor said, waiting for the next round of dark impulses to shudder through him. He did not have to wait long.

"It originates in the hearts of men and women like you."

Stated as if a fact, Hanor doubted it, but its impact managed to unnerve him. Surprised to be communicating with such an *entity*, this was as incredible as it was creepy. “What is the purpose behind...,” he halted, a chilling wave of dejection shuddering him. The cold bitter world of isolation exaggerated the deadness as if life had no point to it. Uselessness nearly caught him off guard. Recovering and remaining steadfast, he let them pass without any lasting effect. “What do you want with us?” Behind him, Bane peered up through half-opened eyes only to cower when the *entity* moved again.

“I have come to offer you a chance to rule with me.”

“Rule... with you?” Reminded of his birthright, with the death of his father, he was now in fact a High-man. Alarmed, he felt sick at the idea of ruling over others, and the notion of ruling with this *thing* was laughable. Before he could speak, he cringed as another dose of evil rose within. When it passed, he could not hold his tongue. “To rule is a great honour and should be done in service and with a warm heart. It would be impossible to rule with *you* as *you* do not know what it is like to care.”

“You can show me.”

Coughing, caught between a breath and a gulp, Hanor was astounded at the possibility. When the next shiver of evil arrived, it was impossible to accept this *entity* was genuine. Using *Gorl-darl* to complete *its* agenda, this trickery was no different. Refusing to get trapped by the same delusion, the prospect of escaping tempted him again. Worried about Bane, this *thing* would not allow them to go without a price.

“Evil cannot rule with kindness. Your dark world is not the same as this beautiful one that *you* are trying to corrupt.”

“There is little left to stop me ruling both Realms. I now offer you the chance to rule with me.”

“Why?” he asked. Discerning some truth in the offer, he could not agree.

“You condemn me because of what you see and feel. And yet, unbeknown to you, you are a contributor to why I exist at all.”

Searching for *its* motives, picking up on that last comment, Hanor could not see the link. Another shudder of fear gnawed at him. Ignoring it, “In what way?”

“The people of The Freelands have also contributed to why I exist. My World is part of your World, the two coexisting for life to flourish. I seek to unite the two.”

“They are not as closely bound as *you* say, especially when one despises the other and seeks to destroy it.”

“I said there is only one fear here even though you do not agree. The same as there is only one anger that rages through this world, and only one darkness that frightens. There is only one evil, yet all of these things manifest amongst thousands of lives. You see them as individual bouts of anger, fear, loneliness or hate, but that is an illusion. They are all parts of the one force, which collectively I am. I am part of you more than you realise. When you get angry, I appear. When you hate, you draw me into your world. I am the sum total of everything that you call evil, and yet, my origin began when the first clumps of selfishness appeared. I took form, increased in magnitude and strength, and yet, I am now as real as you.”

“You do not expect me to believe that my ancestors gave birth to you!”

“Shall I show you what your ancestors were like?”

A shimmering patch on the lifeless *Mist* condensed, similar to when Rinar of the Shavani Folk had shown him and Balkorn what life was like above ground using his staff. Intriguing Hanor, a male of some stature appeared at the centre, the Tardanian turning to a female and embracing her. A woman from the Planes, he gave her a small black object to keep. Touching as the moment was, it was soon disturbed by the sounds of a baying crowd, the two kissing before he departed through a window. Climbing down vines to the lower level, he leapt onto a Kyboe and left the City of Tardoc. It was night and the Tardanian kept riding, fleeing for his life. Fire-torches by the hundreds filed out of the City after him, charging on their mounts like people possessed. Wide-eyed, Hanor was transfixed as the fellow rode across the plane and up through the mountain passes, only to descend again into the thick band of trees beyond. Drawn towards every hypnotising moment, the hate of those pursuing was intense.

“Do you see their malice?”

Powerful words entered Hanor’s mind, the images captivating. Scores of torches headed down the mountain pass, Hanor feeling the drama as though he was there.

“Look above the chasing group at the dark energy they are creating by their wrath.”

Closing in on those behind, Hanor gasped at the contorted features of hate. Desires for blood were creating subtle waves of energy rising up from the mob. Similar in essence to this vast *entity*, the picture seemed distorted by that rising mass of dark energy. Understanding what was happening, shimmers of their abusive lust were radiating from them like the mist above a lake on a crisp morning. Perceiving this *entity* above the chasing pack, increasing in power, their rage was feeding this *thing*. Lost to delirium, they could not see what their destructive desires were doing. Viewing the deep past, he knew beyond doubt that this happened.

Refocusing on the fleeing person, he felt connected to him. When the images closed in on the Tardanian, a light of recognition flared as to who the person was. A rushing force of illumination, he staggered back at the disclosure. Conscious that it was in fact him, not as Hanor of Manson but Tarkon of Tardoc, turn away as he might, the flooding truth could not be dismissed. In a previous lifetime, he had lived as the ancient hero of Tardoc. Brandor’s tragic tale told of how the hero of that nation had brought peace to the region and was much loved by his people. Falling in love with a lady from the Planes instead of Tardoc, it had been too scandalous for many. Chased to his death, he knew where the images would lead, turning away at the fatal moment. Giving Shoona the *Heart of Tarkon*, the very *Stone* he had become so dependant on, it had been an earthly symbol of his undying love for her. Saddened, wiping a lone tear, Hanor slumped onto the rock floor, empty and drained.

“We came so close,” Casvern Tarn said, their group lining the edge of the ravine. Peering down and across at the fifth and final *Pillar of Life*, hundreds more were braving the conditions to see the graphic alterations in the surrounding landscape as well as the fabled *Centre of Power*.

“What does this mean?” Hayla asked, angry at the suspended *Mist* that showed no signs of change. Most of the rock had fallen away beneath *it*, assuming *Gorl-darl* was preparing to seize the *Pillar*. Too painful to think about Hanor and Bane, and the missed opportunities they had had, the hurt was heavy.

“We can only hope this is not the end,” Greema said next to her. “I fear The Freelands will not survive this invasion.”

“Whilst I carry a sword, I will never give up,” Hallen declared, ready for a fight. “I suggest the rest of you do the same.”

“Brandor is coming,” Raldama said.

Through the half-light, Brandor looked commanding as he strode across the bumpy terrain towards them.

Halting when reaching the ridge, the *Sphere of Power* appeared just as incredible as the one Brandor had seen at Manter, marvelling at the forces involved. Searching for Hanor along the fiery ravine, but there was no sign of him or Bane, confirming his worst fears. Hanor had not survived the *Mist* or this devastation. Fending off sadness, they were all in trouble if his *Wall of Power* was not created soon. Leaving the six on the hilltop locked in mental activities, when the quake had come, Brandor had expected them to get distracted, but no such disruption had occurred. Relieved, upon hearing about the *Pillar's* discovery, it now left more questions than he would like. *Nyshifters* had left shortly before the tremors started, so what was *Gorl-darl* and that vast *entity* up to? At least now he understood where *Gorl-darl* got much of *his* knowledge and power from. Drawn to the *Pillar of Life* below, this was not the end surely.

“They are moving on the other side,” Kifter warned, breaking the unease. Pointing out across the other side of the Vale, visible through the moonlight, the mass of bodies were eager to start, some already heading around to the end of the ravine. A motivating call from Nabban - the High-hite bolstered his troops to get ready.

“The timing is so tight,” Brandor muttered. “Just another short-turn is all we need.”

Heavy rumbles of feet signified the whole encampment was shifting. Undisturbed by recent shakes of this region, the enemy's advancement looked final.

Piercing shrills added to the drama, the night sky erupting in a shrieking chorus of wails. It meant only one thing. Sweeping down above the evil *horde* like deathly banners of war, *they* headed for the defenders, wanting victory in memory of *their* Master.

Identifying no gratification in the *entity*, *it* just waited for Hanor to respond. “I had not... expected that,” he confessed, Tarkon's demise haunting him.

“It was necessary to prove my point.”

How could he dispute it? The problem was it did not make sense how it was possible. “What... do you really want from me?” Shivering from another bout of fear, they were losing their potency.

“I exist... because you and the people of The Freelands exist. I offer you a seat at my side so that you may show me your ways. I know them not because of how I came to be, but does that mean I cannot? Is it true that the Dark cannot know the Light?”

Flickers of compassion tingled in his heart, but Hanor was still waiting for the deception.

“I do not think... it is possible,” he said, still burdened by what he had just witnessed.

“Who decides that, me, you or some other power?”

