

Chapter One

The clear nights of spring still carried the chilling bite of winter, and the men were bundled appropriately. The drafts that slipped under the door and sliced between the shutters made the barmaids linger by the fire as they served the black bread and stale cheese that went so well with ale. However, not even that nor the curses against the cold could dampen the atmosphere of warmth in the tavern. The young maids smiled genuinely at the tired jokes and meager tips of the farmers who gathered in anticipation of the spring festival, and they kicked playfully at the shins of the guardsmen who suggested lewd propositions.

Nothing could have suited Henry better. The fat tavern keeper's spirit rose with each mug of spirits swilled by the men. He laughed and swapped lies with everyone who frequented his kegs, and the goblet at his feet overflowed with copper and steel coins. It was a great boon after the lean months of winter. Most of the misshapen disks came from the men of the guard. The blue-clad soldiers had a steadier income than that of the average local, who was more inclined to save that rare extra coin than to drink it at his establishment. Henry generally tolerated the gruff and occasionally obscene guardsmen because of this and the fact that their mere presence more-or-less guaranteed an honest patronage. That was well worth the trouble they sometimes caused.

Dendrick stumbled to the wall, empty tankard in hand. Henry blocked the big man's path with an outstretched leg. He reached down and jingled the coins in his makeshift coffer with a three-fingered grasp. The soldier stared a moment with glazed eyes before digging beneath his belt and dropping a handful of money in Henry's general direction.

The fat tavern keeper scooped the coins from the ale sodden floor and clucked to himself at the small denominations, but he allowed the man to fill his cup. The night was too profitable to squabble over specifics. He watched the soldier stagger back to the long table and collapse upon the bench. Dendrick's sergeant plucked the mug from his unconscious fingers and drained half the contents in a single pull. He

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smiled at the laughter of those who noticed and ran a sleeve over his mouth and beard. Sergeant Travis was a wide faced Northerner of heavy accent whose easy manner and ready grin made him easily accepted by the wary people of Bren. Henry liked Travis because he often took the role of peacekeeper among his fellows. That made the tavern keeper's life much easier.

Henry called to a girl and sent her scurrying after a mug of the better mead. It was with deep satisfaction that he tipped his chair back against the wall and listened to the light banter around him. Many of the guardsmen were listening intently as old Earle Fordwith told of one of the many border skirmishes he had witnessed as a youth. The mercenary-turned-farmer had spent nearly three-quarters of his life in one conscript or another until his service and advanced age had merited a few acres and a mule. He had married a local lass, buried her, and with the help of his second wife and eight of his sons had procured more land and a high status in the community. Now near his seventieth summer, the scarred veteran spent most of his days propped before the door of Henry's tavern telling tales and drinking ale. Henry had no doubts of Earle's word; he had heard each story at least a dozen times. Each one held a consistency that rang of truth.

The girl returned with his mead, and Henry sipped at the heady stuff with real pleasure. He never ceased to rejoice in his fortune of having avoided the life of a soldier, for only the lucky survived and ill fortune fell to all eventually.

Glowing embers streaked across the hearth as a log settled between the blackened dog irons. Henry's eyes sought out the form of the young guardsman reclining on the bench in the flickering shadows of a corner. He frowned. Recently whenever Travis and the troop frequented the tavern, the youth was there as well. His name was Bryant. He generally stayed just on the outskirts of their conversation and seemed content to watch and listen, smiling now and again at their rough humor and making rare comments of his own. Occasionally Henry would find Bryant staring up into the rafters with dark eyes fixed with some personal concern. At other times, he would lie back as if sleeping though the tavern keeper could sense he was awake. At the end of the night when Henry swept the floor, he would find the cup of ale that gave the young man a right to the bench untouched on the corner of the hearth. Henry always shook his head as he drained the cup and wondered about the boy.

A sudden gust from the opening door set the small tongues of light dancing in the lamps above. The young woman who entered drew the

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immediate attention of all, and a still silence fell as she cast about in the smoky gloom. She searched the many faces until her gaze reached those of the guardsmen, and she quickly started in their direction. For a moment or two the quiet hung uncomfortably in the air, then someone struck a spark of conversation that caught and swiftly spread among the others. Soon some semblance of the earlier discourse prevailed, though in a more subdued manner.

