

## *A Dove Before Dawn*

The vultures circling the sky instantly told the rider something had gone terribly wrong. He pulled his aging mare to a halt and gazed at the foul beasts above, filtering the evening sun with their black squalor. There were many; almost two dozen. The man scowled and urged his mount ahead, gingerly leading it past the boughs of adjacent trees and into the clearing beyond. At his arrival, a handful of vultures took to the air, squawking angrily at his intrusion.

A gruesome scene, but the rider showed no surprise. He had seen it before. The massacre of these wagons was no different than others he'd come across recently. Taking a sip from his waterskin, he cursed the dead travelers for their stupidity. Passing caravans were not safe on the Border Road, and that fact had become increasingly more evident in the past few months. The narrow dirt pass weaved directly between two intense rivaling kingdoms, and anyone upon it was considered fair game. Roradith, the kingdom to the east, demonstrated an aggressive stance, and used their black-walled border fortress, Erdoth, as a vessel to raid every convoy which came along, regardless of its destination. A harsh cruelty of war, though not one of necessity.

Directing his mount past the loose debris, the rider absorbed every detail. Both wagons had been damaged and overturned, and all goods of value stolen. Three caravan guards lay in awkward angles over the dark stained dirt, their pathetic armor shredded and torn. A young man in his teens leaned against a wagon, his body pierced with arrows. Near him rested an older man, the boy's father perhaps, with a massive hole in his back, the edges crusted thick with dried blood. Various other bodies lay strewn about the area as well. One woman lay motionless on her back, her lifeless eyes gazing upwards to the sky. The rider didn't want to dwell on what they had done to her.

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Warily, the man inspected the scene. Judging by the freshness of the corpses, this butchery happened no more than a day ago, yet he had no need to feel anxious or fearful. The men who'd done this heinous act were long gone, and though most items of worth had departed with them, the rider sought anything salvageable.

After several minutes, his patience proved rewarding. A rusted pickaxe lay harmless in the dirt, its handle unbroken. He gazed at the tool from his mount and gave the faintest smirk. With a little work he could make the blade good as new.

Leaping off his mare, he knelt down and grasped the pickaxe, turning it over in his hands. Satisfied, he hooked the object to his belt and had nearly returned to his horse when something caught his eye. An overturned crate, half-hidden amid the wreckage, had a peculiar, snake-like object coming from beneath it. Squinting against the low-hanging sun, he moved carefully toward the modest looking container. Drawing near, he realized it was a leg, small and motionless. A hint of sorrow took him. Even the children are not spared, he reflected with a dour shake of his head.

Lifting the crate from the lifeless body, he was momentarily taken aback. A small girl, no more than six winters, lay on her stomach, her tresses matted across her face. But what struck the man was the color of her hair. The chin-length locks were *white!* Not a light blonde, but sheer white, like the wool of sheep. The man had never seen anything like it, and strangely, her loss saddened him greater. He wondered how much brutality the young girl suffered before her death. Gritting his teeth, he forced the mournful thought from his mind, yet as he continued to gaze upon the small body, something else occurred to him.

*Where were her wounds?*

The child's purple gown was muddy and stained, but it shown no evidence of harm, nor did the body it covered. The man knelt and gently turned the girl over. Her front side appeared the same, utterly untouched. Quickly, he thrust two fingers against the side of her neck, feeling for a pulse. Gods, she was alive! How had they missed her? The Roradith warriors never left survivors.

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Had she fainted and then the crate fallen atop her, hiding her from view? Even so, the black army was always thorough and systematic in their destruction. It seemed impossible that a small girl could have escaped.

The man drew away the tangled ivory hair that covered her face. Innocent features gripped him, her closed eyelids giving the girl a calm, serene look. Still, something else dwelled within her; something the man couldn't place; yet it made her appear strong and defiant. He was immediately drawn to her.

Abruptly, the girl stirred and softly moaned, "Father?"

"Your father is dead, child." the man answered. But if she had heard him, she gave no response.

Placing his arms beneath her petite body, he hoisted the girl upon his shoulder and silently turned back toward his horse.

*Twenty years later*

"We are ready, Captain. The troop is eager to be off."

Amaria nodded. "Where is Royce?"

"On his way," the foot soldier stated, his spear at his side. "He should arrive shortly to see you."

"Very well. Get the men in formation. We depart as soon as I see Royce off."

The soldier bowed low. "Yes, Captain."

Amaria watched the lieutenant hurry away toward the soldiers awaiting him. Over the past day, she'd discovered she was just as eager to proceed as her men. For many years she had waited to undertake this particular march, and the sudden reality of it was difficult to fathom.

Glancing down at her platemail, the woman adjusted her pauldrons. The silver armor had been specifically fitted for her elegant, yet durable physique. She was beauty, grace, and power rolled into one; or at least, that was what her husband flattered her with at every opportunity. Hanging atop her platemail, from the front side of her shoulders down to her knees, a sturdy crimson cloth gently flapped, a magnificent looking white dove embroidered at the breast. Draped across her back was a flowing

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red mantle, also imprinted with the same exquisite dove symbol.

