

DESCENT
JOURNEYS IN THE DARK

THE DOOM OF FALLOWHEARTH



A new darkness threatens the realms of Terrinoth

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

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A Descent Novel

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*Legendary heroes battle the undead and dark sorcery, in the first of a rip-roaring new series for the fan-favorite epic fantasy game, **Descent***

When the Baroness of Forthyn's daughter disappears, she calls on the legendary orc hero, Durik, to find her. Durik enlists his old questing partners – the dwarf alchemist, Ulma Grimstone, and roguish Logan Lashley – in the hopes of reliving their glory days. Together they journey to fearstruck Fallowhearth. There, instead of clues, they uncover necromancy: graveyards emptied of corpses, with trails of footprints leading into sinister Blind Muir Forest... But the forest holds more than just the walking dead: between its boughs lurk treachery, a sorcerous ally turned to darkness, and a shocking infestation of giant, murderous monsters.

PROLOGUE

Darkness in the heart of the light, light in the heart of darkness.

The figure in the traveling cloak stood where she had not been a half-second earlier. The mist that had borne her to this place retreated, crawling down her body, and away into nothingness.

She gasped. The night air was cold and clear in her lungs, snapping her fully awake and banishing the last vestiges of the mist shroud from her mind. Her heart was racing in her chest. She felt sick. Was it always like this?

She looked around, noticing her surroundings properly for the first time. She knew instantly where the mist had taken her. The bone yard. Graven headstones surrounded her in neat rows, carved with branches, skulls and the other morbid icons of the god of death. Just a few months ago, such a place, wrapped up in the cold dark of night, would have given her pause. Now, though, there was a thrill to it. From this place of death, still and silent, good could yet flourish. She had convinced herself of that.

She drew back her cloak and hefted the heavy book in her hands. She'd sworn she would return it to its rightful owner. That was what she was doing tonight. It was why she had summoned up the hex nebulum, the mist shroud, why she had used it to slip past the guards, under the gates and through the town unnoticed. But first she had to know. She had to try. Just one incantation, and then she would give it back and beg forgiveness. She found the page, murmuring a simple oculus spell to enable her to read the words in the darkness.

The Black Invocation.

She hesitated. This moment was irreversible. If she did this, she knew her life could never be what it once was.

Was she being too hasty? Perhaps. But there was something wrong in this town, something creeping and scuttling and crawling, something malignant. Something with no concept of mercy. She could fight it with this power, though. She didn't even have to call upon her guards, upon the townsfolk, those honest people who would be expected to die for her. She simply had to raise the bodies of those whose spirits had long passed on. The evil would be overcome, and all without a single life lost. Surely that was worth the price she was about to pay? Surely that was worth giving up her inheritance, breaking the ancient laws. Distorting nature itself.

Besides, there was no other way she could be with her teacher. She loved her. It was an emotion she wouldn't give up, not now that she really knew what it meant. The life she had been given wasn't the one she wanted. She would make a new one, with her, starting tonight. She would give up her privileged existence, one she had never cared for, and start anew. Her teacher would understand. She knew she felt the same way.

She turned towards the crypt.

It was one of several that dotted the shrine's graveyard, a low stone structure with an iron door wrought in the likeness of rows of exposed bones. The gate was secured with a heavy padlock. She stepped towards it and raised her hands, her eyes closed. She felt the night's cold, drew it within, softly speaking words she'd carefully memorized. Part prayer, part incantation, each breath now turning to a frosty billow before her.

Ice clenched and hardened around the lock, spreading from her fingers. There was a dull crack as metal froze and warped. Finally, a splitting sound and the heavy thud of frozen metal striking dirt. The lock had cracked and broken apart.

She eased the gate open, trying to ignore its rusty protests. Within, five stone caskets lay undisturbed. The forebearers of the Fulchard family, interred together. She stepped back without entering, raising the book, settling it in the crook of her arm.

What she was doing might be a form of desecration, but it was necessary. Once she knew she had mastered the Black Invocation, she would no longer need the book. She could raise an army and save this town. Then, truly, her teacher would realize her worth. There was good in even the blackest of magics. Light in the dark. That was what she'd show everyone.

She began to speak, her voice low, taking care with each syllable. The words seemed to shudder and coil across the page before her. She felt a wind stir around the headstones, moaning through the small, open crypt. The power of Mortos, elemental death, rising to greet her.

