

His Dark Empire

Tears of Blood, Book One

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CHAPTER ONE

Aren

The arrow thunked into the broad trunk of the giant redwood, only inches from Aren's head. It had been close, so close that he could feel the sharp cut of the air around it, and hear the whistle of the feathers passing by. Aren leaned forward and dug his heels harder into the roan's flanks. The horse gave its all to forge ahead, but it had been born and raised for farming, not outrunning death.

"Come on, Tisha," he cried, eyes filled with a mixture of sweat and tears. "Please."

They pounded through the brush, trampling a new path in the dense wood, each smack of Tisha's hooves leading Aren in a new prayer that the horse wouldn't find herself stepping on a loose stone, or tripping over a fallen tree branch.

"You never should have run."

He could hear the voice in the wind, in the air around him, and in his mind. Gathering courage, he decided to chance a look back, to see if he could spot the soldiers chasing him. The glint of sunlight off a metal helm showed him their position. They were gaining.

"We could have helped you, if you hadn't run."

Aren swallowed, his throat nearly clenching from the dryness. He heard the thunk of another arrow, and saw the fletching protruding from the redwood to his right. His heart beat a rhythm of panic in his chest, and he did his best to block out the voices surrounding him.

"We could have helped you," they said. "You have the curse. We would have cared for

you."

"No!" Aren shouted. He dared lift his hands from Tisha's neck to squeeze them over his head. Except the voices weren't traveling through his ears. They were everywhere, and they were nowhere, and there was no escaping them.

"You had to run. You had to defy us. It is a waste. Such a waste."

Aren jerked as Tisha bunched and leaped over a fallen log, causing him to nearly lose his grip. He dropped his hands from his ears and wrapped them tight around her neck again when she landed with a splash, her wild run taking them to a wide, shallow, stream. It was a place far afield from anywhere he had ever ventured before. A place he could die, and never be found.

He counted heartbeats while he waited to hear the echoing splash of the soldier's chargers. If his heart hadn't been beating so fast, he might not have even reached five. They were gaining.

Aren heeled into his horse once more. She had never run so hard for so long in all of her fourteen years, and yet somehow she found more energy, more speed, more power in those legs that were muscle hardened to drag a till, not to outrun *his* soldiers.

The water flew out behind them, hooves finding slippery purchase on the smooth stones below the surface. An arrow hissed by, further off the mark this time, landing in the water a dozen yards ahead. Aren guided Tisha to the right, a sharp hook that moved them perpendicular to the soldiers and brought them into denser brush; brush that was better protection from arrows. The soldier's heavy chargers couldn't turn as fast, and he could hear them cursing as they slowed to change direction.

"You should never have run." The voices returned, forceful in their anger, their sadness, their pity. "We could have helped you. You should never have run."

"Be quiet," Aren shouted, his words echoing in the forest, reverberating off the trees and bouncing from ancient glacial stones.

The scream startled Tisha for just an instant, her desire to please her master faltering beneath the loud tone of his words. At a full gallop through heavy foliage, a startled instant was all it took.

He felt the break before he heard it. One step and her gait was smooth, the next, and it was lost. A loud crack created a new echo, replaced again by the combined screams of horse and rider as they were both thrown forward.

Time and direction lost meaning. The world slowed, and Aren watched with fascination as it happened. He saw Tisha begin to drop below him, her newly broken front leg buckling under the weight of their bodies. He saw himself raising higher, the momentum carrying his body upward and outward. He looked upon every branch and leaf in utter detail, every crack and crevice of skin and vein. He thought of her, while he tumbled. He remembered her, and he began to cry.

Time had slowed for Aren, but there was no time for tears. Tisha vanished beneath him, crashing headlong into a moss covered stone, stopping in an instant with a sickening crunch. The stone wasn't quite wide enough to claim him, though he felt the fire in his shoulder when it struck the immovable object, twisting and twirling him, sending him heels over head. He landed roughly on his back, feeling it too ignite in fire while he gazed up into the density of the forest canopy, searching for the blue sky above.

Laying there, time regained itself. The pain was enough to make him groan, and a single tear dropped from his eye. He heard the snorting of tired horses, slowed to a careful trot in order to navigate past the obstacle that had cost his horse her life. The obstacle that would cost him his.