With a patient sigh, the woman took a moment to breathe the morning air. A soft mist hung languidly over the regiment of soldiers, bestowing them a sense of newness. The men had been awake for only an hour, but all were in high spirits, and hope laid firmly in their minds.

The sounds of hooves on cobble jerked her attention from the placidity of her surroundings. Two men, both atop strong russet geldings, approached her.

One of the men swung down from his horse and immediately greeted Amaria with a jovial grin. "Ah, there be my beautiful wife! It is a fine morning, is it not, milady."

Amaria couldn't help but smile. Royce had that affect on her. A tall, muscular rake with jet-black hair curled inward at the temples, his clean-shaven smile seemed ever present and there was nary a time his humor didn't sit upon the tip of his tongue. In sturdy leather garments, Royce ambled toward his wife and fell overdramatically to one knee.

"I am at your service, o' Knight of the Dove. Command me."

Amaria stifled a laugh. "Get up, Royce. Are you drunk?"

Royce stood at once, "Is that an invitation?"

Shaking her head, Amaria wiped a strand of ivory white hair from her face. "Hardly. How are your preparations?"

Royce gestured behind himself to the other man, still atop his mount. "As always, Jorg and I are always ready at a moments notice."

Amaria scrutinized Jorg with piercing emerald eyes. He was a thin, wiry fellow with a jagged scar over his left brow and a perpetual twist to his mouth. He'd aided Royce on several ventures previous, and had proven himself a capable and trusted companion. Still, Amaria felt uneasy, for she could never relax when Royce put himself in danger. Gazing at her husband, she pleaded, "Must you be the one to scout? Erdoth Fortress is a dangerous place."

Her husband could only nod, his expression a mixture of confidence and sympathy. He understood her concerns all too well, for he endured identical feelings each time she went to

battle. "That is why you send the best, milady."

Amaria nodded submissively. "Yes, I know. But promise me that I will see you at the encampment."

"I promise." Royce tenderly kissed her on the lips. "I am already looking forward to it." Swinging on his heel, he returned to his horse and motioned to Jorg. "Come my friend, we must be leaving." Turning back to his wife, he called, "I will see you at noon in two days, my sweet Amaria!" With those words, the two horses pounded off, leaving a pocket of dust and a wistful Amaria watching them until they disappeared.

Drawing her attention from her husband, she turned to the line of men awaiting her. One hundred and fifty soldiers, mostly footmen with a handful of elite on horses, awaited her. She ambled near the face of the procession, her visage grim and resolute. Whatever qualms the troop had over their superior officer being a woman had been quelled years ago. It was well understood that she could best three or four of them at a time if forced to. Indeed, right from the onset of her time in the military, eight years ago, her battle-prowess had been proven extraordinary. Some even whispered that she had magical talents; though no proof of such a claim existed. Her colorless hair had granted her the title of "Knight of the Dove," but many called her the "Dove of the Gods." It was an identity she accepted with no objection.

Taking a lead position before the regiment, she mounted her white stallion and motioned her lieutenants into action. The column of soldiers commenced a gradual march that would last for two days.

When the door banged, Meran nearly dropped his book in shock. There hadn't been a visitor at his cottage for over a year, and certainly not one past nightfall. Carefully placing the tome down upon the desk, he reached for his cane, and amid a chorus of grunts, pushed himself up from the chair. His joints ached with age, and his steps to the door were slow and deliberate. Draped from a clasp on the adjacent wall, a rusted sword waited for him. Snatching the weapon with his free hand, he examined

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the chain lock that would only allow the door to open a half-foot. After he insured it was properly fastened and felt content with his safety, he cracked the portal open.

“Meran, you old fool! Let me in!”

A wide smile crossed the old man’s face as he quickly undid the chain and threw open the door. Amaria, in full regalia, stepped into the entryway and embraced him warmly.

“Careful, child,” Meran grumbled within her strong grasp, “these bones are not as sturdy as they once were.” Following one final squeeze, Amaria released her grip and grinned devilishly. Meran, taking several large breaths, stepped back and looked her over, taking in every detail; her face, her hair, her armor. “So,” he muttered with feigned self-pity, “the old man gets a visit.”

Amaria laughed. “And why not? You saved my life once.”

“No, child. The gods saved your life. I merely found you.”

The woman shrugged. “Regardless, you are the reason I have become what I am.” In some small sense, her words spoke truth. As soon as Meran had discovered Amaria in that fateful clearing on the Border Pass twenty years earlier, he had fathered her. Not long after, he began to witness the girl’s extraordinary abilities, including a couple of phenomenons he could never hope to explain. When she turned sixteen, he made the arduous decision to part with his adopted daughter and take her to the city of Dhorn-Dyas where she could train to become part of the Illidor military. She still visited him on occasion, and sometimes Meran wondered if those brief visits were the only thing that kept him alive.

“You look as immaculate as ever, child.” The old man stated simply, gazing at her unblemished face.

