

## **PROLOGUE**

### **Carthix Castle**

The army of Northing invaders was closing in upon Carthix Castle. After weeks of rumors and the scattered reports from scouts tracking their surprisingly rapid progress crossing the jagged barrier of the Earth's Teeth, the barbarians had emerged from the mountains in remarkably good order and in still more remarkable numbers. Two days ago, reports had them reaching the high passes, yesterday put them among the foothills, and now as this morning dawned, they had already spilled out upon the plains and were nearly upon Carthix Castle itself.

The woman stood just inside the main gate of the castle and looked up at the mass of clouds that had come over the mountains as well, almost as if they were providing a blanket of cover for the invaders. The first hint of morning light showed that these clouds weren't white or grey or even black: they were a noxious, unnatural green. Green clouds moving against the

mountain winds and keeping pace with the vanguard of the Northings, thought the woman with a slow shake of her head. That speaks of magic, powerful magic. But Northing wizards are usually lucky if they're able to darn their own socks with a mending spell.

The woman was dressed as a common serving wench complete with thick housedress and apron that nevertheless hung nicely on her lithe frame, and normally come a'morning, she would be in the food halls, the kitchen, or the scullery helping to feed the thousand hungry mouths of the garrison and the castle's inhabitants. But no one had a thought for food this day, and the courtyard was dotted with anxious servants who had come timidly out in the hopes of learning something about their approaching peril.

This woman, however, had positioned herself directly beside one of the small observation slits in the main gate where a dozen guards were peering out in turn at the enemy army. She planned her move carefully as one of the guards stepped away from the opening to comment to his mates and left the spot momentarily unattended. She could tell from the mutterings that none of them had any eyes for her.

“...looks like nobody left north of the mountains...”

“...surging past on both flanks...”

“...Northings burn their prisoners alive...”

She had only a few seconds at best, and she made the most of them, scanning across the view from left to right rather than just a single stare that might fixate on one thing. Spread out across the plain before the castle was an endless mass of flickering torches, the sign of an army that had marched through the night, all coming steadily closer. The sight was as fascinating as it was unnerving. It seemed as if the mountains had spawned a plague of monstrous fireflies that had all taken flight towards Carthix Castle.

The woman slipped off to the side as the nearest guard turned back to the viewing slit. Northing raids across the mountains were not unheard of, several tribes banding together to force a passing of the Earth's Teeth for the promise of easy booty in the soft lands of the Plains, but they inevitable fell to quarreling over the first division of plunder. They should have lost a third of their strength making a spring crossing of the high mountains, the woman told herself. Melting snows, rock goblins, and personal quarrels all should have taken their toll. Instead, they looked like they had just emerged from a comfortable rest with warm beds and plenty of food.

Something a' miss, she realized. Some key to explain how this could be.

She simply had to get another look at the closing enemy. The officer at the gate was a surly fellow named Gamblen who had leered at her on numerous occasions when she had been serving in the officer's food hall. He will do nicely, she decided.

"Oh your lordship, what might all these alarms mean?" she asked him, wearing her meekest expression.

The man turned upon her, his face hard, but it softened at the woman's deep blue eyes.

"Nothing to worry your pretty head about," he said. "You just mind your plates and pans, and leave us to deal with the Northings."

"If I could just take a tiny peek, perhaps I might not feel so helpless," she whispered and glanced towards the observation slit.

"A peek at the Silver Horde of Alacon Regnar to give you courage!" the man laughed, naming the dreaded Tyrant of the Northlands who was said to have banded all Twelve Tribes together beneath his iron hand. "If you tremble now, you'd die from that sight!"

"You know best, Your Lordship," she whimpered. "But my heart would surely take it as a kindness if I could but look once."

The man smirked at her timidity, a smirk the woman longed to wipe away with her hidden sword, but she firmly checked the impulse. By feinting fear, she was bending him to her will as certainly as if she had a knife to his throat, and sure enough, he stood back and bid her look.

Now with no restraint on time, she was able to stare more closely at the advancing enemy, and she nearly choked at what she saw. Her eyes were far better than most, and through the morning mist, she saw there were groups in the closing force that did not have torches lit, creatures that spurned the light, creatures that needed that canopy of clouds to protect them from the hated sunlight.

Rock goblins!

Rock goblins, the deadly enemies of all humanity, were actually marching with the Northings!

The woman fell back, the enormity of the revelation bursting into her brain. The size of the Northing force, their rapid progress over the mountains, even their speed in marching at night, all of it explained by the shattering fact that the rock goblins were helping them rather than fighting them!

“A scary sight and no mistake, as I warned you,” said Gamblen, misreading her reaction. He stepped closer, reaching out for her as he added softly, “But I know how to keep you safe.”

