

PART ONE: THE ICEHOLD

Who can say what secrets are concealed by the ever-shifting snows?

Chapter One: Tunguska

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Gideon had waited, with a mixture of dread and fascination, for most of his life to see a Shaper; it was perhaps not a great surprise, therefore, that when he first set eyes upon one it was something of a disappointment.

Since birth Gideon had been raised like any other child of the colonies of the Outer Reaches on a steady diet of tales that the Shapers were monsters, demons from the underworld who walked the world of men sowing discord and strife wherever they went. They were, it was said, the eternal enemy of mankind, and the antithesis of the Bright Ones, those sacred beings who had created the planet Rygarth.

A younger Gideon had once asked his father how it was that the Bright Ones could have allowed an evil like the Shapers to come into existence. His father had smiled then, and replied that it was not for a man to question the will of the Gods. Gideon had bowed his head at the mild rebuke but that was not the only answer his father had given him.

“Perhaps they were sent to test us. After all, how better to show our devotion to the Bright Ones than to stand firm against all that would sway us from the Path of Light, whether in the form of threats or inducements. For make no mistake Gideon,” and here his father’s face had become grave, “the Shapers have more than one means of furthering their goals. All of us have heard tales of their destructive powers but less well known are the stories of Shapers who walk among us in forms that are fair in looks as well as speech. In that way they have caused much evil in our world.”

Those words from long ago were uppermost in Gideon’s mind as he beheld his first Shaper. What he had been expecting was a monster; in the event what he got was a creature that looked almost human.

The Shaper was man-sized, although its true shape was indeterminable due to the thick robes in which it was swathed. That alone was unusual. Tunguska, in common with all the remaining human colonies on Rygarth, was a climate-controlled zone and within its confines it was possible to walk freely in nothing more than a woollen tunic and leather breeches, which was all that Gideon himself was wearing. Outside Tunguska wearing such attire would have been nothing short of suicidal; despite the spring thaw maximum temperatures even at this time of year were several score degrees below freezing point. Gideon reflected that it was simply the case that the Shaper had not had time to change, as it was said, after all, that his kind lived as nomads on the fringes of the Frost Mark, the snowy desert on the Outer Reaches. Gideon made the sign of the Star, a gesture of protection among his people, as he thought of that. There was no life at all inside the Frost Mark; even the ever-resourceful lizard-rats of Rygarth were unable to eke out an existence there. No normal man could survive for more than a short time even on the Mark’s fringes. That the Shaper could make his home there was surely proof of his inhumanity.

At least that was what Gideon tried to tell himself as he saw that the Shaper’s hands, which poked out from beneath the thick robes and gripped its walking-staff,

appeared to be pink, fleshy and entirely human. No other features were visible; a hood concealed the Shaper's face and for that Gideon was thankful. Legends spoke of Shapers that could turn men to stone at a glance, or subjugate the will of another merely by gazing into their eyes.

Gideon averted his gaze then, suddenly conscious that he was staring like a wide-eyed fool or a boy barely out of swaddling clothes. He sternly reminded himself that he was now a man of sixteen winters – tomorrow he would participate in his First Hunt, and here he was, shaking like a stripling at the sight of a single Shaper! Gideon lowered his eyes then and furtively scanned the faces of the other men gathered in the Meeting Hall, fervently hoping that their expressions bore some reflection of the misgiving which he was sure had been plain on his face but a moment earlier.

Varsh was there, but if Gideon's elder brother had any fear in his heart there was no sign of it on his face, as was befitting for the Hunter-Commander of the Tunguskan militia. As always he stood at his father's right hand side on the raised dais at the heart of the Meeting Hall, where the Chieftain's seat was situated. Jarl Magnus was the only man there who was not standing; no one, not even close family like Gideon and Varsh, sat in the Chieftain's presence. Years of leadership and combat had moulded the face of Gideon's father so that there was rarely anything other than a careful, weighing expression there and today was no different. Yet Gideon, who knew that face so well, could tell that his father was troubled. It was there in the tightening of his hands upon the armrest of the Chieftain's seat, and in the slight frown that tugged at the corners of Jarl Magnus's mouth. It was that, more than anything else, which set Gideon's nerves on edge.