“It is a matter of principle,” Hanor said, drifting along on traumatised feelings. “You cannot be happy and sad at the same time. One exists or the other, not both. Evil cannot know goodness.”

“If I am evil then why am I talking to you? Does that not suggest I can change if shown how to?”

“I am... confused,” he said, rubbing his temples. “Are *you* saying *you* want your evil Realm to change for the better?”

“Does that alarm you?”

The idea was appealing but seemed strange. Encountering too much death on his travels, what he would give to see peace reign in The Freelands. Conflicts had to be dealt with by finding the root of the problem, so was he not facing the root underpinning evil in this world? Was it too good to be true to accept that this *essence* wanted to change? The temptation was astounding. *Gorl-darl’s* Plan drifted in as a careful reminder. “This is not real is it?” he asked, imploring for honesty.

“I have revealed the facts, but it is for you to decide what we do.”

Desperate for clarity, the offer seemed more than plausible when so much was at stake. Torn, Hanor could feel the *entity’s* sincerity but where was the trickery? Something gnawed at him as if not right. Another chilling bout of emptiness shivered through him, a timely reminder of this opportunity. Did this *entity* truly want to know what goodness was? Scrutinising him from above as if cautious, did *it* fear him? Judging it was not him but the *powers* running through him, he still could not decide.

Confident there was to be no more earth shakes, he veered over to the edge and looked down through the gap between the *Mist* and the rock. Intense heat from the golden river below flushed his cheeks, fascinated at the powers involved. Unable to see above the ravine because of the *Mist*, where were the insights? About to turn back to face the *entity*, something below caught his eye. Fiery light from the lava concealed much of its form, but the shadowy sphere was unmistakable.

“Have you decided yet?”

Booming words filled his mind, but he ignored the promptings to respond. Initially forgetting why he was here at The Centre Vale at all, he could hardly believe the fifth and final *Pillar of Life* was hovering just above the lava flow. Tiny movements within *its* shell were the sparks of life he had seen previously. Desires to merge increased, the *entity’s* offer fading.

“You must decide... now!”

Tone shifting, there was an urgency to *its* call rather than control and great power. Turning away from the rocky edge, Hanor needed to gather his thoughts. “*You* knew the fifth *Pillar of Life* was down there?”

The *entity* did not respond, waiting instead for what he was going to do.

“*You* do not want me to unite with *it*?”

“Why would you?”

“*It* is the *Source* of life.”

“It is not the source but the death of life.”

Thinking it a peculiar answer, Bane peeped from the rock he still clung too, but just stared, too shocked to do anything. “Why is *it* the death of life?”

“Because nothing ever comes out of it. What do you see down there?”

A genuine enquiry, Hanor took another look over the edge at the *Pillar*. “I see a *Sphere of Power* creating life in this Universe. *It* is a point of unity and harmony, and complete oneness of being. All originate from *it* and likewise will one day return. There is nothing

to fear.” Shivering again at the coldness of the *entity*’s presence, he wanted an end to all evil. “What do *you* see down there?” Traces of fear from the vast *being* shocked Hanor.

“I see... a churning funnel of darkness, a vortex sucking everything down where nothing can escape its power. You think I consume everything and yet... this Black Hole absorbs all, not I. Life itself dissolves into its unknowable depths. It is the extinction of all form and the destruction of life. You call it unity, I call it death.”

Staggered that this *entity* perceived those *divine forces* like that, *it* was viewing them opposite to what was happening. Experiencing that bliss himself, but *it* saw the *Pillar* as a path to oblivion, the oneness as a loss of individuality and therefore life. So vast in scale and power, but *it* seemed more a child than he was. Desiring to help the *entity* view the *Pillar* as *it* truly was, he remembered what was said earlier. Darkness can never know the light just as evil can never know how to love. There has to be a transition from one to the other for the person involved. The same for this *being*, change was possible, but there was no chance of *it* knowing *now* what love was.

Gentle tugs on his heart from the *Pillar* were a reminder of that blissful state. Sensing the *entity*’s apprehension, *it* did not want him to unite with the *Pillar of Life* below, but why? Another pulse of dark energy shuddered through him.

“Show me what I must do to love like you do.”

A strange plea, Hanor was pulled in opposite directions. *It* had said they could rule together and bring peace to The Freelands, but he sensed that meant him not merging with the final *Pillar*. But why? An even larger doubt arose. How could he reach the *Pillar* without burning alive in the lava? Checking for a possible way down, it was a sheer drop. No outcrops of rock were visible, and to jump was preposterous.

Thinking about the *entity*’s offer again, “*Surely that would help The Freelands?*” the whisper came, caressing him. Each time he peered over the edge, his stomach rolled. Not one for heights, the *Pillar* was so near and yet virtually unreachable. Uniting with *it* would mean death. Even though he would live on afterwards, thoughts about his distraught mother entered the fray, highlighting how selfish that would be. Already losing his father and Nole, was it reasonable for her to lose him as well? Thoughts about Brandor, Tarmon and the others reminded him of the debt he owed them too.

“Will you condemn me to an eternity of darkness?”

It was not what Hanor wanted to hear. Committed to the *Pillars*, but rejecting *its* appeal was harder than he wished. With so many depending on him, did it make sense to unite with the fifth *Pillar* and die when peace was possible? He could always come back and do it at a later time? Why was it so important to do it now?

Questions rolled like a mumbling song. The truth was, he had no idea why the *Pillars* were a factor in this anyway. The starting point of life, what had he actually achieved? Tremendous energies had been released each time he had merged with one, but that made no sense? All he really wanted was peace for The Freelands, and it did not matter how that was achieved. Detecting no deception in this *being*, but how could they rule together? Then again, he could not see himself jumping to unite with the *Pillar* either, for that is what he would have to do. Trying to tune into his heart, there was no help, as if his nerve was being tested this one last time. With so much to give up, could he really go through with it? Peering down, why did the *Pillar* have to be situated there of all places? Longing for that oneness, what was he to do?

“What if you miss the target?”

That last whisper snapped Hanor from tumultuous thoughts rambling through his mind. At last seeing the light, that one hissing doubt was what he had been waiting for. Adamant it was planted by this *entity*, there was no direct connection but intuitively he knew where it had come from. Understanding that this *being's* plea for guidance was just a distraction, *its* objectives were purely survival. Unable to comprehend the *powers* below, this *thing* was terrified by what would come of it. Insights cleared away the doubts, the burden lifting as his true purpose returned with clarity.

Moving to the edge of the rock, the heat and fire did not faze him for his mind was made up. Glancing behind to a wide-eyed Bane, his friend was staring as if he had gone mad. Thoughts about his mother and friends were a final barrier to prevent him from doing this, but he let them go, he had to do this.

Familiar shrills echoed from below, terrible creatures still fighting on the other side of this loathsome *Mist*. Convinced the only way The Freelands could be saved was if he merged with the *Pillar*, he was willing to give up his life for the greater cause. A strange exhilaration energised him. Looking down at the shimmering *Sphere*, Hanor inhaled one last time. Without acknowledging Bane or the *entity*, their sharp disbelieving calls went unheeded, leaping from the ledge to fulfil his destiny.

Chapter 30 : Spiritual Man Revealed

Unleashing their white fiery light, crackles of heat bit into the underside of the *Nyshifter*, Brandor putting up a brave defence against the overpowering assailants. Striking the nearest one to him, but it was not enough to cause any lasting damage. Aghast, the beast still managed to grab a couple of men further back before climbing into the night. Satisfied when another *Nyshifter* was struck above the hilltop, Whis, Bronn and Sorlam were up on the rise guarding the six who were still working towards completing the *Wall of Power*.

Other *Nyshifters* were just as ruthless, flying into their defensive line, the terror absolute. Responding to the northern *horde's* advancement, roars from Hites, Balts, Fifes and men alike exploded as one defiant voice. A wave of bodies charged down the slope towards the opposing numbers now making their way across the base of the Vale. Forced around the ravine scored into the earth in front, the clatter of bodies was final.

"Our time has come!" Hallen hollered, those of his company rising to the challenge. Traditional weapons would have to win the day, so Hayla, Raldama and the others got ready to join in that final push.

Bane's outstretched hand fell flat on the cold stone, his punctured heart wilting, the desire to live ending. Tears streaming, his fingers strained at the ledge where Hanor had stood a moment before. Numbness in his legs still hampered him, left like an imbecile clinging to an unreachable hope. Hanor's incredible alertness prior to him jumping meant he had known without doubt what he was doing. Whatever madness had overcome his best friend, there was no one else to blame but himself. Now dead because of him, if he had not been so weak and fallen for *Gorl-darl's* trickery by stealing the gilth pouch, things would have been very different.