She slipped away with a shy smile, though she wasn't concerned with modesty; a touch on her body would tell him she was wearing leather armor beneath her serving dress. Her mind, however, was still swirling with the implications of what she had seen through the portal.

This could be no mere raid.

This was an invasion.

The soldiers around her were still confident behind their walls, knowing the Northings could not carry siege equipment across the mountains and wood was too scarce and too green on the plains to build any quickly. Without siege equipment, the barbarians could do nothing against the solid walls of the castle and must fall back in the end, frustrated as always in the past by the citadels of the plains.

All very true, but the brave soldiers around her were missing one very critical point. The Northings, whatever their disagreeable tendency to sack villages and burn people alive, were no fools. They would not have mustered such an army, enlisted the aid of the Rock Goblins and endured a spring crossing of the mountains for naught but a raid. They had come to break Carthix Castle. But how?

“Come now,” Gamblen was saying to her. “Set aside your shyness, girl. Who knows what fate awaits us this day?”

Mirna’s gift to women, she thought wryly as she looked at him. But the fool has no idea how much truth there is in his words. The clouds on the horizon seemed to shift for a moment, allowing a watery hint of sunlight to slip through, and Gamblen suddenly got a clear look at the expression in the woman’s cold blue eyes. He took a step back.

"My Lord!" came the unexpected cry of one of the lookouts on the battlements.  
“Something comes against us!”

Men rushed to the ramparts to peer out at the mist-shrouded dawn, straining their eyes in the dim light. Gamblen went to one of the slits in the gate, but the woman pushed beside him, casting caution aside. The snowy peaks of the Earth's Teeth were stained green from the reflected glow of the leprous clouds overhead, and below them were the rough, dark masses of the foothills, children of the mountains clinging to the feet of their great parents. Closer were the

torches of the Northing host, scattered throughout the morning fog, but that could not have been the cause of the guard's alarm, for the torches had been in sight all night long.

Then, as she watched, it seemed as if one of the foothills took a step towards them.

"What in the name of Darkness..?" Gamblen cried softly.

They had all been focusing on the torches of the approaching barbarians and had had no eyes for something much larger looming over them, something that had been lost against the shadows of the foothills, something that had been approaching them steadily through the night. It moved again, and they saw it stood upon two legs, though each was thicker than the bodies of half a dozen men, and it seemed to have arms of equal size. The form stayed black despite the weak morning light, as if it denied the power of the sun, and from deep within its midnight face, two glowing red eyes blazed with an endless hunger that chilled the blood of all caught within their gaze. It was a terror from a madman's nightmare turned loose upon the waking world.

"Merciful Mirna," breathed Gamblen. "What has that devil set upon us?"

The woman flung herself away from the gate and charged up the narrow stairs to the battlements above, and no one took notice of a serving wench going to man the ramparts. She was effectively puncturing her own disguise, but she had to get a clearer look. She reached the ramparts, pushed in right beside the soldiers, and froze in place.

The thing was continuing to move towards them, slowly but with a dreadful intensity that made each and every heart quail, and around the feet of the monstrous shadow, the Northings pranced and capered in unholy glee. It must have been steadily approaching throughout the night, and they all began to understand the growing dread which had been seeping into every heart: their souls had felt the coming of this terror long before their eyes beheld it.

"Catapults and ballistas!" an officer was crying, trying to rouse his men from their stupor. "Stand to your weapons there! Altor, aim for the thing's eyes and blind it! Captain of the Wall! Are you asleep? Those Northings are within arrow range! Shadow or no, we'll teach them the price of dancing beneath the walls of Carthix Castle!"

The boulders and bolts from the castle's artillery were sent flying, the soldiers loading and firing with the speed and skill of long practice, all of them raining down on the monster. But though their aim was true and the weapons struck home, the projectiles had no effect on the darkness, and the shadow never faltered as it inexorably closed upon the walls.

"Burning oil! Bring forward the oil!" came another shout. "Pikemen to the walls! Stand to on the battlements!"

Onward the shadow came with the enemy packed around it, closing on the castle with a startling speed, and arrows that should have rained upon the Northings were wasted instead against the apparition. Onward it came without faltering once, approaching the great ditch filled with sharpened stakes and gnarled thorn trees, its blazing eyes nearly level with the men on the parapet, cold and despair radiating from it like heat from a flame. The burning oil was brought along the battlement, a dozen men manning the wooden handles of each cauldron, and the tainted morning air was overwhelmed by the stench of the oil.

The monster stepped down into the ditch, the packed thorn trees that guarded the walls snapping and cracking beneath its black feet, and the tempered steel of the spears and pikes were hurled down upon it. Then three cauldrons of burning oil were flung out to envelop the thing in fire, igniting the trees around it to create an inferno that nothing living could possibly endure.

