

INTO THE VALLEY'S GRASP

1.

"Vinola."

The thought of her was the first that came into his mind. Had he spoken her name out loud? Perhaps. However, the crass reality made itself known as he found himself in the same prison carriage wherein he had gotten his last, troubled sleep. Outside, the morning sun shone upon the greenish, Gabbar'dani landscape.

"No use to be calling to her here, prisoner", one of the guards said, walking past the carriage with a melancholic smile on his face. "You're not likely to meet any women where you're going. "

Tregos shut his eyes and remembered. It all seemed very unreal. He, a soldier of about thirty-three years, now condemned and transported to captivity by the same, stout army he had served for more than a decade of his life. The Rakkhari war machine was functional and swift, and had brought him far from his home village. He had imagined himself dying in the field many times over. Oftentimes, it had been a close call. A soldier's life was short and fraught with danger. One could perish from infected wounds, from sustained injuries, or from disease. Tregos' body, like many of his fellow comrades, was burly and short. He was, in fact, quite a bit shorter than most of his comrades had been, but what he lacked in length, he had compensated in swiftness. The war in the footsteps of the Godslayer had to continue; each able soldier within the vast Rakkhari realm had to contribute in the way able to him.

Via many different places of war, Tregos' last posting had been here. This country around him, Gabbar'dan, was a province and a prefecture, though more or less in the final stages of its order. The young Prefect did his best to quell the growing disorder and social banditry in the realm. How was the order of a Prefecture to prevail when not even the guards in the capital city were safe? It would be only a matter of time, or so Tregos' comrades had heard, before higher command would be forced to send more Rakkhari troops to the central parts of the country. In the north and northeast, however, things were safer and relatively peaceful. This was true in the case of Brataikrów, where Tregos and quite a few other Rakkhari soldiers had been posted for more than a year. It seemed like a touch of irony, then, that it had been during his first visit to the neighboring, prefectural city of Vanshiyr-Doryath where Tregos had committed his two, ultimately condemning, crimes by the sword.

2.

Or, at least, such had been the version in the eyes of the judges. Three weeks earlier, he had been allowed a week's leave and teamed up with his friends to visit Vanshiyr-Doryath. He shut his eyes and remembered his last afternoon of freedom. A market place in Vanshiyr-Doryath's Lower City. Salesmen trading their wares, women walking about with clay pots on their heads and salesmen's aides with clothes or other pieces of embroidery folded in their arms, hurrying to and fro. The market streets had been packed with people, seeking to do trade in both wares and gossip and to find shelter from the afternoon sun. The climate inside the crater surrounding the city, lush as it was, had been humid. Tregos had, indeed, come to like Vanshiyr-Doryath and, as he sat with a jug of soft drink at his table, had begun planning to apply for a new posting here when things became calmer and the war effort would draw to the final victory. Perhaps, had he thought, if Vinola had been willing, they would be able to settle here and set up shop. A house in the Lower City would've been a rather nice prospect, in which they would be able to raise their family and retire in their forties. Tregos, in a civilian's clothes, had sat and dreamt of the various prospects.

3.

No indication of anything extraordinary had taken place. Then, the brawl had started. Two guards from the Prefect's order had, for some reason, gotten into a fight with a bunch of broad-shouldered market workers. Tregos hadn't been able to discern what the brawl had been about in the street close by. With certainty, though, he had been able to tell that most of the market workers had simply been troublemakers. The guards, on their hand, had been outnumbered. The two guards of the Prefect's order were one elderly man and a seemingly very young and inexperienced soldier. As the market workers had grabbed clubs and knives, towering above the soldiers, the veteran guard from the Prefect's Order had maintained his calm and tried to reason with them. The workers, however, hadn't been willing to listen and the young soldier had drawn his sword. Shouts of abuse and swearwords had been flying through the air. Confused, Tregos had looked at it and seen two of the workers beating at the young soldier; more or less chasing him into a corner. He held, trembling with fear, his sword in front of him, but the workers could tell of his fear and had only been all the more driven forth by it. As for the elderly soldier, he had been knocked unconscious and was now lying on the ground with five workers beating him. Tregos had known that the lives of the two prefectural soldiers wouldn't be of much worth unless more City Guards were to arrive soon. The young soldier had tried to stab away some inexperienced and rather desperate moves at his enemies, which had held them off for a while. However, they had been closing in on him and wouldn't turn back.