Clamping his midriff, it was difficult to breathe from the painful convulsions. Closing stinging eyes, Bane did not know at what point the monstrous *entity* above faded and returned to *its* own Realm.

Time stood still, peace enshrouding Hanor. Fearless, he looped out and down towards the majestic Pillar of Life. Intense heat of the fiery lava did not scorch, the cells in his body now vibrating to a higher rhythm. Concentrating on the Pillar, the liquid lava no longer appeared real and life threatening.

A sudden rush of light from his heart burst forth towards the enigmatic Sphere. Divine powers were of Hanor's Spirit, extending out to unite with that point of light at the centre of the Pillar. Consciousness expanding, his skin began transmuting from the slow physical into the purer state of his Spiritual Self. Gone was the grime of his physical life, transforming instead into the higher substance of Spiritual Matter. Glowing like a sun, his pure heart was the means to which the powers could now work.

Illusions dissolved under the intensity of the glorious transformation. Awakening to the Higher Realms, he could see the physical world was a great arena to which the Spirit of Life descended. Generating the right conditions for isolation and ignorance, pain and pleasure, but their rule was temporary, until the time came when each person matured and would be liberated just as he was now. Overcoming the base desires of his physical nature by dedicating to a greater cause, his willingness to help his fellow man had been

proven. Even though giving up his physical life, he was in fact gaining the whole Universe.

Merging in a flash with the Pillar of Life when reaching it, Hanor was instantly transformed into a being of light. Now aware of the Great Maker, he could see the beauty of its plans for this World, marvelling at its capacity to love and the patience required to see life grow. His own success proved that the people of The Freelands had evolved enough to release the Great Maker from its bondage on this planet. Completing its own magnificent work too, heavenly melodies chimed, Hanor basking in the celebrations.

Hayla pointed frantically at the *Sphere of Power* at the base of the chasm. “Look...! The *Pillar of Life* is aglow,” she cried to her companions, the pitch of her appeal piercing the dull roar of thousands.

About to commit to battle at the end of the ravine, the small group turned to where she indicated. Brandor stopped and stared at the radiant *Sphere* now alight. Fearful of what *Gorl-darl* or that darkest of *entities* was up to, gasps rose, the *Sphere of Power's* brightness intensifying. More people stopped, astonished by the spectacle. Expanding in brilliance and power, everyone felt the magnetic pull of *its* calling. Illuminating the sky like a great beacon, even *Nyshifters* were drawn to the unworldly sight, suspicious of what was to come.

Shielding their eyes, the group took a step back for safety, expecting the worst. Captivating yet daunting, believing the *Pillar* was about to explode, but few were willing to run, caught up in *its* majesty. Growing, the scene was electrifying. Outshining the flowing lava below *it*, something inconceivable was about to unfold.

“What... is...?”

Kifter did not end the stuttering question. A beam of light shot skywards from the *Sphere of Power*. Straining necks, thousands followed the beam's trajectory. Flashing in every direction when reaching a certain altitude, the night sky lit up like the dawning of a new turn of day. Shimmering outwards, there seemed to be no end to the *Pillar of Life's* power. Continuous, the beam of intense light was as if the planet was releasing all of its energy into the atmosphere.

Shrieks of pain rendered the air, the deadly *Nyshifters* struggling to cope with the brightness. Just like when Rinn had suspended one at the Five Passes, holding *it* up for the sun to rein down its glorious life-giving energies, the monsters were now clawing through the sky for a place to shelter under. But out here, no such cave or dwelling existed, no hilltop would open up to shield *them*. Without a Master for guidance or to ease *their* pain, the despairing noise haunted those below. One by one the evil monsters fell from the illuminated sky, crashing and writhing on the ground from the burning light.

“Look..., the *Mist!*” Raldama shouted, pointing at the once insufferable power.

The *Mist* was thinning, the beam of light alongside affecting *its* stability. Cheers went up when others along the rim noticed the *Cloud's* demise. Daring to hope it was real, unfolding too quickly for people to absorb the changes, they had stepped from desperation to victory in a heartbeat. How was it possible?

Some of *Gorl-darl's* creatures continued fighting at both ends of the battlefield, too far from the initial lightshow, but now they too could only stare. With the demise of the

Blackwings, Gorlins in charge now had other issues to contend with. Sensing the downfall of their *Master's* domain, only a brutish nature could keep them moving forward. Growling orders, but many just stared, less eager to obey.

The Gor-up-sa never failed to ravish flesh, but without that inner guidance, many set upon their own kind. Those here from the Dortian Realm were also hesitant. Such a terrifying display of power resulted in vast numbers running, indecision hindering those remaining. Seizing the opportunity, High-hite Nabban rushed without remorse into their hesitant foe.

Eyes dry, Brandor was struggling to take it all in. Tremendous *powers* from the *Pillar* continued illuminating the whole region in a pale otherworldly light. Thankful of the *Nyshifters'* demise, but it was the *Mist* that mattered. Gradually fading to reveal a flat bed of rock where *Gorl-darl* had stood, he hoped to see Hanor standing proud. Instead, he was shocked to see the lone figure of Bane lying next to a small bulge of rock.

"The *Light*..., look at it," Kifter called from behind.

"Is it... Hanor?" Hayla called, daring to accept the miraculous.

Inside the *Column of Power*, there was an abnormality in *its* formation just above ground level. Definable lines of Hanor were unmistakable, their young companion now ablaze in white light. Difficult to judge what had happened, he looked across at them, amazing the group that he was still alive. Sadness followed briefly when realising he had moved on from this world.

"He must have attained the fifth *Pillar* after all," Tarmon said, the others agreeing.

"We were distracted," Raldama said.

"He looks so alive and content," Hayla said, tearful. "And so handsome!"

"He is where we cannot go," Raldama said, saddened that some were still fighting further along in both directions, and that this miracle had not ended the war entirely.

Brandor felt the need to respond. "Where he is going, we will all someday go." Wanting to say more, but this was not the time. Understandably, the glowing figure of Hanor turned to look at Bane who still sat lolling on the bed of rock. So incredible, the *Dai-laman* knew not what to make of it.

"Bane!"

Gentle and kind, the call formed in the distraught young man's mind, Bane lying slumped against the rock. The grief was unbearable, ignoring the soft appeal when it spoke again.

"Bane..., it is me, Hanor."

Frightened by that explosion of power erupting so close, Bane did not want to move, too scared in case he burnt to death. Guilt was triggering the calls. Blaming himself for the death of his best friend, who would want to know him after what he had done?

"Thank you for everything."

Soothing words filled Bane's mind through the turmoil. Covering his ears to shut them out, "Leave me alone," he cursed, certain he was going mad.

"Look at the *light*, Bane..., and you will see the rewards of your work."

Now that the chill had gone, a ruthless fatigue sapped Bane, tears lining his cheeks. Sensing the thoughts to be from Hanor, he did not want to be fooled again, his weakness already costing him everything.

“I cannot stay here for long, for the powers at work are not of my bidding,” the voice went on, patient. “But if you do not look now then I cannot say goodbye to you.”

More tears flowed, the loving words trying to soften the shame. If it was Hanor, why did he even want to speak to him? Leading him to his death, he wanted to ask for forgiveness, but did not have the courage.

“We will see each other again, I promise,” the voice continued, unperturbed by his lack of movement. “Do not lose yourself to despair Bane, for it is not yours to suffer. Without your contribution, I would not have completed my work. Be not ashamed by this traumatic quest, but look into your heart to see the benefits this long journey has had for you and The Freelands. If you do not heed my words, you will descend back into the Realms of the Planetary Dweller to which you have already seen. Be strong, my love for you knows not what shame is.”

Bane could not contain the outpouring of his broken heart. Devastated, he sensed it *was* Hanor speaking, but knew not how or why. Wanting to believe him, but the shame gripped tighter, determined to keep him in darkness. Daring to look up, the brightness was absorbing, shielding his eyes from the glare. A faint humming sound buzzed, his vision adjusting to the brightest of *lights*.

Conscious of a sudden change within, a subtle vibrancy began pulsing and energising Bane’s body. Strange, its medicinal effect was unmistakable. Altering for the better, a new dawn started shining, a sense of freedom never felt before rising. Rejecting his grief, even the desire for answers softened, granting him the peace he had yearned after for so long. Finally accepting the change, shadows of despair began fading, permitting him to see more clearly.

