

There was no hatred-- not even fury-- in the eyes of the lanky archer as he dropped his bundle of pheasants into the mud at feet and pulled an arrow from his quiver. He aimed slowly, deliberately, and sent his arrow into the chest of the unsuspecting captain, who was raising his riding crop to hit Lina again. Lina watched it all sobbing, half naked and bloody. The captain looked, bewildered, at the arrow in his chest, and then collapsed.

The noise of armor crashing to the porch brought the other soldier running out of the inn, his arms piled high with plunder. He stopped in the doorway, and looked down at the body of his captain. An arrow through the eye knocked him backwards into the inn, and silverware and coins showered down around him.

A moment later, Lina's husband emerged from the doorway, stepping timidly over the dead soldier and the spreading pool of blood. By then, a stocky, balding man had his sword leveled at Derick's throat, still holding a string of fish in his other hand. Derick struggled against the ropes that bound him to the post. The evil-looking horse tied up beside him sputtered at the movement, spraying Derick with spittle.

The stocky man scowled at the brothers and hissed, "I'll teach you to bring trouble to good people..." He pressed his blade against Derick's throat, forcing Derick's head back against the post behind him. The horse breathed its foul breath in Derick's ear, seeming to enjoy the threat of violence. The stocky man looked over his shoulder at the archer, who raised a hand to stay the blade at Derick's throat.

"Ho! Kerry! What part did the boys have in this?" The archer called toward the porch. Lina's husband watched numbly while the third man, bearded and swarthy, hacked at the ropes that bound Lina to the rafters with his knife. When the rope snapped and Lina fell to her knees on the porch, the bearded man wrapped her in his cloak. She stared, shaking, at the dead man lying in front of her.

"Kerry!" The archer called again, walking toward the inn. The innkeeper turned toward the voice, slowly. The archer's angry companion waited, but kept his blade at Derick's throat. The archer gestured at Jerad and Derick and asked Lina's husband, "The boys?"

"The soldiers were after them. Lina fed them. She gave them clothes." Kerry knelt, sobbing, beside his wife and put his arms around her. "It was awful... awful."

Derick squirmed against his bindings, and was met with a growl. He could not see the blade, but he felt it pressed more firmly into his flesh and looked into the flushed, contorted, features of the man who held it. His skin was weathered and aging and bore a couple pale scars. What teeth he had were yellow and chipped. He leaned closer, until their faces nearly touched, and Derick stared away from the man's eyes to his pocked cheek, where stubble was growing in in both black and white.

"Are you boys bandits?" The man asked, eyes narrowed, an inch from Derick's face.

"Lay off him!" Jerad yelled, from the other side of the post. "We've done nobody wrong."

"Lay off him, Wenté," the archer called from the porch, "least til we know their crime. It's clear the lawmen were no good."

The swarthy, bearded, man turned from helping Lina into the inn to yell in agreement, "Let the boys speak, you thorny bastard."

The thorny bastard named Wenté spat, and lowered his sword. The horse snorted loudly and nipped at his shoulder, but Wenté pulled away. He and the horse stared at each other for a long time until the horse, apparently recognizing a kindred spirit, wandered off to see what he could find at the other end of his short tether.

The archer ambled over and looked the brothers up and down, and said, "All right then, what's your story?"

Jerad struggled against his rope, craning his neck to look at the man. Tears were forming in his eyes as he spoke, "Two of Paulanus' men came to our home in Tildale, dead drunk, and demanded my mother's gold and Derick's horse. I tried to kick them out them of our house and one of them broke my hand and would have killed me, except that Derick killed him first. He spared the other soldier's life and we fled. We thought we were safe when we stopped here. We were exhausted and hungry and the Lina took care of us. We hid when the soldiers came, and she tried to protect us, but they found us."

Jerad struggled fiercely against the ropes that bound him, tears running freely down his face. "Let us go!" He demanded, "Let us go and we'll kill every one of them!"

Wente gave them an unfriendly snort and the archer laughed out loud.

"You're going to kill them all, are you?" The archer asked, looking down at Jerad, his face wrinkled with amusement that did not totally obscure something else, angry and grim. "Tied to a post, a hundred miles in the wrong direction, with one half-dead horse and three working hands between the two of you?" When Jerad only scowled, the archer said, "You're off to a fine start," and withdrew to the inn porch to consult with companions, out of earshot of the brothers.

"Stay calm," Derick whispered. "They won't hurt us."

