

Chapter 6

The sky was a brooding swirl of orange, purple and red as the sun rose on the horizon. The air was hot, still and heavy with the scent of the sighuna trees.

Tarquin Salook, the Grand High Shaarn of The Golden Sheer, put his head back, closed his eyes and breathed in a deep breath. He held on to the lung full of air for a long time, before letting it out through his nose.

His bodyguard, Saneeth, looked up briefly from his game of 'Wood and Iron', but promptly returned to contemplating his next move.

Tarquin scanned the view from the palace balcony. He had spent the last half hour looking, but it had been in vain. Carefully and systematically, he scrutinised every detail, from left to right, across the wide expanse of fields and orchards. All the while he listened intently.

He looked with a sense of satisfaction. This land was his. His land for as far as the eye could see, in every direction, and then further beyond. This land, he mused, was not called 'The Golden Sheer' without cause. Its long, broad, sweeping arc, stretching from the far mountains, across rolling planes down to the sea, was bordered – like a hem – with the brightest, dazzling sands ever known.

A sheer was a formidable weapon in the hands of a good cavalry rider. Its long, curved blades (each the same shape as their province) sat either side of an axe head at the end of a long wooden shaft. A sheer could be deployed with a swing or thrust, from horseback, with devastating effect. If the blades did not decapitate an opponent, then the axe head would penetrate their body from front to back.

Tarquin held another lung full of the hot, sullen air and then exhaled it at length. He looked down at his reflection in the trough of water by his feet. If he chose, he could have had servants douse feathers into the water and swoop them thru the air on the ends of poles to create a cooling mist, but Tarquin shunned such frivolous luxuries.

Gazing down into the trough, Tarquin studied his own face. His sun bleached blonde hair hung down to his shoulders, framing his long face with its long, sharp nose, dazzling blue-grey eyes and full, wide lips. His light bronze skin was illuminated in a cooper glow from the sunrise. He made a mental note to have himself painted in this quality of light as soon as possible.

Tarquin returned to his scrutiny of the view, for one last time, peering intently with his eyes and straining his ears.

This was a routine with which Saneeth was extremely familiar. It was one repeated every morning. There was usually nothing to show for it. Sometimes, however, there would be a result.

Saneeth stretched in an exaggerated movement, then stroked his closely shaved head with his long, brown fingers, before moving them to cup the chin on his scarred, but still pleasing face.

He pursed his lips and moved them, this way and that, as he looked in dismay at the game in progress on the board in front of him.

Reluctantly, he made his move, but then stopped, as if frozen in time. Continuing to hold on to his playing piece at its proposed new position, he was hesitant to release it and commit himself to his move. His eyes raced around the other squares, again, re-checking his opponent's pieces for threats. Then, shaking his head, he moved his piece back to its former location.

The head chef of the palace laughed quietly, from the other side of the table and flicked a sand fly out of the air with the edge of her fan.

"You're only putting off the inevitable!", she told Saneeth, giving him her sweetest smile.

let out a single ironic laugh: "Ha!" and declared, dryly: "I know how he feels!"

The chef stood up, leaving Saneeth to his ruminations. She walked across to balcony rail, placed her hand on Tarquin's arm and squeezed it. "I have a bad feeling about this morning, my husband.", she said.

"Let me listen and look with you, Dearest," Chef Sarquoina said, leaning over and kissing his cheek, "My senses are keener than yours."

"Your eyes should be extremely keen, considering I snatched you out of your cradle to marry you, Beloved", he replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Less jokes about my age, if you please!" she replied, chuckling, "Preparing the finest food ever known to civilisation is my great passion. While it keeps you safe from poisoners, it also means that I can dispose of you, myself, on a whim!"

Tarquin, Sarquoina and Saneeth all laughed, loudly. Friends since they were children, climbing trees and playing 'catch me', they shared the same sense of humour.

Exasperated by the trap that Sarquoina had laid for him in the game, Saneeth sank back into his chair and turned to watch the royal couple.

Sarquoina was beautiful. Tall, elegant, feminine and aristocratic. Her long blonde hair, which she wore to below her slim waist, was nearly white, like the palest gold. Her intelligent, deep blue eyes shone and sparkled either side of her perfectly proportioned nose and above her wide, pale red lips.

If fate had been different, and the monks had chosen him, instead of Tarquin, to be Grand High Shaarn, all those years ago, then their roles would be reversed and it would be Tarquin guarding him and he, Saneeth, married to the lovely Sarquoina.

His gaze switched to Tarquin and he found the other looking at him. As their eyes met, Tarquin gave him a nostalgic, sympathetic wisp of a smile and nodded, confidentially, with maximum economy of motion. He knew exactly what Saneeth had been thinking and Saneeth could not think it possible that Tarquin did not think the same thing, from time to time.

Sarquoina said something and pointed. Tarquin turned back.

"Look," she said, "Over there." and pointed towards a group of tall, thin trees.

Tarquin leaned forward, subconsciously, as if this might increase his focus.

"I see it," Tarquin replied, "Its an Angel's Cry! They don't usually perch so close to the palace or the fortress."

Sarquoina smiled and sighed, "I remember the first time Hannah saw one," she confided, "She was absolutely captivated by that wonderful red, blue and gold plumage. Its a truly beautiful bird."

"Hannah is growing to be a lovely young woman.", Tarquin told her.

Sarquoina cocked her head to one side and replied: "She's my sister. What else would you expect?"

The two of them burst out laughing and hugged each other.

"I don't see her nearly so much, these days, since she became one of your Royal Messengers," Sarquoina said, nostalgically, "Riding off here and there, at top speed, all the time! Always in a hurry!"

"Do you think I could have ever denied her?", Tarquin protested, "Its all she has ever wanted to do, ever since she first sat on a horse!"

"You're right," his wife admitted, "She is never so happy as when she is galloping off somewhere!" Sarquoina looked melancholy and added: "I just miss her being my little baby sister."

Tarquin put his arm around the best chef in the kingdom and pulled her close and kissed the side of her head.

"I miss talking to her," she continued, "And telling her things. Little things."

Sarquoina pointed towards the bird in its tree, "She asked me where the Angel's Cry got its name. I told her about the legend. She was spellbound. She was hanging on my every word. I told her how its actually mute and that, despite all the rumours and myths, it never actually makes any sound."

Sarquoina gave a little, far off sigh, and continued: "I told her how the Ancients said that when such terrible hurt and misery befalls mankind that the angels in Heaven shed tears for us, then the Angel's Cry joins in and sobs in grief, too."

Tarquin looked at Sarquoina for a long moment. He stroked her hair and kissed her gently on the lips. Sensing her gloom and melancholy, he suddenly straightened and, with a mischievous sparkle in his eye, said: "It's a good job for us all that the angels have never tasted your cooking!" and screwed up his nose as if in disgust.

His wife and supremely talented head chef looked aghast for a moment. Then her face split into a smile. She punched him reproachfully on the arm and laughed gleefully.

Saneeth, who had abandoned the board game in defeat and strolled across to join them, laughed too. Saneeth had a loud, hearty laugh and the bird in the tree fluttered its wings and shuffled a little on its branch.

"Saneeth! Don't frighten the bird!", Tarquin scolded, in mock annoyance.

Sarquoina feigned having been taken by surprise and took a step backwards, "Its not just the bird!", she said, "He's frightening me, too!"

At this point, they all roared with laughter, swaying and holding onto each other for support. Soon, they found themselves laughing at the sight of each other laughing. A little while after, they were laughing from the sheer and simple joy of laughter itself.

In years to come, all three of them would look back and recall this moment as the end of the days of happiness and the beginning of the days of darkness.