There was a creak of leather, and the clank of chain, the lightly armored soldiers sliding off their mounts. Two sets of footfalls, the breaking of branch and twig. They would be upon him soon.

There was nothing but cold fire, the sharp, throbbing intensity of broken bones that shouldn't have allowed Aren to rise, and yet he did. He turned on his knee to face his attackers, to face *his* soldiers. They were nondescript beneath their steel helmets; two pairs of brown eyes, two days worth of growth on their chins, thick lips and strong builds. They wore the black chain he was expecting, covered by a black leather doublet bearing *his* mark, a red eye, the bottom waved and distorted so that it looked like it was crying. Crying blood.

"You shouldn't have run," the soldier on the right said. Aren decided to call him Right.

"You're a traitor," the other one said. Left.

He could have tried begging, but his pleas would have been ignored. He could have offered coin, or land, or things of a more personal nature, but there was no bribe that would convince the soldiers to let him flee. They were controlled by something more powerful than any bribe. They were driven by fear.

Aren knew it, and so he didn't beg. He had been driven by fear too. It had been that fear that had caused him to run, to try to escape from the soldiers when they had come for him. It had been that fear that had led him to the forest where he had never tread, his horse lying dead ten feet away, his own life about to end. The voices were right, he should never have run.

His body was broken, but he found the will and strength to stand, rising before Left and Right, holding his arms out wide. He offered his body to them. He offered a target for their swords to skewer. He should never have run.

Left pulled longsword from scabbard with a soft *schnikt*, while Right notched another

arrow to his bow. He was broken and beaten, and yet they still approached with caution. Aren's eyes narrowed, and in the corner of his eye he found the sun.

He should never have run, he decided. He should have stood and fought.

Left was too slow. He didn't even see Aren's hand when it shot forward, sinking into his flesh and wrapping itself around his heart. His eyes traced Aren's wrist to the unbroken armor, and he screamed in fear and pain when the hand was removed, his life's muscle still pumping in it. Aren dropped it to the floor, but Left hit the ground first.

He turned to Right, who had found himself suddenly blinded by sunlight, despite the thick growth of the forest. He couldn't see to train his bow, and he still couldn't see when the bow was wrenched from his hands and the north end used to puncture his vulnerable throat. He too tumbled to the earth, blind in a sea of light.

Aren began to cough, his lungs filling with blood. A moment more, and he wouldn't have been able to speak the incantation, too softly for them to hear. He fell back to his knees. A moment more, a wish for just a slice of time; time to see her big bright eyes, time to see her toothless smile. Time to tell her he loved her, and he was sorry. He reached into a pocket, searching for the ring, but it was gone. He knew he must have lost it when he was thrown from the horse.

He never should have run, but he had been afraid. Afraid of what would happen to her, if they had known that she was his. Afraid that she would become *his*, if her luck was as poor as his own. They had discovered one of his secrets, but there were two more that he would take to his grave.

"You never should have run." The voice was there now, focused on a singular spot, a spot where a man now stood. He wasn't a soldier, but that didn't mean he wasn't a threat. Aren's eyes

were growing dim, but he was able to see well enough to make out the bleeding red crystal eye that clasped the man's nightmare black cloak at his throat.

"You never should have followed," Aren wanted to say, but all that came out were gurgles, and so he spat the mouthful of blood at the Mediator's feet. He knew that Right's arrow had fallen nearby, and his hand moved slowly, searching the grass for it.

The Mediator came closer, revealing his boyish face, a face too young to be so cold. "We would have cared for you," he said. "We would have treated you like a brother."

I had a brother, Aren thought. He had been cursed in sword and bow. *He* had taken him for *his* own. That was why he had chosen the wheat and the udder. Better to hide your curse.

Aren's hand found the arrow, and he carefully wrapped his fingers around it, rolling it into his palm. The Mediator came closer still, reaching to his waist and lifting a polished metal blade from a simple rope loop at his hip. He took one step closer, and then another, and then another.

