

Chapter One

The summer rains had not come. The grass was beaten down and scorched by the sun, and the soil was like rock beneath the horse's hoofs. With each step, dust rose and hung in the air, caking Derick's shirt and face. The fields were abandoned. Scattered throughout the bare furrows, stunted patches of corn were kept alive by irrigation that was hardly more than a series of muddy ditches.

Derick felt nearly sick as the column of the Harvest Temple appeared on the horizon. Houses gradually appeared, as he guided his horse further toward Tilldale. He wanted to race the rest of the way into town, but the horse was exhausted and Derick was not sure he cared to know what awaited him there.

The Harvest Temple was a simple platform with one column

extending from the center. Dust clung to it, streaked in places where somebody had tried to wipe away the orange and uncover the marble beneath it. As he passed, Derick tossed a wrinkled apple onto the platform, sending up a cloud of angry flies from the slaughtered calf that lay, sickly and thin, at the foot of the column. Now that he had left Merendir, he once again felt compelled to keep the rituals.

There was nobody on the streets. Yards were unkempt and desolate. A dog that he did not know watched him with rheumy eyes, but did not bother to lift its head as he passed. Derick dismounted and tethered his horse to a tree. He could not bear to go up to the house yet, so he searched his packs until he found a bowl, set it in front of his lathered horse, and filled it from his flagon. He measured his pace, so that he would not run to the house, or turn back and ride out the way he had come. He pushed open the door, and the hinges creaked exactly where they had before, and then he was face to face with a small grey haired woman, eyes narrow and jaw clenched.

"Derick?" Her face softened.

"Mother." He wrapped his arms around her and coughed in the dust from his clothes.

"Get out of those horrible clothes."

Derick shrugged out of his cloak and unbuckled his sword belt.

"Why in the world are you riding around dressed like a soldier? You're likely to end up in a noose that way."

The door crashed open behind him, and Derick spun around. His little brother stood blinking in a lazy cloud of dust. He was taller than Derick, and ready to fight. The anger on his face turned briefly to confusion, and then he laughed. He tossed aside the bag he had been carrying and threw himself on Derick. He felt strong and wiry in Derick's arms. His hair was stringy with sweat and dust.

"Are you back for good? Did they let you go?" Jerad asked.

Derick had not given much thought to what he would do now that his military service was done. He had thought only about coming home and seeing his family, and Eliyna.

"I'm back for good. When'd you get so tall?"

Jerad took a step back and crouched down.

"What, are you worried that I can whoop you now?" He lunged at Derick, who jumped aside and into the table, nearly knocking a pot onto the floor. Jerad stumbled and regained his footing, too close to their mother, who gave him a brutal smack on the back of the head.

"Cut that out. If you two want to act like animals, go out and wrestle in the street."

Jerad grinned.

"Jerad, go buy some ale." She fished around behind a pile of clothes and pulled out a coin. It had been a long time since Derick had even seen a scant silver. His mother said sternly, "Tell Celper we want a whole jug for this, and that his watery ale isn't worth any more."

"I'll come too," Derick said. He wanted to see the town again. On his way out the door, he untied a pouch from his belt and left it discretely on the table by the door. There were eight gold coins in there, nearly a year's salary. It had been easy to save in Merendir, not having tastes for fine wine or clothing. Money had been tight for mother since his father had died, but they had always had bread and soup, clothes, and a roof over their heads. What he had saved in three years in Merendir would last them ten years or more in Tilldale.

His brother walked quickly and his strides were long.

"Did you go to war?" Jerad climbed over low stone wall to cut across a neighbor's yard.

"It wasn't much of a war, but I saw some fighting."

Derick had spent a few weeks in the field, chasing bandits and putting down a minor insurrection, but the men he'd faced had been poorly organized with little will to fight. They had broken quickly when faced with a century of imperial soldiers.

The brothers were passing one of the oldest houses in town-- a mansion with three stories and a stained glass window. The trees planted to shade the broad veranda had already shed most of their leaves, and those that remained were mottled brown and yellow from the drought. The garden had been abandoned, and only hardened furrows remained. A few melancholy phrases of music drifted from the porch. Derick squinted toward the building, outlined by the sinking sun, for a glimpse of a familiar face.