Tregos had, in that instant, made a decision. He had put his jug down, got up from the table, walked over to the young soldier and ripped the sword-hilt from his hands. This, of course, had

made him the prime target for the brutes. Unknowing that they were now fighting an experienced Rakkhari veteran, they had shouted some Gabbar'dani swearwords and charged at him *en masse*. With the young guardsman's sword in his hand he had cut their attempt short. One of the brutes he had killed on the spot, and wounded two others. One of the brutes fell back and drew an entire market table with him. Tregos had commanded them to stand down in Rakkhari, as he hadn't known much of the Gabbar'dani dialect, but they had been too bewildered to listen. The fight had grown out of hand, and other sorts of troublemakers had also seemed to join the fight. Prefectural Guardsmen had ultimately been rushing through a nearby alley to assist their comrades and drive the brawlers back. Another band of market workers had shown up, drawing knives and begun fighting the first pack of market workers. Some, as best they could, tried to plunder the unguarded market tables nearby; others were content with watching. It had been a market brawl with a deadly edge, quickly spreading across the block. Tregos had been able to discern the desperation, hunger and wrath in the eyes of the Gabbar'dani. Had he been wearing his uniform and insignia, there had been a possibility of him calming the situation. Though for the present, no one understood his language or perceived him as anything else than a random thug wielding a guardsman's sword. The brutes were, mostly, unskilled and poorly armed, but they were many – and dangerous nevertheless. Utter turmoil had taken over; people had accidentally stepped in front of each other and gotten beaten or hacked down by the Prefect's Guard.

It had been in this moment that Tregos' tactical skill and caution failed him. At one occasion, he himself had gotten pinned down a doorway in a close fight with a Prefectorial Guardsman, trading blows with him. The Guardsman had shouted: "Yield, scum!" or something similar to him in Gabbar'dani dialect; Tregos had replied to him in his own, Rakkhari dialect. However, none of them had really been able to hear the other over the brawl; ultimately, Tregos has struck a blow at his opponent's right-arm to disarm him of his sword. The Gabbar'dani Guardsman had dropped his weapon and fallen back towards the wall; blood gushing from the wound in his right arm. Tregos, still acting on instinct in his attempt to escape, had been run into by a man clothed in bluish clothes and cut him down in the heat of the moment.

4.

That moment had changed Tregos' life. The fight had drawn to a close, with more Prefectural Guards arriving. The remaining brutes had lost their urge to fight and were either imprisoned or scattered throughout the streets. At least four market-workers; or rather, criminals, had been killed by Tregos' sword and lay dead on the ground. So, however, had been the case with two Prefectorial Guardsmen. One of them, Tregos had killed in self-defense. The other had, in a moment of misjudgment and irrationality, perceived him as one of the thugs and set out to kill him

by striking at his throat. Tregos had parried, ducked and eliminated the threat by stabbing the Guardsman in the chest. The other Guardsman, whom Tregos had wounded in the right arm, had not only been wounded – but bled to death from the wound. Most devastating and unnecessary, however, had been the man dressed in blue which Tregos had cut down in the doorway – simply due to nothing else than the chaotic conditions of it all. Tregos had merely seen a bluish shadow drawing close upon him; not able to tell whether the man holding his arm inside his blue cloak had been wearing a weapon or not. Moments after, his blood had been on Tregos' sword.

The consequences had soon become known to Tregos. The man in blue clothes which he had killed, had been a famous merchant and a nobleman with ties to the leadership of the city. The reason why he had rushed into the marketplace had been for nothing else than to see if his relative, a merchant living close by, was unharmed by the brawl. And the fact that Tregos, a Rakkhari soldier, had killed him along with two Prefectorial Guardsmen, had seemed to be all that mattered in the eyes of the authorities and the representatives of the Rakkhari realm. Tregos' leave had of course been suspended in an instant. He had been jailed and charged and found guilty of two severe crimes: Stupidity and bloodlust.

5.

