

Chapter 8

Tarquin, Sarquoina and Saneeth stood on the balcony veranda in a little huddle around the night lantern, half-heartedly discussing opportunities for revenge and tenuously debating plots of reprisal.

The weak shadows cast by the lantern, strong and bold only a little while earlier, had now thinned and paled until they were virtually indiscernible. The trio watched as the night lantern yielded its nocturnal dominance to the coming of a new day.

Without warning, a series of loud, piercing notes sounded from a shrill whistle. Saneeth quickly reached for the thin chain around his neck and pulled up a whistle of his own, which he immediately put to his lips and blew. The thin, high pitched note was almost painful to hear and both Sarquoina and Tarquin screwed up their faces.

It was rare for a messenger to come riding in at day break, but this was unmistakably the signal to announce their urgent approach.

Tarquin held out his hand to Saneeth and the other placed a long metal tube into it. At either end of the tube were fixed objects that had started out their lives as clear glass beads, but had been tirelessly cut and polished until they were almost flat, like a pair of discs. Looking through the device, Tarquin was able to make out a mounted horse, galloping furiously towards them, from way off in the far distance.

Tarquin's fascination with this ingenious 'Eagle Eye' instrument never waned. He took it from his eye and held it, spanning the distance between his upturned palms, and smiled down at it with fascination and deep satisfaction.

Almost as if it pained him to part with it, Tarquin passed the Eagle Eye to Saneeth who, after brief inspection through it, passed it quickly to Sarquoina.

"A blue flag mounted both at the front and the rear of the horse", said Sarquoina, pointedly.

Tarquin and Saneeth exchange a meaningful glance. Blue flags meant news of vital importance.

"We live in dangerous times." Tarquin announced, dryly.

Tarquin motioned to the steps at the rear of the veranda and the three friends walked quickly across and disappeared down them. They emerged at the back of the courtyard, below and behind where they had been stood. Torches still burned in fixtures on the walls and their smoke drifted, lazily around beneath the sheltered

over-hang of the main palace building. The hour was early, but staff were already busy about their day, moving back and forth, bowing to the group as they passed.

The party strolled through the cool shadows to the smaller entry courtyard where the main gates were located. On seeing them, some of the soldiers stiffened visibly, but carried on about their business.

There was an edge of excitement and expectation in the air and everybody appeared to be feeling it. A scout messenger was coming in, at full speed, and the blue flags meant that important military news was being carried.

"Injured rider!", shouted one of the look outs from the top of the gatehouse tower, "The tandem rider is hurt! A lot of blood on their tunic and cloak!"

Sarquoina's face contorted with a spasm of pain. The look of fear in her eyes was unmistakable. Tarquin quickly reached out and rested his hand on hers. They looked at each, locking eyes only briefly, neither wishing to express the nature of their fear.

Sarquoina's younger sister was a messenger. She was a Royal Messenger. She was currently one of only two pairs of Royal Messengers out on active missions. The expression of dread on Sarquoina's features said everything.

These girl messengers rode tandem, two to a horse, to enable them to ride continuously, 24 hours a day. They exchanged fresh mounts at route stations, but stopped only for the briefest possible duration. This did not include sleeping. The messengers slept in the saddle, the co-rider physically strapped to the back of the active rider. It was said that if a sleeping off duty messenger were pulled from their bed at their barracks, stuffed into a barrel and rolled down a hill, they would only wake up if the barrel hit a tree or fell into a river!

Saneeth shouted back to the tower, urgently: "Send out an escort! Two escorts!"

"Yes, sir!", the lookout cried back.

Almost immediately there was the sound of clattering hooves as a pair of riders set off, out across the swing bridge over the moat, then crunching violently up the gravel track to the outer gates. As they passed under the archway, both riders leaned down from their saddle and expertly snatched up a kimmel, the tall, thin, flexible pole on which a high-ranking rider flies their flag of allegiance.