But there was something off. It only took her a few lines to realize it. She faltered. One word, mispronounced. A frown crossed her face. She paused. Remember what you've been taught, she told herself. Remain calm. One wrong word doesn't end the world. A few might.

She began again. And again, a wrong word. Then another. Panic started to grow inside her, made worse by the fact that the heavy book seemed to be getting lighter in her hands. With a rush of horror, she realized that it was starting to dematerialize. Even as she tried to race through the arcane lines and bind the magic around her to the words, the pages began fading, growing incorporeal even as she gripped it.

The locus redivus! She was a fool! When she had first stolen the book and hidden it in her bed chamber, she had cast a location binding spell on it, a simple little hex that would return the book to where she had concealed it. She had feared that some servant or maid might discover it and take it away. In her decision to return it to its rightful owner tonight, she'd completely forgotten to unbind the spell. Now the book was vanishing right before her eyes.

"No," she began to murmur, then louder. "No, no, no!"

Her concentration was gone. But it wasn't too late. She knew the hex nebulum off by heart. She could still slip back into the castle, retrieve the book from where it had now returned, break the binding enchantment and leave. Return it to her lover. Make amends. As the last of the book vanished and she found herself clutching nothing but air, she attempted to marshal her thoughts once more.

But it was too late for that. She knew it the moment she heard the sound, cold and rasping, from nearby. What was

done, was done. She had chosen her fate and there would be no going back now.

From inside the crypt she heard a low, slow scrape – the grinding of stone on stone, followed by a crack that reverberated through the suddenly quiet graveyard.

One of the crypt's coffins had just been opened.

CHAPTER ONE

For years now, Logan Lashley had fervently believed that his days of trouble were behind him. He had made a promise to himself – generally the only person he kept promises to – that the misadventures which had marred his youth would never be repeated. That was all in the past now, settled, nothing more than a source of free tavern ale from easily impressed merchant burgesses and city aldermen. He was retired, and glad of it.

There had been other promises too, most of them related to that first one. That he would enjoy his wealth. That he would never again draw his sword in anger. That he would never risk his life to save another being, living or near-dead. That he would finally get over his fear of spiders. That there would be no more adventures.

Adventures, misadventures. The differences were, in Logan's long experience, illdefined. Was his current situation – attempting to affect an air of outrage as the town guard took their time over his travel pass – an adventure or a misadventure? He feared the latter. Ever since he had

awoken three weeks earlier to the clatter of the letter-carrier outside and discovered that scrap of paper slid beneath his townhouse's front door, a sense of foreboding had been stalking him. That mark, roughly scrawled on a scrap of hide parchment, always spelled out "trouble."

The man-at-arms standing by the town gate looked again from the travel pass to Logan, and back to the pass. He was typical of this cold, inhospitable corner of Terrinoth, a squint-eyed, patchy haired, pox-scarred brute in old chain mail and a worn leather hauberk. Logan was close enough to smell his stink – stale sweat and staler alcohol, mixed with the oil recently applied to his armor and the crude head of the heavy billhook hefted over his shoulder. The man sniffed, paused to scratch behind his ear like a dog and finally handed the pass back to Logan.

"Welcome to Highmont, Master Gelbin," he grunted, sounding anything but welcoming. He gestured to the second guard beside him, and the man released the bridle of Logan's horse. He'd been holding onto it as though afraid Logan was suddenly going to spur the thickset piebald past the gatehouse and into the town's alleyways. Imagine that. Logan Lashley, hero of Sudanya, Master of Sixspan Hall, held under suspicion! It would have been an outrage, if Logan had been traveling under his real name and if he had indeed not just been considering making a break for it.

No need for that, at least not yet. The men-at-arms parted, and Logan drew his cloak tight against the late morning chill before easing Ishbel in under the portcullis. Beyond it lay a narrow dirt street, sloping upwards, thick with townsfolk going to and from the noonday market stalls. The buildings

crowded along the way, crooked and jostling. They were dark timber and pale wattle and daub for the most part, three or four stories high, many with thickly thatched roofs, a few with slate. Signs hung above narrow doorways declaring the trades practiced on the ground floors – a tailor, a cobbler, a dairy-seller, a physician.