These crimes, along with the fact that he had killed, if unwillingly, a Gabbar'dani nobleman with ties to the leadership, had been something his superiors couldn't pass without judgment.

"Our armies are strained enough as it is", his superior, a man named Korel, had said in front of the persons of authority set to judge the whole situation. It had been a quiet afternoon in a banquet hall in Vanshiyr-Doryath, close to the prison. "How can we Rakkhari expect the liberated peoples to trust us, if we can't rely on the behavior of our own soldiers? Here in Gabbar'dan, many sentiments towards us are dark enough as it is. The actions of this renegade, Tregos, can and must be punished."

Thus, Tregos had been sentenced to deportation after a short trial. The destination had been the infamous Valley of Forgetfulness – a place, or so rumor held it, where one would lose one's memories. This, Tregos thought, was probably just rumor: it seemed more likely, that it was a place where one was forgotten by the outside world. Nevertheless, he could see the towering mountain range in front of him and the gates approaching. It would be the end of his freedom and the beginning of his deportation.

"Driver, stop!" shouted a soldier in front of the gate.

The cart stopped. Tregos was brought out. His hands weren't chained, but he had no weapons and it seemed evident the guards wouldn't expect him to run (not that there would have been many

places where to run, had he even had the strength).

"I see you've brought the prisoner", the Highguard of the gates said.

"Yes. On what charges?"

"Stupidity and bloodlust. And some special circumstances", one of the guards said, "pertaining to this case. Sentence is to be effective immediately."

The Highguard nodded.

"Very well."

He approached Tregos. He was a man in his mid-thirties with a stern face and a calm, though not unsympathetic, look in his eyes.

"Prisoner", he said, "we don't receive many newcomers here these days. It's a shame we have to convict our own people to this place, but if you resort to bloodlust you've chosen a path with the consequences that entails." It was evident that the Highguard spoke a rural dialect, but that he did his best trying to make it sound more sophisticated than it actually was.

"When these gates open; you walk through them and we'll close them behind you. Simple as that. Do you have any questions?"

Tregos was astonished. He hadn't expected anyone to ask if a convicted prisoner like him had any questions.

"Yes, Highguard", he replied, "I don't understand... what is it I'm supposed to do here?"

The Highguard hinted a melancholic smile.

"That depends on you. This, the Valley of Forgetfulness, is a place of remorse more than anything else. What you do is up to you, but I suppose you'll have time to think over your actions. Once you pass through these gates, the Rakkhari realm has disposed of you for good."

With those words, the large, metallic gates were opened. Tregos was urged forward by the guards, and made his way through the gates.

"Think of what you've done", one of the soldiers shouted at him in a mocking tone, "for as long as you can remember any of it, that is!"

With those words, the massive mechanisms of the gates worked and made noise like a roaring waterfall. At the last, they slammed shut behind him.

6.

Tregos could see the mountain range and the gates far behind him. He had been walking for almost half a day. It looked like it was noon. The valley seemed desolate and empty. Here and there lay heaps of rocks, and bits of vegetation on the ground. Here and there, also, lay heaps of skeletons from prisoners who had gone before him and perished. Had they simply withered away

here, Tregos wondered, not even trying to make it out? Or maybe, he thought, they had exhausted all their powers trying to force the mountains. The mountain range reminded him, to a degree, of the place in his homeland within the vast Rakkhari realm. What he had to do first, he realized, would be to set up camp somewhere. Then he would have to gather food, and study the whereabouts. No place, he thought, not even the Valley of Forgetfulness, could be without natural exits. Perhaps some subterranean caves, or some passable spot in the mountains. There was a way, he would find it – and then, he thought, he would find of a way to take vengeance on the Rakkhari realm who had sentenced him to this.

During the first days he built a camp in a small cave in a mountainside. He had no tools, but was able to make a small, primitive bow and even hunt some game. He had also found a water source close by the cave. His confidence grew. He was Tregos: he would make it. If the Rakkhari authorities had thought it would scare him having to live in this valley, they would be gravely mistaken. He had been living under open skies most of his adult life: a bit of discomfort was nothing to a veteran soldier like him. Two more days went by, and he explored more parts of the Valley. Crooked, sad trees stood here and there close to what seemed like chasms in the ground. Then, during an afternoon, Tregos thought about the woman. What, he wondered, had her name been again? Rossa? No. Detys? No, not at all. He realized – he couldn't recall her name. He remembered her face, her voice and her traits – he knew, that she had existed and that they had thought of forming a family after his service in the Rakkhari army was to be over. But indeed, he was incapable of remembering her name.

