



Quicksilver Rising

Chapter I

It was a place of cheap magic.

A swarm of tiny sphinxes gathered, fluttering just above her head. Snapping jaws, whipping wings, curling tails. They weren't convincing. Their colours were wrong, and up close they were semi-transparent.

Serrah swatted, irritably, her hand passing through them as if they were dawn mist. They disintegrated into countless infinitesimal specks, like glowing rust. The tips of their spread wings were the last to go, popping out of existence in little burnished puffs.

'We going to skulk here all night, Ardacris?' Phosian hissed.

He hid next to her, but the alley was too dark to make out his features. His garb, like hers, was uniformly black, with a silk mask covering nose and mouth. Where flesh showed, it had been smeared with ash. The sheen of their blades was dimmed by grease and soot.

Serrah inwardly bridled at his familiarity and the disregard of her rank. But in deference to his connections she whispered only, *'Patience.'*

Phosian sighed. Serrah needed no light to picture the conceited expression on his callow face.

Nothing much stirred. The street was a midden lined with hovels, all gloom and demented angles. Its glistening cobbles were silvered by a half moon. Flies teemed, the air stank. Now and again a low-priced glamour walked, crawled, flew or drifted by, waning, and was ignored.

The house they watched was grander than the others and set apart. Two guards were visible at its front. There were more at the sides and rear. Again Serrah wondered if her modest forces would be enough.

'Think our strength's up to it?' Phosian asked, hinting criticism of her.

She was struck by the idea that he might have read her mind. But she knew such magic was likely mythical. And if it did exist it was so rare even *his* relatives probably couldn't afford it. *'Numbers aren't everything,'* she said. *'I'd take one seasoned fighter over a regiment of conscripts any day.'*

'And what would you call those inside, seasoned or green?' Sarcasm dripped.

‘Ruthless bastards,’ Serrah replied, still seething at having him foisted on her. ‘But I’ve a team I can trust.’ With one exception, she thought, adding, steely-toned, ‘It’s taken weeks to get to tonight. Nothing’s going to jeopardise it.’

His silent contempt was almost tangible.

By knowing where to look, and straining to see, several others in her group could be faintly made out, grey against the blackness. They were in position.

‘It’s time,’ she decided. ‘You know what to do. Stay close.’

He gave an indolent grunt.

She had a short piece of twine, and worried its end with thumb and forefinger, as though flipping a coin. Suddenly the tip glowed cherry red. Less conspicuous than a naked flame and generating no heat, it was a very basic glamour; just an ember, but enough for those alert to it. Serrah quickly signalled, then pinched it out.

They waited.

The nearest guard, a shaven-headed colossus, stood gazing at the night sky. His broadsword was thrust into the ground at his feet, his palm absently caressing the hilt. Further back, a leaner companion prowled with meagre enthusiasm.

A sound cut the air. High, smooth, and abruptly stilled by a soft impact.

An arrow quivered in the big man’s chest. He looked down at it dumbly. The sound repeated and his comrade dropped. A second bolt winged into the giant. Arms outstretched, he fell heavily.

‘*Move!*’ Serrah barked.

Dashing out of the shadows, limbs pumping, she ran for the house. Phosian chased her, his scrawny form contrasting with her athletic build. As they arrived at the entrance, two more of her crew slipped from the darkness to join them. Like Phosian, they hefted axes.

The double doors were oak with iron bracings. At her sign, the battering commenced. Almost immediately the rest of her team began pounding at the back of the house.

Serrah scanned the street, feeling vulnerable. Imperial agents weren’t exactly popular in this quarter and she half expected to see locals rushing in to take issue.

But she was more worried by what might be waiting inside.

The doors gave.

A dimly lit passageway stretched ahead of them. There was another door at its end. A corridor was set in the right-hand wall. Serrah motioned for one of the party to keep watch, then she, Phosian and the fourth group member carefully advanced, weapons drawn.

Something came out of the side passage. They froze.

It slinked, ebony fur bristling, a mass of fangs, claws and ill temper. Its hard, tawny eyes regarded them haughtily. It let out a wheezing snarl.

The barbat was waist-high to Serrah. Had it stood upright it could have laid its forepaws on her shoulders while it tore her throat out.

Absolutely still, they watched as a second cat padded into the hall. It was just as big, just as irate. Its ears pricked tensely, its ample pink tongue lolled.

Serrah couldn’t be sure about the creatures. She took a chance and edged forward.

‘Chief - ,’ one of her team cautioned.

She paid no attention and moved in on the nearest cat.

It leapt.