Gasping when the illuminated figure of Hanor came into focus, radiating brilliantly, this was difficult to accept. Aglow like a white fire, Bane could feel the tranquillity and joy radiating from his friend. Detecting no malice or regret in that kindest of smiles, a glint in Hanor’s dazzling eyes proved that every word spoken was heartfelt. Tears dried up, Bane’s heart now full, dissolving recent failures. Experiencing for that short period what unconditional love was, peace replaced the anguish.

Captivated, when Hanor turned to face those out across the gorge, there was no jealousy. Gaining so much because of the inner changes, when Hanor smiled and started rising up the beam of *light*, Bane had no regrets. Unsure at what point the black *Mist* had faded, he leant against the stone, not caring if he ever walked again.

Savouring the finale, Brandor stood and watched as Hanor disappeared up the fiery column. Members of the group marvelled too.

“One does not see many exits like that,” Casvern Tarn said, straining to where he had gone.

A signal for the fifth *Pillar of Life* to end *its* presence in this world, the radiant *powers* abruptly went out. As if a mighty hand had turned off a mountainous beacon, the temporary daylight ended, returning all to darkness. Throwing everyone into panic, the golden orange glow from the ravine made the transition a little more palpable.

“Bane needs our help,” Hallen called, the boy vulnerable now the beam of light had vanished. A miracle that he was alive, typically, the only escape was on the enemy’s side, and not all monsters had left.

Sending a ball of white fire to cover the area and protect the lad from a large group of Gorks nearby, the rest of the group set off around the ravine to reach him.

Cupping shaking hands over a tear-streaked face, High-grove Anser of Rovot had no idea how they had survived. Thousands marauding his beloved City had fled the moment the night sky had lit up like a new turn, and the few remaining were no match for his inspired brethren. Exhausted, he had not slept for two nights because his youngest son Graddon was recovering from a brutal chest wound. Standing tall to lead his people, they would not have lasted another short-turn if that *light* had not shone as it had. Cheers of victory falling silent a short time ago, questions left many stunned by the outcome. Such power was enough to humble the proudest of hearts. Gazing out into the darkness, there was a nagging fear their enemy might regroup and try again. At least he could now rest, even if just for a while.

Monitoring Hallen and the group as they made their way around the ravine to the still seated Bane, Brandor prayed none of them would fall at such a late stage of the war. Huge numbers of their enemy were still fighting, even though their *Master* was nowhere to be seen. Unsure what had transpired inside the *Mist*, a sudden alteration behind alerted the Dai-laman. Detecting something energise the very atmosphere, he only hoped it was his *Wall of Power*. Anticipating the enormous *entity* preparing to ensoul *it*, materialising now was better than not at all.

Scanning the darker regions beyond the rim of the Vale, nothing was yet visible. Sef - the Tardocian Master, was confident of success on their part, but the instability of the other groups was where the problem lay. Encouraged when shimmers in the atmosphere were discernable as if charged by a new type of force, unlike the final *Pillar of Life*, there was no explosion of power. Sensing the force field expand in both directions, stirrings in his heart acknowledged the emerging power, stimulating his mind enough to understand the otherworldly unfoldment. This was it!

No one else nearby seemed to register the change, invisible *powers* at the crest of the Vale hidden to most. Only those sensitive enough could see or feel *it*, excited at what this meant. Amazed by the dimensions involved, the new energy field would eventually stretch from Tarden all the way to Rovot. Somewhat anxious at what was supposed to happen, his original vision had detailed a fiery display should have occurred, so this careful manifestation was surprising. Respecting the twenty-four involved were doing their best to stabilise *it*, distortions proved they were a long way from mastering it.

Ensuring the white ball of blistering energy was still protecting Bane behind, Tarmon and the others had not reached him yet. Caught between two fronts, not until his body started tingling did he really take note. Astonished, the *Wall of Power* was now touching him, the sensations not of this world. Passing right through him, he span on his heel to where the expansion was heading and what impact it would have.

Hallen, Kifter and the others finally reached young Bane, fighting off a few wretched Gorks in the process. Everyone around him was still ignorant of the *Wall's* presence. Amazed when a quiet *voice* spoke to him using thoughts to communicate, Brandor froze in wonder.

“My body is made of Mental Matter, the same substance as to what your thoughts are made of. What you see is Mental Matter vibrating at a slower rate.”

Overcoming his initial shock that the long-awaited *entity* was talking to him in the privacy of his own mind, he needed answers. “People are still dying, how are *you* going to end this fighting?”

“The people on this battlefield do not view me as you do, but my influences can be no less dramatic.”

“What can *you* do?” Desiring something a little more visible, he sat back to quench the disappointment. Admonishing himself, forgetting what a monumental occasion this was, he was communicating with a wondrous *being* that had never manifested before. Still passing his position, he let go of expectations to savour the miracle.

“My influences work from the inside where they cannot run away or cut me with a knife. I will work through blackened hearts to achieve the results longed for. From a higher vantage point, this is the Blaze of Glory you seek.”

The fighting continued as it dawned on Brandor what he had just been told. Fantastic as the tremendous display of potent energies was earlier, he could see that the changing of hearts was where the real power lay. For someone to change direction for the good was a wondrous thing. Viewing the potential of this *being* as far more dramatic now, further questions soon quashed any premature hopes. “*Gorl-darl’s* creatures have no heart,” he said, presuming it was an obstacle to peace.

“Your interpretation of what a heart is incorrect. Where there is a beating life there is a beating heart. Even the wildest of beasts can be tamed by love. Nyshifters had affection for Gorl-darl, and so it is with all lives.”

“What do *you* intend to do exactly?”

“Where there is freedom there is life. Energies within me help stimulate deeper thoughts so they can penetrate the darkness of ignorance. I have not come to slay but to help the process of Awakening. The Great Lives of this Planet use different forces to make life function as it does, and I am but one of them.”

Permitting the newcomer to do *its* work, not expecting immediate results, Brandor leant against a small boulder to rest. Feeling the wide band of *its* presence pass beyond his location like a departing heat wave sweeping across The Freelands, without that lightshow, no one would even know of *its* influence. Only the unusual changing of attitudes might be proof for some, but not all would be convinced.

Affording a smile, through the shadows, a boisterous High-hite seemed shocked to find some of his troops had pulled up. Other pockets of fighting were beginning to quieten too. Eerie to witness such invisible powers at work, Brandor could only marvel at the healing done this turn of day. “It is glorious indeed,” he said, trusting the war was about to end. Tarmon and the group were making their way back around the ravine with young Bane, leaving a line of corpses in their wake. A touch of pride moved him.

Chapter 31 : Aftermath

Gentle snaps of a simmering fire were far from comforting, Bane sighing and wiping a tear. Now that Brandor and the other leaders were convinced their foe had gone for good, they were to stay here until dawn before deciding the next step, meaning a time for sore reflection. Returning earlier to the same spot where they had slept before, even now it seemed surreal. Wholesome feelings he had experienced during those last moments with Hanor had virtually disappeared. A subtle peace however remained, but shock was setting in. Some of his companions had settled nearby for a deserving rest, whilst Kifter, Tarmon and Raldama sat on the other side of the fire talking quietly about the astonishing events.

Healed of his paralysis shortly after Hanor's miraculous departure, it had something to do with his best friend's unconditional love he was quite sure. Lifting the guilt, the tranquillity had been plain to see for his rescuers too. Desiring to know what had happened inside the *Mist*, it was whilst sharing the intense details afterwards that the joy had started to fade. Emotional strains had reappeared during the tale telling, the old Bane returning. Compassionate for what he had suffered, they had not blamed him at all for what he did, which was most surprising.

Reflecting now on the whole outcome, ugly doubts were trying to squirm their way to the surface again. Trusting Hanor that everything would be fine, Hayla's hug earlier had helped, determined not to lose himself anymore to grim moods. Missing Hanor already, so too Nole, he sighed, the loneliness cold. Glancing down to where Hayla lay, through the moonlight, she was looking at him.

"Come here Bane," she whispered, motioning for him to lie next to her.

Doing as requested, the invite was the last thing he expected.

"You still look dazed," she noted, rubbing his upper arm for reassurance.

Smiling to hide the doubts, "I thought... I had lost everything."

"You cannot be condemned for how you reacted," she said, squeezing his arm. "The fact you were with Hanor at the end is what matters." She paused, considering another point. "I cannot imagine what it must have been like facing *Gorl-darl*."

Unsure if it was what she said that made him feel better or just being in her company, it was what he needed. Picturing their adversary's face when *he* destroyed the gilth pouch, it was hard to believe he had fallen for the *Voice's* trickery and not made the connection to who it was. "I am lucky to be alive."