Aren wasn't a violent man, and he wasn't a warrior. He was a farmer with secrets. One had been discovered, the others he was desperate to protect. With his last surge of strength, Aren threw his hand forward, intent on putting the arrow tip into the Mediator's stomach. It had only cleared the grass when it exploded into splinters that lodged themselves in his hand.

"I'm sorry," the Mediator said, drawing back his blade. His left hand was balled into a fist through which a gold light filtered.

You will be, Aren thought. Death had made him angry and cold. He tried to move, to fight, and found himself held in place by unseen bindings. The last thing he saw was the sunlight reflecting from the perfect, lustrous alloy of the sword.

The Mediator stood over the farmer, staring down at the space between the body and the

head. A single tear welled from his eye; a tear the deep, rich, red of his blood.

CHAPTER TWO

Eryn

"Come on Eryn," Mother shouted, standing at the base of the ladder that led into their small cottage's attic. "Papa will be home soon, and he'll be hungry like a monster from smithing all day."

Eryn rolled her eyes. Papa was hungry like a monster whether he worked the forge all day or not. Even on his day away from the sweltering heat of fire and metal he would still tear through a roasted duck and a bowl of berry porridge like it was going to run away from him.

She was standing at the top step of an unsteady stool, trying to reach the furthest corner of their elevated pantry, where the last bag of the salt they would use to flavor the duck sat mocking her reach. If only she were just a little bit taller.

Of course, there was nothing she could do about that. Her father was the tall one, and she was merely of average height for a girl of fourteen, though she did possess a lean strength that had come from many days of begging her father to tag along with him to his shop in Watertown's square.

"If you're going to come to work with me, you're going to come to work," her father had said.

She had been eager to agree, and had surprised her father, both in her effort to keep him supplied with the iron he used to make horseshoes and scythe blades for the farmers, and for asking to return with him on future days.

"You will be a strong young lady," he had said with a laugh. "But mind you don't work too hard. Few boys will want a wife that can lift more grain than they can."

Eryn smiled at the thought. She had taken his advice to heart, and only gone to the smithy with him on odd days, staying home with mother and learning the ways of the household on the evens. Which was why she was standing on the top of a rickety old step stool, struggling to reach that last bag of salt. If her father was to be believed, she was growing into a very pretty young lady, despite the fact that she favored doeskin pants and loose homespun blouses to skirts, and kept her hair cut to her shoulders so it wouldn't get burned at the forge.

"I've almost got it," she called down to her mother.

She steadied herself on the stool, and leaned forward again, trying to judge the distance, the shiftiness of her platform, and the weight of the bag. She knew she should be able to reach it, after all she had put it there at the beginning of the year, and she had surely grown at least a smidgeon since then. Still, the salt evaded her, leaving it in her mind that perhaps Roddin had snuck up while they were sleeping and shifted everything back. He liked to play tricks like that.

"Hurry, my love," Mother said. "You know if we don't salt it in time, Papa will bellyache about the flavor."

"Papa always bellyaches about the flavor," she replied. "It's too salty, it's not salty enough, the skin is too crunchy, the skin isn't crunchy enough."

He always found something wrong with the duck, but it was more of a rolling humor than a serious complaint.

Eryn stretched out one last time, sighing with the effort, but falling just short. The tips of her fingers touched the edge of the bag, and then she felt herself losing her balance and was forced to shift her weight back. "By Amman," she said under her breath. Papa would have

scolded her if he'd heard her speak so.

She turned her head and looked back at the daylight rising through the small opening to the attic, feeling her heart begin to beat faster. She knew she could get the bag of salt. She knew how to retrieve it even though it was beyond her grasp.

She also knew she was forbidden.

Eryn had been twelve when she and her family had first discovered that she was Cursed. It had been a total accident, as the discovery usually was. She had just been fortunate that only her family had witnessed it, or she would have been locked up within the hour, and they would have been summoned to their small village. *His* soldiers, the frightening men who patrolled every corner of every province in search of the Cursed, to take them away from their families, never to be seen again. It had seemed unfair to her, but *he* was the Emperor, and all were *his* subjects. They had no choice, and no say.