Most of the evening, as the sky grew darker, he tried but couldn't remember her name. What if, he thought and felt a striking of fear in his chest, she had never existed? But yes – he could remember the place where they had lived, what the house had looked like. What she had felt like, how her voice had sounded yes – she existed. So why couldn't he remember her name, then? Was it due to exhaustion? Or shock of some sort?

"Think of what you've done... as long as you can remember any of it, that is!"

Tregos felt his heart beat faster with fear. He remembered the soldier's words at the gate. The Valley of Forgetfulness. Was there any truth to the rumors? No, he thought, there couldn't be. Such a thing was impossible: What a man learned, he would remember throughout his life unless old age or some sort of illness would make his memory wane. It had nothing whatsoever to do with which country one lived in. Surely, he thought, he would remember the name of the woman the next day. He made camp, and went to an uneasy sleep.

The next day, he found an even bigger pile of bones – human, all of them. Some of them were in piles, others were spread out here and there. That seemed strange to him. As if they had simply been lying down and died. Perhaps of malnutrition – but, though not overflowing with it, there were game in the Valley. With a bit of wits, one could build traps to catch small game and even birds. Water was not lacking, either, and there were plants that were eatable if one knew which ones to pick. Tregos felt overcome by fear. Why would the former prisoners simply have died in the dust like that? It made no sense at all. Soldiers fought and died on the battlefield; prisoners died either due to malnutrition, disease or in vain attempts to escape. But they didn't lie down and die just like that. He felt a cold whisper in the wind and looked around; was there anyone there? Not that he could see. It was time, he decided, to go back to the camp, shake the sightings off his mind and begin working on a way out of here as he had planned from the beginning. The camp was to the west, he knew, so the gate whence he had come had to be in the south... or, he thought, was it necessarily so? The gate might have been in the east. It was difficult to tell: it was late afternoon, and he was tired.

8.

Two days later, he found himself thirsty. Drink... yes. He looked around inside his cave, but found no water source. But how had it been possible for him to stay alive this long, without water? He must have had a source someplace! His heart pounding with fear, Tregos got up. He rushed out of the cave, and there – he could hear the sound of water. Somehow, he recognized the place: the well. He rushed to it, drank and felt how tears of relief mixed with the water. Refreshed, he started to think. The sudden relief he felt was, nevertheless, jolted by fear as he realized he couldn't remember why he had got here. He remembered something about a fight... sword, blood, chaotic incidents in a marketplace in Vanshiyr-Doryath. Yes, that had indeed been the name of the city: the Prefectoral capital city in Gabbar'dan, in the Rakkhari realm. His name was Tregos: he was a Rakkhari soldier and had been for most of his life. Then, he thought, why was he here? He couldn't remember. Now, he recalled, this valley had a name to it. Something about memory. The Valley of Memory? Yes, that was it, he thought. Though something, he realized, still cold with fear, was wrong with this place. Perhaps the "Valley of Memory" simply meant that one was to lose one's memory if one stayed here long enough? Rumors, he thought to himself – but he couldn't shake away the feeling of having become more forgetful and disoriented. Through his many years in the field, especially during long marches, he had seen young soldiers becoming disoriented either due to fear, drought or homesickness. Quite a few, also, might forget where they were and what they were doing due to lack of sleep. This had happened to him quite a few times, and was something the superiors wanted to avoid. No use commanding a group of blunted, disoriented young soldiers into battle. At the end of the day, after having gained some more firewood and a successful hunt,

he felt that his mind was getting sharper. Perhaps, he thought, this Valley had some strangeness to it – but none that couldn't be conquered if one knew the terrain and the system behind it. He, Tregos, had lived the disciplined life of a soldier. No one could take that away from him. He had made a primitive torch to light the way back to his camp. It shone at a piece of white rock in front of him. A beautiful stone, he thought, grabbed it and took it with him in a pouch he had made.