“I wish I could say the same for you.” Amaria’s humor had left her voice, for Meran’s bearing no longer resembled the broad and vigorous man she recalled from her childhood, but rather that of a weak and wilted elder. His once thick hair was nothing more than thin silver wisps that fell to his shoulders, and countless wrinkles lined his face. “Father, you cannot live here any longer. Your body weakens. Even you must admit that. Let me bring you back to Dhorn-Dyas where someone can care for

you.”

Meran shook his head. “I have lived in this house for forty years. Age will not force me to leave. I shall die here happy and content.” The old man turned away and quickly changed the subject. “Are you thirsty? I have no ale, but there is fine ginger mead I can offer.”

Amaria declined with a wave of her hand while she found her way inside, taking a seat on a padded wooden divan. The interior of Meran’s home was dark, but warm and cozy. Only a single lighted candle atop the desk added to the light given by the fireplace. When the old man finished pouring himself a glass, he gingerly eased his way back into his rocker. The candle flickered next to him and cast a bizarre glimmer of shadow about the room.

“So,” Meran asked after a hearty gulp, “what brings you my way?”

“I have brought a contingent of men,” Amaria stated as she leaned back with arms folded. To Meran, her emerald eyes seemed to sparkle in the firelight. “Our campsite is but a half-hour southwest from here. We have come to conquer Erdoth Fortress.”

The comment caused Meran to raise an eyebrow. “Truly? How many men do you have?”

“One hundred and fifty.”

The old man nearly choked on his drink. “One hundred and fifty? Have you lost your mind? You will be routed!”

“A second regiment, with an additional four hundred men and siege equipment is to meet us in two days. They come from the northern road. Together, we will empty those black walls.”

Meran stroked his delicate, gray facial hair. A look of contemplation draped his features. Eventually he spoke, his voice soft and poignant. “And thus, the Knight of the Dove finally seeks her vengeance for a deed long past.” He sighed deeply. “The destruction of Erdoth will not bring back your family.”

The woman shot to her feet, her fists clenched. “Do not involve my family in this, Meran! It is a military operation. I have been given orders from Ser Darus himself to lead an army

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to overthrow Erdoth Fortress. It has been a thorn in the side of Illidor for years!”

“Really?” Meran lowered his cup, placing it next to his book. “I’ve not seen an army come from that stronghold in ten years. Even their garrison dwindles. I would be surprised if three hundred men manned those ancient black walls now. The war has passed this area by, child.”

“War passes nothing by, Father. When we stand over the fallen forces of Erdoth, it will be a victory.”

Meran drew aging hazel eyes to the fire. The radiance of the flames prominently displayed the ever-deepening creases above his cheekbone. “Whose victory, child? Illidor’s, or your own?”

The two horses twisted their way through the underbrush as hanging branches and leaves lapped across their faces. With silent stealth, Royce led the way, directing his gelding over dried pine needles and coiled flora. Jorg followed closely behind, his deep-set eyes constantly darting back and forth into the dark places between trees. The forest granted many obstacles to travel through, but it also provided excellent cover for the two men as they mapped the area and marked the defenses surrounding Erdoth Fortress.

From the west, a single wide road, cutting through the expanse of trees, led to the black-walled stronghold, and the woods proved to be an effective natural defense. A large army could not pass through the dense forest, and thus their approach along the road was easily spotted. Also, the wood almost single-handedly eliminated the possibility of Erdoth getting flanked from opposite sides.

Even so, Royce had been surprised at the lack of defensive measures taken. He concluded that Erdoth expected no offensives in the near future, and the notion made him smile, for Amaria would lead no common siege. Slinking along the shadows of the undergrowth, he counted only two guardposts along the road, both of them manned by a single soldier. They spotted two additional patrols, which they easily avoided by simply hiding away. Amaria had instructed them not to engage



the enemy, and Royce always took her words to heart.

It was early evening, and the slanted rays of sunlight had difficulty penetrating the thick shield of vegetation. Royce took a moment to scan the area, absorbing every detail. He would enjoy planning a scheme of attack with Amaria. The fortress should prove a great challenge, but the satisfaction always matched the severity of the trial.

“Let us move closer to the walls, Jorg. I wish to see the balustrades,” Royce directed.

Jorg grunted a response and steered his gelding behind Royce’s lead. After twenty minutes of maneuvering through the flora they began to notice the tall black barrier slowly rise above them. Both men felt a sense of unnatural foreboding, and even the jacket of trees could not hold back the menacing gloom that emanated from the dark spectacle. The walls rose from the ground like a giant vertebral pillar holding the earth together, and for long moments, both men only stared at the monstrous barricade.

In time, Jorg found words. Clearing his throat, he whispered, “Let us make this quick. We have already gained enough information, and we place ourselves in needless danger.”

Royce nodded. “Agreed, friend. We’ve seen enough.”

Abruptly, a twig snapped near them. The two scouts swung their heads in time to see a dozen soldiers emerge from behind a thicket of bramble. On the opposite end, another dozen appeared, surrounding them. In their shock, both men nearly froze. Royce threw a glance at Jorg, silently asking; *How did we not notice them?* Jorg gave him no response.

One soldier wearing an open-faced helm coupled with black plate, and carrying a sword, stepped forward and announced, “Halt! You tread on restricted land. Step down from your mounts and be forthwith with your identities!”