There were many others gathered in the chamber that day: Hunters like Varsh, who stood with their weapons bared in a show of strength and defiance; all of the Elders of the settlement were also gathered, including the grizzled War Chief Shemeth and the portly Wadi, artificer of the colony. What either of those two old campaigners thought of the Shaper's visit to Tunguska, and specifically how it impacted on their particular spheres of influence, was anybody's guess; Shemeth and Wadi had been experienced at schooling their features to inscrutability long before Jarl Magnus had become Chieftain of the outpost.

Gideon noted that a number of the younger members of the settlement were gathered at the cavernous entrance to the Meeting Hall. On official occasions such as this only the men of the outpost were allowed within the chamber's confines, those who were considered to be below the age of majority were strictly allowed only to watch and not participate in what took place within it. Gideon forgot the Shaper's presence momentarily as he felt a sense of satisfaction at the fact that he was no longer considered a boy in the eyes of the colony. His features adopted a look of superiority that only wavered when he realized that if the Shaper's visit had occurred just a day earlier, before his sixteenth birthday, then he would also be standing outside the Meeting Hall. As if reading his thoughts, Varsh looked over to Gideon at that point and nodded to him, not as an elder brother to a younger, but as a Tunguskan Hunter to a fellow comrade-in-arms. At that look Gideon drew himself up straight and schooled his features to calm implacability. It would not do for the son of the Chieftain to show fear in front of a Shaper.

As the Shaper approached the Chieftain's dais, where Gideon stood not far from his brother and father, he noticed for the first time that the creature was not alone. The Shaper was tall as well as bulky, although it was not clear whether that bulk was due entirely to the robes which enveloped it. Nevertheless, at well over six feet in height, it towered over even the tallest man of Tunguska there and for this

reason it was only as the Shaper drew close that Gideon noticed that behind it walked a girl.

Whatever doubts about the humanity or otherwise of the Shaper that there were in Gideon's mind, he found it impossible to extend those uncertainties to the creature's companion. Although she was dwarfed by the Shaper, Gideon could see that the girl that walked behind it was herself quite tall, and she walked with a grace of carriage and a pride in her bearing that added to her stature. With bright red hair that cascaded down her shoulders like a shower of flames and eyes that were green as star-emeralds she was quite striking. As Gideon tried to work out what could possibly have brought the pair together she turned and frankly met his stare with one of her own. At her gaze he quickly dropped his eyes, aware of a sudden flush on his neck that had nothing to do with the warmth of the room and everything to do with his embarrassment at being caught out in such a way.

Surely she could not be what she appeared to be, nothing more or less than a woman, and a young one at that?

It made no sense. Everyone knew that when a Shaper encountered a lone human in the wild it spelled certain doom for the human. Shapers were known to eat the souls of their victims and leave their broken husks for Snow Cats to devour. What possible reason could there be for such a one to take on a human girl as a travelling companion? There were other tales, of course, stories of people whose minds were stolen by these monsters, so that they became witless slaves to a Shaper's will. Gideon was sceptical, however. The young woman looked far from witless, and her stare was full of intelligence and confidence, defiance even. Would one possessed by a Shaper seem quite so... assertive?

Just as Gideon was prepared to accept that the girl was indeed no more than the Shaper's human travelling companion, no matter how unpalatable such a thought was to him, another more worrying possibility occurred to him. Perhaps the girl was a Shaper too.

His father had told him that Shapers did not always go abroad in forms that were terrifying to behold. Gideon remembered then that although intimidation was the primary weapon of a Shaper, they were almost as adept at dominating others by means of seduction and enchantment. Gideon realised with shame that the girl-Shaper had almost succeeded in ensnaring him in its power as he remembered the effect seeing its fair-seeming form had had on him. He almost hung his head in shame at that, that he, a Hunter of Tunguska, had almost been distracted from his duty by the sight of a pretty face! His hand tightened on the haft of his hunting lance as he focused his attention fully on both of the new arrivals in the Meeting Hall.

Varsh was the first to approach them, his hand raised in a gesture that might have been interpreted as either a greeting or as a signal for the Shapers - Gideon now thought of both of the figures as Shapers - to halt. The robed Shaper, who was clearly in charge, came to a stop first and the girl-Shaper stayed a few steps behind him as they drew to a standstill.

"I, Varsh Embarr, Hunter-Commander of Icehold Tunguska, bid you welcome, Shaper." He said, opening in the formal style. His next words were less polite, however. "You know well that your kind and mine are enemies, and yet you enter our territory uninvited and unwelcome. Such an infraction would in the usual course have earned you only the courtesy of a swift death but my men informed me that you advised them that you have a message for the Chieftain of this outpost. That has earned you an audience with Jarl Magnus of Tunguska but I warn you that we are

wise to the subtleties of Shaper trickery and my men have their hunting lances trained on your hearts lest you attempt your witchcraft in his presence.”

