

WE DO NOT KILL CHILDREN

PART ONE – THE STONES

1st OCTOBER 570 After Landing – FIRST DAY OF EXILE

Five days after the murders, the trial.

Dorac had always hated being stared at. He stood, flanked by guards, in the centre of the White Hall in Stonehill Castle. Around three sides crammed men, women and children. Most though not all he knew, and every eye was fixed on him.

Fifteen years ago, he had sworn his oath to King Arrion's mother in this hall. Since then, he had received orders here, and delivered reports, and greeted new brothers and sisters. It was the centre of the life of the King's Thirty.

The long whitewashed walls glared in on him.

Before him on the left was a table with the holy gospel, on which the witnesses swore. The priest, a short scowling woman, stood by, and the King's Questioner, Lady Kara. On the right, another table with that cloak, *his* cloak, stiff with blood. The witnesses sat behind. Cremdar looked troubled, Arvill looked distraught, and Braf looked like nothing.

The eyes burned into him, and raised sweat.

He answered what turned out to be the last question, and was told to step forward and take the oath. His right hand on the open book, hearing himself stumble over the words, he swore that the evidence he had given was true. He knew that no one believed him.

The eyes shifted away, and he was cold. Everyone looked – Dorac looked – at the man sitting on the dais at the north end. King Arrion, his lord for nine years. His lord, his friend, his brother. Everyone else had been staring at him because they believed him guilty. The King looked away for the same reason.

“Your Grace, do you wish to retire to consider?” asked Lady Kara.

“No. But he may sit down.” So someone brought him a stool, but he ignored it. He waited. Fought the knowledge of doom coming. All around the walls, a hiss of talk. Dorac could not hear words. He could guess.

(“He murdered three children, and thought the King would *approve*. One of the Thirty! Why is it taking so long? What is there to decide?”)

The King stood up. Silence beyond imagining.

“Dorac Kingsbrother, I find you guilty of the murders of Ilda aged twelve years, Gascor aged nine years, and Filana aged five years.”

It still seemed impossible.

Hands on his shoulders, pushing him to his knees. Blood pounded behind his face. Possible and actual. At least he would soon be dead.

“You have served my mother and me and this land with great loyalty for many years. I do not doubt that you thought what you did was for the best. Words were spoken at Council

that may have helped you to believe this. But whatever your motives, it was an abominable act.

“From this day, and forever, you are exiled from this land, and from the fellowship of the Thirty. If you are still within the realm one week from today, or if you ever return without the King’s word, your life is forfeit.

“I take back your companionship, I take back your land and your gold to comfort the bereaved, I take back your horse and your armour.” He paused. “Your sword you may retain. Go from here, make a better life, and may God forgive you.”

That was all. He barely noticed the eyes now. As he stood up, he overbalanced and had to steady himself on the floor. Someone almost laughed. He bowed to the King, turned, met Cremdar’s eyes one last time, and walked out of the Hall.

So his life ended.

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But still he walked and breathed, and had to decide what to do.

In fact he went to his cell, packed his satchel as if for a normal journey, handed over the gold in his pouch, and even spoke a few words to one of the guards. Yet also it seemed that he walked in a straight line from the Hall to the Castle gate without looking back. *They believed Cremdar. He believed Cremdar.*

The King said, “I find you guilty.” Cremdar said, “I did not want to believe it, it was so horrible.”

His brother's lies, his lord's condemnation carried him on as he strode through the familiar streets. More and more eyes. Shopkeepers and errand-girls and beggars and even dogs. More and more whispers. "Only exile! Why is he still alive?"

The news was spreading through all the city of Stonehill. Gemara and the others would be returning soon, and would be told, and would curse him. In a month his crime would be known everywhere. His steward would hear it at Valleroc; his cousin in the north; Tor's sister, whatever her name was, in the east. His father would hear it, if he were still alive, and sober enough to listen

Dorac the Childkiller. A good name for a story.