“Please forgive us, sir,” Royce implored with a humbled voice. “We are mere travelers that have become lost in these woods. Perchance you can direct us to the nearest road?” He flashed a charming smile.

Several men drew bows as the same soldier spoke again, his

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manner gruff and uncompromising. “You have been instructed to dismount.”

Royce glanced at Jorg, speaking with his eyes, and then dropped his feet to the ground. “I have my papers of identity right here.” He fumbled in his pockets as he neared the lead soldier. In one sudden movement, Royce’s blade was freed from its hardened leather scabbard. Once he drew his weapon, he’d surrendered his life, but it mattered little, for he was dead already. The black army left no survivors, and he only hoped to distract them long enough to allow Jorg to escape. With startling boldness, he drove the weapon into the unprotected abdomen of the astonished soldier.

Because his attention focused on his enemies, Royce didn’t see Jorg’s gelding turn sharply and sprint into the woods. He also never saw the arrow slice the air and pierce through the back of Jorg’s neck, dropping the man instantly.

Royce had cut down a second foe when an arrow planted itself into his back. He felt the pain, but he fought on, ducking the stab of an opponent’s spear and lifting his own sword into the man’s shoulder. His enemy lurched backwards, but another came at him from his flank, sending a blade into Royce’s thigh. The scout screamed aloud and whirled his sword at the attacker’s head, hoping to decapitate him. Unfortunately, the man had already backed away. Royce pursued him when something extraordinarily hard slammed across his head.

His world swam for several seconds before fading into blackness.

Royce awoke, discovering himself supported by two men. His head pounded in agony, but he managed to lift it enough to view his surroundings. He was in a large hall surrounded by several black armored soldiers. Bright braziers covered the walls, and the light hurt his aching eyes. Directly in front of him, on a greystone throne, sat a particularly imposing figure dressed in the same black armor, but wearing a closed helm that had several spikes jutting upward and to the sides. Alongside him, standing at his right hand, lingered a smaller man, stooped in stature and

wearing a hooded black robe.

“It is good to see you awake,” the man on the throne stated. His voice was sepulchral, like the wind upon dead leaves. “You almost missed your sentence.”

Royce coughed but said nothing. *By the gods, his head hurt!*

“Welcome, I am Harash, Lord of Erdoth,” the figure continued. He pointed to the man next to him. “This is Vairees, my advisor. Now, if you would be so kind as to introduce yourself and inform us who you work for. Perhaps, I may spare you.”

“I’ll say nothing,” Royce muttered, shaking the cobwebs from his throbbing temples.

With the barest tilt of his helm, Harash proffered, “Is that so? I would ask your companion, but—” a body was thrown to the floor in front of Royce. Jorg’s body, his throat opened like a ripe fruit. “He seems speechless at moment.” A chuckle escaped the man’s headgear.

“Jorg!” Royce yelled, forgetting the pain in his head. “You godsbedamned bastard! Amaria Eversvale will tear out your heart!” Royce regretted the words the instant he said them. Silently, he scolded himself for his impetuous outburst.

Although his face could not be seen behind his helmet, Harash seemed to be smiling. “Well, that was easier than expected. Amaria Eversvale.” Harash lifted an arm and rested his chin inside his palm. “‘The Knight of the Dove.’ Yes, I have heard of her. So that is who sent you. How interesting.”

Royce said nothing more. He closed his eyes and lowered his head in apathy. He had failed his love.

Harash seemed to contemplate the situation. For several seconds, only silence pervaded. Then he stood and pointed a gauntleted finger to the lifeless body of Jorg. “Tie the dead one to a horse and send him back where he came from.”

“What of the other one, lord?” Vairees, the man in the black robes, asked.

The armored lord stepped down from the dais and stood mere inches from the limp Royce. “Cut off his hand, the one with the rings, and send it along with the other man. Then hang him at

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the front walls.”

Royce’s eyes opened like saucers. “What? You . . .” His words were cut off by the fist that hammered into his check. Pain coursed through him as he sagged within the arms of the two men that held him. His lip had been split open and he tasted the torrent of blood which came forth. With no hesitation, his two retainers placed his arm on a thick wooden stand that seemed far too convenient to be present.

Things suddenly moved too fast. An oversized, shirtless man entered the hall holding an axe. Royce could only manage a whimper as the man advanced, his menacing axe blade glinting in the light of the braziers. Then he stood next to him. Royce tried to struggle, but his body would not respond. He forced his head upward, and stared into eyes as impassive as stone.

Royce garnered only a baleful smile before the axe was lifted high in the air.

The disk of light, in its full luster, shone powerfully in the star laden sky. Amaria lay upon her bedroll and had nearly fallen asleep when an officer woke her with urgent words.

“Captain! A horse approaches!”

In mere moments she stood on her feet. “A horse? Take me to it.”

“This way, Captain.” Amaria, wearing loose fitting cloth garments, followed the officer to the edge of camp where a handful of additional soldiers gazed into the night. She stepped alongside them and followed their line of vision. A horse trotted gradually toward them. They could hear its heavy panting, and it was obvious that the animal had run a great distance.