Gideon looked to the Shapers for their response to his brother’s typically blunt greeting. A look of contempt crossed the face of the girl-Shaper at Varsh’s words but her companion remained implacable and unmoved. Several moments passed and Gideon became aware of the discomfort of many of the other Hunters present. It was there in the reluctance of the men to look directly at the lead Shaper, in their shuffling from side to side, and in their growing nervousness as the creature continued to give their own leader no answer. Finally Varsh lost his patience.

“Speak Shaper, my lord father has no time to waste on your games!”

A collective gasp rippled around the Meeting Hall as the lead Shaper reached up to pull his cowl away from his face. Gideon’s imagination had conjured up many images to represent the visage that the Shaper had until then kept hidden from view, but the reality was like nothing he could have ever dreamed.

The Shaper’s face was as white as that of an albino, but where an albino had golden eyes, this creature had only whites showing where his pupils ought to have been. Its face, which was human enough despite its unusual colouring, was marked by a patchwork of tattoos whose strange patterns left only its forehead bare. The top of the Shaper’s head was hairless; what hair it had fell around the sides and back of its head in thick silvery locks which seemed even more inhuman than its strangely coloured skin and the absence of its pupils. Despite himself Gideon was forced to adjust his thinking towards the Shaper – now that he had seen the creature’s clearly masculine features he was forced to consider it a man-Shaper in much the same way that he regarded its companion a girl-Shaper. In his mind the creature now became a ‘he’ rather than an ‘it’, although the change brought no sense of comfort to him.

The Shaper turned his eyeless gaze upon Varsh and Gideon reflected shamefully that he was glad not to be the object of its attention. The milky white eyes unsettled him, and he could tell from a sidelong glance at some of his fellow Hunters, that he was not alone in that regard. To his credit, Varsh did not flinch from the stare of the Shaper.

When the Shaper spoke no words issued from his mouth, only a guttural rumble that seemed to emanate from somewhere deep inside. It was like nothing Gideon had ever heard before, not quite the voice of a man but something more sophisticated than the sounds an animal made. It barely seemed to be a language at all, and when the words, if that was what they were, stopped an eerie silence descended on the Meeting Hall. Varsh looked at the Shaper in confusion and seemed taken by surprise when another voice, this one light and entirely human as it used the Settler Tongue, spoke up.

“My father, Jaganath Rom, bids you welcome and regrets that it has been so long since one of the *Muradin* visited the Sacred Mountain.”

It was the girl-Shaper who had spoken, although even Gideon, who had regarded her as a Shaper like her companion almost as soon as he had seen her, now found it difficult to reconcile them as father and daughter. Sacred Mountain was said to be an old name for Tunguska, from a time before humans settled Rygarth, although Gideon was not used to hearing it in common parlance. *Muradin*, however, was not a word that he had ever heard before, although, from the way that she used it, he assumed that it was the girl-Shaper’s name for her people.

“And who are you?” said Varsh, the puzzlement in his voice clearly showing that he too was somewhat confused by the girl’s presence there.

“I am Ellani, daughter and voice of Jaganath Rom,” she answered, her back straight and her voice containing an unmistakable hint of pride as she continued, “My father notes your hold Master Embarr but, without causing offence, he asks that he be permitted to address directly the one who is leader here.” She looked pointedly at Gideon’s father as she finished speaking.

Varsh bristled at Ellani’s words and seemed about to respond to her with an angry retort when, to Gideon’s surprise, his own father spoke.

“Let him address me then. I am lord and master here,” said Jarl Magnus. “But ask that he make speed, for spring has come to the place that you call the Sacred Mountain and my men have much work to do with the coming of the thaw.”

Gideon observed that it was Ellani’s turn to bristle at these words and smiled inwardly. The Shaper and his daughter would find that they were not the first visitors to Tunguska to suffer the impatience of its lord. Jarl Magnus was too experienced and canny a ruler to be taken in by the games of a Shaper.

Jaganath Rom replied to Gideon’s father in the same dull, rumbling tones as before, barely pausing before Ellani translated his words.

