

It was nearly dawn. The rain had not let up, and still the parched soil soaked up the water as quickly as it fell. Derick's horse was shivering, and had slowed to a grudging trot, occasionally trying to look back at the brothers with reproof. The brothers fared no better than their horse, soaked through and exhausted. They could not travel quickly through the tall grasses in the rain, but the terrain was flat and reliable and they did not want to travel by road. The rain hid them from sight, but it also hid anybody who might be pursuing them. Derick thought Paulanus' men could not have followed them.

Derick stopped at the outskirts of a town. There were lights on at an inn and Derick thought he could smell baking bread, through the heavy aromas of wet earth and grass. The town was small and looked a lot like Tilldale. The houses were mostly small, built of grey stone with thatched roofs, and fenced to keep the sparse livestock from wandering. Unlike Tilldale, this town sat next to a river and seemed to be prosperous. Derick guessed that the town was Canter and that the river was the Shale. If this was true, they had not gone far at all.

"I can go on," Jerad mumbled as Derick nudged his horse forward, toward the inn. Jerad sounded delirious. Derick's stomach growled and he realized that he was half starved and that his head ached.

"We'll sleep for a few hours," Derick declared. "We could have gone in any direction, there's no reason for them to look for us here." He hoped he was right.

"I'm hungry," Jerad mumbled, and then he swayed and nearly fell from the horse. Derick dismounted and helped his brother down. They approached the inn on foot, and Jerad leaned heavily on Derick's shoulder. They climbed two stairs to the covered porch, and Jerad doubled over in a fit of coughing.

"Hello?" Derick called. They waited for a reply that did not come, and then let themselves in. Derick stopped at the threshold, kissing both palms and touching them to the doorframe before he entered the inn. Jerad copied his older brother. They were travellers now. It would be best to observe the rituals of the Vagabond.

The common room was well-lit, with lanterns burning brightly in every corner. There were

several small tables, and a smoldering fire. The smell of baking bread was stronger. There was nobody in sight. Derick called out another greeting and, a moment later, a tiny rotund man, covered in flour from his bald head to his sandaled toes, emerged from a back room.

"Oh my, look at you two," he exclaimed, clapping his hands together and disappearing for a moment in a cloud of flour. "Hand those clothes over to my wife and change into something dry. I'll have breakfast on the table in just a minute." He bustled off, calling out "Lina!" as he disappeared again into the back room. Shortly after he left, a woman came into the room who was nearly a perfect match for the man, except that she had a full head of hair-- white, and cropped close to her round face. She was short and round and moved in the manner of somebody who is accustomed to being busy.

"For the Lord's sake," she said, clapping in the same way her husband had. "Follow me." She began to lead them upstairs. She stopped on the landing, looking back at them and clearing her throat. "You do have coin?"

"Yes. Our horse..." Derick began.

"We have an excellent stablemaster," Lina interrupted. "If your horse looks half as bad as you two, he'll need a bag of oats and a rub down. What possibly compelled you two to travel on a night like this?"

"We have... business in Merendir." Jerad stammered. Sweat and water from his sodden hair was streaming down his face. Lina's eyes narrowed as she looked at his bandaged hand.

"You're a bad liar," she said, sizing them up more closely, "but that's the mark of an honest man. If you boys are in trouble, see that you don't bring it here. I will take very good care of you, until you start trouble, and then I will throw you out, with no hesitation." She scowled and then added, "Three of our lodgers are trained soldiers, and they're very fond of us." She opened the door to a small room with two pallets. "Put something dry on and come downstairs for breakfast."

"We, uh..." Derick was embarrassed, "have no fresh clothes."

"I'll see what I can do," Lina said left. The brothers stretched gingerly and massaged

themselves until she can back with two sets of dry, clean clothes. They even fit reasonably well. When Jerad and Derick went back down into the common room, two bowls of steaming soup, a loaf of fresh bread, and a large, soft, pad of butter sat on one of the tables. The brothers set into the food with enthusiasm, suddenly awake and refreshed. They ate in silence for a while, trying to ignore their questions.

"Do you think mother will be alright?" Jerad asked finally, around a mouthful of bread. His eyes were deeply ringed, and he even chewed slowly.

Derick played with his soup for a little while before he said, "She's more likely to be left alone if we're gone than if we had stayed, right?"

Jerad said nothing.

"She couldn't have come with us," Derick said, "right?"

Jerad shrugged.

