

CHAPTER 1

Secret Hope

All sense of time had long been lost, replaced by the constant beat of hooves and low wheezing gasps for breath. The smell of sweating horsehide smothered the rider, that and the dark starless night. It was the same, the same, for days on end the same, yet still this rider pressed on.

Three had been dispatched, two hours apart, with the same message, the same destination. Then, in the early morning long before first light, a servant came in silence to a fourth with orders to immediately make ready to ride.

Garth was the young and untried son of the royal stable master. To be given a task for Triiton King of Luminus was an honor beyond expectation, especially in these dark days.

Life had changed in Luminus ever since Prince Aalon, the son of Triiton and heir to the throne, had been assassinated. He was engaged to marry the Lady Casandra of the House of Hiram.

Many believed he was killed to prevent the union of these two powerful families.

It was understood that Fedale, so called Emperor of The Alliance, was behind the killing; however, proof of his guilt, if it existed, was a well-kept secret. Grievously, how the Prince had been poisoned, and by whom, was still unknown. Rumors abounded, but the most persistent was that the court of Triton had been infiltrated by a traitor, perhaps even one from the king's own household!

Garth dressed quickly and followed the servant to the royal stables to saddle a horse. Setting down his small lantern, the servant nodded toward a certain stall. Garth knew the stall and the horse within it. He smiled and picked up saddle and bridle.

"There you are girl, there you are," cooed Garth. He did not intend to startle this warhorse.

The servant melted into the night, leaving as silently as mist. Garth did not notice when the servant left, nor did he see the form of a man standing in the shadows, watching.

Garth worked quickly, his fingers cinching saddle and rope with an ease earned from years of practice.

“Practice makes for habit and habit makes for speed” had been drilled into his head by his father, Cheval. From the time he could stand he had worked beside Cheval and had learned his lessons well. Now, when speed was needed, his fingers moved without conscious thought.

The dark form in the shadows shifted slightly. Slowly, silently, it moved closer and closer. His back to the shadowy form, Garth worked feverishly on readying the horse. He saw nothing, heard nothing, suspected nothing. His mount, Citation, stirred. Ears back, eyes wide, the horse whinnied and stamped.

“Easy there,” whispered Garth. “You’ll be on your way soon enough.”

The man was now within reach of Garth. His right hand held a strange club, two feet long and crowned with a silver horse head. His left reached out to grab the boy from behind.

Abruptly, Citation reared in her stall. Before Garth could move to calm her he felt the iron grasp of a leather-clad hand. Shouting, he jerked around and stood wide-eyed. Seeing the club and the one who held it, he fell to his knees and remained motionless, fearful, head bowed.

“Forgive me, your Majesty,” gasped Garth, “I didn’t know you were here.”

Citation stomped the ground and snorted in aggravation.

“There is nothing to forgive, my young friend,” answered King Triton of Luminus, “Except perhaps my startling you so badly; but absolute secrecy is needed.”

The king took Garth’s arm and moved him to his feet, saying, “Please stand, Garth. We have much to do and little time. Three riders have I sent this night, yet I fear for their lives. So send I you, my fourth, and my secret hope.” Then, after a moment and so quietly that Garth could almost not hear it he added, “I alone know of our meeting. I alone know you are here.”

“What of the servant who brought me?” asked Garth.

“The servant who brought you has been killed to guarantee that no one knows of your leaving...to guarantee your mission, to guarantee your safety.”

Garth’s face paled at this news, and he stood, blinking and slack-jawed.

As if in answer, the king whispered, “Dark times call for dark measures. The servant was a

traitor, as are many in my court, it seems. I do not know how Fedale has done it, but by bribe or clever words or some dark craft he has turned the hearts of more than a few trusted friends.”

The king’s face seemed to age as he spoke. A grave tiredness came upon him. His shoulders sagged under the weight of death and deceit and the war that was upon him.

“Listen now,” he commanded; a forced vigor in his voice. “I have a message for you to deliver.”