Her response was instant. She fell into a half crouch, simultaneously swinging her sword up, two-handed, teeth gritted with effort, carving an arc. It crossed paths with the slaving animal, slicing cleanly through its body. But not as though it were flesh.

The bloodless halves of the cat hung in the air for a second, then dissolved into golden shards and nothingness.

Rising, Serrah expelled a breath. ‘Sentinel glammers,’ she declared, unnecessarily. And well made, she judged. Costly magic.

The other barbat turned and loped back to its alcove den. They ignored it and readied themselves.

‘Let’s *move*,’ Phosian urged testily.

Serrah glared at him. She swung her boot at the door. It flew open.

At first sight, the chamber was unoccupied. Large, with a high ceiling, its windows were covered. Candles and brands gave light, and several tall braziers were scattered about. There were stacks of chests and barrels. Threadbare cushions and shabby sticks of furniture had been randomly dispersed. Chicken bones, shattered wine flasks, scraps of stale bread and general detritus littered the floor.

A crooked line of benches ran along one wall. They were laden with stone bottles, funnels, vials, jars, mortars and pestles. There were hessian bags, slit open and disgorging dried plant matter, and two or three cauldrons with rising wisps of milky vapour.

On a table at the end of the line was something Serrah knew too well; mounds of faintly crystalline, yellowish-white powder. The sight of it rippled her insides like ice.

As they took in the scene she was aware of Phosian straining at the bit. ‘Easy,’ she chided.

‘More loitering,’ he grumbled. ‘What are we, petitioners?’

‘We have to be sure.’

He spat scorn at her. ‘To hell with that.’ Then he elbowed past and bounded into the room.

‘Phosian!’ she called, dumbfounded.

He took no notice. In the centre of the chamber, brandishing his axe, he began to yell. ‘Come out, you scum! Face us!’

‘*Idiot!*’ Serrah mouthed. ‘Stay!’ she snapped at her comrades, and went after him.

‘Filthy, low-life trash!’ Phosian raged, fluffed-up with gauche bravado. ‘*Cowards!* Show yourselves!’

‘*Phosian!*’ She approached warily, though her anger was barely restrained. ‘What the *fuck* are you doing?’ She glanced around nervously. ‘When I give an order, you obey!’

‘My people give the orders, Ardacris. You mind that.’

‘I don’t care a damn about your kin! When it comes to my command, you’re just - ’

An object soared past her, end over end, wicked edges glinting.

The hatchet struck Phosian square to the heart. He cried out and staggered back. His axe slipped from his fingers and clattered on the flagstones. Blood streaming from his wound, eyes rolling to white, he hit the floor.

Serrah gaped.

Then too much happened at once.

Figures emerged from behind barrels and boxes, and from a blind corner. A sharp grating noise rang out to the rear. She spun around. A second, inner door, heavy and metal banded, dropped like a portcullis and met the ground with a weighty reverberation, cutting off her companions on the other side. They started hammering.

She swung to face the advancing gang.

There were five of them. Wiry, tattooed, granite-miened. Scarred and

broken-toothed, with eyes of flint. Men well versed in the profession of violence.

They flowed into a horseshoe pattern, aiming to take her head-on and from the flanks. But the room's clutter meant the shoe's nails were unevenly spread. She had two bandits on her right, with a third crowding them. A fourth was at her left. The last, directly ahead, couldn't have been anything but their leader. He was brawnier, and meaner looking than the others, and his smirking menace was even more palpable.

For a beat, nobody moved or spoke. It seemed as though the leader studied her. At last he rumbled, 'Butterfly.'

Whatever she'd expected, it wasn't that. She was lost for a response.

'*Shining* butterfly,' he added, staring glazedly at her. 'Black silk butterfly.'

Serrah understood then. They'd been sampling their own wares. They were crazed, unpredictable. Ramped.

Her gaze went to the heap of white powder, and for a second she was at the void again. 'Ramp's forbidden. You know that.'

He was deadpan. 'Just making a living.'

She eyed Phosian in his spreading crimson pool. 'Some living.'

The pounding from outside increased, and now there were sounds of fighting elsewhere in the building. Enough of a distraction for Serrah to slide her free hand into the folds of her shirt unnoticed.

'I know you,' the leader said, resuming his scrutiny. 'Even with the mask. You're known to my kind.' He wasn't making a benevolent link.

'Good,' she replied dryly. Jabbing her sword at the table, she repeated, 'The ramp's illegal. By the authority vested in me by the government of Gath Tampoor - '

They burst into scornful laughter.

'Save your breath for dying,' the leader grated.

'Right,' she agreed, favouring them with a smile. 'Let's get this over with.'

They moved. She was quicker.