"I'd never heard of Paulanus, before last night!" Derick snapped. "So why don't you tell me?"

"Paulanus and his men are bullies and thieves," Jerad said, pausing to slurp noisily at his soup. "As far as I know, they haven't done any killing."

"So they'll be looking for us-- you and me." Derick said, a bit peevishly. "So the best thing we can do is leave. Let them chase us. They have no reason to bother her, if we're gone."

Jerad said nothing, bit off a large chunk of buttered bread, and said nothing, but gave his brother a smirk.

"Right?" Derick demanded. "What else could we do?"

Jerad leaned forward and said, with his mouth full, now smiling insanely, "We could kill them."

For a moment, Derick was speechless. Then he leaned forward and whispered in Jerad's ear, "Don't joke about killing Imperial soldiers."

Jerad whispered back, "I'm not joking."

Derick bit his lip, and then shrugged, as if he was actually entertaining the idea, and

asked, "One green soldier and a cripple against an entire band of seasoned soldiers?"

"We don't have to kill them all at once." Jerad looked around the room to make sure they were still alone. "And they're not that seasoned. They go out in pairs, or small groups. They drink like Northmen, and they pick fights. The people might help us."

"They're still the Emperor's men," Derick said, "and they still wear his uniform. We'd be likely to bring a whole legion out here." He remembered the insurrection he had helped to put down, and the executions that had followed. "Besides," he added, "how would any of this help mother?"

Lina swept back into the room. Jerad scowled and bit into the bread again, but stayed quiet. Lina approached the boys where they sat, asked if they were satisfied, and was gone again as soon as the two had smiled and given their approval. Jerad shook his finger across the table.

"Mother won't be any worse off, and many people will be better off. We aren't doing anybody any good by running off to Merendir," Jerad said.

Derick could not deny that this was true. Suddenly, he was exhausted again. The meal no longer held any pleasure for him. He looked across the table at his brother. Jerad's face was haggard, his eyes were bloodshot, and he was trembling noticeably.

"You're delirious," Derick snarled. It was probably true. They had been awake all night and Jerad's pain must have been severe. Jerad bristled. He pushed his bowl away and moved his chair back from the table-- too quickly, because he used both hands and choked in pain. Derick regretted his sharp statement, and tried to reason, in what he hoped was a conciliatory tone. "Even if they travel in groups of two or three, what's to say that we would be able to best Paulanus' men?"

The question hung there for a while, while Jerad looked past Derick.

"We may find out sooner than you'd like," Jerad said, gesturing out the window.

A burly man in Imperial light battle gear was reining in his horse outside the inn. He moved gingerly, wincing at the dawn.

"Is that one of Paulanus' men?" Derick whispered, rising from the table.

"I don't know." Jerad was stubbornly nonchalant, apparently offended. He crossed his arms across his chest and made a good effort at a surly stare, but his eyelids fell a bit and he nearly swooned in his chair. Outside, the soldier dismounted, massaged his temples for a moment, and started slowly tethering his horse to a post.

Derick hauled Jerad up out of his chair. Jerad hissed quietly with pain, and mumbled something that Derick could not understand. Derick tugged Jerad after him, up the stairs until they had passed the turn, where they could not be seen from the room below. Jerad's eyes were watering, and he looked angrily at Derick, but both brothers stayed silent and waited. Derick noticed uneasily that sweat streamed from Jerad's brow, in spite of the chill in the air.

The door to the inn slammed violently open and the soldier yelled "Innkeep!"

Heavy boots struck the floor as the man came into the common room.

"Innkeep!" The man bellowed again, and now to the brothers heard light, hurrying footsteps. "I'm searching for two men. One of them has an injured hand." Jerad turned to Derick with a wide-eyed stare, before his eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed. Derick caught him, heaved him across his back and took the stairs slowly, wincing with every creak from the old wood stairs.

"We have no new guests." They heard Lina lie to the man. Jerad mumbled something in Derick's ear.

"Whose breakfast is this?" The soldier asked.

Lina's response was too quiet to hear.

"I think I'll have a look in the rooms!" The soldier proclaimed loudly.

Derick struggled as quickly as he could up the remaining stairs, carrying Jerad. As they reached the hallway to their room, he heard Lina protest that her guests were sleeping. Then the old stairs groaned again as the soldier came toward them. Derick pushed the door to their room open with his foot, deposited his delirious brother on the bed, and then hurried back to close and latched the door as quietly as possible.

