



IV  
DIABLO

LORD OF HATRED

ON NIGHTMARE'S  
WINGS

NEYRELLE

A SHORT STORY BY  
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**H**ear me now, for I am the Oracle Queen. It is mine to know what is, what has been, and what will be.

*Dreams are the doorways to the sleeping mind, that dark place where shuttered windows and locked passages cannot bar the truth from entering.*

*In dreams we plan and hope, we scheme and believe . . . and we wake thinking we have solved all dilemmas, discovered secrets about ourselves.*

*Oh, how the universe delights in such faith. As if the melody of a hopeful dreamer can impose its will on reality.*

*But it is not in dreams that truths are revealed. No. It is in the cobwebbed corridors of nightmares that truth waits to be found.*

*But at a cost.*

*Ah yes, at such a cost . . .*





## NEYRELLE

Neyrelle walked long miles that day and in dreams walked farther still. Hopefulness was her usual garment, but doubt had begun to pull at the threads. Neither journey, awake or asleep, brought her total peace. Neither path took her to green fields where sunlight sparkled and shadow merely marked the absence of light.

With each step she felt herself traveling away from the truth. From her purpose.

Mephisto was rising. That much was certain. His power grew every moment of every day, and as it loomed, Neyrelle felt herself diminish, losing direction, losing purpose.

Hope.

Since her journey began, she had forced herself to learn more, to know more, to unlock secrets hidden to any but the most dedicated scholars of the truth. That knowledge had served her in every battle, but lately doubt was a hungry worm in her mind.

When she stopped for the night to make camp in a narrow pass of the Fractured Peaks, she built her fire high and sat close beside it with furs pulled around her against the bitter wind. The days were cold enough, but even with her layered garments, the air found openings between jerkin and underclothes, nipping at her skin. All around Neyrelle, the winds shrieked in the voice of darkness, conjuring images of frozen ghosts hunting for living heat.

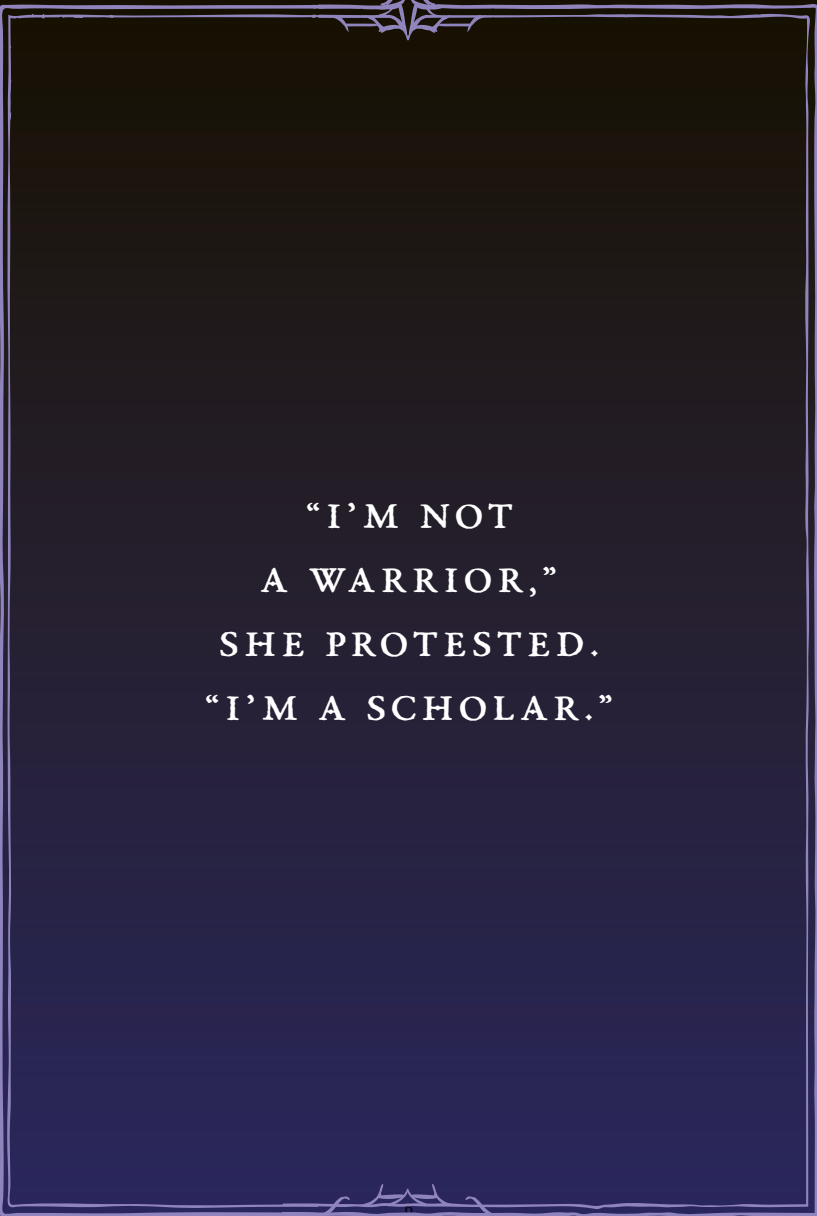
It was like that every night.