Wrenching her hand free, she flung its load at the knot of bandits on her right. A score of barbed throwing stars soared in their direction.

Three were real. The charm was so good, she didn't know which ones.

Nor did her targets. They were in a confusion of dodging, blundering, shielding themselves as the stars flashed in. Most burst harmlessly on impact, vanishing silver blooms against their bodies and the surrounding jumble.

Razor sharp reality was another thing.

A genuine star cleaved the throat of the middle bandit, spraying blood and felling him. His cohort to the right, batting at illusions, caught a star in the cheek. The third man, shoving from the left, was drizzled by plaster as the last genuine star struck the wall above. A gory scrum ensued.

That was the end of her spells. Now blades would settle the issue.

The leader was roaring orders, and the man on Serrah's left was closing in. She swiftly drew a knife to augment her sword.

The bandit came at her with a whipping scimitar. She blocked it with a cross from her knife that jolted them both. At the same time she wielded her sword in a low, curving slash, aiming for his vitals. He deflected it, just, and sent out his own pass. Serrah parried, retreating a step.

There was no time and the odds were too long. She powered in again.

Working her blades in unison, she rapped aside his scimitar. Her follow-through employed the knife, laying open his sword arm. Howling and swearing, he pulled back, wound gushing. Serrah charged him. Still clutching his sword, he tried to fend

her off. She swept away his guard and buried her blade in his chest. Pitching, he jammed the path of the hollering leader.

Vaulting a shabby couch, an outlaw landed six paces away. She saw it was the man her star had narrowly missed, covered in plaster dust. Serrah took a swipe at his head. He ducked and kept coming. She beat at his defences, eager to down him before anybody else got to her. Stasis ruled for a moment, neither giving. Then more by luck than design the tip of her blade scoured his jaw. Stumbling, hand to face, he crashed into the table and sent the ramp flying. Powder dispersed, a swirling white blizzard, and Serrah pressed the back of a hand to her mouth and stilled her breath. The leader screamed his wrath.

She had a glimpse of the bandit she'd wounded in the cheek, the star still embedded in the side of his face. He scrabbled in a corner, throwing crates aside. The racket from her men outside grew louder.

Her respite was brief. The thug with the copiously bleeding jaw disentangled himself. He and the leader attacked together. Checking the latter with a lashing cross, she focused on Wounded Jaw. He swiped wildly at her. She turned aside the blow, knocking his blade high and wide, then her darting sword took the opening and found his belly. He fell, a dead weight.

Blazing with ramp-quickenened fervour, the leader piled into her. Serrah backed-off, footing unsure on the debris. A breath later, she rallied. They churned metal, toe to toe, hacking and chopping. Breaching his guard, she dealt his stomach a hefty kick. He doubled over, mouth springing open. But he had the presence to keep his blade in play, impeding her follow-on. Serrah withdrew.

She saw that Gashed Cheek had almost cleared the crates, revealing the outline of a trapdoor. Now she knew why they could afford to linger. That split second of wandered concentration nearly cost her dear.

Raving incoherently, the chief snatched up a clay vessel and tossed its contents at her. She leapt aside, narrowly avoiding the shower of liquid. It splashed on boxes, fabrics and litter, seething and smouldering, billowing acrid smoke. A few spots of the vitriol peppered her hand and side, stinging like fiery needles. She clenched her teeth against the pain and kept moving. He stalked her, hurling obstructions from his path.

Her flight took her close to the bandit by the crates. Blood dribbled from the protruding star. He was on his knees, tugging at a rusting metal ring, and had the trapdoor raised about an arm's span.

Serrah seized her chance and hewed his neck. Man and trap went down.

She was panting. Her muscles ached and sweat prickled her spine. But there was no lull.

The maddened chief caught up and unleashed a battering storm. They fenced hard, brows furrowed, hands blistering. Wrong-footed, Serrah had to vault when he tried hamstringing her. Her return blow missed, struck one of the tall braziers and toppled it. Burning coals bounced in all directions. Strewn rags and tattered furniture ignited. A dozen small fires broke out.

They battled on. Serrah stumbled against the prone Phosian and nearly fell. A stroke intended to decapitate came close enough to rend her collar.

A mouldering couch started to burn. Fire caught the pitch on a barrel, quickly leaping up the rest of the pile. Flames took hold of a window drape and raced to the ceiling. A thick, black haze began to fill the chamber. Serrah was thankful for her mask, though it did nothing to stop her eyes smarting.

Now stamina and nerve were all that mattered, and the duel became a slogging match.

A series of detonations rocked the room as pots and jars exploded on the blazing benches. The combatants ducked from flying pottery shards. Then an axe head penetrated the door.