Still, many of the men stared after her. Henry noted how she blushed and shrank from the sneers and mumbling that followed in her path. One of the blue-clad guardsmen started with a snide remark that was cut short when the sergeant rattled the table with a kick and fixed him with a hard look of warning. He knew of the girl, not directly, but through the young man who rose from the shadows to greet his sister.

The tavern keeper saw immediately that something was amiss. The young woman spoke in a broken whisper and pulled at Bryant's arm in obvious distress. With her every word Bryant's face took on the aspects of cold anger. His look roused Sergeant Travis's interest as well. Both men watched as the boy made a brief reply and then abruptly took his sister's chin and turned her face to the firelight. She tried to pull away, but he held her firmly. Bryant's dark eyes came alive in the dancing lamplight with a rage that startled Henry. Without another word Bryant strode from the tavern.

Sergeant Travis lifted Dendrick's head from the table and splashed his remaining ale in the man's face. "Come along, there's about to be trouble." Dendrick sputtered incoherently and promptly rolled under the table with a thud. Travis kicked him away with disgust. Henry nodded to the man as the sergeant hurried from the tavern and into the street.

The crisp night air slapped the sergeant sharply across the cheek, and he inhaled deeply to clear his head of stale smoke and cheap ale. The initial shock faded quickly. By his fourth breath his vision sharpened, and his equilibrium returned. Travis sought out Bryant and started after him.

The young man was setting a pace down the center of the street that was a challenge for the stocky Northerner's shorter legs. He swore under his breath as he stumbled over a broken cobblestone in his haste, trying to watch the ground before him even as he kept an eye on Bryant. It was a difficult task for the night held no moon, and the few stars peeking behind the canopy of clouds were of little use. The slim figure was but a dark outline against the gray stone of the street and darkened sky.

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The crunch of gravel underfoot alerted him that he was being followed. Travis risked a quick glance over his shoulder and saw the slight woman behind, her face a pale circle under her hooded cloak. He looked back in time to see Bryant disappear into a lighted doorway, and he called out for him to wait. Travis broke into a lumbering run.

The doorway turned out to be that of a rank alehouse, a filthy dive with an atmosphere far removed from that of Henry's place. Travis pushed his way into the crowded, haze filled room and strained to find Bryant in the hot press of smoking braziers and sweating men. The din was deafening from the games played at the tables, shouts of encouragement and wails of disappointment mingling in the general mayhem. Travis was well aware of the attention he was attracting, furtive glances of mistrust and suspicion that were directed at his guardsmen garb. He returned each one with such hostility that they turned away, lowering their eyes and concentrating on their drinks.

Someone stumbled against his side, and Travis reflexively reached out with a steadying hand. To his surprise he saw it was Bryant's sister. His first impulse was to chastise the girl for daring into such a place, but his harsh words caught in his throat when he saw the fear in her eyes and felt her tremble beneath his touch. At the same time, her long tawny hair and fair face, reminiscent of the women of his own province, unbalanced him. A long, ugly welt ran down her left cheek. Travis knew immediately the cause of Bryant's rage. He felt some of the hot stuff simmer in his own chest.

Fleetingly, he caught a glimpse of Bryant as he passed before the red glow of a brazier. He was inching his way along the shadows of the far wall, and Travis realized with sudden misgiving that the boy was unarmed. That was an open invitation for trouble among men such as these. The fact that he was dressed in the same manner as Travis only made matters worse, for his youth and lack of Travis' hardened appearance would draw scorn rather than respect. Travis resolved to get the boy out quickly.

From the far corner came a deep murmur, and Travis recognized the signs of a game grown sour. Rising from the table, a grizzled bear of a man roared in anger and shattered a clay mug against the arm of his chair. Across the table was a plump, balding man who recoiled even as he held out his hands to utter a weak protest. Judging from his drab brown tunic, Travis surmised that he was a farmer who had no business with his present company. His face was a mask of terror as his eyes darted back and forth to the two men who squeezed in close to either side.

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Travis knew the man was about to receive a beating, if not worse. It was then that he realized this was where Bryant was headed. Travis muttered a promise to beat the drunken daylights out of Dendrick for abandoning him for a stupor beneath Henry's table. Caught as he was in the tight press around the ale kegs, Travis could only watch the boy slip toward the back of the tavern.

It was then the farmer caught sight of the young guardsman. "Bryant!" he cried in desperation and started to rise, but the ruffian to his left grasped him by the shoulder and pulled him forcibly back to the table. An ugly smile creased his dirty face. His prey cringed and held a hand tightly over a bulge at his chest as he cried out loudly and struggled against the hands that grappled with him on either side.