Neyrelle felt as if every camp, every sleep, every midnight, and every dawn was an echo of life without the things that made it worth living. Despair choked her as she sat staring into the campfire. What, after all, was the reward at the end of so many roads? What was the prize for battles fought and loved ones lost?

"Has he already won?" she asked the night as she lay shivering in her bedroll. The cold was a tireless assault and she, its victim. As heat leeches from her, her confidence and optimism likewise froze and splintered, blowing away one flake at a time into the pernicious and merciless night. "Is this my purgatory? To believe I'm fighting for good when all I'm doing is burning off my years?"

A crow stood on a cracked boulder beyond the fire. She could see that while its ancient eyes were filled with knowledge, the nightbird had no answers to her questions.

Neyrelle closed her eyes, squeezing them shut. If only she *were* the magpie her



“I’M NOT  
A WARRIOR,”  
SHE PROTESTED.  
“I’M A SCHOLAR.”

mother had named her. If only she could speak to this crow in a language they would both understand. Would it whisper secrets to aid her? Confirm that doom walked a step behind on all these long roads? Tell her that this arduous journey could only end in defeat and death and dust?

Thinking some of the heaviest thoughts she owned, Neyrelle fell into a sleep that was both deep and dark where nightmares waited.

The night grew black. The cold became deliberately and viciously more intense, but Neyrelle found herself still at that fire—now a nest of glowing orange coals. But she realized with a jolt that she was not alone.

Impossibly, *Donan* sat there with her. His graying beard, his kind eyes. The scars and laugh lines.

Joy leapt in her heart. Neyrelle cried out his name and reached for him. Donan flinched as if to pull back but allowed her touch. Even as she took his hands, a shock of horror shot through her. Donan's fingers were cold as graveyard clay. Lines of black sickness ran crooked up his arms, looking like the roots of dying trees.

"What is it?" she gasped. "Are you ill?"

"It's nothing," said Donan as he pulled his hands free. The action was not vicious, but it was not gentle. There was a subtle hostility to it, echoed in the way he tugged his sleeves with short, sharp movements. When he smiled, there was that old familiar grin, and yet it was strange, as if viewed through some veil. It gave his face a wolfish and predatory gleam that offered no real comfort to Neyrelle.

"You look well, my friend," murmured Donan. "How long has it been? It feels like forever."

Yet he did not wait for her reply. Instead, still wearing his lupine grin, Donan went on, talking about the roads they had traveled together, the places they had been. The things they had done, separately and together. It made her feel oddly old to hear so complete a tale. Had she truly done all those things? Had there been that many battles?

Had they buried that many friends along the way? It was a dreadful thought, and Neyrelle half sagged beneath the weight of it.

As if he was reading her thoughts, Donan's face fell into sadness. The change of expression did not entirely erase his smile, even when he uttered a long and deep sigh. Then he shook his head and looked into the night. "I suppose," he murmured, "our time is about up, isn't it, Neyrelle?"



“Up . . . ? What do you mean?” she asked.

He used one oddly long fingernail to trace the contours of his beard and then looked at the nail. It glistened, but instead of blood or sweat, she saw the same intense darkness as the veins on his arms. Donan gave a small nod, as if expecting nothing less. If he was distressed by what he saw, it did not show. Instead, was there a hint of some kind of amusement? She wasn't sure, and that uncertainty made the night feel both colder and darker.

“Yes,” he said. “Time to throw it all in.” He gave her a penetrating, knowing look. “Aren't you tired? Surely you, of all people, must know that the war outlasts the warrior.”

“I'm not a warrior,” she protested. “I'm a scholar.”