The three men on the porch argued for a while. Eventually, Wente stalked across the yard to retrieve the dead quail and the string full of fish, and then stalked back into the inn. Wente's companions approached the brothers, but seemed to be in no hurry to untie them.

"Tell me more about this Paulanus fellow," the archer said, grimacing as he reached back to massage his shoulder beneath his leather jerkin. The other man regarded the brothers suspiciously for a moment, before turning his attention to the horse, who let out a huff of stinking breath into Derick's face and then put his head down uneasily at the man's touch.

Jerad cleared his throat to speak. Derick kicked backward lightly and struck his brother in the heel.

"Certainly," Derick said, "but I'd like to do so with free hands, a cup of tea, and without this foul-breathed horse giving me the evil eye."

"Once we're inside, Wente will be giving you an eviler eye than that horse." The third man commented sagely, a long piece of straw bouncing from his lip as he spoke. He and the archer looked at each other for a long moment, silently communicating something, before the archer laughed and pulled out a knife.

"Boorsman is right," the archer said, carefully sawing at the brothers' bindings until they fell away. "But you needn't pay Wente any mind. He was born tragically deficient of humor,

subtlety, and the rest of the niceties that make men charming. His heart is good, though, and he loves Lina and Kerry like they were kin."

Inside the inn, Lina and Kerry were nowhere to be seen. Wenté sat on a stool, scraping the scales off his catch into a bucket. He looked up darkly at the brothers when they came into the room, but he said nothing.

The archer sat Derick and Jerad at a table and then sat himself, while Boorsman stood impassively beside them and across the room, Wenté scraped the fish, grunting.

"How much do you charge?" Jerad asked suddenly. Derick turned sharply to glare at his brother.

"Excuse me?" The archer asked, taken aback. Wenté and Boorsman said nothing, but watched Jerad and the archer intently.

"We've got a fat purse of gold and you've seen for yourselves how Paulanus' men treat the good people around here," Jerad said. "Ride with us to Fort Drake."

Jerad looked around the room intensely, something wild in his eyes. Boorsman chewed his straw inscrutably and the archer leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, staring at Jerad with narrowed eyes.

Wenté spoke first. "A weight of gold for the first two weeks, no scrip. If the work is good, fifty weight silver will buy you another week." A pile of fish filets sat beside him on the table, and now he was hunched over a quail, pulling out the feathers.

"Same for each of us," the archer said, and Boorsman nodded.

"Excuse us for a minute." Derick grabbed his brother by the arm and hauled him roughly out of his chair and halfway up the stairs. Once they were alone on the landing, Derick could only stare incredulously at his brother.

Jerad shrugged. "They were obviously for hire."

Finally, Derick hissed, "Have you lost your mind?"

Jerad looked maddeningly unconcerned. "Let's go take a look at Fort Drake, and see if we get the chance to rid the world of a handful of cruel men."

"Paying them will cost us most of our gold."

Jerad shrugged. "We can get more."

"You're crippled," Derick snarled, "and I'm beginning to wonder if your fall knocked you senseless."

Derick was hoping to get a rise out of Jerad, but he just grinned.

"Do what you want, big brother. Ride on to Merendir. I've got some gold of my own, and I'm hiring these men and riding to Fort Drake, crippled and senseless."

Derick could only grind his teeth.

Jerad smirked, and said, "Of course, mother won't be happy if she finds out that you let me ride off to Fort Drake and didn't come along to look after me."

"You're an ass," Derick snarled. "You can ride off and get yourself killed, and I'll tell mother that you died like an ass."

Nevertheless, a few hours later Derick was trying to load the saddle bags of an ill-tempered horse while the archer-- who had introduced himself as Stefford once the gold had changed hands-- sat on the porch putting quail feathers on newly cut arrows. They had slept a while, and been fed a good meal. Lina and Kerry had packed them enough provisions for an army. At least they would not die hungry, Derick thought, bitterly. Jerad had found a crossbow among the dead captain's things. He could hold it against the ground with his feet and draw it with his good hand. Derick heard intermittent twangs and thuds from the stables as Jerad practiced firing into a bale of straw again and again.

Wente had carried the bodies away, one over each shoulder, and was just now returning. Boorsman had brought three horses around and was loading their saddlebags. He suggested, in a confident tone that made argument difficult, that Derick's spent horse would stay with Lina and Kergy at the inn and that Derick should ride the vicious stallion that had belonged to the dead soldier. Derick and the horse had decided long ago that they did not like each other, and Derick had to be very careful about where he stood, to keep from getting bitten or kicked. He was trying to resign himself to the idea of being thrown from the saddle as he finished the

packing. He hoped that it happened before they got moving too fast.

