



IV
DIABLO
LORD OF HATRED

ON NIGHTMARE'S
WINGS



ADREONA



A SHORT STORY BY
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Hear 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 . . .





ADREONA

Adreona had spent much of her life fighting her way through a storm of spears to find solace. Now, as warrior and queen, she at last possessed what steel and blood had earned her.

Peace.

She walked her capital, the sea breeze caressing her face. People saw her and paused—not merely to bow but to smile their thanks for all she had done.

They loved their queen, and she loved them. In taverns they sang of her valor, of her courage. As she walked, she felt the heaviness of her spear and—not for the first time—how leaden it had become. Time had crept up on her. It dwindled her own frame while giving weight to the weapon that had once been like a wand of moonlight in her hand.

A small girl darted from one of the market stalls. She held a ripe red apple—plump and juicy—and offered it to Adreona in a cradle of two pink hands.

“A gift for our beloved queen?” she said, tripping over the words in an endearing way.

Adreona bent and took it, lingering to bless the child, enjoying the girl’s pride and delight as the queen took a bite.

As she walked back to the palace, though, her heart gradually lost its lightness. With each step something else ached, reminding her of the many tithes she had paid for her kingdom. Did all the queens who’d come before her feel this weight?

She retired early, took a sleeping draught, and settled down for a long slumber, hoping that slumber would chase the doubts back into their corners.



Sleep was a doorway, though, and she passed through it into a darker place.

In the distance she heard her shieldmatron calling her name, the seasoned officer’s voice filled with fear. That made the queen turn in alarm.

“What is it?”

“My queen,” cried the shieldmatron, gesturing to the balcony outside the chamber.

“They came in beneath the cloak of night.”

They.

Adreona leaned on the balcony rail and stared in horror at what filled the bay. Sails.

Dozens of them. No, scores of them. Black lateen sails marked with the symbol of a flaming skull.

"Pirates, my queen," breathed the woman.

"No," said Adreona. "That is not what they are . . ."

"What, then? They fly death's flag. What are your orders? Should I go meet with them? Or . . . are they avoiding the storms? Is that it? Safety in our harbor until it has passed?"

Adreona shook her head. Indecision stayed her tongue.

If she was right about those sails, diplomacy was useless. *Call it by its name*, she told herself. Truth had always been one of her greatest strengths. No deflection or sugarcoating. Those sails were *his*.

Death had come into her bay.

Even knowing that, she could not name him. Not even in her thoughts.

She turned and touched the captain's shoulder. "Seal the city. Raise the alarm, but do it quietly. Don't make a show of it, but get a spear into every hand. Hurry now!"

The shieldmatron gaped for a moment, then spun away and ran, growling orders to her officers.

Aides came in bearing Adreona's armor, and she stood, arms out to her sides, face set and grim as each piece was strapped or buckled on. Greaves and gauntlets, cuirass and helmet. And her spear.

The mighty Thorn of Skovos, handed down from queen to queen. Blood had flowed along its length, and Adreona herself had used the weapon to slay humans and monsters, soldiers and demons.

Once her armor was set, she strode from the room and down the winding stairs. Her forces waited for her, their spears gleaming with silver promise.


Adreona nodded to them.

"We are beset," she said. "This enemy will grant no quarter. None. They are not here to conquer but to vanquish."


She gestured, indicating everyone and everything in the land.

"Death has come for us, my sisters," she said grimly. "Let us show them the cost of every drop of Amazon blood."

They were old words used in battles long past, but she saw how it straightened the backs of her younger spearmaidens, how it ignited fires in their eyes.



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Though as she drew her spear, she saw the small flickers of doubt in the faces of her senior captains. They saw how she struggled with her weapon, how her armor slowed her movements. Their faces were pale, but they forced themselves to attention.

Together they rushed out to meet the enemy.

Time stumbled and collapsed beneath the burden of horror. On one side of a broken moment, she was inside the hall, and the next she was in the heart of a fierce battle. It was quick, but Adreona could feel the familiar ache in her limbs that came from hours of fighting.

Hours.

Her arms were so heavy, and although her spear was red to the hilt, it felt slow and clumsy. Too long. Too heavy. Even the handle felt odd in her grip.

All around her, a battle raged with steel and fire.

And the bodies.

Corpses were heaped around her, none of them whole, each chopped and slashed into a red nightmare. She looked for the sailors dressed in black with the burning skull on their armor, and there were many. But there were more Amazons among the dead than enemies.

Far more. Her warriors were born to battle, and all of them had waded through lakes of blood. How could they fall like this? It was wrong. It was madness. And Adreona felt her world crack around her.

The din of battle half deafened her. That . . . or her senses were failing. Her understanding was faltering as well.

One of her captains, a seasoned warrior, knelt on the ground, hands pressed to a mortal wound across her stomach. She looked up at the queen with such a strange, puzzled expression.

“Why, my queen?” she begged. “Why did we attack?”

“What . . . ?” asked Adreona.

“They were just passing through. Why did we . . . ?” And with the question unfinished, the captain died.

Adreona staggered back and turned to find many more Amazons on the ground, bodies hacked to crimson inhumanity.

Then a shadow fell across Adreona, and the queen turned to see a man clad in black. On his chest was a symbol—but now that she was closer, Adreona could see that



embroidered on his chest was a pelican with spread wings flying across the face of the morning sun. Not a killer serving Hate, but a trader.

He held a dripping scimitar in his hand, and his face was filled with anger, hurt, and confusion.

“Queen Adreona,” he said, “why did you do this? We came in peace—to offer our goods—and you ambushed us. Has all reason fled? You were once a great queen—strong, but fair. How have you come to this? Has age stolen your reason?”

She looked down at the spear in her hand and cried out in horror. The hilt was broken, the blade pitted and chipped. But worse—far worse—the hand that held it was withered and ancient. A weathered hand, not that of a warrior.

“We came in peace,” growled the sailor, “but you chose war. So, war it shall be. If there is no peace here, if war is all you can offer, then we shall *take* what we need and call it just. You drew first blood, but we shall spill the last.”

“No . . . I . . .”

“No more words,” he snarled, raising his weapon. “You betrayed your own people by forcing this war. Every drop of their blood is on you. And so everyone knows that Skovos is polluted with treachery, we will burn this city to the ground. We will sweep like a storm throughout your islands and erase this evil by wiping out its source. You are a failed queen, weak and treacherous, and we will wipe you from the pages of history.”

Adreona staggered backward, trying to lift her broken spear. All around her, Amazons were falling. But even as they died, they looked at her with reproach, with shattered hopes. Their mouths spoke her name, but no longer as a rallying cry, no longer with love. They spoke it as a curse. *She* had failed them, and they would all die damning her.

Her spear was too heavy, and even if she had raised it high enough, she lacked the power to parry that blow. The scimitar struck her and smashed her back into a screaming wakefulness.

Adreona half fell from her bed, heart hammering, throat clenching as she tried to breathe.

She twisted around to stare at the window. Sunlight streamed through the blowing curtains. The queen tilted her head to listen.

No screams. No clash of swords on shields. No death cries.

“A dream . . .,” she gasped as she turned away. “Only that.”

But a sound made her look up again. There, on the windowsill, feathers fluttering, stood a crow. Ancient, with thinning feathers and eyes that looked at and through her. Eyes that seemed to hold within them every fear, every secret, every fragment of nightmare prophecy.

“No . . .,” she breathed.

The crow merely stared at her with bottomless black eyes.



And 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.