Donan gave a bitter laugh. “All the more reason to bring this journey to an end.”

Those words seemed to heap weight on her, and Neyrelle felt her body sag beneath them. It was as if the cold called to her, offering her the peace of eternal sleep as her prize for all that she had done in her war against evil.

“I am so weary,” she admitted. “That was an impossible road to walk. Given the choice, I would not want to do it again.”

“No . . . ?”

She did not like the way his eyes twinkled as he asked that, and in a firmer tone, Neyrelle said, “Mind, I did not say I *could* not.” Her tone was as sharp and hard as a stone dagger.

Donan nodded. “Evil is eternal. It endures, and we burn away our mortal years trying to conquer what we cannot ever hope to overthrow.”

“I . . .,” she began, but her words faltered.

“There's nothing more you can do,” said Donan, and now there were hints of those black lines rising from the collar of his wool shirt. They climbed the sides of his throat.

“What are you trying to say?”

“My friend,” said Donan, his smile weary and sad, “how many times have you ever actually *succeeded* on these roads? Where have your endless wanderings taken you but to the foot of an empty grave?”

She said nothing.

Donan shook his head. “Neyrelle, take a moment to think it through. Let that sharp mind of yours focus. If you do, you'll see that it's time to give in.”

She gasped. “Give *in*? Are you mad?”

“No,” he said, his voice taking on an edge. “I speak the truth you keep running from.”

“No,” she snapped. “I will never accept that. If people like us don’t push back, then all is lost.”

“What is lost? You would make a show of dying with honor in a fight that was never winnable. Is that courage or hubris?”

“It’s the fight that must be fought.”

The darkness she thought she saw in him was more pronounced now. The whites of his eyes seemed to melt, taking the color of his irises with them, becoming black as the wings of the nightbirds. His mouth still smiled, but there was no humor in it now—only cruelty.

“Neyrelle . . . face the truth,” he said in a tone that was more feral growl than human voice. “The truth is that everything you love *dies*.”

Blackness covered him completely now. It leaked from his eyes like tears and dripped thickly from the corners of his mouth. In the voice of a demon, he whispered, “Mephisto cannot be beaten. Not by mortals. Certainly not by you.”

Neyrelle staggered to her feet. “No!” she snarled. “I will *never* give up.”

He rose too, and despite all that she felt for Donan, Neyrelle threw a punch at his face, wanting to knock that malicious smile askew. The impact was like punching smoke. Her fist passed through him and sent her staggering off-balance . . .



She screamed as she rolled from nightmare onto the burning coals. Neyrelle scrambled away, slapping at the flames on her blanket.

The night was vast and dark, and it held its breath.

Neyrelle was alone except for the crow on the rock. It stared at her with blank eyes. She crouched there, panting, terrified. Furious.

“I will *never* give up,” she said with all the truth in her damaged heart. “Never.”

The nightbird opened its mouth to caw, but it made no sound at all.





**A**nd so, you see.

No one, neither scholar nor queen nor warrior, truly owns their own soul. No one is free of the consequences of knowledge. We are all plagued by what we have done. Every choice we make has propelled us along our own road. Each decision, even when we are convinced of its rightness, cuts like a knife. Through those wounds we bleed away our hope, our purity. With each wound we invite corruption into our flesh and blood.

And yet . . .

*Some* minds are less easily corrupted. For good or for ill . . . who is to say?

I wake from my own dreams . . . my own nightmares. My eyes turn away from terror, and yet I can still see. I still *know*. The words tumble out of my lips.

“Something is coming,” I say. And in the trees outside a thousand nightbirds cry out in fear. “Something terrible . . . is coming . . .”



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JONATHAN MABERRY** is a *New York Times* bestseller, five-time Bram Stoker Award winner, four-time Scribe Award winner, Inkpot Award winner, Inkpot Award winner, author of over fifty novels, and editor of thirty anthologies. He is also a comic book writer, poet, executive producer, and writing teacher. His *V-Wars* books became a Netflix original series; his novel, *Rot & Ruin*, is in development for film with Alcon Entertainment; and his *Joe Ledger* thrillers are being developed for TV by Chad Stahelski—director of the *John Wick* movies. He writes horror, sci-fi, fantasy, adventure, thrillers, and more. He's president of the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers and the editor of *Weird Tales Magazine*. Find him at [jonathanmaberry.com](http://jonathanmaberry.com).