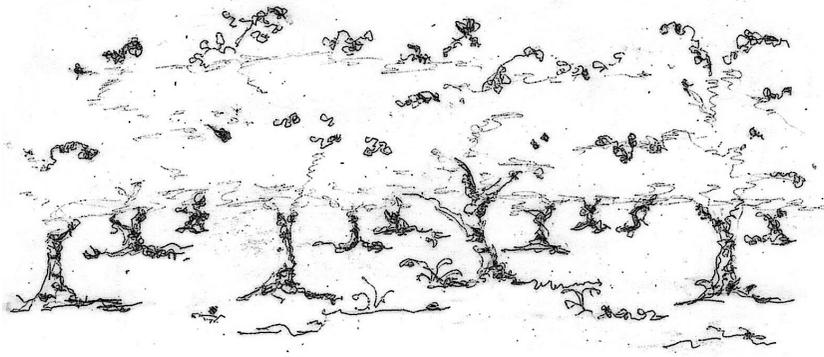


## Chapter One



# Tower Strike

“Where’s Flinch?” Tarc asked. He surveyed the secluded rendezvous spot where his friends were mounted on their horses, ready to ride. “The sun’s setting, we’ve gotta go!”

“We figured he’d be coming with you...everyone else is here,” Luften said, and then muttered to himself, “First chink in the plan and we haven’t even started.” He turned his horse around to head back into town. “I’ll find him and we’ll come along behind you.”

“Tell him to hurry, we need him to man the signal lantern,” Tarc replied. “Otherwise, Patin will have to do it.” He motioned toward Patin who was trying to get his horse to move, with no success. “Last thing we need is to have Kief dragged through the dirt when he gets it wrong.”

“Don’t you worry, we won’t allow that to happen. We’ll catch up to you in no time,” Luften replied.

“And” — Tarc’s shoulders dropped as he let out a huff — “he’ll miss the whole spectacle if he doesn’t hurry.”





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Luften was already on his way, but he stuck a thumb up for Tarc.

Kief flipped his reins on Natch's rear and headed in the opposite direction. "See you there!" he called after Luften.

Patin's horse continued to nibble stubbornly on a patch of grass until he finally jerked the horse's head up and kicked the old steed, not wanting to fall behind. "Oh it's going to be a spectacle all right," he said under his breath. He rubbed his hands together, trying to keep the cold out of the gloves that he wore.

"You guys know Kief could die doing this. It's not some circus," Sefrana reprimanded. She swiveled about in her saddle to glare at Patin, who instantly raised his hands in protest.

"Don't look at me," he argued.

"He'll be fine," Tarc replied, waving it off. "The man's practically a bird."

Sefrana situated herself forward again and spoke just loud enough for Kief to hear at the front of the line. "He just thinks he is," she said.

Kief began flapping his arms at his sides, the disappearing sun casting long shadows of his arms across the trail.

Clarín smiled at Kief and wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck. She pulled her horse up alongside him. "Are you sure you've had enough practice with that thing?" she asked, flashing her big brown eyes at him.

Kief patted the bundled poles and fabric jutting out off the back of his horse. "Yeah, there's not much to it. Besides, Tarc might have killed me if I had asked for one more run through."

"I heard that," Tarc called out.

Kief paid him no attention; his eyes were fixed on Clarín. Having finally had a day to herself, she'd used it well. Her silky brown hair was clean and combed, held back from her face

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by a thin leather strap wrapped over the top of her head. The ends of her hair danced softly in the evening breeze, brushing against her shoulders. She'd put on a different pair of boots, tan and polished, rising to her knees where her pants were neatly tucked in. Her deep blue wool coat covered her hips and rested on her thighs as she rode in the saddle.

"Stay focused when you get up there," Clarin said.

Kief snapped his head forward and began studying the trail ahead of them. "Oh I...I will," he said, fidgeting in his seat. He trained his eyes on a grove of high pines, but it was no good. He was besotted — and he knew she knew it.

"Well good, I'd hate to have to open my nurse's pack for you again," Clarin replied.

"You're going to need a full body splint and stretcher before he's finished," Patin called at them. "I don't think you have that in there."

"I guess I can improvise," Clarin called back.

"Well, you'd better get started figuring," Patin said, "those chatra trees are going to snag his line and bring him down like a wounded duck."

"Do you think we're stupid, Patin?" Tarc asked.

"This whole plan answers that question," he replied.

"Remind me again why we brought him? Luften could have run decoy on his own," Tarc said to Kief, and then turned back to Patin. "You're such an idiot, we've been over this a hundred times. We're going to run the open field, south of the orchard. Why do you think Sefrana went to all the trouble of getting this rope?" Tarc shook the 100-pace coil of frog silk rope hanging from his saddle. "Rope this long and light isn't easy to come by."