"How's Jarny doing?" Derick asked. "Has he gotten even meaner in his dotage?"

"Nah," Jerad did not look over toward the house. "The old man passed away last winter. That's his son playing the pipes on the porch. I guess it's in his blood. Jarny may have been a mean old coot, but at least he'd play something lively every now and then. Now it's nothing but dirges."

They walked in silence for a while. The heat had not abated and the air felt too muggy for their dry landscape. The sun hung red and hazy just above the horizon.

"What did mother mean when she said that I might end up in a noose wearing my uniform?" Derick asked.

"She was exaggerating. The Emperor's men out here..." Jerad gave Derick a sidelong look.

"Out with it. I'm not the Emperor's man any more."

Jerad shrugged. "They take what they want. They live like lords and act like bandits. People talk..."

"I would hate to see Tilldale after a century of imperial soldiers was done with it," Derick muttered. When they had put down the insurrection in the highlands, his commander had been merciful, and only a handful of the leaders had been executed. Other towns, Derick had heard, had fared much worse.

"Me too, but I wouldn't worry," Jerad reassured him. "People grumble, but nobody wants to fight."

Derick nodded. He hoped his brother was right.

"How's Eliyna?" He asked. His brother hesitated.

"She's... alright."

They walked again in silence for a moment.

"Is she still..." Derick did not want to ask the question that had been weighing on his mind for three years, "living with her parents?" he finished.

"Uh-huh." Jared answered quickly and looked away. Derick leaned forward and saw that his brother was trying to hide a smirk. He grabbed him by the arm.

"Come on, jackass, stop playing with me. Tell me everything you know!"

"Alright, alright. Let go of me, you're going to break my arm. She still lives around here. I don't talk to her much, but she seems as happy as anybody in this awful place. She looks even better than she did before. She's single, and she asks about you all the time. Is that good enough?"

"Really? She asks about me all the time?"

"No, I just thought that's what you wanted to hear. She probably doesn't even remember your name." Jerad winked. "She only has eyes for me now."

Derick took a swing at his brother, but Jerad was expecting it and skipped aside.

"You better watch it, little brother, or I really will break your arm."

Jerad changed the subject. "How's Lars? Why didn't he come back with you?"

"Lars is well. He developed a taste for city life and signed up for another year of service."

Lars was the same age as Derick, and had been restless in Tilldale for as long as Derick could remember. He loved the life of a soldier and the hectic streets of Merendir.

They were approaching Celper's Inn, which was a sorry sight even by the town's sorry standards. Still, it was the only place in Tilldale to get a pint or a room for the night, and a couple of gloomy-looking ponies were tethered outside. The sign that hung over the doorway depicted two jolly and buxom young women waving pints of ale and dancing by a festive fireplace. The paint was chipped and faded, so their jolly expressions merely a memory. Even still, the women on the sign bore little resemblance to the actual patrons of the inn.

A few old men that Derick recognized sat around a table by the grey hearth with mugs in their hands, passing around a pipe of oily-

smelling tobacco. If any of them were happy about Derick's return, they did not bother to show it. Two loud men in dusty cloaks at the bar seemed, by their diction and bawdy conversation, to have been there for quite a while. One of them turned as the brothers entered and Derick saw the rising sun of Merendir emblazoned on his tunic. Celper himself was nowhere to be seen, but a desiccated woman with thinning hair and a lazy eye stood behind the bar. Derick wondered if everybody who still lived in the town was old and infirm.

"What can I do for you boys?" The woman asked in a raspy but gentle voice. She could hardly be heard over one of the soldiers, who was boasting of his exploits with some wealthy woman in Merendir.

"We'd like a jug of your best ale!" Jerad clapped his brother on the back. "We're celebrating my brother's return from his military service in Merendir."

"'sat right?" The louder soldier turned to Derick, swaying slightly on his stool. "I'm a soldier, too, y'know." Derick nodded politely. "The women in Merendir are something else, huh? What'd you come back here for?"

"My family and friends are here."