9.

The following morning felt frightening, without him being able to tell why. His past seemed a blur, as did the present. What is wrong with me, he wondered. Something is definitely wrong with me... or with this place. He grabbed the white stone; it felt rather warm, in comparison to everything else that felt cold. It was time to light one of those phenomena that gave heat. But how? He knew how to... but he couldn't make it work, though he sat for a long time and experimented. His only attempt to make heat and flame, simply resulted in him burning up most of the grass he had collected. It just didn't seem clear to him how to make the different moments of work into a meaningful, coordinated unity.

"It's this place", he thought, "it makes you sick! Sick in your mind..." he stumbled out of the cave, laughing in fright. An invisible foe! This Valley was his prison, and his invisible foe. He walked out in the open.

"You'll never defeat me!" he shouted. "I am Tregos. You'll never deprive me of that!" His shouting echoed throughout the mountain range and across the valley. He walked on, not knowing where, until he found the spot where the skeletons lay spread again. He realized, that it must have been this place that had done this to the skeletons. They had simply forgotten... everything, he realized; probably walked around without aim, until they had dozed off and died in passivity and malnutrition. A fate worse, he thought, than being slain in battle. He felt the rock warm inside his pouch: he had taken it with him. Well, standing here and shouting, he thought, wouldn't make him any warmer. It was time for another attempt at making heat and flames. The morning sun wasn't that high yet; in time, it would get higher and bring some warmth to the valley. In the evening, however, he hoped that he would be able to remember how to make heat and flame.

Half the day had passed – and Tregos had lost the path back to his camp. His forehead was wet with sweat, his lungs felt heavy, his heart beat at the height of its capacity. He was afraid. Not only was he afraid, but his instincts told him someone was following him. After a short while, he came to a place where reddish dust covered the earth. He walked up towards a mountainous cave. It was too dark to see anything in there; at least without heat and flame. Then, from outside, he heard a noise. He peered back out, and thought he could see movement – and something reddish at the corner of his eye. Slowly, he moved back outside. There, in the dust – he could see his own

footsteps... and a pair of two others. His mind went tactical and cold, like his days from the battlefield. Someone else was here too. And that someone was following him.

He continued eastward. Someone was following him: someone he couldn't see. This, Tregos thought, he had to remember. He kept repeating it to himself. "Someone is here", he thought, "someone is here... someone is here..." Ultimately, he arrived in a network of caves and natural columns. The stone felt hot in his pouch. Could this, somehow, be connected to him being followed? He couldn't tell – but he could hear. Someone was out there in the sand. A whisper of a movement – then nothing. Tregos, quietly, moved the white stone out of the pouch and placed it on the ground. Then he, himself, disappeared into the shadows.

10.

For a long time, he waited for something to happen in a small hole in the cavern wall, two meters above ground and the cave opening. Nothing seemed to happen. Daylight, the very thin rays that actually made it into the cave, was fading from the entrance. Then he could hear the whispers again. Someone was drawing near to the cave entrance. From beneath, Tregos could discern a tall shape, dressed almost entirely in red and with a reddish sort of helmet, enter the cave. The creature walked slowly, as if looking around inside the cave, and went forth to the stone. It was now, Tregos realized, or never. Without a sound, he dodged from his hideout and struck his feet on the creature's shoulder. The creature in the red cloak fell forward in an inhuman, mechanical sound of surprise, and dropped the white stone in the sand. The moment of surprise, however, was short. Tregos could see how a claw-like arm slashed by, mere inches away from his throat as he ducked to the side, and buried itself in the rough-hewn stonewall. Now, Tregos had his chance; he tore the helmet off the creature and rammed a rock into the side of its tall head with all his might. A scream was heard, somehow, in Tregos' own mind as well as inside the cave. It seemed in that moment, as the reddish helmet was torn off and the cloak fallen to the side, that the shape of the red figure became more visible and real. The cold face, metallic and ungraspable and with many armor-like hoses in it, along with two glassy, inhuman eyes, yielded no expression. Monster, Tregos thought, avoided another slash from the creature's left arm – its right arm was still stuck in the wall, and struck another blow at its temple with the rock.

