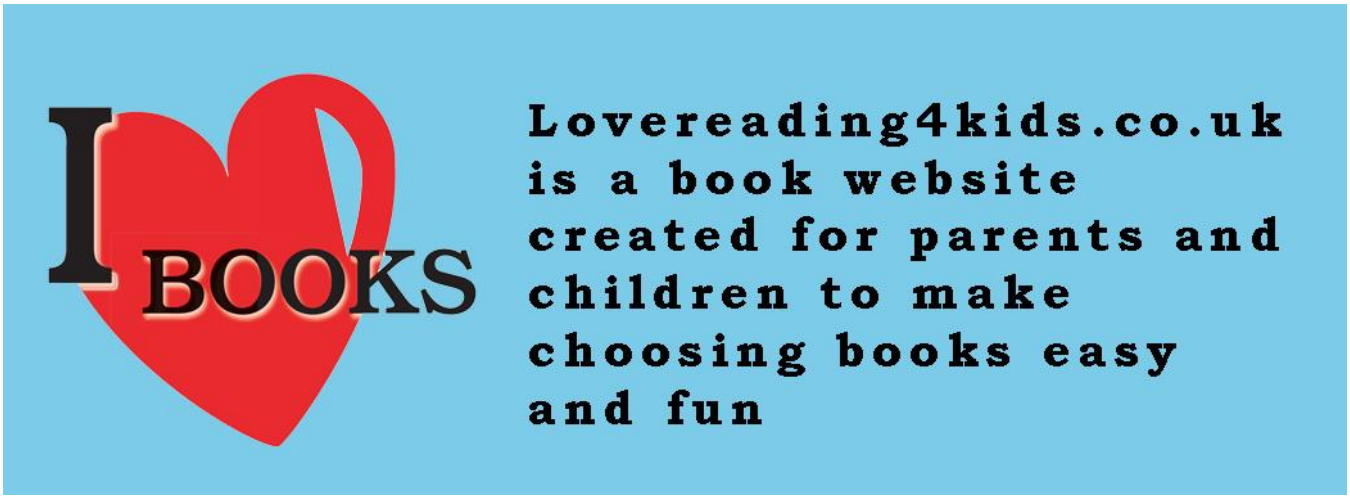



Opening extract from

# Free Lance and the Lake of Skulls

Written by

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This book has dyslexia-friendly features

# 1

"Oy, you!"

I looked up. I was in this flyblown, two-bit tavern, drinking watered-down ale. All of a sudden a heavy great tankard came whistling towards me. I ducked.

Ale slopped all down my front. I cursed under my breath and looked round to see the tankard slam into the face of the little, timid-looking drinker next to me. It struck his jaw with a sound like a hammer splintering wood.

With a low groan he slumped to the floor at my feet. His drink joined the ale down my front. It was spiced mead, if the sickly smell

was anything to go by. I was a mess. But not as much of a mess as the little fellow.

Two teeth lay on the floor in front of him. A trickle of blood oozed out over the sawdust.



Behind me, a loud, beast-like roar went up. I turned to see a great hulk of a man lumbering from leg to leg in a slow battle-jig. He was all hairy jowls and heaving gut and I recognised him at once.

His fists were clenched. His bloodshot eyes were wild.

"Come on, if you think you're hard enough!" he bellowed.

'Here we go again!' I thought. 'Why do I always seem to end up in this type of place? You'd think I'd have learned by now. All I wanted was a quiet drink. Is that too much to ask? Is it?'

Given the day I'd had so far, maybe it was ...

*

I'd woken that morning, bitten to blazes. The night before, Jed and I had taken shelter

from a storm in a shabby stable. In the early morning light I saw that the whole place was jumping.

Of course, *Jed* was all right. The fleas hadn't touched him. They were too busy gorging on yours truly. As I scratched at the bites, Jed neighed. I could have sworn he was laughing.

I packed up, saddled up and crept out of there, as quiet as a princess breaking wind. I was far out in the back of beyond, where it didn't pay to draw attention to yourself.

Normally, I stick to the castle tournaments, but after the season I'd just had I was prepared to do anything. Exhibition matches, sword displays, even a joust on a village green. I wasn't proud.

I'd knocked over my fair share of big-time knights at the beginning of the year, but then a churned-up field and a second-rate lance