"So you're a country boy, huh? I bet you can live like a king

here after earning city wages." The drunk soldier squinted at Derick. "You don't look like the kind of guy who spends much money on wine or women." The soldier's companion snickered and muttered something into his beer that was met with a hearty guffaw and a slap on the back.

The old woman returned with a jug and slid it across the bar to Jerad. He gave her the coin that their mother had given them, then pulled another from his belt pouch and slid it across the bar, too. He winked at Derick and turned toward the door.

The sun had fully set, but Derick saw few lamps in the windows of the houses that they passed. He wondered for the first time what kind of life it was that he was returning to. Jerad seemed to sense his thoughts.

"It's like the town is dying." Jerad took a long swig from the jug of ale. He poured a bit out for the Harvest God, and the dry street soaked it up immediately.

"Where is everybody?" Derick asked him.

"The young people have moved away to seek their fortunes. The older people have gone to look for work to support their families. The people who stay here fixate on their despair and grow old before their times. For three years, there's been no rain. Mother says half

of the town elders have died or moved away and that nobody has taken over their positions. Even Denard packed up and left a few weeks ago."

Ageless and unfailingly jovial, the Harvest Priest had been in Derick's life forever. As was befitting of a Harvest Priest, Denard had always seemed to be eating, preparing, and sharing food, and he was always just at the threshold of sobriety. He was instructive when it came to the rituals, and he kept them well, but mostly he would sing and tell tales of Tilledale and the surrounding towns. He composed and compiled the histories of their inhabitants, and their ancestors, and he would hold forth for as long as anybody cared to listen, passing a flagon the entire time. It was no wonder that the town seemed empty, if even Denard had moved on.

Their house was filled with lamplight and the smell of cooking onions when they got back. As soon as they stepped inside, Derick's mother handed him a washcloth and pointed to the back room, where she had boiled him a bath. Derick drew the curtain and gratefully stripped out of his dusty clothes and slipped into the hot water. He ached from travel and his skin felt sticky and grimy. He sat back and let the hot water massage him.

Derick was half asleep when he heard a crash in the next room. It was the front door slamming open. He sat up and heard his brother's voice, angry and indistinct.

Somebody said "It's time to pay your taxes!" in a loud, drunken drawl. Derick jumped from the tub and pulled on his breeches, still soaking. He went into the next room and saw his brother standing chest to chest with the loud soldier from the inn, looking up into the larger man's face. The other soldier stood in the doorway.

"The Emperor demands..." the soldier was swaying in a pronounced way and had to stop after each phrase to choose the next one, "that you pay... for the purposes of citizenship..." he took a deep breath, "your gold and the use of your pretty... Pretty..." he leered at Derick's mother and then pointed out the door behind him, "...horse." The second soldier giggled and leaned his head against the doorframe.

"Get out of our house." Jerad said through clenched teeth. His toes were practically touching the soldier's now. He planted his hands on the soldier's chest and shoved. The soldier staggered backwards and it looked like he would fall, but he recovered his balance with surprising speed and dealt Jerad a backhanded blow that sent him spinning into the wall. The soldier turned to Derick and

wiped some spittle from his beard as Jerad crumpled to the floor.

"Are you looking for trouble, too, soldier boy?" The man spoke with alarming clarity. Derick did not want trouble, especially being unarmed and half-naked. He stood speechless for a moment, then he saw Jerad slowly stretching his arm toward the sword belt that Derick had discarded earlier. The soldier followed Derick's eyes and wheeled around, bringing his boot down hard on Jerad's hand. He grinned and shifted more and more of his weight onto Jerad's hand until Jerad screamed along with a series of sickening cracks. Derick looked over to his mother, hoping that she would say something to make the situation better, but she stood frozen in the corner.

Later, when Derick replayed the scene, he could never decide whether he lunged for the butchering knife before or after the soldier began to draw his sword. He remembered clearly the moment before-- his brother's gritted teeth and tears of pain and anger; the soldier looking down at his brother with a cruel smile and all his weight on Jerad's broken hand; the second soldier standing in the doorway with wide eyes and an eager, almost lustful, expression; and his mother, speechless and pale, staring into the soldier's face. The next moment he was throwing the knife, and then blood was everywhere.