"Who are you!?" he shouted like a maniac, and grabbed hold of one of the hoses, "who are you!?" In that instant, the creature was able to loosen its left arm from the wall. Tregos felt how he was lifted with immense strength several feet off the ground. He grabbed one of the hoses of the creature's mask – presuming it was a mask – and tore it off. The creature, an instant away from killing him, seemed disoriented and fell several steps back. Tregos could feel a rush of disdained words, curses and emotions of contempt rush through his head. The next moment, however,

any element of surprise he had gained was over. The creature flung him through the room and he was violently smashed towards the wall. He didn't lose consciousness, but saw the red-clothed creature running towards the exit of the cave, with the white rock in his hand. Tregos got up. He hadn't lost his vigor as a soldier, and hurried after the creature. He could, though now with some difficulty, see the creature more clearly. Its red cloak flew in the wind. Tregos grabbed a rock from the ground, took the piece of cloth he used as a stone-sling, and landed a shot onto the left shoulder of the creature. The latter dropped the white stone and seemed to slip to the side on the rocks; lodging its right foot in a small chasm. It fell forward, disoriented and bewildered, seeming to care about nothing but the white stone. Tregos dashed forward, jumped next to the reddish creature in a death-defying jump, and snatched the white stone almost from underneath its hideous face. He ducked and, by mere inches, avoided another blow of the creature. He closed his hand on the sand and hurled it up the creature's face.

It's the white stone, he thought, it wants the white stone.

Inside his mind, Tregos could feel a forceful, demanding voice telling him one word: *<Give!*

He fought it back, clutched his fingers around the white stone, and dashed to make a distance between the red-draped creature and himself.

Tregos was a fast runner, but the fight had quickly taken its toll on his endurance. He gasped for air as he looked around. The red-cloaked creature was slower, but nevertheless kept following him. Ultimately, it seemed to hurry its steps. Tregos didn't know to where he should run, but he knew he had to get away. In front of him, an opening was seen in the mountainside. He quickly ran into it and disappeared, still with the warm, white stone in his hand.

11.

He barely avoided falling to his death, as a three-meter deep hole emerged in front of him. A narrow pass by the side allowed him to step by it, mere inches before the red cloak was seen in the entrance of the cave. The creature was too tall to follow him on the pass – and leapt across. Now, Tregos realized, he had to make another, death-edged, difficult choice. He couldn't escape any further into the cave as there weren't any passable tunnels to escape into. And he didn't have any weapons nor the strength to confront this creature physically (though he doubted whether even any sharp Rakkhari weapons would have sufficed against a foe like this). But if he was going to fall to his death, he would take this monster with him! He hated it, he hated the Valley, threw himself forth and gripped the red cloak with both his hands. An inhuman grunt was heard from the creature as it, along with Tregos' weight, fell into the hole. Tregos slammed to the ground on top of the creature, and saw, on the edge, the white stone glimmering. It must have fallen out of his pouch. The creature groaned, got up and attempted to scale the wall.

Tregos lodged his arm against its hideous face and drew it back with all its strength.

< *Let go*, the inhuman voice commanded him.

"Never!" Tregos groaned. He realized that the only, probable reason why the red-cloaked creature didn't beat him to death was that his left arm had been injured in the fall.

< *Let go, or things will take a turn for the worse.*

"I hardly see how that is possible", Tregos replied.

< *You're insane. Why can't you just leave me in peace and let me harvest what I need?*

"I want to know who you are. And I want to know what is happening to me!"

The red-cloaked creature stopped, as if thinking over his words.

< *Your kind seldom puts up any resistance*, it said. *Most of you simply fade away under the sky.*

"Like the skeletons outside", Tregos said. "I've seen them. It's what I'll become, isn't it? After I've been made to forget everything I know and everything I am?"

< *That is most likely. Your kind cannot endure this place for long. Beautiful drops of your minds used to litter the ground underneath the skies before... nourishment to us. Now, I require that stone. Let me up.*

"I'll give you the stone", Tregos continued, but you'll have to help me first.

< *Your need is no concern of mine*, the creature replied. *Am I to blame for your weakness? The weakness of your kind nourishes us: there's no right or wrong in that. It just is.*

"I don't want to stay in this valley", Tregos said. "All I want is a way out."

