

Book 1 of The Centre Vale Trilogy

*The Heart
of Tarkon*



S.C. Meakin

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by

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Chapter 1 : An Awakening

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hanor...! Are you up yet?” a sudden voice yelled from outside.

Bane, his ever-present curly-haired friend had promised to call if the weather was good. ‘*Not now*’ Hanor thought, snuggling deeper into the warmth.

“The girls are going to the lake,” Bane yelled, unsurprised that Hanor was yet to appear at his window. The early morning sun was already radiating its mid-morning glory. “Hanor...!” Bane snapped again, irrelevant that his friend was the son of a High-man. Frustrated as usual by Hanor’s lack of enthusiasm before half-turn of the day, it went against everything he believed in. Blessed with bags of zeal himself, his friend was going to miss out if he did not move.

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

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

“Are you coming or not?”

“Yes... yes,” replied Hanor, pulling back the shutters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And too young for yours!"

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

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

Shy, she giggled with her friend.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Careful now," the voice said, amused.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brandor started laughing, evolving into a hearty roar.

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

The misplaced laughter subsided, Hanor sensing the circumstances change.

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

"Pardon?"

“Sit down.”

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

“Close your eyes.”

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

“Good,” Brandor commended, kneeling behind him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you not well?"

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

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

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

"Do you feel ... sick?"

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

"Do you want to talk about it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nole said nothing.

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

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