They had been having a picnic, way out in the Whistling Woods on a beautiful spring day. Papa had loaded his cart with food and drink for once, instead of ingot and hammer and wood. He had guided them through the lighter part of the brush to a wide, shallow stream that divided a gigantic field of grass and wild flowers. They had eaten and drank, played games like hide and find, and Papa had even shown her how to draw a bow and loose an arrow. It had been the perfect day.

It *had* been the perfect day, until they had loaded up the cart and started making their way back home. What was a bright, cool, sunny spring day turned dark as heavy clouds moved in,

and before long the wind had picked up and a steady rain began to fall, soaking them all to the bone. They didn't really mind being wet, in fact she and Roddin had enjoyed jumping in the newly created puddles that were born in the cratered earth of the woods. If that had been the end of it, their lives could have continued as before.

It had been a flash of lightning, and a tremendous clap of thunder that had startled their horse, Maxin. He had snorted and reared back, then launched forward like one of the arrows they had been loosing earlier. It would have been easy enough to let him race his way back home, except she and Roddin had been out in front of the old stallion, jumping in the puddles and playing tag. It was Roddin who'd found himself in the frightened horse's path.

She could still see it clearly in her mind. Papa's booming voice roaring out her brother's name in warning. Mother's shrill cry of alarm at seeing her child in harm's way. Eryn herself saw the horse before Roddin did, and out of nothing more than instinct she had wished her brother would move from here to there.

It had felt strange then. A tingling sensation that had started behind her ears and ran down her back and chest to her arms. Of their own volition they shot out straight towards Roddin, and the air in front of him began to wiggle and squirm. She saw Roddin's hair get blown to the side as though he were caught in a mighty wind, and then his whole body had been lifted up and thrown aside, only moments before Maxin rushed by with the cart.

They had run to him then, Mother and Papa, with Mother leaning down and wrapping her arms around her older child. Eryn had been too stunned to move, and she stood as still as she could while her arms dropped to her sides and the tingling sensation faded. She realized then that she was crying, and she brought up one of her arms to wipe away the rain and the tears. When she pulled her it away, she saw that it was streaked with blood.

Papa had seen it too, she remembered, and he had rushed over to her and held her tight and cried. She didn't know why he was crying, not at first. She had been too young to pay much attention to the stories about the Cursed. In time, they had told her that she must never tell anyone what had happened that night, and that she must never let her ears tingle like that again.

It had been an easy promise to make at the time, but a much harder one to keep in the two years that had followed. After all, how could it be a Curse when she had used it to save her brother's life? How could it be bad when it was so useful? She had gone out to the edge of the Whistling Woods on her own when nobody expected her to be anywhere in particular. She had tried again and again to make her ears tingle, and to feel the energy rushing through her body. It had taken weeks of trying, but eventually she made it happen once, and then again. It was never as strong as when she had pushed Roddin out of Maxin's path, but it was enough to do little things.

Like move a bag of salt just a tiny bit closer.

CHAPTER THREE

Silas

Silas Morningstar lifted the mug of ale to his chin, and then tilted his head to peer down into its depths.

"Almost gone," he mumbled to himself, shaking the mug so the dark amber liquid inside would shift and swirl.

Silas watched every rise and fall of the remainder of his drink, considering the movement of swirling ale, and the patterns of the resulting waves. "To a fair lady lost at sea," he said, a little louder than intended.

"Hey Silas, I didn't know you had a fair lady?"

Wenley Hollow was the proprietor of the Sleepy Hollow, a small inn and tavern in the town of Root. He was a small man with a large appetite, and a burgeoning belly to match it. He laughed at his own sense of humor while he dried a fresh mug with a less than fresh cloth.

"Only a fool would know," Silas mumbled. His head felt heavy. His eyes felt heavy. He kept staring into the ale. "Is there any sense in cups?" he asked nobody. He brought the mug to his mouth, and took his final swallow. "I'll have another," he called out to Wenley.

"A copper a cup," Wenley replied.

Silas grumbled and got to his feet. His somewhat unsteady feet. He reached into his pants, feeling around for the hidden pocket where he kept his coin.

"Where is it?" he whispered to himself. He felt a little sick. "It has to be here, I haven't

changed my pants in..." He tried to remember. He only had one pair of pants. When had he last brought them down to the river to soak? When had he last brought himself down to the river to soak?