"I thought... I had lost you," she said a little too quickly, checking his reaction in the twilight. Unsure if he picked up on just how much he now meant to her, ever since hearing about his entry into the *Mist*, she had known that he was the one for her. Sensing deep down that Hanor was beyond her, their short relationship however had broken her forced isolation and any fanciful ideas about Casvern Tarn. After meeting her childhood sweetheart again, those longings had lost their colour, now knowing where her loyalties lay. Smiling, life was a puzzle.

Following his gaze up at the twinkling stars, she felt brave and nestled closer to him. Sensing his hesitation, she wondered if he had lost interest in her after recent traumas. "There is a chill in the air," she said, lifting her blanket over him.

Heart racing, Bane tried hard not to read too much into it. Looping an arm around her like a friend, fatigue caught up with him, sleep preventing any further intimacy.

“What a wonderful dawn,” Sharn said, sitting beside a tired looking Brandor. Approving of the deep reds and yellows merging with oranges and purples on the northern horizon, to think this had been a battlefield was incredible.

Concurring, Brandor stared down and across at the huge golden gash at the foot of the Vale. Hissing its fiery flow, the Dai-laman was pondering what they had been through. “I had my doubts about surviving,” he admitted, unashamed. Occasional sounds filtering through the pre-dawn from other regions of the Vale meant they were not the only ones up. Relieved that a bloodbath on a monumental scale had been avoided, but as of yet, he could not gain the rest he longed for, a subtle disquiet the cause.

“You seem saddened,” the younger Dai-laman noted. Heightened senses due to his mental connection to the *San* - the *entity* ensouling the *Wall of Power*, Sharn could tune into the atmosphere, picking up on subtle differences he would not have noticed before. Fully conscious of the *San* whilst waiting for his closest friend to respond, he was no longer chained to that concentrated state necessary at the beginning. Stabilising itself in this realm had released him and the others from the intellectual demands they were originally under. Still getting to grips with it, additional benefits were that he was not only mentally in tune with Sef, but also Hader and the three female Masters, as well as the other eighteen Masters involved. Just fixing his attention on any one of them instantly tuned his consciousness into theirs no matter where they were. An extraordinary relationship, other members of the Hisian-set were in a spin at its possibilities.

“I will not be content until I have answers,” Brandor continued after a pause. “Answers?”

Insights into the mysteries surrounding the *Pillars of Life* and why Hanor had been taken was just the beginning for Brandor. The *San* was another issue, embarrassed that he had got the original interpretation wrong. Respecting the magic of *its* influencing powers, even so, the spectacular arrival he had promised everyone would be challenged. Most would have difficulty accepting *it* was real and doing some good. “Ignore me..., I am but a doddering old fool.”

“There is a great deal to reflect on,” Sharn said, following his gaze down to the glowing crevice. “The Freelands will never be the same again.”

“I agree.”

“Rinn always enjoyed this time of the morning.”

“We need to remember the sacrifice made by all.”

“Most of all..., your young friend, Hanor.”

“Yes, he turned out to be quite special.” After that encounter by the lake when Brandor had first stimulated the boy’s heart to awaken to the *Sacred*, the lad had turned out to be most enduring. Bane’s tale of their final moments was a clear reflection of Hanor’s courage and willingness to complete his objectives until the very end. Losing his life in this world, but the young man had gained a whole new one on the other side.

“And our ancient adversary has gone for good,” the younger Dai-laman said.

“A new Age is upon us,” Brandor said, sensing the beauty and potential of the coming era. “There is a great deal of rebuilding to do, but also wounds to heal. When the time is right, the regions of Dortia and Pern should be brought back into the fold. We cannot risk a repeat of what we have seen here.”

“And what of the remaining Gorls, there are thousands still running loose?”

“Nabban intends to set up a force to combat it, but we must allow the *San* to do *its* bidding before commitments are made,” Brandor said, in quiet awe.

“I am conscious of the *San* as we speak, and I do hold a hope that substantial changes can be made, but not all will be tamed.”

“That should keep the southern regions vigilant and keep complacency at bay. The mountains of the north have ample space to contain such creatures. They will probably destroy themselves soon enough.”

Permitting the coolness of the pre-dawn to refresh them, Sharn thought about what was to come. “What do you think our next step should be?”

Staring at the widening band of orange and red on the horizon, there was still no sign of the *horde*'s return. “When we are certain of The Freelands' safety, I intend to open up the Sleep and invite the next generation to come and explore the wonders of life. Hopefully, the powers witnessed this night will trigger an interest for the mysteries.”

“I do like the idea of teaching again.”

“What is the point of learning all this knowledge and wisdom if it is not passed onto the next generation?”

“I agree Brandor, I detect excitement in the air at last.”

“There should be,” Brandor agreed. A little more upbeat, he was exhausted. Difficult questions for now would have to wait.

“They smell foul,” Hallen decreed, kicking the broken arm of a dead *Nyshifter*.

Inspecting the grisly site along with his companions and numerous leaders, carcasses of the deadly creatures were discernable amongst countless bodies plaguing the scorched landscape. Islets of bone and charred flesh, the *Nyshifter*'s end was reassuring. Hundreds were scouring the ruined fields of this once lush vale, a clear sky heartening. Halfway through the morning, there seemed to be no rush to get the scene cleared, murmuring throngs amazed they had survived.

“So would you smell foul if you had a night like *they* did,” Casvern Tarn joked.

“I have had my fair share of rough nights,” Hallen chuckled.

“That I can believe.”

“This should help Bane come to terms with Hanor's departure,” Greema supposed, surprised there was still no sign of the young man.

“He is still clinging to his new lady friend,” Hallen griped, unimpressed by Hayla's shocking closeness to the moody boy.

“Do I detect jealousy?” Greema teased.

“I have already said *no* to her,” the big Hite said, walking around to the *Nyshifter*'s head.

“I do not remember her asking you,” the Grove doubted, leaving him to his delusion.

Hallen huffed but remained tight-lipped.

“What a mess..., and such a waste,” Raldama exclaimed nearby, horrified by how many were dead. Men and women were scattered far, hoping not to see anyone he knew.

“The sooner we get fires going,” Caldon - Master of Tarden's Forces said close by. “The quicker we can send a clear message to any straying Gorls tempted to return.”

“They need to be driven back to where they came from,” Casvern Tarn said, suspecting some to take refuge at Mandurin.

“No strays will remain in our lands,” High-man Lorvanon promised.

“That sounds encouraging,” Tarn said, praying his old friend Aider Nash was still alive in the tunnels beneath Mandurin’s High-house.

“We must learn to watch out and support each other,” Lorvanon said, turning his nose up when getting too close to one Gorl. “And shoulder our responsibilities for the less abled. Only on these foundations can we make The Freelands safe.”

“Looks like Nabban has already decided that,” Hallen said, his High-hite preparing to ride with close to four hundred of his brethren away to their right.

“He does not waste time,” Lorvanon said, refusing to add further duress on his troops yet.

“I am afraid we Hites act first and think later,” Hallen laughed.

“That is if you manage to think at all,” Kifter added, the mass of bodies heading out after a resounding call from their illustrious leader.

Signalling when Nabban waved, High-man Lorvanon had to smile. “He is bold for sure.”

Agitated by the returning sounds of devastation above, Aider Nash and those still alive waited, the noise of vile creatures running wild again echoing down the tunnel. Trusting it meant only one thing, they had lost the war, this new invasion saddened the few scores left. Reeking corpses taken to other areas of this oversized burrow did not help, their foul odour a constant reminder of what awaited everyone. Stacked high with supplies, but to live down here indefinitely was a fate worse than death.

Jolting at a sudden rapping on the main door above, Aider stood in readiness, so too Jinn and Cern, the other two here protecting the wounded. Praying fits of coughing from their suffering brethren would not give them away, a louder bang drew swords and shooters from the defenders. Moving towards the entrance, they could not flee further into the tunnels because most of the wounded were still in a terrible state. Preparing to fight, a slam on the door shook them.

A new roar, angry and fierce, entered the room. Expecting the worst, a squeal and bitter struggle on the other side of the door was followed by odd crashes and a gurgling sound. More thrashes ended with a sharp crunching noise, a final act of ruthlessness. Certain something was still on the other side of the bulky door, the three expected the door to be bashed down. Short moments merged into longer periods before comprehending what was happening. The victor was feeding on the one it had killed and was in no hurry to move.