Compared to the vast cloister streets of Greyhaven or the great monument city of Archaut it wasn't much, but Logan supposed the sight constituted civilization for this part of Terrinoth. Highmont was the capital of Forthyn, the most north-easterly of the baronies and the seat of its ruler, Baroness Adelynn. It was, in Logan's opinion, like Forthyn in general, a cold, windy, muddy place, and a damn sight less pleasant than either his townhouse in Greyhaven or his country estate on the edge of the Greatwood. It reminded Logan of the sorts of place he used to frequent in his younger days, which begged the question why he had come here at all. The slip of paper weighed heavy in his pocket.

He urged Ishbel up the street, the townsfolk hurriedly parting before him. For the most part they were strange-looking compared to the people he had grown accustomed to, living in western Terrinoth. They were shorter, burlier, fond of thick animal pelts and closecropped hair. Even here, in the heart of the barony, the influence of the northern clans was clear. To Logan, Highmont had the air of an outpost on the edge of the wilderness. Gods only knew what Upper Forthyn was like.

He passed a cluster of market stalls, catching the scents of fresh vegetables. Several sellers called out to him, clearly noticing his wealthy attire, but he ignored them. Past the stalls

he had to duck beneath a low-hanging tanner's sign. Ahead, the turrets and crenellations of Highmont citadel, perched on the crag that formed the hill-town's peak, were just visible over the rooftops. He turned right along a side street after the tanner's workshop, easing Ishbel past half a dozen human tapmen and several Dunwarr dwarfs unloading casks from a pair of wagons. He didn't get much further.

The narrow passage was blocked by seven or eight figures, and more were gathering. They appeared to have spilled out from the back door of a thatched three-story tavern building. Logan heard raised voices, rebounding from the hunched buildings leaning over the street. He eased on Ishbel's reins. He'd barely been in Highmont for ten minutes. The last thing he needed was to get caught up in a tavern scrap that had spilled out onto the street.

Most of the figures ahead were men-at-arms, clad in mail, hauberks and sallets and carrying an assortment of polearms. One, presumably the ringleader, was wearing a tabard bearing the heraldry of Baroness Adelynn – an azure field emblazoned with a rampant roc, its golden claws and feathers a contrast to the stinking drabness of the surrounding street. The man in the tabard was the one speaking, addressing a figure at the center of the group.

“You think I'm an idiot? This is obviously a forgery! I should have you arrested right here and now, filthy adventurer!”

Logan didn't need to get much closer to make out the figure Tabard was addressing. He stood a good head taller than the men surrounding him, a rough hide pelt drawn round his broad shoulders, those heavy features set in a look of resignation. A spear was slung over his shoulder, and a

long, curved dagger was sheathed at his waist. With a flicker of recognition, Logan realized the figure was an orc.

“I know your kind are dull, but are you deaf as well?” Tabard was saying, reaching out to push the orc’s shoulder. The hulking figure held the man’s gaze but didn’t react. Tabard laughed, and the other men-at-arms joined in. A few of the tavern’s patrons had stepped out to watch the confrontation, and the tapmen behind Logan had paused their unloading. Tabard, clearly relishing his growing audience, held up the scrap of paper he’d been carrying in one hand and dropped it into the dirt at the orc’s feet.

“We don’t want your kind around here, adventurer,” he spat. “Not in Highmont, or in Forthyn. You bring trouble with you wherever you go. That’s not a reputation Highmont needs in times like these. We’ll take you to the main gate and see you on your way. Unless you’ve got other plans?”

The threat was clear, as was the orc’s response, delivered with a level of clarity in the common tongue that visibly surprised the guards.

“If I fight, I kill. And I do not wish to kill you.”

For a second everyone was silent. Then Tabard laughed. The rest joined in as he half turned to address his spectators.

“Well, great Kellos burn out my eyes! Some adventurer you are! Coward, more like!”

The orc remained silent. Tabard spun back abruptly, raising his gauntlet to strike. Logan’s voice stopped him before the blow fell.

“Kruk, by all the gods, what do you think you’re doing?”

The assembly froze and Logan, unnoticed until then, felt all of the tension packed into the narrow street switch to him.

Fortuna watch over him, but it was too late to go back now. He glared at the orc.

“Come here this instant, Kruk,” he snapped, gesturing angrily. Nobody moved.

“You know this knave, sir?” Tabard asked slowly. Logan looked at him as though only noticing him for the first time.