Jerad emerged from the inn, exuberant, and decked out in a mail coat and an iron cap that were a bit too large for him, and a soft leather belt with a long dagger sheathed in it. He carried the crossbow in his good hand, and his broken hand had been newly cleaned and bandaged. He seemed to be grinning with his whole body as he strode up to the gentle horse that he had inherited from the captain. Boorsman had prepared Jerad's horse easily in the time that it had taken Derick to get close enough to throw the saddle bags over his horse's shoulders.

The horse, seeing that Derick's attention was now on his brother, swung his head around and took a bite at his shoulder. Derick dodged barely, and the horse snorted. Jerad slipped his crossbow into one of his saddle bags and walked up to Derick.

"I'm glad you decided to come," Jerad said, sounding genuine enough.

"Shut up." Derick snapped, but it did not deflate his brother at all. Instead, Jerad reached out to stroke the muzzle of Derick's horse. The horse bit at Jerad's hand, but he was expecting it and pulled his hand away to safety.

"What are you going to name him?"

"Foul Beast," Derick said sourly, and to his surprise the horse turned toward him when he said it. Jerad laughed.

"He seems to like it. Here you go, Foul Beast." Jerad pulled a carrot from his pocket and held it out to the belligerent horse. The horse eyed him distrustfully, then darted out to grab the carrot. Jerad wisely pulled his hand back six inches at the first sign of movement, and the horse got the carrot and Jerad kept his hand. The carrot seemed to pacify the horse some, and Derick hastily threw the last of his possessions into the saddle bags and swung himself up onto Foul Beast's back. Feeling the rider on his back, Foul Beast reared and tried to toss Derick off, but Derick clung stubbornly to the pommel and kept his seat. After a few increasingly half-hearted attempts to dislodge Derick, Foul Beast resigned himself to his lot and stared sullenly at the ground.

Derick reflected for a moment on everything that had happened since he had arrived in Tilldale the previous night, and then Shefford reined in beside him. Wente and Boorsman and Jerad were already riding north. Derick flicked the reins apprehensively, and Foul Beast began to trot after the others. Shefford rode beside him and for a while in silence. The rain had left the air damp and the wide expanse of sky shimmered in the afternoon sun. The grass had greedily soaked up the rain and now stood tall again, and even showed a little color. It had been a long time since Derick had smelled the grass like this.

"This is a beautiful place," Shefford said after a while, and Derick nodded. Shefford smiled. "We came to the plains for the bounty on wolves, after the Blue Forest was won. Once we'd stayed in Canter, fished the Shale, and met Lina and Kerry..."

The three riders ahead of them had let their horses run, and the sight of animals streaking over the subtle swells and falls of the land, the grass swaying around them, was wonderful. Derick was reminded of exploring the prairie with Jerad, farther and farther afield, on their father's old pack mules. Derick unwittingly snapped the reins, and Foul Beast shot forward like he was possessed. Derick crouched low and held on with white knuckles. Shefford spurred his horse forward, and kept up for a few paces, but Derick quickly left him behind. In no time, Foul Beast caught up with the other three men, and passed them as well. The faster they went, the less agitated the horse seemed, and Derick gradually relaxed and sat up, even beginning to enjoy the ride. When the other men began to fade with distance, Derick pulled the reins apprehensively. Foul Beast tossed his head and snorted, but slowed and allowed the other riders to catch up.

They rode for several hours, and stopped for a meal as the sun began to reach the horizon. Foul Beast became impatient almost immediately. While the other horses ate and drank greedily, Foul Beast all but refused refreshment, and tried again to bite Jerad when he strayed too close. Boorsman eyed him appreciatively.

"That horse is a beauty, when he runs."

Wente nodded and spat. He heaved a sack of provisions out of his saddle bag and settled

down among the tall grasses, breaking off chunks of bread and cheese and passing them around to the others. They all sat, tired from riding, and mostly silent as they focused on eating. Then, without a word, Wente packed the provisions back into the sack and lugged it back to his horse. Jerad looked disappointed, but stayed quiet.

Then they were riding again. Night fell and a huge bright moon rose and cast its silver glow over the swaying grasses. The air grew cool and the horses grew tired-- all except for Foul Beast, who continued to charge ahead as if pursued by some predator. After a while Derick took to turning his horse around and riding back to meet his companions, rather than waiting for them to catch up to him. Finally, on one such occasion, Shefford beckoned everybody with a raised hand, and slowed his horse to a walk.