Appalled, the chunky door latch shook, holding shooters again at the ready. An impatient growl rumbled from the other side, displeased at the inconvenience. Disbelieving their luck at the sounds of the creature departing, Nash returned to the wounded, whispers of assurance calming their anxious companions. They had survived!

For the following three turns, scouting parties searched the northern regions for their fleeing foe. Running down any they found, Nabban was as boisterous and courageous in his work as he was in the evenings when passing around the sasta. Strong relationships formed, an air of stability and confidence returning. Fires were lit and carcasses destroyed, the evidence of evil evaporating into thick plumes of smoke. Freedom was evident in both song and laughter, the nightmare drifting into the realms of history. Exchanging promises of support, the future appeared bright. Those who were not fighters returned to their homes south, leaving the hardy ones to follow after.

“Tomorrow, we will return to Tardania,” High-tard Polon said, speaking for his people as well as Caldon - Master of Tarden’s Forces sitting next to him.

Now late in the evening, Leaders of the various Races sat discussing the future with the remaining members of the Hisian-set and other prominent figures of the defensive force.

“Three hundred Tardanians from Tarden have volunteered to stay and join the force High-man Lorvanon intends to set up,” Caldon said, keeping to earlier promises. “And every three cycles of the moons, they will rotate with another three hundred. This is our pledge to the peoples of The Freelands to ensure peace.”

“Tardoc pledges the same number,” Polon said, supportive. “It is our wish to retain close links to the peoples out here on the Planes.”

“Your offers are generous,” Casvern Tarn said on behalf of the survivors of Mandurin. Sending word to the rest of his people sheltering at Manter about their victory, he hoped to see some arrive soon.

“It is Casvern,” Lorvanon agreed. “And I will send builders and craftsmen to help rebuild your homes.”

“Thank you,” Tarn replied, trusting the builders might change their mind when viewing the damage done.

“Are we any further forward to understanding what took place here Brandor, with Hanor in particular?” Raldama asked, taking the opportunity on behalf of their group. What had happened here had left most people with mixed feelings.

Asked repeatedly over the past couple of turns, Brandor knew few would understand it. Waiting for a revelation, he was as frustrated and confused as everyone else. “There is little I can give you at this time, so for now just savour the peace.”

“What happened to the *Wall of Power* you promised?” Raldama added another question, desiring to know more. “The rumours I have heard do not make sense.”

“Answers given now would merely add confusion,” Brandor replied, still frustrated. “So I ask for your patience until details can be properly given, especially with what happened to Hanor and his somewhat unusual departure. Explaining now would tire many, some of whom,” he glanced at Hallen and grinned. “Have already tolerated enough.”

“You are so thoughtful,” the Hite smiled.

Sharn thought it was appropriate to say something. “The *Wall of Power* is active as we speak. For those of you who want to know more about *it* and what happened here, the Hisian-set invite all to the Sleep to learn about the Mysteries of Life and more.”

“I look forward to my stay,” Raldama acknowledged.

“And so do I,” Caldon agreed. Yet to face the complicated issue of High-tard Drola on his return to Tarden, Sharn’s invite was still welcome.

A chorus of chatter followed, light-hearted comments about staying at the Sleep passing back and forth.

“We have seen enough light shows,” High-hite Nabban declined with a grin. “But we also extend invitations to any who wish to visit Hitori.”

“Thank you,” Hader replied this time, smiling at the numerous Hites drinking their Sasta heartily. Relieved the Hisian-set were no longer bound by pleasures of the body, service to The Freelands was all that mattered.

“I have one last question,” High-man Lorvanon said, thinking about the unenviable task ahead. Friends with High-lady Lizan of Manson - Hanor’s mother, explaining what happened here would not be easy. “It has been said that Hanor was seen rising up that *Column of Light*. What has actually happened to him? Tarmon told me about the young man’s serenity, can you be sure he is well?”

Expectant eyes waited for Brandor to speak. Sensitive, those who knew Hanor longed for answers, but Brandor had been unable to give any. About to reply, the Dailaman certainly did not expect Bane to answer.

“I can vouch for his safety and well-being,” Bane stated, a gentle squeeze from Hayla helping him hold his nerve. “I experienced Hanor’s peace, and through him, I now know we should never lose ourselves to our circumstances, something of which I regularly did.”

A cue for Nabban to break out into an old Hitorian song of bravery, where the great sacrifice of some meant freedom for everyone else, when finished, he stood and started a merry dance unashamedly. Others joined him, a chorus of cries cheering from campfires nearby. It was a fitting end to the formalities.

High-grove Fordain of Grovan slumped forward onto the neck of his kyboe, his heart bleeding from the wretched sight. When convinced their foe was not returning to Grovan, against the advice of his healers, he had come to search for his beloved son Orl at Holen End. Riding hard for two turns, ignoring chest and neck pains just to get here, but this shock was far more brutal than any claw mark. So much devastation, the Cropping Village to which his brave son had defended was in ruin. Appalled by the atrocity, the entire region had been burnt to the ground. Even the fields were plundered.

Pinning so much on Brandor’s *Wall of Power*, Fordain had prayed for *it* to reach this far. Manifesting two nights ago, he had not sensed *it* but trusted the Masters’ word. Regretting that he had not forced the once proud inhabitants to head for Grovan, his son had been unwilling to leave them so open. Defensive walls built to keep out bandits had not been designed to fend off the evil to which it had succumbed. Crying into weary hands, he had failed them all.

“It seems strange watching them go,” Raldama said, standing alongside his companions upon the hilltop, viewing the departure of High-tard Polon, Caldon and the many other brave souls from Tardania.

Mid-morning of the following turn, countless others were also leaving. Sad as it was, the fact so many had survived was a miracle. No one savoured goodbyes, the mood sombre.

“I am surprised you have not left with them,” Casvern Tarn said to Tarmon.

The Tardanian grinned. “You have forgotten where my heart’s desire is.”

“Ah, I see what you mean,” Tarn returned, recalling the tales about the Lady of Selmor Forest. Desires to return to Mandurin were equally strong for him. Missing out on the sweet Hayla of Manter, the fact she was spending so much time with young Bane meant he had to handle rejection for a change. Awaiting the call from Rosa Tor, who was also preparing to head north with a large band of men and women to safeguard it, as well as the promised six hundred Tardanians, they could not leave soon enough.

Pleased Nonn - his compatriot from Mandurin, was organising the rest of his brethren, Tolly Roe had already left for Manter to organise the folks there. With the future still uncertain, Tarn loved new challenges.

“We are heading out too,” a sheepish voice said from behind the group. Surprised to see Bane and Hayla standing timidly waiting for a reaction, it brought home the reality that their journey together had finally reached its end.

“Well..., good luck to you both,” Greema declared, disliking the awkward silence. Stepping forward to hug them both, he had trouble hiding his emotions. “I too am heading back to see how Grovan coped.”

“You mean we will not have to endure your grumbling anymore?” Hallen joked, patting his back and accepting a hug.

“And I will miss your quick wittedness, Hallen,” Greema said, everyone hugging and saying their goodbyes.

“This is it then?” came the call from Brandor who was approaching. In some ways regretting their journey was to end, tired eyes showed the strains he had suffered.

“I am sure we will all cross paths again at the Sleep,” Raldama exclaimed.

“Brandor owes us a few nights of hospitality,” Hallen boomed, cheerful.

“Your stay at the Sleep will not be fuelled by Sasta and bloated stomachs anymore,” the Dai-laman chirped. “But laughter and good cheer are definitely welcome.”

“What will you do now?” Kifter asked.

Coming so far and through so much, Brandor found it difficult to imagine life returning to normal. The Masters Sef, Crissy, Meth and Wenda were amongst the returning group to Tardania, leaving the Hisian-set to head back to the Sleep. “There are still plenty of mysteries to solve to keep me busy for a very long time.”

Using this special moment to show his appreciation, Brandor gazed purposely around at each member of the group. No need to say thank you for what they had done, the quiet unspoken exchanges were warm and full of hope. Last of all, he looked at Bane. The young man’s emotional trauma would take a long time to heal, but he seemed to have grown in maturity at last. “Your fiery passions are a treasure, Bane, and a good motivator when in the right circumstances..., but if you seek to learn more, then you are most welcome to come to the Sleep. I only lay at your feet one condition, and that is for you to leave that biting wrath outside of our Grand Halls and tied up to a nearby tree. Not that I have anything against trees of course but... they do not live as we do, so may tolerate it far more than I.”

“To think you nearly stopped me from coming on this journey is incredible,” Bane said, meaning when he had first met him at Tarden.