“Gods, man, know him? Kruk here is my strong-arm. I sent him on a simple errand with my travel pass and here he is, carousing in a tavern. Typical! I do hope he hasn’t been causing you any trouble, Captain...”

“Kloin,” Tabard said slowly, looking him up and down. That’s right, Logan thought. Take it all in. The knee-high riding boots, white doeskin britches, the fur-trimmed traveling cloak. Logan’s attire might show a few days’ wear and tear, but the quality was obvious. He was clearly a man of means and status. Not the sort of visitor worth antagonizing. Hopefully.

“Well met, Captain Kloin,” he said, maintaining the practiced, arrogant tone and accent of a west Terrinoth noble. He had them on the back foot, and he had to keep it that way. He casually tossed his reins to another of the men-at-arms and dropped down from Ishbel’s back. Then, lip curled, he parted the gathering and plucked up the scrap of paper Kloin had thrown at the orc’s feet. As he bent forward, he made sure everyone got a glimpse of the bejeweled pommel of his sword and the fine blue-dyed cloth and silver trim of his tailored Rhynnian doublet.

“I should have known he would misplace this,” he said as he stood back up, brandishing the grubby paper in the orc’s face. “I told you to be careful!”

The orc remained impassive, gazing stoically back at Logan.

He turned to Kloin.

“My pass, if you wish to see it, though it seems to be somewhat illegible now, I’m afraid. I’ll have to procure a new one from the town watchmaster.”

He made a show of the mud-smearred paper, letting the men-at-arms wonder whether he’d seen Kloin throw the pass in the dirt earlier. That seemed to do it. Kloin nodded.

“My apologies, sir. We didn’t realize he was your strong-arm. We thought he was another vagabond looking to cause trouble. We’ve had too many of those here lately.”

“An entirely understandable mistake,” Logan said brusquely. “My thanks for finding him for me, captain.”

As he spoke he made brief eye contact with the orc, before remounting Ishbel and taking back her reins. He snapped his fingers, summoning the orc from the midst of the men-at-arms.

“Come, Kruk! We’ve wasted enough time as it is. If I am late for my appointment with the master of the roc hatcheries, you will be sharing the horse’s feed again for the rest of the week!”

After a moment’s hesitation, the orc fell in alongside Ishbel. Logan fished in the heavy-looking purse hanging from his saddle’s pommel and tossed a silver crown towards Kloin, which the captain caught deftly.

“A token of my thanks, for your assistance,” Logan said, touching his spurs to his mount’s flanks. “Rest assured I shall put in a good word with the baroness when I next sup with her.”

He’d made it a good ten paces, the orc still sticking by his side, before Kloin answered.

“Sir?”

Logan fought the urge to dig his spurs in, wondering if he'd overdone the act. He twisted in the saddle.

"Captain?"

"Be careful," Kloin said, examining the coin. "These are troubled times in Forthyn. Some of the good people of Highmont may not be quite as... accepting of outsiders as I am. Adventurers aren't welcome."

Logan managed to summon up a smile, silently damning the arrogant, unwelcoming bastard. "Don't worry, captain. Neither of us intend to outstay our welcome."

He said nothing to the orc until they had turned up the next street and then paused in the shadows of an alleyway. Logan dismounted, tied the uncomplaining Ishbel to a hitching post at the alley's entrance, and paused to check the street beyond was quiet before turning to the orc looming behind him.

"I believe this is yours," he said, fishing into his cloak's pocket. He drew out his travel pass, then the dirty one he'd taken off Kloin, and beneath it found the scrap of paper that had brought him halfway across Terrinoth. On it, written in a heavy but legible hand, was a short note. *Remember Sudreyr. The White Roc Tavern, Highmont.* Beneath it was a signature, an X bisected by a vertical line – the mark of a pathfinder of the Broken Plains. Logan held the paper out.

"You came," the orc grunted, looking down at the note he had written without taking it.

"And lucky you are, too," Logan said. "Fighting seven men-at-arms all at the same time is a bit much at your age, Durik."

The orc lunged. Before he could react, Logan found himself being crushed in a fearsome bearhug. He wheezed,

accidentally inhaling the orc's musky armpit, and gave the big pathfinder a pat on the back.

"Easy there, '*Kruk*,'" he managed. Durik broke the hug and held Logan at arms' length, golden eyes surveying him in the alleyway's fetid gloom.