"We're not far." Shefford said when all five men had assembled. "Our horses are tired. If we are to stop short of Fort Drake, I say that we do so now, before we get too close."

"If we aim to stake out the fort and judge the strength of these brigands, it will be best to do it in darkness." Boorsman offered.

Shefford agreed. "It's true that the prairie affords us little shelter in daylight. We still have half the night ahead of us, and I believe that the fort is not more than an hour's ride from here. If we make for the river, it should take us directly there."

Shefford turned questioningly to Jerad, who chewed his lip for a moment and then passed his judgement.

"We will press on, have a look at the fort, and then ride back to find a place to make camp for the night."

His decision was accepted without comment. Foul Beast pawed the ground and snorted and then they were off again. Shefford steered them slightly to the west, where they were certain to run into the river. Derick imagined that he saw a slight glow on the horizon ahead of them, but blamed his weary eyes. A few minutes later, when there was no mistaking that something lit a good part of the horizon in front of them, Shefford raised his hand and the men slowed again.



Shefford spoke, frowning, "That light does not come from the fort. Unless I have entirely misjudged our direction, the bend in the river is north of us still, and Fort Drake lies north of there. That light comes from the river, to the east."

"Let's investigate," Jerad said, adjusting his ill-fitting helmet.

The mercenaries looked around among themselves, and Shefford spoke them. "I say we leave Boorsman here to tend the horses and that the rest of us proceed on foot."

The three mercenaries all turned again to Jerad, who nodded.

Boorsman nodded his agreement. The riders dismounted and Boorsman let the horses graze, except for Foul Beast. He came and took the reins as Derick dismounted, putting a hand on the horse's neck. Foul Beast seemed to relax at the man's touch. To Derick's amazement, Boorsman took hold of Foul Beast's muzzle and pulled his lips up, leisurely examining his teeth and gums in the light of the moon. Foul Beast's eyes rolled slightly and he moved his feet, but he made no move to pull away or do violence to the strangely calm man.

"He's a fine horse." Boorsman said to Derick, and then fixed him with a determined stare. "By right of killing those soldiers, I reckon he belongs to Shefford."

When Derick did not argue, Boorsman looked whistful. "If I had a stud like this, I'd settle down out here in the prairie and raise horses."

"I'll be your representative in Merendir," Derick suggested. "Once we start winning the races, we'll have to build a silo to house all our gold."

Boorsman chuckled, and actually smiled.

There was now some distance between Derick and the other men, and Derick began to jog toward them. They were coming to the top of a slight rise, and the tall grass at the top of the rise glowed. It was not the flickering light of a nearby fire, but the steady glow of many lights far away.

All of a sudden Jerad, who was the first to reach the top of the swell, fell to the ground. Something had hit him, Derick thought at first, but then his brother turned around and motioned for the other men to get down. Jerad crawled slowly forward, until he could look

over the rise. Shefford moved quickly in a crouch until he stood beside Jerad. Derick and Wente approached the ridge carefully behind them. Derick could now hear the murmur of the river, and above that the sound of voices.

Derick and Wente were still several yards away from the top of the ridge, when they heard a large object hitting the water. Jerad charged over the swell and out of sight, and then Shefford was on his feet, loosing one arrow and notching a second. Wente started to run. Derick was the last to mount the crest, drawing his sword.

The lights came from across the river, where hundreds of torches lit hundreds of men and horses, tossing their shadows around at odd angles. They were clearly soldiers, marching away to the southwest, but they did not have a single banner raised. There was a small group of soldiers closer, on Derick's side of the river, and they wore the plain, black tunic of Fort Drake beneath their armor. Two of them had fallen to Shefford's arrows. Three more, bare swords shining in the moonlight, were running toward Shefford, yelling something that Derick could not make out. One of them grunted and fell, and two ran on. Another man, mailed and helmeted with sword in hand, ran at Jerad. Derick ran to defend his brother, but Jerad was running toward the soldier. Just before he came within range of the man's sword, Jerad planted his feet, swung his crossbow up into the man's chest, and loosed the bolt. The bolt penetrated the man's breastplate cleanly, lifting him into the air before he fell. The crossbow was jarred from Jerad's hand, but he drew a dagger from his belt and ran toward the river.