Looking around the stable once and then again, the king extinguished the lone lantern and nudged Garth further into the horse’s stall. Bending close to the boy’s ear he whispered the message and precise instructions as to its intended recipient.

Silently Garth led his horse out of the stables and into the cold starless night.

“If not for Speed, the Kingdom will be lost,” were the king’s last words as Garth mounted Citation. As if she understood the need, the horse leaped into the darkness and was away. The king stood motionless until both the sight and sound of the horse had faded into the night. Then he slowly started down the path to his palace, praying as he walked. Unseen, hidden above in shadows on the

stable rooftop, a hooded figure watched Garth and the king disappear.



Night provided little rest in the Lord Hiram's camp. It had become only a time to do tasks that did not require the light of day. All ten sons of the House of Hiram had ordered their troops on full war footing. The Lord Hiram had not ordered it, he did not need to. His eldest son, Lord Falcon, had taken the initiative and the others had agreed. It seemed odd to take such action without direction from their father, yet it also seemed immensely right.

Many rulers begin to fear when they see their heirs grow in strength, confidence and ambition; not the Lord Hiram. He had raised his sons purposefully to develop their unique strengths and their individual confidence. Falcon, Tulmar, Shank and Kyler all had been raised as front line warriors. And warriors they were.

Falcon, with his blood red battle flag, commanded an elite corps of men who had never known defeat, never left a comrade behind, never balked at any hardship.

Tulmar, his flag as fire orange as his forge, was master of armor, weapons and metallurgy. A giant of a man, his strength and skill with metals provided strong sharp swords, razor points for lance and arrow, shields like walls, and light, tough armor. Tulmar's skill gave his brothers an edge on the battlefield as well as on their blades.

Shank, as bright at heart as his yellow flag, commanded practiced archers, skilled in both long bow and cross bow. Tall, strong, and quick, Shank's men had proven their value many times over. They were usually the first to enter battle. The distance and accuracy of their volleys often turned the battle even before it was fully engaged. When coupled with the Cavalry's Grand Charge, they formed a force most foes simply could not face.

Kyler, the youngest of the first four, led a shimmering silver cavalry with lancers, all of them horsemen without equal. Tall and fearless, Kyler lead his men from the front. They would follow him anywhere. But courage and respect were not his only gifts. Early on Kyler had shown a rare ability in selecting and breeding horses. As a result, the House of Hiram possessed horses groomed for speed, or endurance, or strength, or size. Whatever

the need, Kyler had men and animals ready and willing to triumph.

The next three brothers dedicated themselves to the support of the camp as a whole. Herald, known by his flag of sky blue, excelled in communications both in battle and peacetime. His flagmen could send and receive long complex messages even during the fiercest battle. His signalmen could send brief messages with the speed of light—literally. They were trained to send coded messages by flashing light with mirrored disks. For very long distances, Herald had established flocks of messenger pigeons that would always fly to their birthplace. The cities that housed these flocks often knew nothing of them. The birds and those who cared for them were a well-kept secret.

Once used, the birds would be smuggled back to their respective cities to await another chance to serve. It had taken several years to develop his network of pigeons and handlers, but now Herald's Friends, as they were known, were a strategic piece of the Lord Hiram's might.

Herald also had trumpeters whose signals kept the camp on schedule. All knew the meaning of the trumpet sounds, everything from a time note, announcing end of watch, to a regal flurry,

announcing the arrival of an honored guest. Regular life was governed by the horns.

Norrom was often absent from camp, his dark blue flag gracing one of his many ships. He was responsible for all matters dealing with transporting the Lord Hiram's army, camp and commerce.

Norrom had perfected the use of horses, carts and wagons to carry people and goods on land, but he was always happiest when sailing. He was young in years and looked younger than his age, but he had wisdom and skill well beyond his years. It was said that Norrom was born an old soul. He had also traveled farthest of all the House of Hiram and in his travels gained knowledge, friendships, experience and riches. Though the House of Hiram had a common treasury, the Lord Hiram had encouraged all his sons to develop resources of their own. Norrom had far surpassed his father's expectations in accumulating wealth. Were the truth revealed even his father did not know all Norrom had acquired.