"You have grown old, little rogue," he said. "And you are still a skinny wretch."

"That's skinny, *rich* wretch to you, pathfinder," Logan corrected, returning the unclaimed letter to his pocket. "I was quite happily enjoying my retirement before your little message. All this way just for insults. I see you haven't changed!"

Durik laughed at the faux outrage and gave Logan a meaty slap on the shoulder. "And you still talk too fast! It will be just like old times."

"That's what I'm worried about," Logan said. "Are you going to tell me just what 'it' is? Why did you bring me all the way out here? And how did you find me in the first place?"

"How did Pathfinder Durik, chief scout of the Guk'gor tribe and first master of the Wilderness, find you?" Durik echoed, bearing his tusks in a grin. Logan pouted.

"Then at least tell me I haven't traveled all this way just to swap old stories, O great pathfinder? Actually, no. Please tell me that's exactly what I've traveled all this way for, and that there won't be any sort of harebrained adventure that's finally going to finish us both off?"

"It's a job," Durik answered.

"I rather feared it would be."

"If you feared, you would not be here, little rogue."

"What does it involve?"

“I will show you. Get back on your horse.”

Logan huffed but did as the orc suggested, untying Ishbel as Durik fondled the horse’s muzzle and fed her an apple he produced from a tusker-pelt satchel. Ishbel crunched noisily as Logan clambered into the saddle.

“If we get accosted by any more pea-skull men-at-arms, let me do the talking,” he said. “How you even managed to gain entry to a town like this is beyond me.”

“The plains and forest and mountains are my domain,” Durik said, making way so Logan could walk Ishbel into the street. “But even in a town like this, it is easier to travel unseen than you might think. Make for the castle.”

“The castle,” Logan repeated in surprise. “You couldn’t even lay low in a tavern by the east gate without being hounded by a pack of guards. How far do you think you’ll get up the esplanade?”

“I have a letter,” Durik said.

“The one that oaf of a captain assumed was a forgery? The one that’s now crumpled and caked with mud? How did you get a travel pass within the walls anyway? The town watch doesn’t exactly seem welcoming to humans, let alone an old Broken Plain nomad with more scars than teeth.”

“I was summoned here,” the orc replied simply.

“You were summoned to Forthyn?” Logan asked, his voice colored by his surprise. They were climbing the street once more, passing a small yard where a set of wheelwright’s apprentices were hammering iron strakes. Logan had to force himself to keep his voice down.

“Who summoned you?” he demanded.

“Baroness Adelynn.”

“The ruler of one of the twelve baronies of Forthyn summoned you, a Broken Plains orc, express to her citadel?”

“She summoned a master tracker and a hero of the lost city of Sudanya,” Durik corrected.

“Well no wonder those men-at-arms thought the letter was a forgery. Kellos’s flames, what have I gotten myself into?”

Durik said nothing, walking alongside Ishbel. A sudden thought occurred to Logan, one that caused an unexpected mixture of both worry and hope.

“Is Dezra here?” he asked. “Or Ulma?”

“I sent the same letter to all of you,” Durik said. “The little alchemist responded first. She arrived here three days ago and left yesterday to Upper Forthyn. She is traveling ahead of us.”

“For the love of all the gods, what is there for us in Upper Forthyn? It’s the only place I can image that’s more inhospitable than here. And what about Dezra?”

“The sorceress has not responded,” Durik said. “I fear my letter did not find her.”

“Not such a mighty tracker after all, then?” Logan asked. Durik said nothing.

To the left of them the street had opened up into a square of leveled ground, set before the arching windows and impressive clock tower of what Logan took to be Highmont’s main guildhall. The space was occupied by the afternoon market, an artificial town in miniature – open-sided wagons and portable stalls formed little streets and alleyways, bedecked in pelts and rugs, dashed through with colorful silks and exotic embroidery. The air was pungent with the smells of fresh meat and fish, spices and manure, and filled with the chatter of hagglers, the cries of sellers and the lowing

of cattle from the livestock pens. It was, Logan considered, the perfect spectacle of a noisy, smelly, dirty provincial town.