With a deft, fluid movement the two riders slid the strengthened lower shaft of their kimmel into a metal tube by their saddle. As they did so, the long rods flicked upwards and backwards into the flow of the wind, flapping the orange and black stripes of the Grand High Shaarn's colours.

The messengers' horse had departed flying the same orange and black banner from its kimmel. In addition, the elongated oblong banner atop the kimmel had been sporting five red fingers, trailing from its end, to denote a royal mission.

Instead of flying a banner, the returning horse flew only two alert flags. The flags, used to signal the importance of its mission. These flags were shockingly unnecessary. How could there possibly be anything that wasn't important about a royal messenger having been intercepted and injured?

Suddenly, the air was rent by the sound of a trumpet, announcing the entrance of the riders. In the courtyard, despite the early hour, a small crowd had formed and rumours were being animatedly whispered in conspiratorial tones between its members.

A cheer went up from the gathered folk as the messengers and two escorts thundered over the bridge and in through the gatehouse. The leading escort horseman, who was guiding the messengers' beast by its reins, simultaneously pulled up both his own mount and that of the two girls. In a single, fluid movement leapt from the saddle. Legs close to buckling from the burden of his middle weight armour, he quickly sprang back up to full height and, lifting his arms either side of their horse's head, tapped its ears forwards with three rapid strokes of his palms.

The messenger's horse, responding without hesitation to its training, promptly dropped to its haunches at the back while coming to its knees at the front. The riders on its back swayed from the sudden descent and began to rock to and fro from the animal's frantic breathing. Hannah, the girl strapped at the rear, gave a gargled cry of pain.

Sarquoina, recognising her sister as the injured rider screamed: "No! No! No! Please, no!" and fell to her knees beside her.

A group of stable hands had rushed to the scene and, together, they and the cavalymen, were able to unharness the injured rider from her partner. Convulsing in agony from her wounds, Hannah gave a long moan that trailed off into pitiful sobbing.

Sarquoina screamed for a second time, higher and more plaintively, and slapped her hands to her mouth as she spotted the end of the broken kimmel protruding from Hannah's left shoulder.

Tarquin growled in fury: "I will personally destroy whoever did this!"

Sarquoina's distress increased and her cries became hysterical as her eyes found the other end of the kimmel, which was exiting out from below Hannah's ribcage. The messenger's shoulder and her side both had a huge dark patch where a crimson pool of blood had soaked through her tunic.

"Who did this?" demanded Tarquin.

Cyan, the other messenger, was physically shaking as she howled and sobbed in utter misery: "I begged them to hurt me! I begged them to hurt me, instead!" she shrieked.

Hannah, every breath obviously causing her pain, nodded her head, weakly, to attest to her friend's statement and gazed with unashamed adoration at her.

A physician, who had hurried up to the scene, put his hand onto the forehead of Hannah's partner and sounded a sharp intake of breath through his puckered lips, "She's on fire. She has a fever. She's burning up."

Pronouncing each word as if it were a sentence, Tarquin shouted at the girl: "Who.... Did.... This....?"

Cyan thrashed her head side to side emphatically and gasped, almost delirious: "We couldn't tell... because... masks. They wore masks. Cloaks... big, long cloaks, too."

Saneeth wrung his hands in despair and tried to comfort Sarquoina, putting his arm around her, but she shook him off, violently. Tarquin fared no better. As he rested his hand on her arm she pulled away immediately. She was inconsolable.

Saneeth suddenly became aware of the sound of drums. There were two rapid beats, a short pause, then two more rapid beats. The sequence then repeated over and over, at speed. Cavalrymen, in battle armour, were answering the drums and beginning to emerge into the courtyard, astride their horses, and forming into ranks.

Turning to the sound of hooves, Tarquin and Saneeth became aware of the General stood near them. He was glowering at the bloody scene before him.