“Stay here,” Amaria ordered the men. “Rhen, with me.” The officer nodded and followed on Amaria’s heels as she approached the exhausted beast. When she noticed a man on its back, she ran. The body had been tied firmly to the horse, each arm and leg bound with rope wrapped around the animal’s underside. Amaria’s heart dropped to her stomach, and without hesitation she moved to identify the body.

It was Jorg. The man was clearly dead, his neck twisted and

disfigured. At first, Amaria breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't Royce. But then a different dread consumed her. The two men never separated when scouting. What then, pray tell, had happened to Royce?

"Look," Rhen pointed, "there is a leather bag knotted around his arm." The officer withdrew a dagger and sliced through the thin cord holding the bag to Jorg's corpse.

Amaria took the container from Rhen and proceeded to untie it. Reaching inside, the woman grasped a strange object. It felt spongy and mawkish in her fingers, and as she withdrew it, she understood why. A cry of shock escaped her, and with equal mixtures of astonishment and revulsion, she dropped the ghastly object to the ground.

"Hells!" cried Rhen. "What is it?"

Amaria could only stare. Bile formed in her throat, and it was all she could do to keep from vomiting. Turning her head, she looked away and somehow managed to form words. "It is a hand," she croaked. "Royce's hand."

"Royce's?" Rhen shook his head aggressively in disbelief. "How can you be sure?"

"The rings. Those are his," she paused, then added, "and *our* wedding ring."

Rhen couldn't take his eyes off the abhorrent image before him. With a quivering mouth he spoke slowly, each word emphasized, "By the seven hells!"

Amaria turned on her heel. "There is nothing more I need to see." Her emotions were spinning out of control, and she couldn't think straight. Without another word, she walked away. Rhen did nothing to stop her, just as he shouldn't have. He was smart enough to understand he could never quell the pain and shock she felt.

Soon after, she strolled near her bedroll, left alone to her ailing thoughts. No one had consoled her. It was all like some horrifying dream, and yet questions lingered in her mind. Was Royce still alive? Could she save him? Anger rose within her, and her path became clear.

Digging in her rucksack, she withdrew a small piece of

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parchment and a quill pen. The woman inked the paper intently, her wording lucid and meticulous. When Amaria finished, she rerolled the parchment and sealed it shut. Then, with ultimate precision, she began to don her armor. The thick steel felt empowering on her body, and her nerves began to tingle in anticipation. As she finished, she slung her quiver of arrows over her shoulder and did the same with her bow. Lastly, she tied her sword belt around her slim waist and mounted her white stallion.

Amaria took one final look around the encampment. A few men watched her, but none moved. They probably think I am merely riding off to remedy my aggrieved emotions, she mused. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the fury that burned inside.

Urging her stallion hard, she was soon sprinting past a thicket of trees and into an open plain. The darkness of night fed her; fueled her. She covered ground at breakneck speed, the sounds of the world around her, wind and wildlife, falling upon deaf ears. Her thoughts centered upon what lie ahead. In time, she came to a winding brook, and she followed the path of the trickling water until it emerged upon her destination; a small grove. She could just barely see the little cottage hidden within the copse of scratchwoods. Nearing the front door, she dismounted and banged her fist upon it as she had done only a day earlier.

Several minutes passed before she heard the scuffling of feet and the shifting glow of a lantern from within. The door creaked open and pensive eyes peered out. "Damn you, Amaria! Must you never visit me during the day? It is the middle of the night!" When she heard the latch come loose, she roughly pushed her way inside.

"Let me do the talking, Father. I have little time."

The irritation on Meran's face vanished. His visage turned serious as he looked upon Amaria, for her expression was one the old man had never seen before. A coldness had overtaken her. "What is it, child?"

"Erdoth has claimed Royce." Her voice was strangely unemotional.

Meran's eyes widened. "What? How has this happened?"

"I sent Royce ahead to scout the fortress. Only his severed hand returned, still wearing the rings he wore."

The old man breathed deep before making a slow path to his chair. He sat with his eyes fixed on the floor and his head shaking sadly. "That is terrible news, child. I am sorry." He had met Royce on two separate occasions, and like most people, had instantly taken a liking to the man's charm and humor.

Amaria had not moved from her place in the entryway. "I am going to Erdoth tonight."

Meran looked up and gazed into her malachite eyes; eyes aloof and distant. "Alone? You will never survive!"

"I do not plan to." Amaria paused momentarily, finding the correct words. "Father, I have come here for two reasons. The first is to say goodbye. The second is to hear from you a promise."

The old man had only half-heard her last statement. He was still absorbing her intentions with repudiation. "Amaria, do not do this," he pleaded. Tears began to descend his somber face. "Are you so ready to forfeit your life?"

Lifting her palm, Amaria said, "It is too late for persuasion. My mind is set." The woman stepped toward her adopted father. "I want you to move to Dhorn-Dyas, to live out the rest of your life in comfort. It is my dying wish." Plunging her hand into the pack hanging at her waist, she pulled out the rolled document and held it before him. "I have written a request that you be allowed to take residence in my quarters. My home is secure, and you will be well cared for."