They were forced to make way for a fresh herd of tuskers being driven down the street, the undersides of their shaggy red pelts matted with muck, their breath steaming in the cold sunlight. They were being chivvied along by a pair of northern clansmen, both youths, their foreheads marked with blue woad. They brandished sticks at the beasts and shouted at them in a language Logan didn't understand. He saw the trio of town guardsman standing by the entrance to the square eyeing the boys darkly, and was abruptly thankful of their presence – if Highmont's men-at-arms were considering their dislike for the northern clans they were at least too busy to be doing the same towards the likes of Durik. Logan set Ishbel back on the street after the herd had passed by, grimacing at how their hooves had churned the dirt and dung into a quagmire.

The upper slopes of the town lay ahead. Highmont sat upon a steep hill that gave the town its name – the high mont, or mound. The streets closest to the wall that circled the hill's base were, typically, the poorest. The higher a traveler climbed, the wealthier the neighborhoods he found himself in. Here, in the shadow of the pinnacle crag that bore the town's citadel, the houses were wider and more regular, with slate roofs and exterior wall carvings decorated with rocs and drakes or hunting hounds and deer. A few were even built from stone. The crowds were thinner, and Logan noted a more genteel style of dress – nothing to match his own quality, of course, but garb more befitting the denizens of one of the baronial capitals of Terrinoth. A few passers-

by even nodded to him, though they gave Durik a wide berth. For the most part, orcs in Lower Forthyn served as bodyguards, enforcers and hired muscle. That at least gave them a believable dynamic to work with. The last thing he needed was word getting out that Durik the Pathfinder had been spotted abroad in Forthyn with a handsome old human rogue.

Logan had almost started to relax, flashing a smile at two young women snatching wide-eyed glances at the orc. Then he spotted the castle esplanade ahead. It was a cleared, cobbled space leading up the citadel's crag, a mustering point or kill zone depending on the needs of the town's garrison. To the right of it stood a squat tower, the guardhouse and headquarters of the town watch. Ahead and above, the citadel itself loomed, sheer gray walls above a sheer gray rock face, flanked by circular towers and overhung with machicolations and wooden hoardings. The heraldic pennants of Highmont, Forthyn and the town's guilds and burgesses fluttered from its ramparts, while a silk banner bearing the personal arms of Baroness Adelynn blazed in the autumnal sunlight above the keep that crowned the crag. The gatehouse at the end of the esplanade had its drawbridge lowered over a sheer chasm carved into the approaching slope, and its portcullis was raised. There were, however, rather a lot of men-at-arms and watchmen between them and the open gateway. Logan gulped.

"My travel pass doesn't extend to the damned citadel," he muttered to Durik. "How are we supposed to get in there with only your ruined piece of paper?"

"I thought you would talk us in," Durik said, as though it

was the most obvious thing in the world.

“For the love of Fortuna,” Logan snapped. “You’re the one who received a personal summons from the baroness, not me! I’m just a very wealthy, very retired gentleman of fortune. I don’t even know what I’m doing here ... Ah, captain!”

The last words were uttered to a man-at-arms who had just stepped out of the guardhouse as they passed by. It was Kloin. He was wearing a smile that looked decidedly unfriendly.

“Well met again, Lord Durik,” he said, falling in alongside as they carried on up the esplanade. “It is Durik, is it not? That’s the name I seem to recall from your pass. You said you gave it to the orc, but it does belong to you, doesn’t it? That’s what you said?”

The captain carried on before Logan could conjure a response, his arrogant tone forcing the rogue to wrestle with the urge to lash out at him. “Funny name though, if you don’t mind me saying, sir. Sounds a little bit ... orcish to me. If you don’t mind me saying.”

Logan tried to mask his fear with a glare, fishing in his cloak pocket for the pass, pretending to fumble it while he made sure the dirt had fully obscured Durik’s name. He’d been regretting traveling under a false identity since reaching Highmont – several rather rampant parties of debt collectors on the road east had made the ruse a necessity. Now it had become over-complicated.

“It’s Dur-Roc, captain,” he said imperiously. “You should remember a name like that. My mother is second cousin to your baroness. Not that you’d be able to read the name now, thanks to your earlier clumsiness.”

He waved the ruined paper in Kloin's face. The captain was still smiling.

"My mistake, sir. It's strange though. Downright unusual. I got back to the wardroom just a few moments ago. It just so happened that the last shift from the town gate had also recently returned. A few of the lads said there was a gentleman who'd just arrived at the town, a curious sort of fellow. His pass said his name was Gelbin. Not from around here either. West Terrinoth type. Wealthy, but not born to it, apparently. A bit vulgar, you know the sort. Almost rogue-like. Come to think of it, the description sounded a lot like you, sir."

