



THE LIONESS

NANCY VARIAN BERBERICK





CHAPTER

1

Sir Chance Garoll looked ahead at his fellow Knights, five in all, and he the sixth. He looked behind him and sighted down the wide road, flattened earth, dun and sun dappled, straight as a shaft through the woodland. The overarching trees gave him the uncomfortable feeling of riding through a tunnel, one closing behind, opening ahead.

One of his fellows hawked and spat then looked over his shoulder at Chance. "Headsman," he called, "keep up!"

Headsman. The others laughed, one pulled hard on the reins, making his broad-shouldered mount snort and curvet. "What's the count, Chance?"

Sir Chance—Headsman Chance—hefted the sack hung from his saddle's pommel. Blood dripped, staining the ground. When he closed his eyes, Chance could see the killing ground, the sunny green swale in the forest where he and his companions had fallen upon a den of elf highwaymen. The Knights had run through the hapless robbers like death's own horsemen, swords flashing in whistling descent to swipe off heads.

Sometimes, Chance thought as he recalled the slaughter,

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the death-scream had howled out of a rolling head's gaping mouth.

"A dozen," he said, settling the sack again. His tall mount's brown shoulder was black with blood. Blood etched a thin trail down the steed's foreleg. Trained to battle, inured to the scent of death, the great beast flung up his head at the thick, coppery scent, an eager light in his eyes.

Headsman, they had named him. He grinned. Not a bad name. He had not taken all the heads, but he'd taken most of them and collected them all. The orders from Lord Thagol had come to him directly; he considered it his duty to bring back the trophies. Chance shuddered, recalling how the brief moments in the Skull Knight's presence had seemed like hours. He'd have to spend time with Lord Thagol again, and here, far away from the Knight, he dared hope and wish it wouldn't be a long time.

Iron-shod hoofs fell heavily on the road. One of the Knights lifted his helm from his head and hung it on his saddle. The other five had a farther road to take than Sir Chance. With the Headsman, they would go down to Qualinost, then they would leave him and ride on to Miranost near the border between Qualinesti and the free land of Abanasinia.

Though the dragon Beryl held the elf kingdom in thrall, there were still ways past the borders of Qualinesti. The main roads had long been warded by Dark Knights who kept the elves in and intruders from any of the Free Realms out. Traders with the proper passes could cross the checkpoints, for these were a source of Qualinesti's wealth and so a resource for the greedy dragon who had her tribute from every steel coin earned. Other ways in and out of the elf land existed, all those that existed before the Dragon Purge and the coming of the great Green, Beryllintranox.

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Headsman Chance lifted in the stirrups, searching high ahead. He caught sight of a shimmer through the trees but decided that must be a glimpse of wishful thinking, for they were yet a three hour ride from the capital of the elf kingdom. No shining tower could be seen yet. He settled to ride, moving in unconscious rhythm with his mount's gait. It was a time before he noticed that in the wake of the passage of the dark Knights, silence flowed.

At the highest point of noon, no birds sang, squirrels did not dart and scold, rabbits did not leap aside and freeze in the bracken. In the sky, far above the arching green canopy of trees, hawks hung, wondering. Six humans armored in ebony steel rode through the Qualinesti Forest, Knights of an order once dedicated to a dark goddess now departed, warriors now in the pay of a dragon just as ruthless. Mail chiming, bridles and bits jingling, the six followed the south-running arm of the White-Rage River.

Though he had been posted to Qualinesti for five years now, Sir Chance had never experienced a silence on these roads like this today. A following silence, as though something he did not see—could never see—came after.

"Anyone hear that?" he said.

The tallest of his companions turned, Grig Gal from out of Neraka itself where lived great garrisons of Dark Knights, ogres, and fierce draconians. Grig sweated in his mail and breastplate, and his thick black gloves hung from his belt.

"Hear what?" he asked, and his voice held an edge like a blade's. Grig didn't like the forest, and he didn't like elves.

"The quiet," Chance answered, feeling foolish as soon as he did. How do you hear quiet?

Grig was not much of a wordsmith himself, not one to ponder the niceties of phrasing or meaning. "I don't hear nothing," he grunted.

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The Knights now rode shoulder to shoulder, six in three pairs. Twice on the way, elf farmers with laden carts had to pull off the road. Once a load of fat grain sacks spilled and split, pouring golden wheat into ditches.

The elves cursed. Grig casually kicked one so hard his jaw shattered on the Knight's steel-toed boot. The elf had a voice like a banshee woman. His scream turned to high keening. To quiet the noise, Grig lopped off the unlucky one's head.

Chance watched it fall, and yes, he heard the wailing issue from the dead one's shattered jaw before the head finished rolling. The dead elf's fellows took to their heels, leaving spilled grain, harnessed horses, and the corpse. As blood mixed with the grain, the following silence swallowed the sounds of anger and pain. The Knights resumed their travels.