"That's right," Sefrana replied, tossing her red hair that bounced out from under the white wool cap she was wearing.



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“And you” — Tarc jabbed a finger at Sefrana — “what’s with the hat?” He threw up his hands. “Grrr! We’re The Dark Eagles, remember? Patin has no clue what we’re doing and you show up wearing a white hat!”

Sefrana bit her lip to keep Tarc from seeing it quiver. “I’ll take it off when I get there, will that make you happy?” she asked. She kicked her foot up and hit Tarc hard in the leg with her stirrup.

Tarc let out a yelp. “Hey, it’s not about making me happy.”

“You’d miss me to death if I were gone — white hat and all,” she said, pursing her lips. Rising up in her saddle, she gave her horse a flick, and sidled in front of Tarc. She smacked him as she passed and then fiddled with her hat, which she had deliberately chosen to show off her fiery locks.

Tarc huffed. “Come on, get with it guys!” And then fearing another retaliation from Sefrana he called out, “You too, Kief!”

Kief turned back with a puzzled look. “I’m focused,” he insisted.

“It doesn’t look like it!” Tarc said.

Kief reluctantly moved his horse in front of Clarin’s.

The trail narrowed as they turned down the ridge into Dondor Canyon. They passed the spot where Kief’s scoop sail had been hung up in the trees. He and Tarc had fished it out a few weeks earlier. It had a couple of tears but nothing his mother’s sewing machine couldn’t fix.

Twilight had almost faded by the time they reached the valley. Smoke streamed from chimneys across plowed farm fields as the city of High Valley settled in for the evening. To the east, at the base of the Virt Mountains, a ghostly glow radiated from the center of the chatra fields. An eerie haze hung over the orchards where steam poured out the distillation tower, condensing in the cool air and shrouding in around it.

Kief stopped to take a look through his spectascope. Four heavy



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transports stood idle, protecting the factory that was surrounded by a newly constructed post and prick-wire fence. He supposed it housed the whole of the surviving troops. Ten or so great lamps illuminated the three completed fuel tanks and the other three under construction. Soldiers worked around the compound like ants on a breadcrumb. Kief clapped his spectascope closed and placed it in his satchel.

“Well?” Tarc asked.

“It’s as if nothing ever happened,” Kief replied. “Looks like three of the tanks are already finished.”

“They’re stockpiling fuel,” Patin said.

“Thanks professor,” Tarc snapped. “You know that’s why we’re doing this, right?”

Patin protested, “We shouldn’t even be here. Let someone else do it.”

“Are you going to start it up all over again, Patin?” Tarc was now clenching his teeth. “Not another word or I’ll strap you to that thing and launch you into the tower.”

“I just hope it works, Kief,” Patin said, ignoring Tarc’s threats. “Just because you saw a picture in a book of a girl flying a kite doesn’t mean you can fly like a kite.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I had you and Luften help me design it or it might not work. I have all the confidence in the world in your brain, Patin.”

A proud smile rose on Patin’s face and he sat up a little taller in his saddle.

Nearing their destination, the rumble of the machines grew louder and Kief’s heartbeat began to pick up. They rode along the outer perimeter of the orchard and headed south for the launch site in the open field. Twisted trunks and waving branches of the chatra morphed into monsters guarding a fortress. Kief rubbed



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Natch's neck, which always seemed to calm them both. He looked behind him at his friends, who at the growling of the press had begun riding low and close, the noses of their horses nearly touching the backs of the rider in front of them.

A rustling in the trees made Kief turn sharply around. He shot his hand up in the air, pulling Natch to a sudden stop and focusing his eyes into the darkness. The breezes and grumbling made the whole orchard seem alive. He slowly lowered his hand and tapped Natch's flanks with his heels. Immediately the rustle came again, loud and distinct. Kief's heart sank.

Sparks flashed, momentarily lighting up the trees, blasts erupting from the grove.

"Go!" Kief shouted.

But before they'd ridden ten paces, Sefrana let out a scream and collapsed from her horse. Tarc leapt off Sarjen and crawled, in the cover of the dry grass, toward her. Slingerfire cracked all around.

"Sefrana's been hit," he called out when he reached her.

Sefrana was holding her arm just below the shoulder. Blood trickled out between her fingers, the sleeve of her wool coat already soaked through.

Clarin scrambled up next to them. "Can you ride?" she asked calmly.

"I think so."

Clarin looked at Tarc.

"Yep," he said, giving her a nod.

She darted for her horse.