The drawbridge was barely a dozen paces away, the portcullis-fanged maw of the gatehouse over it. Kloin put his hand on Ishbel's bridle, bringing her to a stop. A trio of men-at-arms, heavily armored in plate mail and carrying maces, began to approach from the gate's archway.

"This is an outrage," Logan began to say, deciding his only hope was to push the "furious nobleman" trick. Kloin spoke through him.

"I don't think your name is Durik," he said. "That may be your orc friend's name, but it's not yours. As a matter of fact, I don't think it's Gelbin either."

"Trouble, captain?" one of the armored men-at-arms asked as he approached. Kloin's smile broadened and he held Logan's gaze as he answered.

"I hope so."

"Listen, captain," Logan said, dropping the act and leaning over in his saddle, almost conspiratorial. He lowered his voice. "You're on the brink of making a very unfortunate mistake."

Unfortunate for you, that is. Not me. Let us pass and we'll forget both this little incident and the one back down in the town."

"I like being intimidated even less than I like being tricked," Kloin replied, his smile disappearing like a spring frost. "I don't know who you are, or what you hope to achieve by talking your way into the citadel, but I fully intend to find out. Probably as slowly and as painfully as possible."

He turned to the men-at-arms who had approached and pointed at Logan.

"Seize them both!"

Logan's hand dropped to the hilt of his sword, and Durik made to draw his dagger, tusks bared. That was as far as anyone got before an angry shout cut the air.

"Kloin!"

Logan saw the captain close his eyes in a look of pure frustration, struggling to contain his own relief as the man turned towards the citadel's open gate. There, flanked by several more men-at-arms, stood an aged woman. She was tall and gaunt, draped in the furs of a thick tusker pelt, the garment drawn over what looked like several layers of thin, gossamer silk. Her hair was silver-gray like her clothing, and she wore it long, hanging down almost to her waist. Her features were severe, haughty, with an air of nobility. Logan suspected that in her youth she had been both very beautiful and very used to having her every word obeyed. He had no doubt that the latter was still the case.

"What are you doing, Captain Kloin?" she demanded in a firm voice, striding out from the gatehouse's shadow and across the drawbridge.

“Lady Damhán!” Kloin exclaimed, forcing a smile. “I thought you were attending the noon guild council?”

“You make it sound as though you didn’t expect to see me, Kloin,” the woman said. “Or that you wish you hadn’t. Why have you waylaid the baroness’s guests?”

“I didn’t realize they were the baroness’s guests,” Kloin said, his expression closing up. It was clear where this was going. Logan couldn’t quite keep the smile off his face.

“Did you not show him the pass I gave you?” the woman demanded of Durik. She had reached them across the drawbridge, and, despite her apparent frailty, looked the orc in the eye as she spoke. She was almost as tall as he was.

“The captain struggled to believe we are who we say we are,” Logan said, glancing sideways at the helpless Kloin. The woman turned her gaze on him, and it was all he could do to hold it.

“It is difficult to judge just how great a transgression that is, given that I don’t know who you are myself,” she said. “Though the evidence points towards Logan Lashley, former rogue, now master of Sixspan Hall. Am I correct?”

“At your service, my lady,” Logan responded, inclining his head while wondering just what had given him away. He needed to have a word with Durik about sharing his identity too readily with his employers. The last thing he needed was one of those damned debt collectors picking up his trail again.

“My name is Lady Damhán,” the woman said. “And if you are quite done being harassed by the captain here, we have a council meeting to interrupt.”

Without another word, Damhán turned and strode back across the drawbridge. Logan glanced at Durik, who shrugged.

“Logan Lashley,” Kloin said, his voice incredulous. “The Logan Lashley of Sixspan Hall? One of the Borderland Four?”

“If you want to hear some of my adventure stories, captain, you now know where to find me,” Logan said, patting Kloin on the helmet before spurring Ishbel forward across the drawbridge. Durik followed him.

“I’ll see you again, Logan,” Kloin called out after him, his voice dark. Logan didn’t turn, but made an obscene gesture over his shoulder. The gatehouse’s shadows swallowed him up.

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