“I doubt I could have stopped you, even with all the powers of the *Sacred*.”

Laughing, Bane was going to miss them. “No, I suppose not.”

“Where shall we go my little Fifanian friend?” Hallen asked Kifter, the two ambling south along the main highway together. Glad to be on the back of an accommodating Kyboe, given by Nabban, the big Hite was in high spirits after the awkward farewells.

“Tilor might be a suitable place to rest and play,” Kifter said, enjoying the after-turn’s warmth. Relieved it was finally over, “Yes..., Tilor will do just fine.”

“It is certainly a good place for a sharp Fife and handsome Hite to conjure up a living,” Hallen agreed. It was what they were good at.

Riding over the rise, Tarmon pursed his lips at the terrible view. Enormous dark areas of Selmor Forest had been burnt to the ground, amazed that his beloved Shanene had survived. Close to her in his heart, he was pleased to see dashes of bright colour already lining the edges that were untouched by the flames. Proving Shanene had been busy, using energies in the ground to rejuvenate their home, he laughed at the prospect. Home! Yes, it was now a place he could call home. A solitary pale figure appeared at the forest’s edge. Spurring his Kyboe on, both longed for a warm embrace.

Difficult to keep track of time, only the tiny thin lines of light scratching their way past the bulky door granted Aider Nash and his compatriots a chance to register each passing turn of the day. The third since that close encounter with those vile Gorls, the stifling conditions in this tunnel under Mandurin were reaching the point of suffocation. To not feel the freshness of a cool breeze again was a horrendous prospect. Another two people had died, adding to the tension. Stuffy, attitudes were beginning to temper, having a mental affect on his companions as much as a physical one.

“What was that?” Cern hissed, certain he heard something above.

Ears turned to listen, the whispers silenced. Accustomed to sounds of falling debris, presuming it was more of the same, but other scraping noises meant someone was there. The low din of barely audible voices shook everyone, fears erupting. Another crash, a rolling sound reached them, certain a large piece of rock was being moved. Imaginations strained, deducing *Gorl-darl’s* hordes had returned.

Gasping when the door latch rattled, something was trying to get in. Wide eyes stared, dreading the outcome, a clunking noise unexpected. Someone was trying a key in the latch. A solid click and snapping sound echoed down the tunnel to the fearful occupants. They had found a key and unlocked the door!

“Get ready,” Nash ordered, holding weapons ready.

Weary and destitute, they could still make a last defence. The door groaned inwards, a flood of light penetrating the darkness. No growls of triumph echoed however, only the quiet hopeful mutterings of human voices.

“Aider...! Aider, are you there?”

A voice so sweet it punched the aged fellow into shock, believing it too good to be true. Apprehensive in case they had become delusional, he dared a reply to the tender calls of his youthful companion. Rasping, his voice hoarse and dry from lack of nourishment, “Casvern!” Aider whispered, just loud enough for the newcomers to hear. “Is that you?” “It is my delightful friend,” Casvern Tarn replied, his relief evident. The stench burnt his nostrils, but he did not care, walking into the darkness like a healing saviour.

Slumping against the wall, tearful, Nash could not hold back the emotions. Drained, when the silhouette of his compatriot stood in front, he leant forward, resting his old head on the young man’s chest.

“Everything is fine,” Tarn promised, embracing him. “You are safe, it is over.”

Convinced her world was to remain eternally dark, High-lady Lizan could not climb from the despair. Two turns of the day since High-man Lorvanon had told her about the

loss of her entire family, the unquenchable pain had punctured her will to live. Rainer had avoided her like a disease on his return, heading off into the wilderness to lose himself to grief. Leaving a void in her heart, how was she to recover from this?

“I am sorry my loves,” she muttered, her dour voice echoing around the silvery chamber of fine design. Blaming herself for contributing to this horrific outcome, if she had permitted Manon to teach their two sons discipline and respect, this may not have happened. Just a delusion she knew, the consequences for both Nole and Hanor had nothing to do with discipline. A grim twist of fate for one and a supernatural destiny for the other, their ending had nothing to do with their upbringing. Searching for other ways it may have worked out, but it just upset her more whenever she did. Another surge of grief whelmed up as was the pattern. Crying so hard recently, she was surprised there were any tears left.

Pacing back and forth beside the empty dining table in the rooftop chamber, used many times by her family for meals and to play games when the weather was good, but the stunning views of the surrounding hilltops had changed forever. Emotionally drained, she did not want to look any further than her next breath. Even though the people of Manson needed a leader, someone to lift them through this dark aftermath, but she could not do it. How could they expect her to lead now? Looking into people’s eyes and trying to smile when inside she was wilting just like they were, how could she do it, she was just a woman, and an emotional one at that?

Sudden and unexpected, an unusual silence fell on the ornately constructed sunroom, prompting another look at that last thought. “I am... just a... woman,” she said, aloud this time. Like a light penetrating the darkness, she looked around as though the answers she needed were all about her. Calming down, glimpsing the illusion swamping her, so overwhelmed by her grief, she now began to see the motives behind her tears. Accepting the loss was hard, but upon closer inspection, she could see that much of her upset was based on fears for the future, her future. Underneath the concerns about her family’s destruction, she could now see the self-pity fuelling her despair. Thousands had been slain or brutally wounded whilst she had stayed out of harms way here at Manson.

A different question formed. Who was she to lose herself like this when Manson had been dealt an even greater blow? So too the Cropping Villages of Sorle and Missel Hoe, if someone was not prepared to stand up and face those fears for the future then how long were people going to linger in their grief?

An additional thought arose. Was time the great healer as it was commonly told or something else? Dwelling on that, she received another glimmer of light. Envisioning herself in this same emotional state in the future, what was it that would eventually help her return to normality? Was it time or was there another reason? The question repeated itself for her to see the wider picture. What difference was there between that future time and now? What change would take place to enable her to get on with her life again? Stopping when the insight came, it was not a matter of how long she would *have* to suffer the grief, but how long she was *willing* to.

Peering through the balcony doors to the fields beyond, it was mid-morning, the grey sky overcast. Mirroring her feelings, a sudden break in the cloud permitted a splendid fan of sunlight to shed its warmth on the surrounding hilltops. Could she not do the same and be a light for the people of Manson? Sensitive to their loss, the answer was yes.

Clambering emotions began cracking like baked mud succumbing to the movements of a flexing muscle. Time was not the great healer, but the firm decision to say enough is enough. Her pain began dissolving, strength and power replacing it. Desires to be that leader grew. Withstanding the doubts clinging to their shadowy existence, she straightened her back, returning the natural poise she had recently lost. Confidence overran leaky emotions. Wanting her people to see a compassionate woman who was hurting but who was moving ahead with dignity and direction, a pulse to do it energised her. Not feeling this strong for a long time, the people of Manson needed her now more than ever.

Chapter 32 : The Great Maker

Relaxing back in his chair on the balcony to enjoy the caressing rays of the sun, it was the fifth turn since arriving back at the Sleep, and Brandor was still recovering. Mind and body aching from exhaustive demands of the past few seasons, he hoped to see a steady line of intrigued students eventually come along the old beaten track from Manter. Playful tunes of a couple of Fliryngs on the balcony wall seemed a long way from recent turbulences.

Quietenning busy thoughts, others of the Hisian-set were already at work with numerous projects, eagerness again the bloodline of this grand building. Questions still remained about what was witnessed at The Centre Vale, failing to reach a conclusion. Lacking the will to fathom it out now, he closed his eyes, the serenity washing away the lingering qualms.

“BRANDOR!”

Opening his eyes from the pounding impact of the unexpected voice, Brandor fell forward, shocked that he was not in his seat at the Sleep. On his knees atop an undulating slab of pitted grey stone, where had the Sleep gone? Surrounded by a ring of thick white mist, pulses of colour energised it, detecting great power within.

Standing, he gasped when looking above. Without cloud or ceiling to block his view, the majesty of the heavens revealed its glory like never before. Countless stars and galaxies were shimmering in a scene of rare magnificence. Initial fears eased, somehow sensing he was in no danger. When the voice spoke again, it seemed to come at him from every direction, searching the mist for who it could be.

“Have you not been here before?”

Certain he had, this place was similar to when he had been given the vision of creating a field of energy to attract the lost Souls responsible for the death of Tarkon. Unsure of the location, but the *Presence* was unmistakable. Through that understanding, his heart opened to a sudden flow of *Divine Love*, the influx of sweet power enrapturing. Appreciating the work he had done recently, a wave of peace dissolved the worries of yester-turn.