"Your Highness!", shouted one of the escort riders, reaching into the saddle bag of the messengers' horse. The soldier pulled out an oblong of red cloth, bordered with a sewn yellow hem around all sides, and featuring a yellow lightning flash across it.

Seeing the flag, Tarquin bellowed: "This means war!"

Tarquin snatched the flag, offered by the cavalryman, gathered up the middle of it in his fist and shook it at the sky, snarling: "They will pay for this! They will pay dearly!"

Saneeth looked at the flag with dismay. It was the flag of The Hashmarja. They had once been staunch allies of The Golden Sheer, but a long dispute over grazing rights for their cattle and water rights at certain strategically sited wells had soured their relationship. For the past 10 years, skirmishes with them across the border, beyond the sands, had flared up, periodically. Sometimes these sporadic conflicts had intensified into outright battles, lasting from a few days to a full week.

Tarquin pulled and tugged at the flag, clearly intending to rip it, but it would not yield to his attempts. This caused him to gnash his teeth in frustration. General Ellis pulled his dagger from its sheath at his side and held out its blade, edge upwards, to Tarquin. The Grand High Shaarn stepped forward and, in a savage and contemptuous movement, impaled the flag onto the dagger and then dragged it up and down until it tore in two.

"General," Tarquin barked, "I will put on my armour and we will ride out with 300 troops and cut the Hashmarja to pieces!"

"Your Highness, no!", the General replied, "I urge you to use caution!"

"What?!", Tarquin exploded, "Use caution? Have you lost your senses? I will use my sword! I will use my sheer! I will use my axe! I will use my caution to choose where I piss in the sand before I leave!"

"Your Highness," General Ellis urged, "With their hunting parties away in the mountains, at this cycle of the sun, the Hashmarja are not strong enough in numbers to risk leading you directly to them by leaving a flag to mark ownership of the crime!"

Tarquin stared at the General, dumbfounded.

"The major part of their traditional grounds are beyond the long belt of desert, beyond those hills, and across into the lands of our neighbours in Kalferna. If we come charging down on them, in battle formation, they will retreat as fast as their horses can carry them and ride flat out across the border."

Tarquin's arms flopped to his side and he looked deflated.

"If we pursue them," Tarquin conceded, dejectedly, "We won't simply be delivering a punishment assault on the Hashmarja....", he left the words hanging in the air.

The General finished for him: "We will be provoking all-out war with Kalferna!"

At that moment, Hannah let out a strangled cry, gasped desperately for air, fighting to breathe, and then began coughing up blood. Sarquoina let out a sob of alarm and knelt closer to her sister's side, "Please!", she begged the physician, "Please, help her!"

The physician looked crestfallen and ashamed, "Your sister has lost a lot of blood, Your Highness. A lot of the blood has leaked inside her. One of her lungs is punctured and some important parts of her body, internally, have been badly damaged."

Sarquoina knew, from the anguished expression on the physician's face, that – if she pressed him to go further – his assessment would be the worst possible one.

Hannah began to wretch and, Cyan, her co-rider burst into a new flood of tears, "I said I'd keep her safe!", she repeated, over and over, "I said I'd keep her safe! I said I'd keep her safe!"

"My sweet, precious angel! My heart!", Sarquoina crooned, cradling Hannah's head and kissing her matted, bloody hair.

Hannah's eyes, flickered and she made a keening sound, like an animal that had been whipped too hard and too long. Sarquoina moved to face the injured girl and kissed her forehead. Hannah's eyes flickered, again, and then slowly opened. The simple act of focusing now appeared to be one requiring stoic effort and concentration. Sarquoina met Hannah's terrified gaze. The tears of the older sister now flowed freely, staining her light bronze skin with tracks of dirt from where she had rubbed her eyes.

Hannah took a deep gulp, "I'm sorry," she whispered, "I'm so very, very sorry."

"No!", exclaimed Sarquoina, "I'm the one who is sorry! I was meant to look after you! I was meant to protect you!"

