

Henry was a good rider, an excellent rider as a matter of fact, but there were several times in his life where he despaired of his limb and sometimes his life. Once was when he took part in the *kok boru*<sup>1</sup> tradition of the Kazakhs of the Asian steppes, something like rugby on horseback. A second was the reckless galloping while racing over two feet of snow: he had no idea what interesting obstructions there were underneath and clung on in spite of the jerking at every adjustment of his horse's footing.

But tonight beat them all. Racing against time to rescue someone else's life and limb, as he feared, not knowing what they would find, hell-bent-for-leather over five miles of equivocal Texas dirt road under a cloudy night sky. The horses never faltered as if they sensed that the urgency went beyond just petty humans' concerns regarding something unknown, which is always worse.

The moon broke out again and, used to the darkness as they were, the horses increased their speed as the road became clear. Then a cloud obscured it. Tom reined to a trot, a quick one to let the horses and riders catch their breaths. They were only about a half-mile of the Doyle Ranch. The slow pace was modified by the sense of urgency but it also made little noise compared to the pounding of galloping hoofs. They had no idea if they were running into an active raid or an ambush or nothing at all.

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But darker is the unlit recesses of the earth. Your brain cannot understand and your eyes cannot tell the difference between open and closed lids. The blackness described as “inky” is not hyperbole: it feels as if the black liquid has been poured over every part of your body and permeates every orifice including your eyes, an oppressive presence.

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<sup>1</sup> literally “gray wolf”; a national game of the central Asian steppes

She stumbled on, one hand pushing alternatively forward or on the dirt and the other grasping the tiny hand behind her. There was a wind blowing on them from the front, blowing through an opening in the juniper copse a hundred yards from the blazing house. The fire behind her sucked up any oxygen it could get and she thanked God that they were the first to receive it or they would have been asphyxiated a long time ago. Tori gripped the hand tighter.

“Lisbeth, you still there honey?” She said loud enough over the wind.

“Mama...mama...mama...mama,” the two-year-old girl began and didn’t stop.

“It’s okay honey. We’re playing hide-and-seek, remember?”

“Yes mommy,” said the boy. “This is the bess hiding place, mommy, isn’t it, Lisbeth?”

“Mama...mama...yeth, mama...”

And on she pushed, her heart racing. She thanked God again, this time for the amazing maturity such a little boy can show when he sees there is a crisis and knows he has the power to do something about it.

She could feel the wetness on her knees, bleeding from crawling on the rocky floor. The kids’ light bodies would keep them from bruising their legs too much but she was hoping the end of the tunnel was near. Suddenly her hand met a wall ahead and in that blackness a faint silver glimmer disturbed that negative visual input they had been surviving in for the last minutes. She looked up and there was a circle of dark, dark blue above her punctuated by orange flickering lights.