“Yes..., I have been here before,” he said, appreciating this blessing.

“Look at the fruits of your labour.”

Following the promptings of his heart, Brandor moved to the edge of the stone, the white mist drawing back. Higher than the greatest mountain, he could see the entirety of The Freelands. Surprised when by thought alone he drew closer, from his vantage point, he could see people going about their business as life returned to normal. But something was different. “The people of The Freelands have matured,” he said. “The war has changed them. There is a definite appreciation of being alive.”

Individuals were performing their work and enjoying their leisure more readily. The war had made a positive difference and the people were savouring the little things. From basking in the sunshine to tasting simple foods, activities were done in a less hectic manner. Valuing relationships too, it was uplifting to see.

Through that insight alone, a score of questions had been answered. Humbling, he sensed the incredible wisdom of the *Being* who still remained hidden. A colossal presence, “Who... are you?” he dared to ask.

“I am the Great Initiator of Life on this Planet.”

Difficult to imagine even for Brandor, the *entity* continued.

“The Universe is made up of different layers, and within each layer, which you call a Realm, we have the countless life forms living out their lives. Most are unaware of the Greater Lives surrounding them. Until an individual is ready to experience beyond the boundaries of their present existence, the door to their awareness remains closed.”

Wanting to understand the plight of The Freelands for so long, these insights about life were incredible.

“You are learning to experience life in your Realm to develop Wisdom and Love, Creativity and Intelligence. As you mature, portals to the higher worlds open just like this experience is happening now. It is a process that unfurls over hundreds of lifetimes. Each lifetime serves a purpose, and then it is broken down only for you to build another to experience other aspects of life. You change repeatedly just like everyone else. What you desire to become, individually and collectively as a people, is what matters.”

“It sounds easy when you exist in this blissful state.”

“Evil is a tool by which you experience the loneliness of darkness and separation. When you seek the Light within your heart, you will realise that it is a gateway by which you are guided from the Higher Realms. Learn to listen to it and much suffering will be prevented. The people of The Freelands have been through a great darkness and survived, and because of that cleansing, you can now see the positive results.”

“Why do you call it a cleansing?” Brandor asked, managing to keep up.

“Moving from one stage of your development to the next, there is always an overcoming of something that has to be accomplished. Facing up to your lower emotions like fear, anger and jealousy, permits those lesser energies to be transmuted into the higher ones of joy, happiness and fulfilment. Revelling in dark energies merely stunts your progress.”

“Are you saying our emotions are types of energy?”

“What else could they be?”

“I... I had never looked upon them like that,” Brandor admitted, amazed.

“Your evolution involves handling and transmuting these energies as much as it does expanding your consciousness. This is a fundamental part of your adventure.”

“Adventure?”

“Is it not an adventure?”

“Most people would find it hard to accept it is all an adventure.”

“Picture a place of peace where there is no pain, strife or toil.”

“That is easy whilst here,” Brandor stated, the blissful sensations tingling.

“How long will it be before you get bored?”

Coming from such an exalted *Being*, the question surprised the Dai-laman. “I could get used to it,” he said, peering up at the starlit sky again.

“That is because of what you have just been through.”

Brandor respected the point. “What is this place?”

“It is a place between worlds that is closer to your true home.”

“If this is closer to my true home then what am I doing down on that world?”

“Having an adventure.”

Laughing, the realisation sinking in, “It seems much more than an adventure.”

“Good, that is what it is supposed to be like. By seeing yourself as an individual separate from everyone else, the illusion of isolation takes effect and thus you can create and become whatever you want.”

“And where do you fit into this?”

“I evolved beyond human limitations a very long time ago. Nevertheless, I too am evolving, but on a higher wavelength. My arena of activity involves the stimulation of life forms. Once a planet has reached a certain point in its development, I am no longer bound to its destiny, which means I am free to pass onto other areas if I so choose.”

“And has The Freelands reached that point?”

“It has. What you saw at The Centre Vale was my liberation from this planet. I am no longer bound to it as you are to your body.”

“Are you saying this planet was your body?” Brandor said, astonished.

“I used this planet for a body just as you use your human one for yours. Does that alarm you?”

“Sounds incredible.”

“Because it is incredible.”

Lacking the knowledge to say otherwise, the energies released when Hanor had obtained the fifth and final *Pillar of Life* seemed too complex to grasp. “Why was Hanor permitted to merge with the *Pillars* but no one else?”

“Because he was the most advanced individual on the planet. His purity of heart enabled those energies to flow through him and merge. Those who are pure of heart can open many doors.”

“Pure of heart?”

“Those who have clear motives. You not only think of yourself but everyone. This you already have considerable knowledge of, but it is only under trial can such motives be known for sure. You may think you are capable of many things, but would be surprised at how quickly you might fall given the unexpected opportunity.”

“Can you not just create a pleasant world for us to live in?”

“There are Forces in the Universe that are as destructive and powerful as the creative ones that build life in the first place. Each has their time of manifestation. You build and enjoy, and then destroy to make room for the next creation. Life is not mundane by any standards. Only individuals who do not challenge themselves experience monotonous lives. The Universe is a flurry of activity, why would you want to spend eternity doing very little?”

“I do not.”

“Neither do I.”

“Where will this evolution lead us to in the end?”

“There is no end. You should therefore ask yourself, what do you want to become? You can ask that now for this life or look ahead to future lives. Learning how to handle greater levels of power is the aim so that you may one day stimulate those smaller lives that are within you, just like you are in me. But worry not about the distant future, it would be more fruitful for you to concentrate on where you are now.”

“That makes sense. How long will this take?”

“Why, are you in a hurry? Eternity is a very long time.”

“It is the suffering that wears people down,” Brandor said, speaking for everyone.

“Darkness permits your sensitivities to heighten so you may savour life. But know this; you will always return to the Source, even if you descend to the darkest depths of creation. Your true home is within you. Be assured by this for you know there is no deception in my heart.”

Brandor nodded before breaking into a grin. “I cannot picture you having a heart.”

“What do you think was at The Centre Vale?”

“A lot of power!”

“Your heart is not just an organ that beats. It is a physical manifestation of an energy centre that is invisible to your eyes. I have already said your heart is a gateway to the Higher Realms. Listen to it and trust those impressions as best you can, and you will draw nearer to the guides of this Planet and... me.”

“I have tried to do that but have not always been faithful.”

“See it as a higher form of communication. What I mean by higher and lower are the vibrational rates of each Realm. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. You will need to be sharp for your remaining seasons. There are many who will need teaching before you leave.”

“Leave?”

“From now on, I am withdrawing the energies that have enabled you to live a prolonged life. It will be the same with the rest of the Hisian-set. That form of exposure is no longer necessary.”

Silent at the prospect, taking his long life for granted, Brandor knew the full impact of what had just been said could not be felt here. Thinking about the scale of this *Being* again, he was curious of the colourful mist surrounding him. “Can I not... see *You*?”

“If this veil was removed, the brilliance of my Light would dissolve you. You are still in a physical body that cannot withstand such potent Forces. It is why creatures like Nyshifters and Boverns could not endure the Light when flowing from the Stone.”

A tinge regretful, Brandor sensed the sight would be glorious.

“The Universe is an ocean of potential, and The One Great Life carries all possibilities within its eternal existence. Time does not bind it and neither does space. The Source is the ultimate Light of every heart and mind. There is a great mystery behind that statement, but I will not reveal its content now. I am The Great Maker, and as you are, I once was, and if you so choose, so too will you one day be like me. This is the eternal cycle of life to which we are a part, so build your dreams as I have built mine.”

Sensing this interaction on the verge of closing, Brandor tried to rustle up questions but could not think of anything.

“On your deathbed, I will come to you if you call me. I will take you on a journey through time and space, and answer many of the questions that still remain. Project a clear thought towards me and I will come. OPEN YOUR EYES.”

The booming words shook the Dai-laman. Sitting forward, finding himself back in his chair on the balcony, he peered around startled by the change. Shielding his eyes from a glaring sun, that was no dream.

Flushed through by the astonishing details, the fact his long days were soon to end felt somewhat unnerving. Dismissing the worries, concentrating instead on the *Great Maker's* promise to take him on a journey through the Universe, a tame grin appeared.

Buzzing from the encounter, he sat back in his seat. Restful, a faint clanging sound disturbed the silence. Spotting a wagon coming up over the rise along the old route from Manter, familiar features of two people he had come to know drew a smile. "Well, Bane and Hayla, if you are to be my first students, I could not wish for a better couple."

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 Altiar

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