"Too many reminders." Meran could barely choke the words out. He ran a trembling hand through thinning hair. "It will be a solemn existence."

For the briefest of moments, warmth shone from Amaria, and she placed an arm around the old man's shoulder, squeezing lightly. "It will make your daughter happy. That alone should give you peace." Then, quickly as it had come, the tenderness was gone. She withdrew her arm and straightened her posture. "There is no time to argue this matter. Will you give me your

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oath, or will you deny your own daughter's final request?"

Meran buried his head in his hands. "Revenge is a useless deed. You will gain no fulfillment."

She dropped the parchment in his lap and moved to the door. "I am beyond such advice, Father. Will you move to Dhorn-Dyas?"

"I promise, child. But I will never rest easy."

The seneschal stood at the entrance to Lord Harash's personal chamber. His cloth garments were spotless, and not a wrinkle could be found in the matted fabric. When Harash turned to view him, the servant dropped to a knee and lowered his head.

"What is it?" Harash asked impatiently. Not wearing his armor, the lord dressed himself in a simple leather jerkin with long pants. His face bore uneven facial hair and a copious brow hung over dark eyes. Long brown hair fell in knotted strands over his face, but the skin beneath was white and pallid. His bare arms displayed thick cords of muscle.

"Milord, a rider approaches from the west road."

Harash raised an eyebrow. "A rider? For what purpose?"

The seneschal twiddled his thumbs nervously. "War, milord. It is a woman. She has already killed four men stationed along the pass. A fifth escaped to warn us."

Harash's jaw nearly dropped to the paneled wooden floor. *The Knight of the Dove! Alone!* The Lord of Erdoth Fortress stared at his servant for a full minute, his mind spinning in deliberation. Abruptly, he turned from the seneschal and ambled to a chestnut armoire. "Prepare the defenses. All of them," he spoke as he withdrew his black platemail. "Oh, and have the fifth soldier executed for fleeing from a woman."

The full moon shown absolute in its brilliance. Glowing shafts of silver bathed the shadows below, lighting up the nighttime world. Had Amaria taken the time, she would have reveled in the serenity. However, the grimness of her deeds had taken the forefront of her mind.

The tall gates of Erdoth loomed just ahead, and she could



already hear the high-pitched whistle of arrows as they rained from the parapets. Though still upon her stallion, she slung her bow in hand and fired one arrow after another toward the archers above. Even in the dimly lit night, she saw two bodies fall and land motionless onto the unforgiving earth. Still, more arrows cascaded around her, but in fewer number, and the five guards standing before the lowered portcullis drew her attention. She shot down three of them before they had time to react. The last two took cover behind trees until she'd gotten close enough to combat.

Leaping from her white horse, Amaria tossed her bow aside and unleashed her sword. She felled one guard immediately, but the last managed to parry her twice with his halberd before her shining blade sliced him cleanly from shoulder to hip. As she pulled the weapon loose, an arrow bounced harmlessly off the pauldron protecting her shoulder. She looked skyward to count the archers still firing at her.

Then she saw him.

From a rope, ten feet in the air, dangled a familiar looking body. Amaria went numb with fear. Let it not be him! Oh gods, please! Overcome with tension, she pulled a dagger from her boot and flung it in the air. The small blade cut the rope cleanly, and the limp form crashed roughly to the ground, becoming still in a graceless angle. She fell upon the body, quickly turning the neck to discern the figure's identity.

Sorrow took her. It was Royce. A stump resided where his left hand should have been, and his face was mangled, evidence that he was badly beaten before his hanging. She lifted his body up, cradling him as a mother would a babe. *Gods, no!* She pressed her face into the crown of his head, letting her tears dampen his already brittle hair. As she mourned, an arrow hit the ground not two feet away, pitching loose dirt against her body.

The flames of anger consumed her. She drew within herself, to her inner core, basking in its rage. Then she called upon the forces that mortals feared. It started as a simple hum from her mouth, but quickly escalated into shouts. Although her words were indecipherable to any who listened, those same words

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carried more power than one could imagine. The woman didn't even understand their meaning, but they flowed from her mouth with ease. "Gods of the sky, the earth, far beneath. Wyur, Carodon, Hysth, Kazgoth, I call upon you!" Amaria took a moment to peer above. An hour, perhaps two, before dawn returned the colors of the world. Balling her fists, she screamed, "Before the crest of the sun rises, grant me the deaths of those responsible! Let their bodies rot while darkness still rules the sky! Grant me power. Give me reprisal for this injustice!"

Amaria sensed it, felt the energy flicker, then set wholly ablaze. She had always been a highly skilled warrior, but the force she suddenly endured only multiplied her talents. In no way could she understand what was happening to her, but she had no desire to understand. She was overcome, she was powerful; she was death.

Stepping up to the barred portcullis, she calmly placed her hand upon it. The solid iron bars shattered apart, creating a space for her to walk through. Up ahead, the courtyard became a flurry of activity as the black armored army witnessed the miraculous act. The legion of troops rushed her as she stepped inside.