"Help him, please!" the young woman at Travis' side pleaded though whether for Bryant or the farmer he could not tell. The largest of the assailants began to rain blows about the head and back of the cowering man.

Travis saw Bryant move swiftly. With a powerful wrench, he pulled back the chair of the nearest man and sent its occupant crashing to the floor. Before anyone could move, he whirled about and caught the grinning ruffian with a solid blow that sent him tumbling from his seat and out of sight.

The tavern exploded. All at once everyone was on their feet, climbing on tables and pushing to better see the disturbance. Travis lost sight of Bryant and fought desperately to reach the boy, shouting over everyone else and heaving bodies to either side. He saw the balding man bolt for the back entrance; his grizzled tormentor and another man followed close behind. Bryant rose above the throng as he leapt upon the table and scrambled in pursuit of the three.

It was impossible to make headway in the boiling chaos, and Travis backtracked to the entrance. A hand closed on his collar and a rough voice exclaimed at his guardsman colors. Travis threw back an elbow, and a body thudded to the floor. The sturdy Northerner cocked back a scarred fist in warning, but a path was already opening before him. Travis burst into the street.

The grunts and shuffling of a scuffle reached him before he rounded the corner of the building. He slowed at the mouth of the alley, hesitant to join the fray before discerning Bryant from the other three. There was a broken gasp, and one of the large silhouettes stumbled to his knees in the half-light of the open tavern door. Bryant's slender form loomed before him and flipped the man onto his back with a booming kick to the chest.

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A blade whispered as it cleared leather, and the second ruffian lunged at Bryant from the shadows. The boy closed with him, and the two struggled for a few tense moments in a silence marred only by the heavy breathing of their exertion. Travis' own knife was in his hand in an instant as he rushed to the boy's aid. Bryant suddenly twisted away from his opponent, and there was a sickening pop. The ruffian gave a shrill cry. His knife flashed as it clattered to the cobblestone.

Bryant propelled both men down the back of the alley with kicks and shoves, the smaller of the two cradling his arm against his breast and sobbing pitifully. The boy stopped short at the mouth of the street, staring after the two for some seconds before returning to the scene of the fight.

Without a word he pulled the balding man from the ground, totally forgotten by Travis during the heat of the encounter. The plump man faltered as his knees buckled and would have fallen had it not been for Bryant's hold on his arm. "Are you hurt?" Bryant asked softly.

The question seemed to drive the man into a frenzy. Throwing off Bryant's support, he pushed the boy away and began screaming wildly. "Who asked for your help! I don't need this from you or anyone else!" Travis was shocked by the vehement profanities the bald man spat at the boy. Bryant simply stood and took the ranting without response. Then, abruptly, Bryant grabbed at the front of the man's tunic, warding off the other's vain attempts to pull away. He received a sharp slap across the cheek before he drove the man violently against the wall, his questing hand pulling something from the man's throat and holding it to the light.

Travis could not see what dangled from the boy's hand, but slowly, almost painfully, Bryant drew himself to his full height, and his body went rigid. As he glared down on the man, he seemed to grow larger, more intimidating, and for an instant Travis saw in Bryant a hard, angry man.

"This was not meant for you," Bryant said harshly. His voice was barely above a whisper.

"It's mine!" the man insisted as he clutched at Bryant's arm. "You've no right!" he cried. "It's mine!"

Bryant gathered the man to his face and shook him jarringly. "This wasn't meant for you!" he roared and doubled the man over with a fist to the stomach.

Travis watched as the anger drained away from the boy almost as quickly as it had come. Bryant drew a deep breath and looked wearily down on the cowering man and then turned and walked from the alley.

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Travis was not aware the girl had left the tavern until she swept past and into her brother's arms. "Bryant?" she asked fearfully, but he cut her short when he gently pulled away.

"Get him out of here," he said woodenly. Taking her hand, he closed her fingers about the broken thongs of a small purse. "Just get him out of here," he repeated. The girl nodded soberly and disappeared into the alley.

"Who is that?" Travis asked. He received no reply. Bryant lingered until his sister brought forth the heaving, stumbling man and half led, half carried him away. "Who was that?" Travis demanded again.

Bryant stared blankly off into the night, the stark emptiness he found there mirrored in his eyes. "That," Bryant said softly, "was my father."

He left Travis standing alone in the barren street.