



ILLUSTRATION BY JASON EDWARDS

THE LOVERS OF ESSAIL PASS

By JEREMY PAK NELSON

LIFE as a working mercenary seemed almost easy in the last years of Ampleur's Folly. Most of the countryside had been pacified, and our company worked exclusively for the loyalist nobility of the kingdom. We were named the Two-Faced Foxes, then, the captain's attempt to subvert our profession's reputation with irony. "We're no more trusted than a discount brothel, may as well be honest about it." So we earned our reputation as the most honest double-crossers in the business.

We gathered around our campfires the night before we set out. Because we were so honest, we weren't working alone. We wouldn't be collaborating with another company, either, but with Esme, the Demon of Essail Pass.

"Is she a real demon? Or a god? Do gods work as mercenaries?" Glen asked. He was the company cook's boy, thirteen but already growing strong for his age. Captain would test him in a fight soon enough.

"She's not one of the half-gods who still walk, boy. Esme's as human and as mercenary as we are." Gum, a company sergeant, never lacked for patience, especially if it involved speaking. We'd joke that he talked most of his teeth right out of his mouth. "But the divine aren't interested in mortal business, at least not the business we see as important."

"And when they do involve themselves, it's for their own interest," I added. "I knew someone from my village who was granted a boon. His family was hungry, and they petitioned our forest guardian for aid. Each one of them lost all desire for food. Still had to eat, mind you. But they looked like twigs before long. Became damned hard to stay in the same room as them."

Glen's wide eyes caught the firelight like mirrors. Gum grinned, showing off the dozen lonely teeth he had left. "But they weren't hungry anymore, see? That's what happens when a god takes a liking to you." Glen's eyes only grew bigger as Esme joined us at the fire.

"He's right. Stay away from the gods if you can." Her leather armor was loosely tied, and from here I saw that it was studded with exquisite sculptures just as fine as a nobleman's silver. A demon's face, a pair of crossed swords, a flag in the wind. Each a victory commemorated in bardsong. Better than a gilt crossguard for showing her success in our bloody profession. More practical, too. Reputation is a fickle thing. The more stories you hear, the harder it is to give them credence. Easier to scoff at the tale of how the Demon of Essail Pass held and turned a thousand spearmen than to think that there were soldiers out there that much better than you could ever be.

As one of the company's singers, my duties — aside from fighting — were to lay down the verses for our fallen. And, when nights grew long, to help pass the time with ballads and lyrics. I knew a few of her lines and thought to welcome her to the fire with them.

*"Her courage drunk from battle's bloody fount,
Her valor true before hungering steel,
God-blessed in comrades' sight, damned by foes' eye,
A Demon guards Essail Pass, flee or kneel."*

"Your voice is decent enough," she said, in a way that left no doubt that there would be no more verses sung.

"I like the refrain best. There was something more about the gods in the song, wasn't there?" Glen said.

"The gods end up in every song, it seems, if you give the bards time enough," Esme said, and left our fire.

When she was far out of earshot, Gum met my eyes. "The captain thinks legends are good for business," he said. "Planning for when the war ends."

"And you know what they say about plans."

"Everyone's got one until an arrow finds their eye," Glen said, and took our pots away to be scoured.

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WE set out as soon as there was enough light to see by. Over the last week we'd rafted alongside the Ullen's stony banks to make speed towards the enemy camp. Our company was exposed, but we'd been given word that limited patrols in the region moved to cover the woods between the camp and the bulk of the King's finest. There was always the chance that the informant was lying, or incompetent — and that's why you send in mercenaries. The final twelve miles were covered by forested hills. Our work would begin at all-dark.

Was I suspicious by nature? I'd been a thief before the Foxes bought me from the dungeons. Not a common cut purse, but one who'd achieved a bit of notoriety, I'd venture to say. Maybe too much so. And though nearly twenty years had gone by, it's hard to leave one's trade behind. And so I kept an eye on our new companions. Despite their reputation, Esme's squad appeared to number only three. The Demon herself, and two younger squires that could have been brother and sister with their matching black hair and green eyes. Caul was lanky, and would fill out with a few more years, but by the rabbits he'd gathered yesterday already

excellent at his bow work. Silver was a spellscribe, and no doubt skilled to be working so young. They'd provide good cover for a full team of swords and spears and be protected by them in turn. But in a team of three, how would the Demon keep the enemy from going past her if they were outnumbered? Perhaps they often worked with others and kept the glory to themselves.