Again she raised her hand, and a column of fire erupted from her palm. A dozen soldiers were consumed by flames, their screams horrific as their bodies burned to ashes. But she had no time to revel in the victory, for other soldiers were upon her. They fanned out, surrounding the woman, and Amaria's blade flashed as she swung it in resistance. The ring of opponents collapsed as she went at them fearlessly. Feigning her body to the left, she rolled right and plunged her weapon into the abdomen of a surprised foe, then did likewise to a second after ducking a spear thrust. She was a whirling menace, the speed of her attacks supernatural.

Three more succumbed to her aggression before an opponent's sword slipped past her defense and thrust its way into the unprotected flesh beneath her ribcage. She punished the offender by severing his head. Though her wound wasn't fatal, it should have brought her immense pain; yet she felt nothing.

Adrenaline and vigor governed her nerves.

Vaguely, as if far in the distance, Amaria could hear the shouts and curses of soldiers as they bellowed commands back and forth, but she paid no heed. Her focus was unreserved. She spun back and forth, delivering blow after blow to anyone near her, and the number of bodies at her feet amplified with each passing moment. Her sword was covered in the blood of her enemies. Yet, as the deaths increased, so did her wounds. An arrow had lodged itself in the backside of her upper calf, shifting painfully with each of her rapid movements, and though her armor was strong, it could not completely protect her from the powerful blows of her adversaries. Various gashes and bruises had been acquired, many along her arms and shoulders. Still, she fought on.

As Amaria pulled her sword free from the opened skull of a dead soldier, she suddenly realized that the attack had been broken off. What remained of the opposition had retreated inside the fortress. Others were actually fleeing, exiting the confines of the stronghold through the shattered portcullis. No more archers lined the ramparts, and Amaria was given a moment to gather herself. The courtyard looked like the site of a mass execution, and every corpse bore black platemail. She wondered how much time had passed during her hypnotic rampage. Taking advantage of the moment of clarity, she gathered two daggers lying loose on the bloodied ground, and also a bow and a quiver of arrows. Then she started for the gates which led into the interior of the fortress. Her limp was plainly visible, but Amaria didn't notice.

The gates lie open, like a black mouth enticing her closer; ready to swallow her wholly into some pungent hell. She embraced the feeling and stepped within the blackness.

The interior was cold and dim; the floor, walls, and ceiling; all stone, dreary and unwelcoming. Amaria didn't pause to take in her surroundings. She strode ahead with fortitude, and the four sentries that met her at the entrance were butchered mercilessly for their audacity to stand in her way.

Amaria roamed several twisting corridors and then climbed

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the first set of stairs she came upon. The woman had no particular destination in mind. Her only goal was to seek the one who murdered Royce. The second level proved very similar to the first. The soldiers foolish enough to confront her died swift deaths, and soon the passages became empty. The only sound was the resonance of her own boots upon the stone, echoing down the wide halls. She was alone.

Amaria ascended yet another flight of stairs, and discovered that two great double doors of solid oak barred her path. She took the iron handle and turned it clockwise. The bolt withdrew with a *click*, and the great doors swung open. Without even a moment's hesitation, she entered.

The chamber was a large sanctuary, with a makeshift throne placed in the center. Along the walls, at perfectly spaced intervals, burned braziers that lighted the area far brighter than any other room she had encountered within the stronghold.

"So, this is the legendary 'Knight of the Dove.'" A fully armored figure lounged upon the gray throne. Next to him, at his right hand, stood a rodent-like man in dark robes. The figure upon the throne spoke with full amusement. "I must admit, you are not looking well. And yet, I find that even in your current state, the myths speak truth, indeed you are stunningly beautiful."

The man's words caused Amaria to finally take a personal inspection of her condition; her face framed by a wild mess of hair and the rest of her covered with wounds. Though only two thin cuts lined her cheekbone, the rest of her body had fared much worse. She bled from several injuries, including an especially nasty lesion just below her collarbone where even her breastplate had been pierced. She understood that soon she would collapse from her blood loss, but she didn't have time to dwell on the fact. Her green eyes stared hatefully at the two men before her.

"That was an impressive display," the armored man said, referring to the battle in the courtyard. "Rarely do I get to observe such fine swordsmanship. Shall we make proper introductions? I am Harash, Lord of Erdoth." He stood from the

throne and bowed low.

Amaria took one step forward. “You have murdered my family, and my husband.” Her voice was bitter and acrid. “Your name means nothing to me. I have come to serve my vengeance. I have come to see you die.”

Harash seemed taken aback. “Vengeance? Perhaps you are mistaken. I know nothing of your family, or this husband you speak of.”

“My husband was hanging at your front walls!” Amaria spat.

Harash’s voice feigned regret. “Oh my, *that* was your husband? How unfortunate. Had I known, I would never have done such a thing. Let me offer an apology.” A bolt of searing light burst from the fingers of the small man standing next to Harash. Amaria had no time to react, and the radiant missile smashed into her torso. She was thrown backwards into the wall, the air knocked out of her lungs. Her sword escaped her grip and clattered to the ground several feet away. Harash released deep laughter and plodded his way toward the gasping woman, the robed man following behind. His voice mocked her. “So foolish. You will suffer for the deaths of my men.”