Ram, his flag a deep royal purple, loved to build things that could break his father's enemies. He was skilled in designing and making machines of war: catapults, ramps, rams, great wheeled towers,

and a new thing that spit iron balls and flame with the sound of thunder. Ram was developing it with the help of Tulmar, who worked in iron, and Gannon whose chemists created a powder that made the flame. He hoped to demonstrate it to the Lord Hiram and his brothers very soon. It could not be too soon, for unknown to Ram, the enemies of the House of Hiram had already perfected such a weapon.

The last three brothers in the House of Hiram had duties that were a little more genteel than the older seven. Important as they were, these duties did not often include the harder realities of warfare. In truth, the youngest three sons of the Lord Hiram had never seen battle. They were untested, unsoiled, unproven. Though none could guess the dark future that rapidly approached, these three would soon know hardship greater than they could ever have imagined.

Vine, his flag the color of deep red wine, was the one son whom everyone in camp knew and loved. He was responsible for food! Bread, poultry, fresh meats and fish, salted meats, roots, greens, fruit and dates, cheeses, wines; all were baked, raised, harvested, butchered, cured, bought, stored, cooked and served by Vine and his people. They

were a happy group. *Vine's Wines*, as the food tents were sometimes called, never closed. The cooking fires were never quenched. Morning, afternoon, evening and late-night meals were prepared in a great dance of activity. Those whose task it was to wash and clean never ended their labor. Those who cooked did so nonstop. The dance continued all day every day; all night every night.

When he was at home, Vine prided himself in his fields, orchards, and flocks. Banquets were held, each more glorious than the last. No one went hungry. Though most homes prepared their own food, a common hall was open to all of the Lord Hiram's subjects. Sweets and treats imported from far away graced the table of the Lord Hiram and often found their way to even the most humble of houses. At camp, all ate in the great food tent.

While Vine was away, the harvest and calving continued with the staff that was left behind. These loyal workers, with the help of Norrom, provided new goods, fresh food, and barrels of wine to the camp; delivered each new moon. Vine's success was as much a result of his keen sense of logistics and administration as it was in his recipes.

His was the group in which most women served, for the women in the House of Hiram did

not fight in battle, but many men served likewise under the wine-colored flag.

Reed, little known and somewhat feared, was the opposite of his older brother Vine. With his flag the color of forest green, Reed provided security and information for the Lord Hiram.

His men and their missions were secretive. Their comings and goings were apart from the other troops. They could be seen making their camouflage netting. They could be seen returning at dusk, covered in dirt and mud and leaves. Rarely, however, did anyone know where they went or what they did.

Those who served as sentries were better known because no one could leave or enter the camp without being questioned by them. But it was known that many concentric circles of hidden guards haunted the forest around the Lord Hiram's camp. Green Eyes, they were called. They watched all who came and went. Some said there were Green Eyes inside the camp as well as around it. Posing as Falcon's Reds, or Shank's Yellows, or Tulmar's Oranges, they had a secret life. They were secret Greens, watching even their own kin.

If this were true, it was at the command of the Lord Hiram himself. Trust and loyalty were

expected among all his sons and subjects, but the Lord Hiram knew that history was full of unfulfilled expectations. Reed was charged with security outside and inside the House of Hiram. He therefore enjoyed a greater closeness and intimacy with the Lord Hiram than any of his brothers.

The most elite of Reed's men formed a special royal guard for the Lord Hiram himself. When one of Reed's men changed uniform from green to the Lord Hiram's white, he took a blood vow to obey, protect and serve the Lord Hiram only. Trained in stealth, and fighting skills with and without weapons, the Lord Hiram's guards were respected and feared.

Though Reed lost many of his best men to the Service of Light, as it was called, he was always most proud of those so honored. Lately, however, Reed had learned that his father had inducted men from his brother's troops. It was the first time that the honor had been given to one other than a Green. If his information was correct, and it almost always was, Falcon, Kyler and Herald all had given men into the Service of Light.