< *We shall see*, the creature responded, much to his surprise. *Now, let me have the stone.*

Tregos let go of the creature. They both made it out of the hole. The red-cloaked creature got up, its cloak a bit torn from the struggle and the full, and clutched its metallic, monstrous fingers around the white stone. It seemed to enjoy holding it close, as if it was somehow partaking from it. Its shape became more outspoken, its shape more visible by the moment. Then, it took a leap across the hole to Tregos' side. It seemed less desperate and more focused.

"If you're going to slay me", Tregos grinned, "do it fast. I'm a soldier, and I'm meant to die in combat. Not like a memory-drained, lifeless pile of bones in the sand."

< *Be quiet*, the creature said, and Tregos fell into unconsciousness.

12.

Tregos woke up on what looked like a bed. A metallic –and whitish interior surrounded him, lit by several unrevealed sources of light. A creature much like the one he had confronted earlier, though dressed in a yellow cloak, stood next to the first one, dressed in a red cloak.

< *This one caused me a noticeable amount of disturbance earlier*, the red-cloaked one said.

< *I understand. Why did you bring him here?*

< He does possess a great deal of conviction. And intelligence, to a degree.

< It's your finding; your responsibility, the yellow-cloaked one said, and disappeared into the hallway.

Tregos got up. The halls around him seemed marvelous and frightening in the same manner. They were made almost entirely of metal. His mind, however, didn't feel as dizzy as before. It also seemed easier for him to remember some of the things he had forgotten.

< Tell me, the red-cloaked one said, *why did you attack me? My people is no threat to yours. It's an anomaly for your people to attack mine. I wish to know more of your patterns of behavior.*

Tregos shook his head.

"You're feeding of us, somehow?" he asked. "Of our... minds?"

< No, we are not, the red-cloaked one replied in what sounded like a surprised voice. *We only pick up what you leave behind. It's our way of nourishment, and always has been. If you could see shining pearls, like water drops, on the ground knowing that it would satiate your hunger – you would pick them too, would you not?*

"I suppose I would", Tregos replied. "Then... you aren't the ones making us lose our memories?"

< I told you, the red-cloaked one said, *we aren't to blame for your dropping your memories over the ground. We are just a different kind than yours. But whoever comes into the valley, leaves something for us. Is that so wrong?*

"Then", Tregos asked, "what is it with that valley that makes people forget what they know?"

< We don't know, the red-cloaked one replied, *and we've been living here ever since the old ages. No one disturbs us, and we take what we need just like your kind does. Is that wrong according to you?*

Tregos bit his tongue. He knew that what he would reply now, might decide whether he would ever make it out of this place alive.

"Perhaps not", he replied, "but do you do it just to... stay alive?"

< For a number of reasons. It would be no sense in letting drops lie about. We gather knowledge, among many other things. Contrary to many other kinds, feuding within themselves, we keep to ourselves and take what we can find. But we can't prevent the valley from doing what it does. We never have known how to, and I suppose we never will.

"Be as it may with the cursed valley", Tregos replied. "I was cast there unjustly. Can you help me out?"

A strange laughter was heard in Tregos' mind.

< It's no task of any difficulty. A subterranean tunnel leads out beneath the mountain range not far from this settlement. But why would you want to go back outside? You've lost many of your memories already. Your existence is faltering and you're more than halfway into the Valley's grasp.

"I do want to get out", Tregos said. "Whatever life I may have outside, I don't know. But it is better than staying here."

13.

The red-cloaked creature went silent again, as if considering his words.

< *You'll have to pass, or rather, be led through, our settlements to get out, he said. And we can't allow you to memorize much of what you're going to see. There may be certain things you may come to view with disgust. Are you willing to take this change?*

"Yes", Tregos said.

< *You must also promise not to reveal what you've seen to a single being of your kind. If you do, we will come for you wherever you are. Do you understand?*

"Yes", Tregos said, "I promise."

Thus, he was led on through the vast, underground settlement. Metallic installations of many kinds, along with glowing rocks, strange glass sculptures, and even stranger devices, were visible here and there. There were many of the strange creatures, cloaked in either yellow, red or black. Then – behind a screen of glass, Tregos could see men and women. They were watched by white-robed beings: Rakkhari, Gabbar'dani, Dalari, and men and women from Rak al-Hina; perhaps from other places as well. Some of them had blunted, distant gazes, others were more alert. Some were distressed, and some wept.