"Once there was an evil man. Once, and not so long ago...." And the story would end with a warning to be good, or else that man would creep into the house at night, and do to you what he did to those children at Ferrodach.

"Please."

A small pant, almost too quiet to hear.

"Please."

"Please!"

He glanced down. The boy was running to keep up. "Please don't walk so fast."

Dorac grunted.

"Please."

He stopped and stared down at the red-faced child. Somebody's squire, very young.

“What are you doing?”

“I wanted to...”

The confused pity in the face and voice was unbearable. Dorac drew his sword, and held it to the boy’s throat. “Go back,” he said, “or I will kill you.”

Horrified gasps from the whisperers. No one dared to intervene.

“You – you wouldn’t...”

He wouldn’t. Cremdar and Arvill’s Dorac, the monster with his name – *he* would.

“Go back,” he repeated, “or I will make you wish you had.”

But he needed no threats. His legs were long enough to outwalk young Gormad.

He turned again, and went on faster. Alleyways, churches, shops. No one spoke to him at the gate.

Away out of the city, south, anywhere.

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Gormad trailed tiredly back up the hill to the Castle. The other squires were standing in clumps, arguing about what *they* would have done to the murderer, had they been the King. They stared at him, surprised or sniggering.

Why had he gone chasing after the exile? *Why?*

He avoided even his friend Jamis, and wandered out to his favourite place in the gardens, the hidey-hole under the bushes. He wished Meril were here to talk to, but she was away dealing with raiders with her lord.

He had no tasks, now that Marrach was dead. He was a squire without a master. He would have to apply to the King for a new lord or lady. Or go home to Dendarry.

Gormad had gone to the trial because everyone else was going, because he needed something to fill the unreal emptiness, and because of his lord's mysterious words.

All the long days, while Marrach was "ill", and then "not getting better", and at last openly "dying", Gormad had sat beside him, and waited on him, occasionally sung to him, held a bowl for him to cough blood into, and wondered if he would ever have a normal life again. One that was not drenched in confusion and worry.

He had worried stomach-crawlingly about his lord. He had wondered, with some guilt, what would happen to *him* if... when...

And sometimes he was distracted by worrying about Meril. They were fighting at the northwest border. She might not come back. When he dared to voice this terror, Marrach said that fourteen-year-old squires did not actually fight. But the Haymonese and the Jaryari were the evil enemy, and perhaps they wouldn't keep the rules.

And all this worry was quite boring, and made him want to scream.

He had paid little attention to mutterings about treason at Ferrodach, wherever Ferrodach was. Then one dark evening, when the physicians were looking even gloomier, the

room reeked of illness, and the walls were closing in, Jamis pounded up the stairs with news too strange and gruesome not to be told at once.

“D’you remember they sent the Kingsbrothers to Ferrodach?”

“No.”

“Dorac and Cremdar of the Southern Six went to arrest Lord Gahran – the Council’s just learned he’s a traitor – scheming with the bloody King of Jaryar – they were sent to arrest him or chop his head off, or whatever, and what d’you think Master Dorac did?”

“What?”

“Lord Gahran poisoned himself, and Dorac went straight away and murdered his children.”

“Whose children?”

“Lord Gahran’s, you idiot, three or four children. He cut them into *pieces*. The youngest one was *five*. Some people say that Lady Sada had said at Council that they should be killed, because they’re traitor’s blood, but the King had said not to. But anyway, he did, and he’s been arrested by his own brother, and is being brought back for trial here. Everyone’s going to go. *A Kingsbrother* on trial for murder!”

But Marrach murmured weakly, “What did you say?”

Jamis explained it all again, a little more slowly.

“Dorac Kingsbrother would never kill children.”

They asked him what he meant, and did not understand his answer, and that was almost the last thing he said to Gormad. The physician and the priest turned him out, and Marrach died that evening.