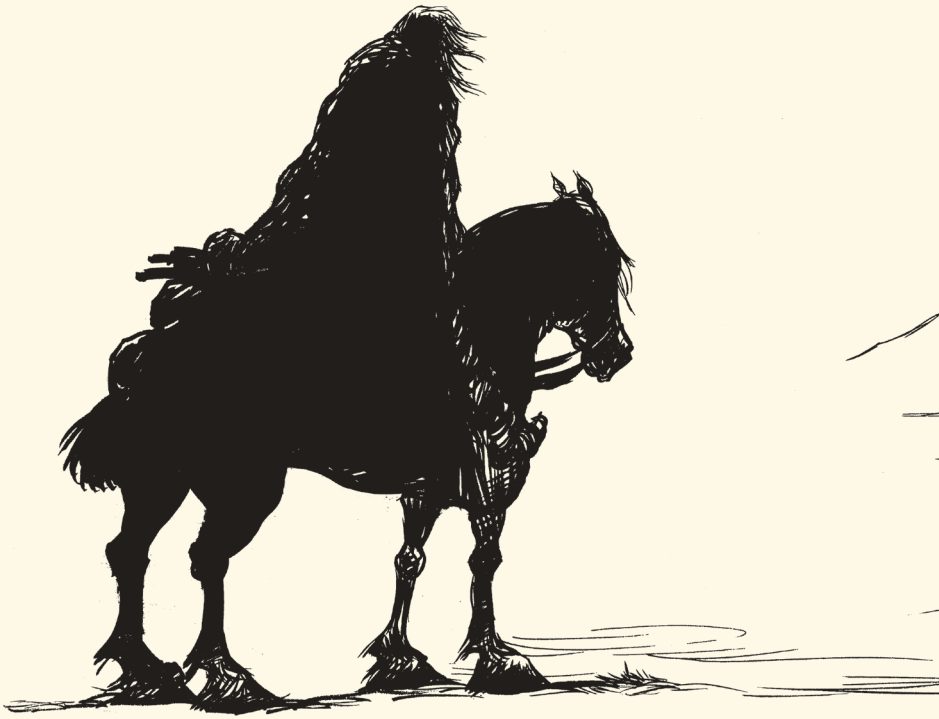
had spelled disaster. The lance shattered in my hand and I went down. I was laid up for a month – and my shoulder still hurt when it was cold ...

I'd ended up in the Badlands. Out here every group of run-down hovels boasted a robber baron, and the contests were – how shall I say? – less refined.

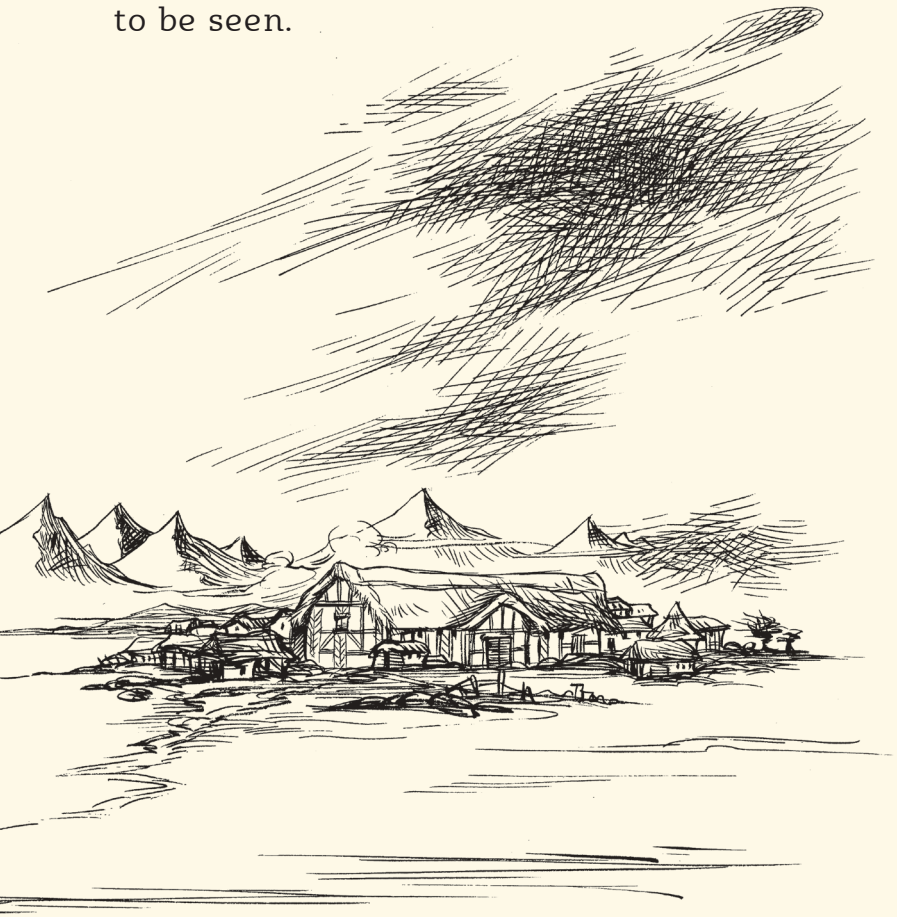


It was another beautiful Badlands day. Murky, grey, and so cold it felt like someone jabbing needles into your skin. The sky was the colour of stale gruel, and by late morning an icy drizzle had begun to fall. I felt the old twinge in my shoulder.

I'd heard talk of a contest in a village up ahead, near a mountain lake, and I fancied Jed and my chances against some yokel on a donkey.



Sure enough, I found it on the other side of a scrubby thorn wood. The village was a miserable collection of ramshackle dwellings clustered round one of those low, mud-brick halls that pass for manor houses in these parts. Jed and I went down the muddy main street. There wasn't a villager to be seen.



Jed whinnied and reared up, and his nostrils quivered. I steadied him and told him it was all right – but he had a point. The place stank. The kind of smell that clings to you like a landlady on pay day. But then, that's village life for you – nothing but cabbage water and open sewers. Give me a life on the road any day.