Kief returned fire while Patin fumbled around for his slinger, their horses prancing and snorting, slugs ricocheting off the cold hard ground underneath them and whizzing through the frigid air.

Tarc pulled off Sefrana's hat and stuffed it in her pocket

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before lifting her up onto her horse. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” he said, and handed her the reins, squeezing her hands around them. “Hold tight, lay low and Clarin will get you home.”

Clarin grabbed the lead rope from Sefrana’s horse and jumped onto her own. “Light up the sky, Kief!” she yelled above the bursting slingerfire.

Tarc sprinted back to his horse, dodging another barrage of slugs that was released in his direction. Flinging himself up into his saddle and hovering his body close over Sarjen’s back, he kicked him into a full gallop. Kief and Patin followed right behind, their slingers in hand, running hard to get out of the soldiers’ range.

“We’re down four Eagles, Kief...nobody to run decoy and no one to man the signal lanterns,” Tarc called out as they rode.

“We’re done for!” Patin cried.

“No we’re not!” Kief replied. “The three of us will have to make do, we’re only done for if we quit.” Not quite at their designated launch site, Kief reined Natch to a halt. “We’ve gotta get me up in the air, now!”

“But we aren’t in the right spot,” Patin protested.

“Now!” Tarc yelled at Patin and yanked out the end of the coiled silk rope, tossing it to him.

Kief flew off his horse and began assembling the wing sail. Time seemed to slow down, and every function felt like it took forever as Kief scrambled to attach the two drop-bombs that were in his saddlebags onto the crossbar. His hands were colder than he’d realized and his fingers moved slowly and stiffly. At last, when the faint rumbling of galloping horses was growing uncomfortably close, he gave Tarc the signal to lead out and take the slack out of the rope.

Kief clipped his harness onto the crossbar underneath





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the V-shaped wing sail he held suspended above him and turned to Patin who stood useless, rope in hand. Kief grabbed the end of the rope from him and lashed it onto his contraption. “Tell Tarc to take it easy until I’m up in the air and then to give it everything he’s got.”

Patin reached for the lantern in his saddlebag. “But what about the signal lantern?” he asked in a panic.

Slingerfire from the soldiers flashed in the near distance, though it was too far for the slugs to reach them. “There’s no time for that now,” Kief yelled, adjusting his grip on the crossbar.

Patin scrambled up on his horse and grabbed Natch’s lead. He kicked his horse again and again, urging him forward to meet up with Tarc, who was now too far ahead to be seen in the darkness.

Kief started running in the same direction as fast as he could, holding the sail above him. He felt the rope go taut and then tug at him as Tarc moved faster. The weight of the bombs made it difficult to carry the load. He chided himself for not thinking to practice with them. His lungs were heaving for air as he stretched his legs as far as they could go, but soon even the length of his stride wasn’t enough to keep up with Sarjen’s increasing pace. He stumbled on a rock, his body smashing into the ground. But before his face hit the dirt, the crossbar in front of him shot abruptly upward, thumping him in the chest and knocking the wind out of him. And then, wonderfully, he found himself soaring above the road, dangling from his harness.

Tarc kicked Sarjen faster, dragging Kief and the sail behind him. The sail shot upward, drawing Kief higher into the sky. Kief banked hard to the left, cutting through the darkness toward the chatra press and distillation tower. He looked down and to his right. The silk rope stretched out above the southern part of the orchard to the open field where he could barely make out Tarc





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and Patin galloping on their horses through creeping fingers of vapor. He could see that they were still a good distance ahead of the soldiers in pursuit. Dot was full and had risen above the mountain, shining brightly on the landscape below him. Passing unnoticed, high above the fence and the armored transports, Kief watched the soldiers around the tower. The machinery was loud, and he was relieved that they hadn't been alerted to the slingerfire in the orchard.

The wing sail was serenely quiet. The fabric over the frame hardly made a sound as it fluttered lightly in the wind. It was very responsive too. If Kief leaned to the left, it would bank left, right — to the right. To ascend he'd point the nose up and to dive he'd point the nose down. He moved himself into position for a direct fly-over of the tower. Untying one of the drop-bombs, he held it by its strap with one hand and clutched tightly to the crossbar with his other. Kief's hands began to ache. He realized he'd been holding on with all his strength. He lightened his grip some. His legs were tight too, so he tried to relax them, holding his course steady for the target.