Once we crested the hillside the camp below could be seen. The enemy had fortified their grounds where the trees met the plain. They had the King's Second and Fifth's companies on their minds, and the grasslands would make an army's approach impossible to miss. There was no doubt where our targets were located. The stables stood over the campground, a rough construction of trimmed logs and canvas twice the size of a village hall.

We'd been sent not to kill a man, or a handful of men, but to tear from the Rosebands their most potent weapon in the war. They alone had, with alchemy and sorcery, kept alive and bred the kingdom's bestial thricemen. And any battle with the magic-infused walking walls was a difficult one. The weapons had been gathered here, all but one or two of the traitorous Duke's personal guard, ready to be deployed against the king's forces. For a calf's weight in gold, we were to ensure that would not come to pass.

Three hours until sundown. Two of our best scouts, Slen and Eben, left to mark the final approach. The rest of the Foxes readied for the evening's work. I saw to my own swords, knives, and kit. Caltrops, steel wire, rope, and the poisons we'd been given in the form of glass vials wrapped in sheepskin. Each piece of equipment muffled to keep me quiet in the night. It was what all Foxes were taught to do.

My preparations did not take long. One benefit of age and experience, I supposed. I went around the camp in case anyone else needed a hand. The newest recruits had stayed at Olmont, so there was none of the wild-eyed excitement — or fear — you'd find in the freshest fighters. Instead, the camp was hushed, not from apprehension but anticipation. Some made jokes to muted laughter. Others sat silent, eyes out over the trees, out towards the enemy. I wondered about our new allies' rituals.

The Demon sat on a crag, further uphill. Her leathers would keep her from being spotted. I grimaced, indignant on behalf of our scouts. Did she think we weren't up to the job, to be up here playing lookout? I moved to make the climb up — I was getting old, but I could still manage thirty feet of steep hillside with trees and roots for handholds. Then I saw she wasn't alone.

A man sat beside her. He was dressed in armor similar to hers, with skin a shade darker than the ochre of the earth behind him. Even from this distance I could see the striking color of his eyes. They were almost white. His squared, sculptural features made him handsome despite the scars that carelessly marked his jaw and scalp. A face one might imagine when hearing of an ice-hearted demon's exploits. Trouble was, I'd never seen the man before. Was he a squad member of Esme's

I hadn't met yet? Or was she playing viper, meeting rebels before our assault? But that was foolish, they didn't have the money to make betrayal worthwhile. And if she were motivated by a faith in their cause ... then she'd be a shame upon our profession.

The man with the icy eyes lifted a hand, and brought Esme close for a kiss. I'm sure I looked like a complete fool with my mouth open. Turning down gold for love was, perhaps, less abhorrent than for politics.

The two weren't slowing down. I caught a few words on the wind, he said something about the "finest establishments." Planning their elopement, no doubt. When I saw her hand reach for the man's laces I looked away. I'd have a moment to better position myself while they were distracted — not to find a better vantage point, no, but to cover his escape. But as soon as I stepped away from the tree, I heard a pebble skip down the slope. A hand spun me around. The Demon of Essail Pass stood in front of me, unflustered.

I had difficulty maintaining my composure.

"Sir," I said.

"Do the Two-Faced Foxes spy on all their guests?" Her words weren't threatening, but her attention was entirely on me, and that in itself felt like a threat. If she decided I'd seen too much, would I have time to call for help? I didn't know. But she couldn't be sure I was alone.

"Who were you speaking to?"

Her face could have been cast from bronze. Yet my throat constricted from — could it be fear? Danger emanated from her. She had the stillness of a lion eyeing prey.

"He's my husband," she said. "A part of my team." Her voice was even as her face was expressionless. If she lied she did it better than any Ulan mountain trader.

"Haven't met him. Too busy to make introductions?"

"Speak to your captain. You'll see us in the fight. We'll do our part." She turned her back on me and walked towards camp. It grated that she didn't see me as a threat. Then again, I was a simple soldier who sang, not a legend of the songs.

Once she was gone I climbed the slope. It might have been for the best that I never had the chance to join her on the ledge. My breath came rougher than it should. From here, where the trees were sparser, the valley spread before me, forest blending into grasslands, and on the horizon were the white peaks of the Eastern Kingdoms. The enemy camp had the steady rhythms of an army at rest — groups of men, minute from this distance, carried logs for fortifications. A good commander makes the most of his surroundings. He must have planned to cut trees to prepare for the king's armies.

It was easy to see where fresh dirt had been scraped off from where Esme and her ostensible husband had been. She would have climbed down, fast, to intercept me. If he didn't join her, he must have gone off in another direction. But I saw no trail.

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