"What are we going to do?" Jerad asked, too loudly, from the bed. Derick went over and sat beside him.

"Shut up," Derick whispered. "Don't worry, just be very quiet."

From the hall, Derick heard the soldier declare ominously "I hope you aren't lying to me. I'd hate to have to make an example out of you." They heard a gauntleted fist pound on a door not far away. The door opened soon afterward and they heard Lina making apologetic noises. Then there were more footsteps, and more pounding. There was nowhere to hide in the room.

Derick went over to the window and looked out. The stables were not far, and his sword was with his horse. The drop into the cobblestoned courtyard looked bad standing at the window, but it was surely not more than fifteen feet. Lina's husband whistled a tune flatly as he chopped wood a short distance away, pausing for a deep breath each time he hauled the axe back for another swing. Derick realized he was gripping the sill with white knuckles. Before he could think too much about what he was doing, he swung first one leg and then the other over the sill, and lowered himself down until he was hanging outside from the sill. He heard pounding on the door to their room and he let go.

The fall was jarring, but he did not hurt himself. He staggered backwards for a couple steps and then turned and ran toward the stables. He was so intent on his destination that he nearly ran headlong into Lina's husband, who was huffing along, red in the face, carrying an armful of wood.

"Woah, hey. Is there a problem, son?" He asked, stepping out of Derick's way.

"My brother's in danger," was all Derick could manage as he threw open the stable door. His horse stood laboriously as he entered and gave him a baleful look. She was not in the mood for any more travelling. He fell to his knees beside the saddlebags and pulled his sword from its sheath. The innkeeper stood in the doorway, alarmed, as Derick ran past him again, this time carrying a naked blade.

"Your wife may be in danger, too." Derick called over his shoulder as he sprinted back toward the front door of the inn. Behind him he heard the clatter of falling wood and heavy

breathing that faded rapidly as he outpaced the squat innkeeper.

Back inside, Derick took the stairs three at a time. The door to his room stood open, spilling fresh morning light into the hallway. Two shadows struggled in the doorway. Derick heard Jerad cry out. Reaching the doorway, he saw the soldier-- a thick man, tan and weathered, with bristling grey hair-- binding Jerad's hands behind his back as his brother struggled feebly. Fresh blood was spreading across Jerad's bandage and he was fighting back tears of pain. Lina stood in the room, aghast, her hands pressed up against her cheeks. Derick stood for a moment behind her.

Before Derick had time to decide what to do, the soldier had a knife at Jerad's throat.

"Drop your sword." The soldier growled. He looked like he was in no mood for anything, let alone this. Derick could see where the blade pressed into the skin at Jerad's throat.

"Drop your sword, fool," the man repeated. "You think I'm scared to kill him?"

Lina's husband made it up the last of the stairs and arrived, wheezing, beside Derick.

"What's the meaning of this?" The stout innkeeper blustered, out of breath and nearly doubled over.

"These two are wanted men," the soldier scowled, the daylight made him wince as he turned toward Lina, "and this woman was hiding them."

The innkeeper stood up straight and looked the soldier in the eye, but he hardly cut an imposing figure.

"We don't want any trouble here. I'm sure Lina wasn't trying to deceive you." The rotund man said. Derick wondered where Lina's soldiers were.

The soldier scoffed.

"Very well then. Bind his arms behind his back." The soldier threw a length of twine to the innkeeper and nodded toward Derick. Derick slowly set his sword down in front of him. As he set it down, the soldier removed the blade from his brother's neck with a trembling hand. The innkeeper wrapped the twine several times around Derick's wrists then pulled hard when the soldier barked at him to make it tight. Still, Derick thought, it was loose enough that he might

wriggle out of it if he was left alone.

The soldier pushed Derick and Jerad in front of him down the stairs and out of the inn, while the two innkeepers followed along behind. He shoved the brothers over to the post where his horse was tethered-- a huge brown beast with unkempt hair and an evil gleam in its eyes. The soldier tied first Derick and then Jerad to the post, back to back, with lengths of sturdy twine wrapped several times around their bodies and arms, the post, and each other. When he was done, Derick found himself nearly eye to eye with the horse and could feel its hot, sticky, breath on his face.

"Careful," the soldier chuckled. "He bites." With this he turned to the doorway of the inn, where Lina and her husband stood watching. "And now for you." He said, leering at Lina. Her husband stepped protectively in front of her, but the soldier just laughed and shoved him to the ground.