Jerad twisted barely out of the way as a soldier on horseback charged up and took a swing at him with a spiked iron flail. Derick ran toward the rider. The horse side stepped toward Jerad, who was crouching, ready to dodge one way or the other. The rider was readying another blow when he noticed Derick running at him. His horse reared as he wheeled it around. Hooves lashed out and Derick's shoulder burned and he staggered back. The horseman, backlit and faceless, raised his flail to crush Derick. There was no time for Derick to raise his sword.

Instead, Derick dropped his sword and leapt at the man. He felt metal against his face,

smooth and cool. The horse shrieked and reared as Derick's knees drove into its flank. Derick was falling, grappling with flesh and cloth and metal. The ground rushed up and Derick's head smacked into the wet sand. The world swam and dimmed and Derick heard screaming, and then found himself looking into the dazed face of the soldier, lying beside him. He saw movement and rolled to the side. Hooves came crashing down. One went into the soldier's chest, caving in his breastplate. The soldier screamed again and Derick realized that one of the man's feet was still caught in the stirrup, and that his leg was twisted horribly. The man's eyes were glazed and blood ran from his mouth. He said something to Derick, but Derick did not know what it was. Derick fumbled in the sand for his sword and jammed it quickly into one of the arm holes of the breastplate, shoving twice with all his weight until the man lay still.

Derick stood and stared at the broken body until Jerad yelled his name. When he turned, Jerad was at the bank of the river, tossing his helmet into the sand. Jerad wriggled out of his mail shirt, paying no heed to his broken hand, and waded into the water up to his knees, and then dove beneath the surface.

Derick looked around, his sword ready, but the soldiers had all fallen. Wentle and Shefford stood side by side, swords in hand, watching something up river. Derick followed their gaze and saw a horseman riding full speed away from them, headed toward the bridge that would allow him to reach the army on the other side of the river. The rider was already a good distance away. Shefford stabbed his sword into the sand and unslung his bow. He notched an arrow and bent the bow until Derick thought it might snap. The bow string hummed and Derick thought for a moment that the arrow had gone astray, but then the rider and horse toppled to the ground. The horse struggled back to its feet and went tearing off across the prairie, but no rider emerged from the tall grasses.

"Derick!" Jerad called again, and Derick turned to see him in the river up to his chest, struggling to pull some unwieldy object to the bank. The torches danced eerily in the distance, across the river. Derick walked toward the river to help his brother, who struggled to bring his burden to shore. Jerad lost his grasp for a moment, and an arm swung free from his burden

and splashed against the water. It was a person.

Derick ran, and plunged into the river. It was shockingly cold, and difficult to move with his clothes plastered against him. His boots sunk deep into the mud. Jerad was fighting to keep the person's head above water, but he could not get a good grip. Derick could not tell if the person was alive or dead.

"Derick!" Jerad called, and then the body slipped from his hands and disappeared into the swirling water.

Derick could not move his feet. He pulled his knife, cut the laces on his boots, and stepped out of them. Jerad dove beneath the surface for a moment, and then surfaced, sputtering.

"I can't find him!" Jerad yelled

Derick tore off his shirt, threw it toward the bank, and swam to where Jerad stood. Jerad had churned up the mud while wrestling with the body, and Derick could see nothing in the river. He dove. Almost no moonlight penetrated the murky water. The grit stung Derick's eyes and his shoulder, reminding him of the wound he had taken. He surfaced, gulped some air and plunged beneath the water again. He could not see anything. He kicked his way down to the bottom of the river and tried to feel around, but came up with nothing but handfuls of soft mud.

When Derick surfaced, Jerad had a tenous grip on the man again, holding his head and shoulder above the surface. Dark hair was plastered against the man's face. His lips were blue and his face was pallid.

"He's tied to something." Jerad said. "Around his waist."

Derick felt beneath the surface of the water and found a rope coiled several times around the man's waist. He tried to saw through it, but his fingers were numb and he could not grip the knife effectively. The man choked, the first sign of life that Derick had seen, and Derick redoubled his efforts, but his progress was scant. Jerad lost his grip and staggered back into the river. Derick held the rope up near the surface and hacked against it desperately, even as the man's head disappeared again into the murky water. Then the rope snapped and Derick

fumbled to grab the man by the legs as Jerad recovered his feet and took the man's arms. Between the two of them, the brothers easily carried the body to shore.

Wente and Shefford stood at the bank of the river. As soon as the brothers lay the man on land, Shefford was kneeling beside him, pressing on his chest. There was a horrible gagging sound as water spewed from the man's mouth, and then he was conscious, gasping for air, and struggling to rise.

"There is no time," he gasped, feverishly, "I must get to Merendir at once."