“Once there were many Shapers on the face of Rygarth and then, as now, we led a peaceful and nomadic existence on the fringes of the Frost Mark. But our numbers have dwindled as the years have passed, and now the girl and I are among the last of our kind.”

Whether Jaganath Rom’s words were meant to elicit sympathy or not, this was not the effect that they had on the humans gathered in the Meeting Hall. As Gideon looked around he saw the men give each other dark looks and some of them nodded, as if in satisfaction that few Shapers remained. Gideon was not surprised by this reaction for Shapers had always been a threat to Tunguska and all of the other nearby outposts – Icehold Zero, not ten leagues away, was said to have been razed to the ground by the machinations of a coterie of Shapers from beyond the Frost Mark. Peaceful co-existence was not the way of the Shapers, whatever Jaganath Rom said, and he would find little pity for whatever plight they were now in if that was what he had come here for.

Ellani’s face became angry at the response that her father’s words drew from the men gathered before them, but Jaganath Rom himself seemed unmoved. He simply waited for the angry murmuring to subside before he spoke again, at which point he drew himself up to his full and quite considerable height. It was a pose that demanded the attention of everyone present.

“All know that we, the *Muradin*, are possessed of mighty powers of mind and hand, powers which, unfortunately, some of our kind have in the past abused, with terrible consequences,” Ellani translated, at which the muttering of the crowd threatened to resume, but she ploughed on regardless, “and perhaps understandably we have all been pushed away from the settlements of men and into the wilderness. There, in conditions that would be fatal to ordinary mortals, we have been forced to rely on our powers to sustain us. Life is hard though, even for us, and over the years the Frost Mark has claimed many of my brethren. These losses, though grievous, are perhaps to be expected in such harsh climes. But there have been other deaths among my people, particularly recently, which are not so easily explained.”

Here Rom stopped and though his features betrayed no emotion, Gideon could tell, by looking at the expression on Ellani’s face, which was suddenly unsure where previously there had been only calm assurance, that something was deeply amiss.

“The Frost Mark is vast and it is not uncommon to go for months without seeing another living thing, whether animal or sentient life form. However, my

daughter and I had travelled for almost two years without encountering another *Muradin* and, growing worried, I sought out an old acquaintance of mine, Nin Zashir, who, unusually among our kind, was not peripatetic by nature and therefore could be found with relative ease in his dwelling at the edge of the Outer Reaches.

I had known Nin Zashir as a convivial soul, always ready with a quip and a story for a fellow *Muradin* and never one to turn away a guest, but I was surprised at the welcome I received when I came to his door. He seemed unwilling to allow us inside, even when I identified myself to him, and when, grudgingly, he finally opened his doors to Ellani and I, we beheld that a terrible change seem to have come over him. He seemed weak, feverish almost, and there was fear and an edge of madness in his eyes. I, who can recognise the signs, knew what was wrong with him, for his condition was a clear indication that he had been using his powers almost constantly for some time, and to a degree that was close to dangerous.”

It was Ellani that stopped translating this time, before her father had stopped speaking. She looked at Jaganath Rom with what seemed to Gideon to be a quizzical expression. He speculated that the elder Shaper was perhaps revealing rather too much about their ways for his daughter’s comfort. The two Shapers conversed quietly in their own language for a few moments before Rom resumed his narrative and Ellani, somewhat reluctantly, continued to interpret for the Tunguskans’ benefit.

“Zashir’s condition worried me, for it is rare for one of the *Muradin* to need their powers in the course of daily life in the Frost Mark. The few creatures that share our wilderness home, such as Snow Cats and the like, know better than to match their strength against ours. In the rare event that a display of our skills becomes necessary all that will usually be required is a small show of force – nothing like the sustained and exhausting energies that my friend had clearly been compelled to exert not long before I arrived at his home. I grew concerned as to what manner of creature could have so tested one of the *Muradin* in this way.

Zashir informed me that he also had noticed the falling numbers of our people in the Outer Reaches and had undertaken an investigation. He soon discovered that we were not the only ones to have suffered a decline in our population in recent times. As you are aware, Chieftain Magnus, we Shapers are not the only inhabitants of the Frost Mark and I learned from Zashir that the Kirith, the Gnarl and the Saluri have also had their ways of life threatened by the arrival of a new enemy. Or perhaps I should say the return of an old foe.”

For the first time since Jaganath Rom had begun speaking Jarl Magnus looked at him directly, his eyes alive with interest. Gideon wondered himself at the Shaper’s words – what manner of foe could he be referring to? Certainly an enemy dangerous enough to prey on Shapers and the ferocious Gnarl warriors was worthy of caution.