So Gormad went to the trial. *Cut to pieces*, Jamis had said. *Exaggerating*, thought Gormad sensibly, but he was wrong. Dorac Kingsbrother stood in the Hall, face bruised because he had fought with the soldiers arresting him, and insisted that everyone else was lying. *Like in a story*. He looked innocent to Gormad. But the King, who ought to know everything, and who chose the Thirty, every member of every Six, and loved all of them as brothers and sisters – the King had condemned him. Suddenly Master Dorac looked as empty and lost as Gormad felt. And he walked out, and after a while Gormad followed him.

Why *had* he done that? “I wanted to...” He was not even sure how he would have finished the sentence. Gormad sat under the bushes, hugging his knees, haunted by the death of one man, and the face of another. And tomorrow was his lord’s funeral. More emptiness, more nothing.

Hunger drove him out, and he ate supper with the others - “What did the childkiller say to you, Gormad?” – and attended chapel, and went to bed. He lay still haunted in the dark. The funeral was tomorrow. The King would write to his parents. And his father would say, “You are no longer a squire. Come home.” *After all his struggle to get away. How Kammer would laugh.*

Where could an exile go? How far had he got? South was the enemy land of Jaryar, whose kings claimed that all of the north and west should be theirs, and had plotted with Gahran the traitor. East was Ricossa, where everyone was fighting each other. Southeast

were the mountains. Master Dorac had seven days, six now, to reach a border. How long would it take him, if he walked all the way?

Walked all the way.

Gormad had not realised he had been asleep, but suddenly he was awake, and it was the middle of the night, and he had the beginnings of the most stupendous idea. *Yes.* It pieced itself together logically in his buzzing head. Very quietly, he slipped out of bed, fumbled for his secret horde of money, and crept out to the stables in the dark.

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Few people were heading towards the city. Dorac strode past those who were leaving, ignoring their stares. A troop of soldiers passed, sent to reinforce the southern border with Jaryar, and for them he stepped aside. But after a while he was alone on the road, fields to right and left, and an occasional farmhouse, wood or more rarely stone, or an autumn-gold tree. The October breeze flapped his cloak. Above, dirty white clouds were bottomed with dark grey. Slowly the light faded. He walked on until it was full dark.

On the edge of Harro's tidy fields, there was space under an elm to sit. He drank, and ate already stale bread. He prayed, but emptily, for what can a dead man say to God? Then he wrapped himself in his blanket and lay down. As so often before, but rarely without companions.

Tomorrow he would need to find or buy more food.

Tomorrow.

All through the hours of praying and shouting and battering the walls in Ferrodach, the journey back under guard, and more hours imprisoned in the Castle, he had supposed he must be either believed, or executed. He had given no thought at all to anything else. To having to live on, without life.

But the King had been merciful.

As never before, he was aware of the cold, and the hard earth, and the impossibility of sleep.

Not impossible, as the sound of hoofs woke him. He tensed, rolled over, and gripped his sword. The roads are never safe. Two horses, one with a rider, picking their way in the dark. But then the riderless horse ambled across, sniffing.

It was Derry.

He stood to allow the beloved stallion to nuzzle his face, heart breaking again.

“Please.”

That voice! He swung round in fury. The child’s small figure was looking down at him from a saddle.

“My lord is dead, sir. I need a new lord.”

This made no sense. He dragged his mind to what did.

“You make me a horse-thief as well as a murderer?” Perhaps he *would* have to kill him.

“No! I...”

“This is the King’s horse now.”

“I bought him! I did!”

It still made no sense. The boy went on talking, but he could not listen. There was a blackness in his head, but eventually he put himself on Derry’s back, and rode away in the dark.

He was so tired, and that must have helped the blackness, for he thought of nothing at all. He rode, not fast, along the road under the autumn stars, until at last the grey came. And he reached the crest of a low hill where the road twisted slightly east. The sun was rising. So beautiful, the sky so threaded with gold and pink, that he woke up again.

The unbearable tomorrow.

END OF CHAPTER ONE