After weeks of smoldering thought, Reed finally asked his father if he or any of his men had displeased him. The question was foolish. All the

sons knew, indeed, all the camp knew that if the Lord Hiram were displeased with someone, he would not hesitate to inform the unfortunate one of his displeasure. There would be no need to wonder at the nature of the offense, nor of its consequences. But Reed decided to ask anyway.

One night as dinner ended, Reed made his fateful choice. As was the custom, the Lord Hiram stood, signaling that dinner had ended. The musicians stopped playing. His ten sons stood also, thanked their father and left the dining area of the Pavilion.

On one side of the dining tent hung a huge double-edged broadsword, the Lord Hiram's actual battle sword. When it was in place it signified that the House of Hiram was at peace, when removed, it could only mean war. The Great Battle Sword had hung in piece for years now.

Nearby, posed in its ornate holder, stood the Lord Hiram's mighty Golden Rod. Six feet long, the rod combined art and function, beauty and history. Made of gold-covered ironwood, the staff was engraved with scenes of important events; coronations, battles, births. The birth and coronation of the Lord Hiram were represented, as was the birth of Falcon. Reed's birth, and that of

his other brothers, was not on the staff. Clearly Falcon was the heir apparent. The Golden Rod was topped with a solid gold headpiece of twin hawks, looking in opposite directions. Wrapped around the base of the headpiece was a dragon, lying as if slain.

Reed lingered between the Great Battle Sword and the Golden Rod, symbols of the Lord Hiram's power and authority. He lightly rubbed the smooth metal surface of the staff where his birth could be engraved, then moved to face his father.

"Father," began Reed without making eye contact. "I have heard that your guard now has men from Falcon, Kyler and Herald. I am sure they are good men, but it has never been so before. Have I, or any of my men, failed to serve you well? Have any displeased you?"

Reed suddenly became aware of the awful silence that filled the tent. The musicians had stopped playing; the guards could not to be seen. Reed stood motionless, arms at his side, head bowed. He felt like a child caught in some misdeed. But, he reasoned within himself, it was his father who had offended.

Upon hearing the question the Lord Hiram gazed so intently at his son it was as if he were peering into Reed's very soul. He remained thus for

so long that Reed chided himself for asking. Finally, the Lord Hiram's cold steel blue eyes softened and he smiled, saying,

“No son, you have always tried to please me. I am proud of you and your men.”

No other explanation was offered. No details were given. The Lord Hiram need not give anyone a reason for his actions. Only silence followed.

Finally Reed nodded, glanced up for a moment with a forced smile, and left the profound presence of his father. As the Lord Hiram watched him leave, a troubling wariness filled his heart. With one quiet clap a guard appeared, received whispered orders and departed, making no more sound than a grave.

The tenth and youngest son of the Lord Hiram was Gannon, whose duties and striped flag were unlike any of his brothers. The men working for Gannon did not wear the uniform of soldiers. They wore the long robes of academia, striped, of course, in Gannon's color.

He was given those who showed the most promise, those who had the sharpest and finest minds. They were the scholars, scientists and physicians of the House of Hiram. Though he ruled

as a son of the Lord Hiram, Gannon was but an apprentice in the arts and sciences. He studied astronomy, cartography, chemistry, history, mathematics, medicinal arts, and more. As unfair as it might seem, the Lord Hiram expected him to master them all. So it was for all ten sons in the House of Hiram. Each was to be the master of his element.

Each son had a role, a place, and a purpose; each was a critical part. Together the parts formed a powerful whole. As the Lord Hiram had planned, the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. Now, with the youngest three sons coming of age, the House of Hiram was united, skilled and more powerful than any could dream; any except the Lord Hiram. It was his dream. A vision honed in wisdom and precision every day since the day Falcon was born. It was a vision built on honor and trust. Trust, in the close-knit family, was as carefully cultivated as if it were a rare blossom. And so it is. This trust had never been tested, until now.