“What ‘old foe’ is it that you speak of, Shaper?” his father asked.

“I speak of the Cygors,” Rom answered and a hush descended on the Meeting Hall as he continued, “The Beastmen of the Frost Mark have returned.”

Gideon drew a quick intake of breath, unsure how to take this news. He had thought the Cygors nothing more than a legend from the days before Rygarth had been colonised. It was said that before humans had arrived, the ice planet had been ruled by another race, brutal warriors who took their greatest pride in the hunt, although they did so more for sport than for survival. He shivered as he remembered the old stories of what Cygor predators did to their quarry once they had it cornered. The Cygors were regarded as the enemy of all, an adversary even more abhorrent than the Shapers, and long vanished from the face of Rygarth, if they had ever existed at all. Personally, Gideon had always believed the Cygors to simply be the creation of

mothers who were keen to stop their children wandering away from the safety of the settlements by conjuring up tales of horned bogeymen.

Jarl Magnus appeared to take a similar view.

“You waste time and try my patience, Shaper. I granted you audience in the belief, which now appears to have been mistaken, that you brought important news. Instead, I find myself listening to old wives’ tales – Cygors indeed! What game is this that you play Shaper?” his father said.

For a moment Ellani appeared to forget her role as her father’s interpreter as she retorted angrily.

“We speak the truth you rustic fool! Do you think that we crossed several leagues and faced many dangers just to bring you a fairy tale? The Beastmen are real and unless you begin preparing now, you will fall just as your pathetic Icehold Omega did.”

Gideon’s father, whose face had at first coloured at being addressed in such disrespectful tones, became deadly serious at the news that a neighbouring outpost had apparently been destroyed. Gideon observed that Jaganath Rom now turned to his daughter in exasperation – he had clearly intended this information to be conveyed with a little more sensitivity.

“Speak Shaper, is this true?” said Jarl Magnus.

“Yes,” said Rom simply, “we heard this from Shaper Zashir and it was confirmed a few days later when I saw the ruins of Omega hold for myself as the girl and I passed through it on the way here.”

The Chieftain bowed his head.

“These are indeed grave tidings, if they are true – and I do not say that I accept your words as truth – for many here, myself included, had friends and family at Omega hold.”

Gideon’s brother spoke up then, addressing their father.

“You cannot believe these words, my lord Chieftain. All know that Shapers revel in spreading chaos and deceit wherever they go,” Varsh said with a contemptuous sideways glance at Jaganath Rom and Ellani, “I myself was at Icehold Omega barely a moon ago and all seemed well there. As you know, Jarl Henrik is a man of perception and experience and I am sure that if anything had been amiss he would have been wise to it. If any ill has befallen the people of Omega hold then I suspect we need look no further than these Shapers for its source - I urge you to ignore their falsehoods and to cast them out of your lands.”

Jaganath Rom raised his hands in a placating gesture, and when he spoke his rumbling tones seemed to assume a soothing quality, which was reflected in Ellani’s tones as she translated what he said.

“Chieftain Magnus, the history of our races is one of bloodshed and distrust, and it is not one that would seem to give you any reason to trust my words. But believe me when I say that Omega hold is no more and that this catastrophe occurred, in my estimation, within the last three days. If that is the case the Cygors are perilously close to your territories and you must take immediate steps to prepare for the defence of this outpost.”

“But why do you warn us Shaper?” asked Jarl Magnus “You yourself admit that there is no love lost between humans and your kind, and yet you are here as our would-be rescuer. You will forgive me if my men and I find it hard to accept you in this role.”

Gideon nodded in agreement at his father’s words. As he had expected, his father did not intend to make it easy for the Shaper. But when Rom responded Gideon

was forced to admit that, to his credit, he demonstrated no exasperation at his brusque treatment and continued to sound reasonable in Ellani's clipped interpretation of his words.

"If you find compassion a difficult motivation to accept on the part of a Shaper, then perhaps you will believe that another incentive drives me," and here, shockingly, he grinned, revealing that he had gums but no teeth inside his mouth, "Self-preservation. My people are all but gone and you humans are the only ones with the necessary strength to resist a Cygor conquest of all Rygarth."

Rom's eyes bored into Jarl Magnus, and for a moment Gideon wondered whether, in spite of his lack of any visible pupils, the Shaper could in fact see.