After a time, Chance looked back again, seeing only the shade and dappling sun. They rode now like thunder along roads where the greenwood gave ground to farm fields and orchards. Cows and goats grazed on the aftermath of a harvest, pigs ran at the edges of the wood in search of early fallen nuts and apples blown green from the last windy night. Farmers and their strong sons plowed on this last day of summer, preparing for the planting of winter crops. In the dooryards their wives and daughters shooed chickens into the coops. All of these, men and maids, heard the coming of the Knights as they would the coming of a storm. None, by glance or word, gave the dragon's Knights further reason to turn aside and bring them grief, not even the young elves who, by the look of them, would rather have ignored a father's command and pitched stones at the dark troop riding by.

The Knights desired no delay now. Past farms Chance and his companions rode, past a small village where it seemed word of their coming had flown ahead. Though the

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day was fine, no loungers were found in the yard of the tavern, no one walked on the streets, and in the stable yard not a horse was to be seen. They rode in silence until they came to the place where the forest fell utterly away before the deep gorge that surrounded the elven capital. Here, since ancient times, was the city's first line of defense, a gorge no mounted man could cross, one that men on foot would be mad to try. Two bridges spanned this gorge, and these were of fast burning wood. Elves had, in ancient times, died defending that bridge, had a time or two had reason to burn it and deny the crossing to foes.

Sir Chance wiped sweat from his face and thought the elves had done a good work when they'd planned that defense. Against all but a dragon, it would hold.

"Ay!" Sir Chance shouted. "On Lord Thagol's service! Let me in, and let my companions by!"

The guard at the wooden bridge called, "Say who you are!"

Chance shrugged and lifted the bloody sack. "You reckon you know who I am now?"

The guard laughed darkly. "Sir Chance, welcome!"

For form, the others gave their names. Sir Grig Gal, Sir Angan Heran, Sir Welane of the Hills of Blood, Sir Dern of Dimmin, and Sir Faelt Lagar. "On to the eastern border," Grig snarled. Before the guard could yea him or nay him, he snapped a curt order to his men, and the troop of them wheeled away from the gorge, leaving Sir Chance, thunder riding north.

Chance spurred his horse forward. Halfway across the wooden bridge, he pulled to a stop and looked back over his shoulder. Beyond the gorge, beyond the clearing, the forest shimmered, shifting before his eyes.

A heat mirage, he thought, wiping sweat again.

Chill touched him, turning sweat cold between his shoulders. Why did only the trees shimmer, the branches

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waver as though he were drink-addled and his eyes unable to hold sight steady? Chance felt suddenly that eyes peered at him from the shadowy depths of the Qualinesti Forest, malevolent watchers.

“What?” said the guard, looking where Chance did.

He looked, but plainly he did not see.

Chance shook his head. “Nothing. Just the heat.”

Uneasiness followed Chance across the bridge and along the road as the four silver bridges spanning the city came into sight, the golden towers of Qualinost rising above in the late sunlight. In their bloody sack, the heads of thirteen elves, one bleeding fresher than its fellows, bounced against the horse’s broad shoulder. Passing beneath the east-facing span of Qualinost’s shining bridge, Sir Chance Garoll, Chance Headsman, looked up to the parapet running from watchtower to watchtower. North, south, and west, those parapets ran in clean, unbroken lines. This eastern one, though, bristled like a hound with its hackles up. Spears thrust up from the rampart, two dozen of them evenly spaced. Gleaming points winked at the sky. Here would rest the remains of one farmer and a dozen elf robbers killed like the worst criminals, beheaded with axe and sword. They were not more than luckless members of the scattered bands of ruffians and outlaws who had spent the summer harassing the green dragon’s Knights. Chance and his fellows had harvested these heads from as far south as Ahlanost near the border between the elf kingdom and Thorbardin of the dwarves. The orders to rout and kill these marauders came from Lord Eamutt Thagol, himself commissioned by the great Marshal Medan, the dragon’s own overlord and general, whose job it was to keep order in the elf kingdom.

A last chance for Lord Thagol, Chance thought grimly, this post to Qualinost. No one ever said it out loud, but Knights did whisper that Thagol had fallen afoul of his

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sponsoring lords in Neraka, had become a liability. It was Medan's faith in the man that kept Thagol from a worse posting than this one. They had once served together in the Chaos War, brothers in arms before the gods left Kryn and the world fell to the Dragon Purge.

It might be, said rumor, that Medan had his old friend posted to Qualinost, this relatively quiet place, because he'd seen or sensed the first shiverings of madness threatening the Skull Knight and wanted to get him out of the way of those who would judge him unfit to serve. Too long inside the minds of others, it was said of Eamutt Thagol, or it might be the Skull Knight had looked into the wrong skull, there in Neraka where the lord Knights of the order ruled.

When Marshall Medan heard a whisper or two in the forest, a tale in a tavern, a song newly minted about outlaw-heroes, he understood that this tinder needed only a spark for rebellion to flare, and only a man like Lord Thagol could curb such a rebellion.

The eastern bridge of Qualinost sprouted heads. Many more heads would join them as the robberies and outlawry continued. They were a stubborn and subtle people, the elves of Qualinesti, thought Headsman Chance.

Suddenly his belly clenched; his blood ran chill. He forced himself to think of something else. From Sir Eamutt Thagol few things remained long secret. Thagol Dream-walker, some named him, and such thoughts as those Chance had just entertained might well look like doubt, or worse, like insubordination. Such thoughts as these were best not framed in words, even inside the borders of his own skull.