Falcon feared that perhaps he was going too far. Never before had he assembled his brothers without decree from their father. Never before had they taken such far ranging actions, without their father's command. They had waited for him to

instruct them, inform them, command them, yet each day was void of any leadership. The Lord Hiram did not order a war council, nor even ask Reed for information gathered by sentries and spies. It was as if he was tired, weak or disinterested. So Falcon took it upon himself and gathered his brothers in council.

The next morning, Falcon prepared to inform his father of their decision. He dressed in a new uniform. He made sure all was spotless and crisp. Falcon twice asked his wife, Cilantra, if she could see any flaw in his appearance. She shook her head with feigned casualness. Cilantra had no idea of the issue, but she knew this meeting between her husband and his father was uniquely important. As he started to leave, she put her hand on his shoulder, let it slide down his arm and rest on his hand. Then she smiled sweetly. Her confidence in Falcon made him all the more sure of himself.

At mid-morning the Lord Hiram could usually be found in a small, non-descript tent off the Great Pavilion. It was well guarded within, but nothing on the outside gave the appearance that this tent held any significance. Among other benefits, this was an added measure of security. Few outside of his family and personal guard knew of this tent.

It served as a personal sanctuary and a place where he could study, think and plan away from the weight of splendor and formality. If need be, a small corridor between this place and the Pavilion provided a discreet way for the Lord Hiram to enter the Great Pavilion and assume his official persona.

As Falcon entered the tent one of the guards within swiftly drew his sword and two others pointed the business end of their spears in his direction. Falcon nodded to the first guard and was acknowledged. No word was spoken but sword and spears were returned to ease. Falcon waited while the guard entered the inner room. Even in here, any who wished to see the Lord Hiram had to be announced and then invited to enter.

Surprised and pleased that his firstborn had come, the Lord Hiram set aside the maps and charts he was studying and welcomed Falcon. Life in court was full of protocol and decorum, even when the setting was casual and private. Falcon knew to wait for tea to be served and for questions of grandchildren and wife and life in general to be asked before bringing up the subject of his visit.

“Thank you for tea, Father. It was refreshing to see you this morning,” said Falcon, carefully

watching his father to detect any impatience or foreboding.

“Please greet Cilantra and the children for me,” replied the Lord Hiram. “We should all ride some morning soon.”

“They would love it, Father” smiled Falcon.

“I have one other thing to tell you, Father,” continued Falcon, finally getting to the subject that had consumed his mind. “I need to inform you that the camp is on full alert.” Receiving no reply, Falcon continued. “After discussing it with my brothers and seeing that all were in agreement, it seemed wise to increase our readiness. Last night I ordered the troops on full war footing.”

His brothers had all agreed. Falcon, however, chose to take full responsibility for the action to shield his brothers should their father take offense at their boldness. It was characteristically selfless and self-assured at the same time. The responsibility was indeed Falcon’s for it had long been clear that he had final authority in the absence of the Lord Hiram.

Falcon waited for his father to speak, but he did not, nor did he move. “Take Reed and the Greens, for instance,” Falcon finally added. “They are giving special attention to their uniforms,

smearing their faces with soot, and wearing camouflage netting. As never before, they are invisible while on watch in the forest. Reed has stationed sentries in new outposts, miles farther out than ever before. These will remain on duty for days at a time, silent, waiting, watching. If any danger approaches, we will know and have time to respond.”

Still, the Lord Hiram was silent, but his gaze told Falcon of his interest. Not knowing what else to do, Falcon continued.

“Reed has divided the service of the Greens into two parts: on watch and off watch. Now, even when not on watch his men’s hands will almost never be idle. They will constantly work, weaving netting and other garments to fool the eyes of the enemy. Even now their hands are blistered and bloodied before they stop for a few hours of sleep. Soon they will have carts full of the netting, enough for all of us to blend with the forest as we travel.”

The Lord Hiram raised his hand and simply nodded his assent. That was it. He had accepted the action of his son. Or so it seemed, but Falcon could not be sure. In any case, it was time to leave.

“Thank you for seeing me, Father” said Falcon.

“You are always welcome, Falcon,” he replied.