Amaria groaned as she sat up and leaned against the wall. She guessed several ribs had broken, and for the first time since she had entered Erdoth, she suffered pain. Her eyes blurred momentarily, and it took great effort to shake the dizziness from her head. Was it over? Had the war she waged come to an end? She had already killed many. But, then she envisioned Royce swinging from the rope along those coal-black walls, his face distended and misshapen from the beatings. Her anger surged, and she was fueled once again by its embers. Looking upon Harash, she pictured him without his helmet, his eyes pleading for the mercy she would never deliver.

Her task was not yet complete.

Harash halted a few feet away from the downed woman. “Your husband was no man. He whimpered like the weakest of women.” Turning to his robed companion, he stated simply, “Burn her.”

The spindly man commenced a hypnotic dance, interweaving

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his arms and legs in an elegant motion as he softly muttered verbal chants. Had it not been intended to do her harm, Amaria mused, the motions would have been beautifully picturesque. As it was, his scrawny hands began to radiate and she knew she had little time for recourse.

Amaria's sword was out of her immediate reach, but she still had the daggers she'd procured from the courtyard massacre. With blinding speed, she seized one from her boot and flung the object at the wizard.

The robed seer's voice arrested in mid-speech, and his hands went instantly to his neck where the small leather handle of the dagger protruded from his throat. A deluge of blood poured down onto his robes, turning them red. With a single twitch of his eyes, he collapsed, dead.

Amaria hadn't watched the gruesome death, for after throwing the dagger, she had rolled to her left, retrieving her sword and swinging for Harash's skull. His blade intercepted the arching path of her own, and the two combatants commenced the solemn dance of war.

Amaria was surprised at the lord's battle prowess and the two parried relentlessly. Only her desire for vengeance kept her going, and their duel spilled from the large sanctuary into a small corridor. At one point, Harash slammed his heavy gauntlet into Amaria's jaw, and as she reeled, he lashed his sword across her shoulder, tearing plate, skin, and tissue. The woman shrieked in pain and stumbled, tripping and falling on the stone floor. Her blood poured a quick decent over her silver armor.

Harash laughed bullishly. "You are weak! I expected more!" With a cry, he brought his blade in low, intending to split the woman's head in two.

Before the weapon made contact, Amaria swayed to her right. The slashing blade just missed, and Amaria spun her head around with her arms, and sword, following. The whirling blade sliced Harash's breastplate, partially caving the thick steel inward. She heard the man grunt as he bent over, and Amaria pulled back her weapon, poised for a second blow. In desperation, Harash leaned in and pushed her away.

The Lord of Erdoth Fortress stepped back to put space between them. “How do you still fight?” he yelled at her, clutching his side.

Amaria said nothing. The woman moved forward relentlessly, and again their steel embraced.

The sharp ring of colliding swords bounded off the walls as they scuffled, but Harash suddenly found it difficult to stand his ground against the unremitting charge of Amaria. He backpedaled, slipping through a portico that led to a terrace overlooking the courtyard. The stench of death invaded the nostrils of both warriors, but they had no time to notice.

Amaria pressed Harash, taxing the lord’s defenses. The balcony was not large, and Harash had no room to flee. With his back against the railing, Amaria thrust her blade at his throat. As Harash lifted his own weapon to parry, she spun her sword and caught her foe on the hands.

The blade bit deep into Harash’s wrists, and he lost hold of his weapon. The steel blade fell over the railing, dropping lazily to the ground far below.

With a triumphant smile, Amaria’s placed the point of her sword at Harash’s throat. “You are beaten. Remove your helmet so I may see your face,” she ordered.

Harash fell to his knees. He shook visibly as he lifted the spiked helm from his head. His dark eyes gave way to untainted fear. “Please! I yield!”

“You murdered my family and my husband.” Her tone was remorseless. “For that, your punishment is death.”

“No!” Harash cried. “I beg you! Spare me! I—“

Amaria’s stroke nearly carved his head in two. As she pulled free her weapon, the lifeless body slumped to the ground, crimson fluids expanding beneath.

With that final death, Amaria’s task was complete.

As she stared upon the corpse of her last kill, the pain returned all at once. All her power, her anger, her rage; vanished, and she was as vulnerable as a newborn. Exhaling, she dropped her sword. The blade clanged upon the delicate tiles of the balcony while she sat down, her back against the terrace railing. She had

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accomplished what she came to do. She had slain the entire fortress.

And yet, Meran had been correct, there was only emptiness within her. All became clear, and she realized what she had done. She had failed.

Looking out upon the courtyard, she gazed upon the carnage she had wrought. She betrayed her honor. Her murderous wrath wasn't delivered in defense, nor for the Illidor cause. It had served no purpose but to feed the dark gods with her anger and hatred.

Tilting her head, she viewed her wounds. They were grievous, and she didn't know if she would survive. She no longer cared. Dawn had arrived, and she watched while the sun poked its fiery crest over the horizon. She soaked in its first rays.

As Amaria closed her eyes and allowed herself sleep, she wondered if there would be a chance for her redemption.