His brother cried out again as the sword fell from the soldier's hands and landed on top of him, the huge soldier gurgled and grasped uselessly at the knife in his throat as he fell to his knees, the second soldier leaned over and vomited noisily, and his mother rushed over to where Jerad lay.

The dying man's companion drew his sword and stood in the doorway, trembling. Derick stared him down as he walked toward him. The soldier did not move. Derick picked up the fallen sword, which was cool and heavy and oddly reassuring.

"There are three of us and you're dead drunk." He told the shaking soldier, who nodded stupidly. "Drop your sword and leave." The soldier contemplated the command for the space of one long, quavering breath, and then complied. Derick watched as the man fled past the tethered horse, then turned back into the house.

Hot blood pooled around Derick's bare feet. His mother was helping Jerad to his feet. The blood seemed to belong entirely to the soldier-- Jerad must have been hit by the flat of the falling sword. Jerad's hand, however, was in a grotesque position-- bent backwards nearly in half, with a few shards of bone emerging from his palm. Jerad looked at the dead soldier, the spreading pool of blood mingled

with vomit, and then at his own shattered hand. His knees wobbled and he sat down quickly, looking very pale.

Derick's eyes met his mother's. She seemed unreasonably calm. They stared at each other for a long time and then she spoke.

"You two have to leave immediately. Paulanus will send men as soon as he hears of this, you two will be hanged."

"I... What about you? Who's Paulanus?"

Derick's head was spinning. His mother was already gathering provisions from the meagerly stocked shelves. Jerad looked like he was about to pass out. The blood in which Derick was standing was sticky and quickly becoming cool.

"Paulanus is the captain of these... men. He's not the type that you want to cross. As for me, I didn't kill anybody and I'm an old woman and a town elder, besides."

Derick was not so sure. "Come with us," he said.

"On what horse?" His mother asked. "You two will be slow enough with crippled brother and weary horse." She held a large flagon in the water barrel for a moment, then capped it and wrapped it up in a cloth with some bread and cheese.

Derick protested, "I'll stay here and answer for what I've done.

They were drunk and violent. I was defending my home and my family."

"You're an idiot," his mother answered bluntly. "Drag that body outside and go wash your feet."

Derick obeyed his mother and took hold of the dead man's arms. The soldier was easily twice as heavy as Derick and it was not a simple task to drag him out to the road. Outside, the air had grown surprisingly cool. The man's pale eyes stared up at Derick blankly. Derick shuddered and dropped the man's arms. He closed the eyes and pulled the knife from the man's throat. A fresh wave of blood washed over his hands.

Inside, his mother had bandaged Jerad's hand. Derick went to the basin of tepid water, scrubbed his hands and feet, and finished dressing. His mother handed him the pouch of gold that he had tried to leave her. He removed two of the coins and gave the rest back to her.

"When it's safe to come home, or if you can come find us, send word to the Mason Inn in Merendir," Derick said. "Are you sure that you'll be safe here?" She nodded, too quickly Derick thought, and embraced him.

"I was looking forward to having you back so much," She said.

"We'll see each other again soon."

Jerad moved to embrace his mother slowly, with a faraway expression. They left the house and Derick's mother closed the door behind them. As he mounted the horse and pulled his brother up behind him, Derick looked back toward the house of his childhood. Lamplight still spilled cheerily out onto the walk. As he kicked the horse into motion, he saw his mother, sitting at the table, her head in her hands.

The wind was blowing hard as they travelled the same streets that Derick had taken into town. In the time it had taken the sun to set, Derick's whole world had been turned upside down. He thought once again of Eliyna.

His horse reared suddenly as the sky lit up and thunder rolled across the plains. His brother grasped him tightly with both hands and gasped in pain. As they trotted past the Harvest Temple, the heavens opened and large, cold drops of rain began to fall. The temple transformed before their eyes as the orange facade of dust melted away and the shining marble was revealed below, looming dark against stormy sky. Derick pulled up his hood, bowed his head against the rain, and spurred his horse out onto the windswept prairie.