As Falcon left the Lord Hiram smiled and felt the satisfaction known only to a father with a well-raised son. After a moment savoring that contentment, the Lord Hiram sighed heavily, walked through his private corridor, and entered the Great Pavilion. His ever-present guards were surprised and, trying to discern where he was going, scurried on and around his path. Usually he would inform them of his plans, or his movement would be known due to his usual cycle of activities. Not today.

He arrived at the family dining chamber before the normal guards could be notified of his presence. He stopped before the thick dark veil that was the entrance to the round chamber. The veil was decorated by ten metal shields, one for each son. Each shield was etched with the emblem of twin black hawks and colored according the each son’s battle flag; orange for Tulmar, yellow for Shank, dark blue for Norrom, sky blue for Herald, and so on.

Gently, the Lord Hiram’s fingers caressed Falcon’s red shield then did the same to Reed’s green shield. His eyes wandered up and down the

veil, pausing at each of his son's emblems. Then he stepped through the veil.

Servants were cleaning and preparing the chamber for the next meal. One stood high on a ladder, adding oil and incense to overhead lamps. At the sudden appearance of the Lord Hiram, the servants took a collective breath, bowed, and exited. The poor servant with the oil was left on the ladder, not having seen or heard anything. Finished, he climbed down, only to bump into the Lord Hiram himself. His heart seemed to stop, and would have had it not been for a kind smile from the Lord Hiram.

"Thank you", said the Lord Hiram, simply. "The light in here is always perfect."

The servant stared at his lord for a moment, nodded, gathered the oil jar and tools, nodded again, and left. The Lord Hiram chuckled to himself as he watched the poor man leave, and then turned. With that motion, the weight of the world descended upon him.

In a few moments the servant realized he had left the ladder behind. Groaning at his carelessness, he set down the jar and tools and returned to the servant's area of the dining chamber. It was here that servants and guards stayed awaiting

a summons from the Lord Hiram. They stood behind a veil, watching, waiting, ready to move at a moment's notice; but not today. Today it was deserted. He was alone. No other servant or guard was present. The man had never before seen this area empty when the Lord Hiram was present. There were always servants present to wait on him and guards to protect him. This alarmed the man, but he had other things to think about, namely the ladder and his own stupidity.

Braced for another encounter with the Lord Hiram, but hoping that perhaps he had already left, the servant silently moved through the veil that separated the serving area from the dining chamber. He had prepared himself, or so he thought, for whatever might happen, but what did happen emptied him of breath like a kick in his gut. The sight would remain with him all of his long life.

Ten huge silk sheets hung round the edges of the chamber. They were colored in the same colors as the ten shields. The silks rippled slightly as he entered. In the center of the room was a huge round white table. Off to one side was his ladder. The hiss of burning oil lamps reminded the servant of his mission, but he could only stare.

The Lord Hiram stood with his back to him, facing the great broadsword that hung in the chamber. Both his hands were on the sword. The fingers of his left hand ran gently along the sharp double edge, light seeming to spark at his touch. His right hand firmly grasped the handle.

Suddenly, with a motion both graceful and terrible, the Lord Hiram lifted the sword from its place of peace. He held it aloft, standing as if in prayer, then brought the sword down, back and forth in violent arcs.

Taking an immensely deep breath, the Lord Hiram slipped the sword into the sheath that now hung upon his belt. Blinking and breathing anew, the servant retreated from the chamber. He was the first to learn that the House of Hiram was at war.



All sense of time was lost to him ever since Long Bridge. He had slowed Citation to a walk, fearing to cross the bridge, fearful of its awkward slate and wood flooring and the long, long drop to the river below. As they walked, Garth caught sight of a shimmer, a slight reflection of moonlight on the

flooring where there should have been none; then another.

The slightest touch on the reigns brought Citation to a halt. Garth peered forward into the night and then behind. Twisting in the saddle he glanced left and then right, but all that could be seen was a mist-filled precipice. Smiling at himself, he slipped from his horse and knelt beside a small smudge of light.