After the death of their parents, when Sarquoina was 12 and Hannah 7, they had moved in with their widowed Uncle. Sarquoina had become the younger girl's surrogate mother. She had washed her, dressed her, fed her, put her to bed and woken her up, daily, for weeks, for months and for years.

Sarquoina had read stories to her little charge, whenever she had woken in the middle of the night from bad dreams, never complaining and never being sharp with her, no matter how tired she might be, herself. Nothing had ever been too great a trouble for her beloved sister. No pain, no effort, no sacrifice had ever been shunned.

Sarquoina had nursed Hannah through numerous illnesses, once staying by her bedside, night and day, for almost a week. She had mopped her brow,

fed bread crumbs soaked in thin soup and had sung to her. Her favourite song had always been about the kitten trapped in the well. Unbidden, the words of the kitten song sprang into Sarquoina's head: 'Hush little kitty, don't you fear, I'll stay close by, so still your tear'. Whenever she had reached the end of the song and the little creature was rescued, Hannah would cry for joy and Sarquoina would hug her and kiss away her tears.

Over the years, Sarquoina had listened, on countless occasions, to her little sister's hopes, dreams, fears and aspirations. Horses were her passion and she had learned to ride with uncanny rapidity. That was back when their parents had been alive and her love of horses had never wavered or diminished, since.

When Hannah had announced that she wanted to be a Royal Messenger and had secretly undertaken and passed the grueling and challenging assessment, their Uncle had said 'No' and stopped her joining. When, six months later, Sarquoina had become bride to the Grand High Shaarn, she had promptly enrolled Hannah into the Royal Messengers and Hannah's ecstatic delight had bordered on delirium! She had run around, leaping and bounding and turning cartwheels and had hugged her older sister so hard that Sarquoina could scarcely breathe. She had gushed with thanks and gratitude and, repeating for the tenth time that she loved Sarquoina more than anything or anybody in the whole world, she had accidentally called her 'Mummy'. They had both been momentarily embarrassed, but had then dissolved into tears and much laughter, hugging and kissing.

Sarquoina was swiftly propelled back to the present as Hannah shrieked with pain and arched her back, gritting her teeth as a wave of agony engulfed her. The gargling sound in her poor sister's throat, as she fought the physical torture that wracked her body, broke Sarquoina's heart into a thousand pieces.

Hannah gasped and gulped, repeatedly, whimpering in distress as she drowned in a sea of pain. Suddenly, her eyes sprang open and met Sarquoina's, "Mummy!", she whispered, hoarsely, "It hurts so much. Can I go to sleep? Please?"

Sarquoina howled in despair, choking back her tears, "Yes, my sweet angel!", kissing first one cheek then the other, "You can sleep if you want to."

Fighting another onslaught of pain, Hannah, winced and shuddered until it passed.

"Will you sing to me?", Hannah asked, her voice barely audible.

"Yes. Yes, of course I will.", wept Sarquoina.

Taking a huge breath and choking on her despair, the wife of the Grand High Shaarn, cradled the Royal Messenger's head in her hands and, her voice breaking with woe, began: "Hush little kitty, don't you fear, I'll stay close by, so still your tear..."

With an exquisitely plaintive little mew, Hannah whispered: "Poor kitty..." and exhaled a long sigh and then fell silent.

The fingernails of both her hands had been dug ferociously into her palms and they dropped lifelessly open to reveal a bloody mess of wounded flesh as her arms fell limply to her sides.

Sarquoina gave an excruciating wail, punctuated with forlorn sobbing that shook her whole body.

Cyan screamed and bawled with unbearable grief.

Their horse, beside them, whinnied and snickered with wild, goggling eyes, thrashing and bucking as it trembled with uncontrollable and inexpressible sorrow.

In the tree across the meadow, the Angel's Cry threw back its head and, with a single breath that seemed to last for all eternity, screeched the most desolate, wretched and haunting song of complete and utter heartbreak.