The concatenation of events threw the bandit off his stroke. Serrah homed in. Leading with the knife, she evaded his careless defence and raked his chest. He wailed, clutched the pumping lesion and crashed into an upended chair. Sprawled on the floor, he tried to hold her off. She dashed the sword from his hand and it bounced away, steel on stone, chiming.

He focused on her through pained eyes, and recognised the pain in hers.

'*Butterfly?*' he whispered.

'This butterfly has a sting,' Serrah told him, and drove home her blade.

She straightened slowly, short of breath, blinking from the smoke. Fire had taken hold on all sides and the heat was crushing. The back of her throat was grievously sore.

An axe cleaved the door again, and another joined it. In a cacophony of splitting wood and rending metal, her group broke through. They spilled in with raised weapons and taut bows, then stopped to stare.

Serrah got a hold on herself. '*Report!*' she demanded huskily.

The foremost group member tore his eyes from the carnage. 'Er, nest cleared, ma'am.' He looked at Phosian. 'No ... other casualties.'

'Good. Now everybody out. *Fast.*'

He nodded Phosian's way. 'What about ... ?'

'Bring him. *Hurry!*'

Arms across faces to shield themselves from the inferno, they ran to retrieve their comrade. Then Serrah shepherded them out, bringing up the rear. The passageway funnelled smoke, and they were all coughing and retching by the time they reached air.

Outside, the rest of her men were waiting. They set Phosian down and Serrah felt for a pulse. The band exchanged looks. At length she shook her head, though she had really known all along.

She took in the faces of her crew and knew what they were thinking. 'I don't like losing anyone,' she said, 'even a wilful dolt. But there are overheads in our work and this was one of them. They'll be no indiscipline about it. The mission's not done till we're home.'

'Of all the people to lose,' somebody muttered.

Serrah thought Phosian's loss was preferable to any of her seasoned crew. But it was going to cause a lot more trouble. She concentrated on priorities. 'This place will be crawling with citizens soon and they won't all be glad to see us. Eyes peeled. And if we run into opposition, no quarter.'

Nobody chose to debate the issue. She assigned a detail to carry Phosian's body and they started out. Behind them, flames were playing on the roof of the ramp den. Inky smoke and eddying sparks belched from the windows.

They moved through the streets warily, keeping to the shadows. As they went they rid themselves of their outer layers of clothing, balling masks and shirts and pitching them into bushes and ill-lit alleys. They wiped the ash from their faces.

Serrah discarded her mask and shook loose a tumble of barley hair. She spat on her hands and rubbed them together. The reaction was starting to set in; the pain of

exertion and of the acid burns made itself felt. Above all, what had happened to Phosian. Taking deep, regular breaths, she willed herself to stop shaking.

They could hear noises behind them, a commotion of faint shouting. Serrah increased the band's pace, and thought about splitting them up. But they reached the piece of waste ground without incident, seeing nothing save an occasional errant glamour. In the curtain of trees they rejoined their horses. Two men wrapped Phosian in a cloak and draped the body over his saddle.

Reaching the road, they saw a group of horsemen approaching, but not from the direction of the raid. They were too close and too numerous to outrun. Serrah and her crew steadied their horses and fingered their swords.

As the riders came nearer there was just enough light for their distinctive red tunics to be made out.

'That's all we need,' one of Serrah's band grumbled.

Thirty or forty strong, the advancing company was three to four times bigger than Serrah's, though how many of them might have been chimeras was anybody's guess. The paladin clans had access to the finest magic.

They arrived in good order, their military bearing contrasting with her band's more casual demeanour. The paladin captain halted his column. A goatee-bearded, hard-faced individual, he wasted no time on niceties. 'Serrah Ardacris?'

She nodded.

'Escort party for Chand Phosian.'

Serrah said nothing, and nobody else dared speak.

'We're here for Chand Phosian,' the paladin restated deliberately, as though addressing a moronic child. 'Where is he?'

'We're fresh from a mission,' Serrah told him. 'They're likely to be repercussions any minute. Let's get out of here and -'

'Where's the Principal-Elect's son?' He read their expressions and added sharply, '*What's happened?*'

Reluctantly, she motioned for Phosian's horse to be brought from the rear. At sight of the burden it carried, the captain's face darkened. He dismounted and went to the steed as the others watched in silence. Pulling aside the cloak, he bared Phosian's pallid features.

'Combat casualty,' Serrah explained.

The captain looked up at her. 'You've been very careless.'

'We take losses on missions, you know that.'

'Some losses are unacceptable.'

'Oh, come on! It was just -'

He swiped the air with his hand, cutting her off. 'Save it, Ardacris! You're coming with us.'