"You lied to me and gave shelter to two men wanted for the murder of an Imperial soldier." He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her around so that her back was against him and held both her arms tight across her chest. She gasped, but said nothing. He tied her wrists and then went to his horse and produced a length of rope from the saddlebags.

"Please, sir..." her husband's voice quavered as he rose to his knees, "please, have mercy."

Derick felt Jerad straining to see what was happening. The soldier threw one end of the rope over a beam that supported the awning for the porch. Lina made a soft whimpering sound and her husband clutched the soldier's pants and sobbed, "Please, sir..."

The soldier shook the miserable man off distainfully.

"No, no..." Lina's husband repeated over and over, shaking.

The soldier grabbed Lina's wrists and tied the rope around them. When her husband saw that the soldier did not intend to hang Lina, he stood, still shaking, and thanked the man several times, more and more quietly, until he was only mumbling.

Once the rope was fastened securely to Lina's wrists, the soldier hauled the rope up so



that her body was fully extended, toes barely touching the ground. She sobbed, and her husband began to shake his head, tears streaming down his face. The soldier grabbed the front of her dress with both of his hands and tore it off in one quick motion, exposing all of her pale, pudgy flesh. She closed her eyes and bowed her head and he struck her hard in the face. His gauntlet tore her cheek and blood flowed liberally down to her chin, where it collected and dripped down between her breasts and onto her stomach.

Derick heard muted hooves striking the soft ground and turned to see another soldier riding up to the inn. This one looked distinguished, with long, well-brushed, hair and a luxurious mustache. He wore no armor, and rode with an air of dignity and command. Maybe, Derick thought, he would put an end to this cruel treatment that Lina was receiving.

The man dismounted before his horse had stopped completely. He stopped for a moment to look Jerad and Derick over before striding imperiously to the porch of the inn, riding crop in hand.

"What do we have here?" His voice, in contrast to his well-groomed appearance, was oily and shrill.

"My lord!" Lina's husband rushed to the new soldier's side and was rewarded with a blow from the riding crop that split his lip and sent him reeling.

"She lied to me about those two, Captain." The first soldier reported. "I thought to teach her a lesson, and the rest of the town as well."

The Captain nodded, and turned to Lina's husband, who looked like he might retch.

"I will send men back here every few hours, do you understand?" The Captain asked. Lina's husband nodded quickly. "She is not to be clothed or untied until you hear it from me. If my men find that you have not obeyed me, both of you will be dragged behind our horses back to our camp, where we will feed you piece by piece to our dogs. Do you understand?" The innkeeper whispered something unintelligible. The Captain took a step toward him and raised his fist. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," came the innkeeper's choked reply.

"Good."

The soldier turned to his captain. "If you like, sir, I leave you to treat this wench to whatever further punishment you see fit. I will go inside and see what taxes I can collect."

"Very good." The Captain replied, and the soldier strode inside, gesturing for Lina's husband to follow.

The Captain turned to Derick and Jerad.

"Watch this well," he said. "We have similar pleasures in store for you at camp." He let out a gleeful twitter of a laugh. "Much, much, worse, of course, but similar." With that he flicked his wrist and lashed Lina with the riding crop. She cried out, tears of pain and humiliation now running freely down her cheeks. A welt raised almost immediately and a little blood began to seep from the wound. Slowly, the captain circled the woman, lashing out every few seconds with his riding crop to bite into soft, exposed flesh.

The soldier came back out of the inn with a bottle of liquor. Derick saw him mutter something that looked like "Oh, thank the gods," before he took a long pull from the bottle and offered it to his colleague. The Captain traded the riding crop for the bottle and sipped and laughed while the soldier flailed brutally at Lina's naked back. After a while, the soldier handed the riding crop back to the Captain and went back into the inn.

Derick heard whistling and turned to see three men walking toward the inn. They strode with easy confidence, fishing poles over their shoulders. One of them, tall and lanky with birdlike features and light, short cropped hair, was the source of the cheer whistling. Two pheasants hung from his belt and a bow and quiver were strapped to his back. The whistling stopped, as the men stopped walking, taking in the scene at the inn. His companions, on either side of him, looked stocky by comparison, but were in fact lanky themselves. One carried a line strung with several fish, still gasping in the air. The other had just taken a large bite from half a loaf of bread that looked very much like the one served to Derick and Jerad that morning. He chewed, slower and slower, and finally swallowed. There was no sound but the chirping birds while the three men looked furiously from Lina, to the Captain, to Jerad and

Derick.