Carefully, he touched it and brought his gloved finger close for inspection. It was wet and sticky. Studying it in the moonlight he reached out to touch it again, sniffed it, and then slowly stood. Blood! It was blood, fresh enough to reflect the full moon; blood, newly spilt and flowing only four, perhaps six, hours ago. He peered forward again into the darkness and listened.

Was that a sound, a muffled noise? He paused, ears straining for the sound of danger, eyes peering into the darkness. The river roaring far below made it hard to really hear anything else. A mist rose around the bridge, cloaking it in a permanent fog.

Assured that he was safe on the bridge, Garth's young eyes moved back to the blood and saw more. Nearby were another pool of blood and

a long swipe of it on the side of the bridge, up and over it. Here Garth noticed a broken arrow, picked it up and froze as he recognized the markings on its shaft.

The sound of a horse, none too distant, startled him to action. He jumped onto Citation and urged her run as fast as she could on the bridge. He had stopped in the middle of the bridge and now could not tell if the sound came from ahead or from behind. The cavernous walls around him echoed his own sounds and those of his own horse. He urged Citation forward, off the bridge.

As Garth reached the road on the far side of Long Bridge, he thought he saw movement in the trees to his right. Shifting the arrow to his left hand he held it like a dagger. Slowly, bravely, foolishly he moved Citation toward the sound. The horse stopped on its own, pawed the ground and snorted.

Garth strained his eyes to see ahead. The brush rustled in movement. Quickly, he reached down and grabbed the wooden handle protruding from his saddlebag. He held the King's horse head club tightly in his right hand, the arrow and reins in the other. Citation called out in a loud whinny and was answered by another. From the brush emerged a beautiful steed, Blackhorn, Citation's sire. The

horse shook its head, neighed and stomped at the sight of a friendly horse and rider. Then slowly, warily, he left the cover of the forest and joined Garth and Citation.

The two horses stood head to head, neck to neck and greeted one another. Blackhorn was wet with sweat and blood. An arrow dangled from his saddle, its barb lodged into the leather backrest. Garth nudged Citation off the road and into the forest from which Blackhorn had come. Blackhorn almost led the way. When Garth felt they were sufficiently hidden, he dismounted. The horses breathed in unison, steam snorted from their nostrils.

"There you are boy, there you are." He spoke quiet words in quiet tones. "Everything is all right now. There you are. Everything is fine."

If only that were true, thought Garth gravely.

Garth's words and tone calmed Blackhorn. Quickly, skillfully he ran a hand up and down each of the horse's legs, fingers searching for wounds. Finding none, he moved on to its haunches, flanks, back and neck. The blood was there, wet and sticky, but the horse was not wounded.

"I'm sorry boy," said Garth patting the horse.

He thought of the rider killed in an ambush as he rode across Long Bridge on a mission for the King. The same mission he now had. "They threw him over the edge, boy, into the river below. They threw him over the edge!" The horse pushed Garth with his nose, as if he understood.

"If only you could tell me what you saw. If only you could tell me."

As he spoke Garth ran his hand over the horse's flank and back, absentmindedly checking again for any wound. His hand stopped at the arrow dangling from the leather backrest. Pulling it from the saddle, Garth inspected it as carefully as possible in the darkness. His fingers ran up and down the shaft feeling the markings carved on it. They were the same as on the broken arrow found near the blood. There could be no doubt. The arrows bore the markings of King Triiton's own royal guard.

Garth knew which horses had left this night and in which order. He had saddled them himself. Blackhorn had been the third to leave. The third messenger was dead, treacherously killed.

King Triiton was right and he was in danger.

With a strength renewed by fear Garth jumped to action. He knew Citation had been going

full speed for hours and, though wet, Blackhorn had been standing, resting, for some time. He spoke quietly to Blackhorn for a moment, patted his neck, and mounted the horse. After tying Citation's reigns to the back of his saddle, they all stood still listening, watching for movement and danger. Finally, Garth returned to the road with both horses. In moments they were flying down the road, no stealth, no more caution. Speed was their only ally.

"Remember," Garth shouted, as much to himself as to the horses, "If not for speed, the Kingdom will be lost."