Approaching the tower, Kief took a deep breath and prepared to release the drop-bomb. The winds blew the steam cloud billowing from the distillation tower directly into the path of his sail. Droplets of water collected on his face and the steam blinded his vision. The sail suddenly thrust skyward in the updraft of rising warm air. A surge of panic swept over him. He could barely see his fading target. Not completely sure of his location, he released the drop-bomb anyway. It quickly disappeared into a flurry of steam. He trained his ears to hear the explosion, but it wasn't necessary. A bright flash illuminated the bulging clouds, followed by a loud blast. Kief looked back, hoping to see a raging fire consuming the fuel factory, but there was only a small blaze



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on the ground near the tower. He'd missed.

Suddenly his sail was being dragged away from the factory. Tarc was circling around in the field to make a second pass. It was strange to be towed along on a tiny string and observe from a distance the events happening below in what felt like delayed time, though he knew it was quite the opposite. Tarc headed directly back toward the soldiers that were chasing after him. Kief refocused on his objective and banked hard again, this time to the right.

With the steam blowing away from him, he had a clear view of his target. Quickly removing the second drop-bomb, he released it a little before the tower to account for his speed. He watched the bomb as it disappeared underneath him. He heard a similar blast as before, only it was followed by a second blast and a blazing ball of roaring fire that nearly engulfed him. He could feel the heat of the fire on his face and hands as he was catapulted into the sky by a volcano of warm air. Anchored to Tarc's horse on the ground, Kief swung in a giant arc through the sky, up and away from the tower that was covered in furious flames.

Far below, he could hear the war cries of Tarc and Patin as they rammed head-on through the soldiers who had been pursuing them. Distracted by the blast, Tarc and Patin were able to slice in between them unexpectedly. Kief watched the sail rope catch three of the soldiers and rip them from their horses. He thought Patin was going down too, but somehow he maintained his balance in the clash. And then Kief felt the wing sail jerk violently and he was sent diving toward the ground. The rope was snagged on the limb of a chatra tree. Kief knew he wouldn't recover without cutting the line.

The wing sail shot downward like a falling star. The trees of the chatra orchard were coming up fast. Kief released his



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iron grip on the crossbar with one hand and wrenched on the towline quick-release he'd installed for emergencies, but the pressure was so tight that he couldn't free the pin. He let go of the sail entirely and gripped the quick-release with both hands. Yanking it hard, it popped free. The towline snapped clear and the wing sail spun instantly out of control. Thrown around underneath the sail, dangling by his harness, Kief managed to grab the crossbar with one hand and then the other and pull himself into position.

He leaned back with all his might, pointing the nose of his wing sail skyward. He felt the tips of leaves and branches brush against his boots, and he could hear galloping horses to his left but was not certain on his bearings. He steered the wing sail away from the orchard and caught sight of Tarc and Patin on their horses, the remaining soldiers right on their tail. Kief pointed his sail toward the fracas, coming up behind Tarc and Patin. He released his harness buckle, allowing himself to dangle by his hands from the crossbar above Natch, who was running right behind Patin's horse. His forearms were burning so intensely he didn't think he could hold on any longer.

"Do it!" Tarc shouted out.

Kief let go of the crossbar and dropped skiwampus onto his saddle. His feet fumbled for the stirrups and he bounced and bumped atop his horse, nearly vaulting off altogether, but Natch didn't miss a stride.

The wing sail spun out of control almost crashing into the soldiers, who dodged to both sides around it.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!" Slingerfire rattled behind them. They didn't look back. Kicking their horses into a full sprint, the three Dark Eagles raced away from the burning chatra factory. When they came near High Valley, the pursuing soldiers peeled off. Kief assumed they feared that there might be others waiting to ambush



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them in the forest. Regardless, it was a good thing they did. Sarjen was breathing heavily and near to collapsing from the strain of having pulled the sail at a breakneck speed.

At the edge of the forest, they stopped to rest and to get a first real look at their strike. The flames had spread to the three completed fuel tanks. Everything was covered in fire. Kief pulled out his spectascope and they each took a look. Tarc let out a cheer with Kief. Patin was at a loss for words; he just trembled as he peered through the scope.

“They aren’t putting that fire out,” Tarc said, patting Sarjen’s foamy neck.

Kief reached out and rubbed Sarjen’s head. “Way to go, boy. You were terrific!”

Natch craned his neck around, stretching his head out for a scratch. Kief slumped down in his saddle, full of relief, and flung his arms around his horse’s neck. “You were terrific too, Natch, like always.”

In the dark, they watched the fire burn like the sun itself had set on High Valley. The glow from the flames extended beyond the perimeter of the chatra orchards, illuminating all the fields around it. Billowing smoke from the factory drifted in the wind toward High Valley. Lamps flickered on in random throughout the city as people emerged to see what had happened.

“Flinch and Luften missed out,” Tarc said.

“That they did,” Kief replied. “Come on, let’s go make sure Sefrana’s okay.” He turned Natch toward the mountains.