"What..." Tregos hissed.

< *These create drops for us, the red-cloaked one said with undeniable satisfaction in his voice. The Valley isn't our only place of harvest. Every once in a while, some walk into our net and we tend to herd home a few. But most of your kind are not hunted at all. We only take what we need, and by comparison, it isn't that much to ask for, I would claim.*

Tregos saw a young man of his age slam his fists toward the unyielding glass. He couldn't hear his voice, but could see him miming the words: Help me! towards him behind the glass. Moments later, the white-cloaked guardians approached and he turned back to the other prisoners. Tregos stopped. He felt the cold, metallic hand of his guide on his shoulder.

< *Move on, the red-cloaked one commanded.*

"These are my kind", Tregos whispered. "There are... Rakkhari here. In your captivity."

< *Yes. And I told you of the conditions. Move on.*

Tregos didn't move. The grip on his shoulder became harder.

< *Unless you want to spend your remaining existence sharing their fate, the red-cloaked one said, move on.*

Tregos moved on and left the many, human captives in their misery. Ultimately, he and the red-

cloaked one came out to a large chamber. There were at least eight of the other creatures there, also dressed in red.

< *It amuses me somewhat*, one of them said – the one wearing the finest garments, contrastingly so, in purple, closest to a pit with an iron rod encircling it – *that you're letting this one see the innermost of our settlement and walking back to the outside world. You're taking a considerable risk.*

< *Challenge is the key to every sort of evolution*, the red-cloaked one said. *Behind that door, the road to your own country awaits, visitor. You do understand that we have to remove some of your... memories, before we let you head on?*

Tregos understood. He also understood that he would regain his freedom; those who were held captive here, would not. Their situation for them wasn't much better than that of the ones having perished up in the Valley. Ultimately, they too would become numb and empty of memory, personality, and everything that had defined them as persons with a will of their own. Above the earth, the war against the oppressive gods would continue. But no one would know of, or being able to help, those who were held captive here. They were locked underneath the Valley of Forgetfulness in the same manner the once-sentenced captives in the Valley were forgotten by the world.

"I understand", he told the purple-cloaked one, "that Rakkath the Godslayer never encountered any place like this. And had he done so, he would have punished you all – monsters!"

With those words, he dashed towards the purple-cloaked one. He could hear the scream of protest as the cloaked creatures tried to lock their minds to his. He dashed, ducked and locked his muscular arms along the purple-cloaked one. He lifted him over the encircling metal rod, and felt his claws touch him and scorch his skin with some strange, fire-like flame. The red-cloaked one was also approaching them.

< Stop him! they shouted.

< You'll regret this! the purple-cloaked one threatened.

But Tregos lifted the purple-cloaked one from the ground, and hurled him – with himself – down the hole into the surging fires far beneath.

14.

They fell. The metallic walls, thick with rods and pipes, were on either side of them. In both his ears and his mind, Tregos could hear the death cry of the purple-cloaked creature. The fear of extinction, the inescapable awareness of its presence. The many memories, like rain drops on the ground. The pride in knowledge. The thirst for more. Thousands of years... people coming into the

valley, losing themselves, leaving nourishment for his own, superior kind. Those who could walk above the ground, tall and strong, unaffected by the Valley's demise. And now he, dressed in purple and revered among his own, cast to death by an inferior kind. It wasn't... it couldn't be true. In his last moments, Tregos thought of Vinola. The mist of forgetfulness had waned, and he remembered her. Below him, he could see the face of the purple-cloaked creature, lacking in expression due to his metallic mask. In mere moments, the flames would swallow them both. It wouldn't give the stolen memories back to the ones having lost them and died in the Valley of Forgetfulness. And it certainly wouldn't give freedom back to the ones held captive here, nor would it destroy the strange, cloaked monsters and their inventions. It would, however, send one of them to justice – along with himself.

Like a cleansed memory, they would both be gone from this world.

Tregos the soldier shut his eyes and readied to meet the cleansing fires.