"Your records only reach back to the Planetfall which precipitated the time of humanity on Rygarth. Despite the Cygor war, which most of you remember only dimly as legend rather than history, humans have no idea of what the true horror of living in a world dominated by the Beastmen is. It would be a catastrophe."

"Even if I accept your words as truth, I cannot see that the return of the Cygors will be a disaster on as vast a scale as you seem to imply," said Jarl Magnus, "You have made reference to the Cygor war. As you know it is said in the old histories that humans triumphed over the Beastmen once before with relative ease. We have greater numbers and better technology than those bloodthirsty savages - what, then, do we have to fear from them?"

"This time it is different, lord Chieftain. There is something else on the side of the Cygors," and here Rom's words sounded uncertain, "Something more intelligent and malevolent than the Cygors. Something with a power that is even greater than that of the Shapers."

Although Jarl Magnus nodded at this, giving the impression that he was considering the Shaper's words carefully, Gideon recognised that this was an ambivalent gesture on the part of his father. The Chieftain beckoned to Varsh and for a few moments Gideon's father and brother conferred quietly. When they had finished it was the Hunter-Commander that addressed the Shapers on his lord's behalf.

"Whether your story is true or not, its implications are grave enough to merit serious investigation," said Varsh. Rom and Ellani looked at each other with expressions of triumph that gradually faded as Gideon's brother continued. "However, history has warned us not to accept the word of a Shaper too readily and we must insist that, until the veracity of your account has been ascertained, you, Master Rom, and your daughter remain in custody here at Icehold Tunguska."

Gideon saw Ellani's face turn red at these words and even Jaganath Rom visibly bristled.

"You have no right to keep us here, you ungrateful primitives!" Ellani half-shouted.

"It was not a request." Varsh said and Gideon noticed that his hand tightened on the haft of his hunting lance.

"Idiot, do you think that you could keep us here against our will?"

The girl-Shaper faced the dais where the Chieftain sat surrounded by his bodyguard and there was no fear in her face. Gideon knew a moment of dread then as he remembered all the stories that he had ever heard about the powers of Shapers. The old tales told of Shapers who could turn men into lizard-rats, raze city walls to the ground in an instant and hurl bolts of lightning. It was said, above all, that it was foolish to test the patience of Shapers, for they were subtle and quick to anger.

Once again, however, Jaganath Rom proved to be the peacemaker. He laid a strong hand on Ellani's shoulder and raised the other, palm open in a universal gesture of peace. Ellani spoke again, and it was clear that her words were reluctant.

"We will abide by your wishes, Jarl Embarr, and should be most grateful if you would be kind enough to show us to our quarters."

As Varsh's Hunters led the Shapers from the Meeting Hall, Gideon caught up with his brother.

"Do you really plan to check out the Shapers' story? I mean, Cygors, by the Bright Ones, they're just a fairy tale! This smells like a Shaper plot to me."

"Keep your views to yourself little brother," said Varsh, his voice stern with the rebuke, "It is not for you or I to question the will of our lord father."

Gideon lowered his head, suitably chastened. A moment later, however, Varsh leaned close and whispered to him in a low voice.

"I agree that this feels like a trick, Gideon, and I'm sure father does too. But we have no choice where the Cygors are concerned. It is ill news for us all if they really have returned."

"Are the Cygors really so terrible?" said Gideon. As a child he had paid little heed to legends and folklore, preferring to concentrate his efforts on learning the skills to one day become a Hunter of Tunguska hold.

"As Hunter-Commander I'm required to learn all the old histories. Our ancestors were only able to defeat the Beastmen because of their superior knowledge and technology – much of which has now been lost." Varsh's face grew grave. "Trust me Gideon, if the Cygors have come back, in force, we may not have the strength to drive them back for a second time."

So disturbing were his brother's words that Gideon barely noticed as the Shapers walked past him on their way out of the Meeting Hall. It was only when Jaganath Rom's robes brushed against him that Gideon looked up and registered with shock the look that the elder Shaper gave him before sweeping past him.

Seeing the expression on his younger brother's face Varsh turned to Gideon with concern once the Shapers had gone.

"Gideon... what's wrong?"

Gideon did not answer for several seconds and when he finally did so it was as if the words were dragged out of him only reluctantly.

"The Shaper, he looked at me as if..."

"Yes?" prompted Varsh.

"...as if he recognized me." Gideon finished, his eyes wide with fear.