He squirmed and twisted while he searched the inner lining for the pocket. "To Heden with it," he cursed.

"No coin, no courtesy," Wenley said, walking over to him. "If you can't pay for another round, you're going to have to leave."

Silas took a deep breath, sucking the air in through a congested nose. "I can pay you in a fortnight," he said. "Or I can pay with a song."

Wenley shook his head. "I took you up on the song once, remember, Silas? I should have known you had the singing voice of an ogre, and lyrics that made as much sense as their howls." He reached out to take Silas by the arm. "You're lucky I even let you come in here, as bad as you smell."

Silas looked around. It was barely mid-morning. He and Wenley were the only two in the tavern.

"You've been a good friend to me," Silas said, his voice rough and raw. "A good friend."

Wenley reached out and put his hand under Silas' shoulder. "I'm not your friend, Silas," Wenley replied. "I'm running a business. I let you in because I'm here to clean and get the place ready, and it's harmless enough to watch you sit there and mutter to yourself. When you have coin. Which you don't. So now you need to leave."

"I can pay you in a fortnight," Silas said again. "Or I can pay you with a song."

Wenley gripped Silas' arm a little tighter, and pulled on him. It wasn't as simple a task as it could have been, because Silas was almost two heads taller. "Come on, old man. Go find a

hole to fall into to sleep it off. Or better yet, go down to the Baden and throw yourself in it."

Silas didn't resist Wenley's tug. He let the man drag him out from behind his chair. "I can wash dishes," he suggested, losing his balance. Wenley's grip was the only thing that kept him from falling to the floor.

"I've never seen you right enough to handle dishes," he said, "and you've been coming around for almost two years."

"On a morning bright, in lighter days. Or is it, on a morning light in brighter days?" Silas looked up at the beams of wood supporting the three floors of rooms above them, and then down at the smooth planked floor. The motion made him dizzy, and the dizziness made his stomach churn. He felt bubbling in his throat, and heard the sounds of his body rejecting the ale.

"Out. Out right now," Wenley urged. He knew what those sounds meant, and he tugged harder on the older man.

Silas shook off the man's arm and rushed himself outside. The streets were quiet at this time of day, and there was a light fog that the sun had yet to burn off. It worked out to his advantage. Nobody else saw him duck around the side of the Sleepy Hollow, to a narrow alley between the tavern and a seamstress' shop. He vomited on the seamstress' wall.

"That was disgusting," he announced to nobody in a deep sing-song voice. He supported himself by resting his head against the wall, and he gazed down into the muck of his regurgitated drink. He stared at it, looking for patterns in the foam.

"To a fair lady lost at sea," he said again.

Silas pushed himself away from the wall and headed back towards the street. His legs still felt like rubber beneath him, and his head was throbbing, but he'd decided he would follow his

friend's advice and head down to the river. He stepped back out onto the empty street, turning left and crossing over towards the town square.

The center of town was known to the locals as the Root Bazaar. It was a massive open space that was cut in half by the Baden river, over which two wood and iron bridges arched. Both sides of the space were used for an assortment of purposes like celebrations, games, and tournaments, though the west bank was often called the Red Bank, because that was where they held the executions.

Each side of the square was closed in by tightly spaced storefronts and taverns, with a few dirt roads that crossed them, and a single cobblestone road on the Red Bank that led from the north gate to the south gate. It was early yet, but there was already a collection of traveling merchants randomly spotted on the grass on both sides of the river, unpacking their wares and putting them up on display.

Being the largest town between the cities of Killorn and Elling, and a hub from the villages surrounding the Baden and its tributaries, Root spent nearly every day each year hosting traders, performers, and nobles on their way to and from the seat of the province's Overlord. Such transient wealth also meant there was a strong presence of less than honorable professions. Silas wasn't always an honest man, but he also wasn't the type to belong to any of those guilds.

Even so, the merchants kept a close eye on Silas as he walked by. Whenever he came too close to one, they would move to stand in front of their wares, and wrinkle their noses at the smell of him. It wasn't that they didn't trust him in particular, but there was something suspicious about a haggard man who couldn't walk in a straight line, wandering past them at this time of day.

Silas reached the cobblestone road and turned north. Using the river from inside of the

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