To no avail.

The dark giant stood unharmed amid the flames and raised one huge arm, both armies pausing with eyes and jaws agape, waiting to see what power that limb possessed. With frightening speed, the black fist plunged downward and struck squarely against the castle, and a dozen massive blocks exploded out of the wall.

The entire citadel shook from the blow, the parapet crumpling like cheesecloth, and the men on the battlements were thrown off their feet, two of them shaken loose from their posts to plunge screaming into the flaming ditch far below. The woman gawked in disbelief at the devastation from that single blow, and as she watched, the second fist came smashing home, blasting still more blocks from the wall and collapsing another huge part of the parapets, sending it down to fill the ditch and make a rough bridge for the Northings. The thing had struck only twice, and already the breach was half-formed.

There was nothing for it. The wall was already crumbling, and in no time, they would be faced with a horde of barbarians pouring through the breach, hungry for booty and slaughter. She could easily slip away during the final battle, move through the shadows and cut down anyone foolish enough to challenge her, but with a sudden surge of anger, she decided to fight. She leaped down onto the stairs and reached the courtyard in two heartbeats to find Gamblen trying to rally his men.

“Man the battlements!” the idiot was shouting, responding to orders now completely useless. “All spears to the ramparts and...”

The woman grabbed his shoulder and hauled him around with a surprising display of strength, the force shutting off his blather.



“Not on the battlements, you damned fool!” she roared in his face, the man’s eyes like saucers. “Stand your men to in the courtyard! Our business is with the barbarians! We’ll try to close the breach after this hellish thing passes!”

Gamblen nodded, instantly recognizing the plan was their only chance, even if it had come from the mouth of what appeared to be a mere serving wench. To his still greater amazement, the woman abruptly produced a gleaming silver sword with black hilts seemingly from nowhere which she swung with practiced skill, the mere sight of the weapon making his throat go dry.

A third blow from the monster, and the battlements collapsed, carrying every man upon them down to a mercifully swift death.

The walls of Carthix Castle were breached.

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Some minutes later, deep within the inner walls of Carthix Castle's central keep, a rat scurried along on business of its own, oblivious to the slaughter and pillage occurring around it. Here, in the narrow shafts, a rat had nothing to fear except water and the rare snake, and this one had grown a little too complacent for its own good. The tiniest of sounds ahead made it look up to see what appeared to be one of its own kind moving slowly towards it, a black rat of unusual size with a totally alien scent. And with a faint green light gleaming from its eyes. The little rat sniffed nervously, trying to identify this newcomer and decide if it were a threat. Suddenly, the darkness behind the black rat moved and two large blue eyes blinked at the little creature. It turned immediately and fled down the passage in a desperate attempt to escape, for while it wasn't sure to what those eyes belonged, it knew there was death in them.

Adella was glad to see the tiny rat run, although she should have welcomed the creature as a little brother. Like other thieves, she was accustomed to encountering rodents of all sorts in pursuit of her goals, and the presence of a rat here made it very likely that any traps or alarms in the passage ahead were set with a coarse trigger, making them easier to find and remove. But though she would have gladly died before admitting it, Adella didn't like rats.

Bloodseeker took advantage of the pause to turn and look back at its mistress, its green eyes disturbing in the darkness even to Adella.

*The battle still rages, it said without words. Why do we waste time crawling through darkness and stone?*

"I've spent eight thousand dinars and three months preparing this job," she whispered grimly. "I'm not going to have the prize snatched away by a bunch of foul-smelling mountain goats." She put her dagger out and playfully jabbed Bloodseeker's hind end. "Now get moving. The sooner we're done here, the sooner you can get back to playing with the Northings."

The rat turned and obediently waddled down the shaft, though in the darkness, Adella could detect a faint green light that seemed to pulse from it. A danger sign. It was reckless to use Bloodseeker as a scout after a battle such as they had just fought, but there was no choice. Still, the sooner she could return it to its true form the better in all ways.

She stretched herself out again, using her fingers and toes to propel herself forward, and the long dress of pure black satin which had replaced her serving wench disguise helped her slide easily over the rough stone, the fabric feeling cool and smooth against her skin. Her leather armor, of course, had been left behind. She had to squeeze every fraction out of the available space, and the armor would also have scraped against the stone, sending dangerous echoes down

the shaft. But after the fight in the courtyard, she felt uncomfortable without the solid hug of the armor.

For just a moment, her mind went back to the huge shadow which had broken its way through the walls of the castle, and a shiver ran through her again, an echo of the horror that had filled her. She shook the memory off, having no time for it now. In truth, she had been too distracted to watch the thing as it passed through the courtyard and began pounding an exit through the back wall of the castle, but she had seen enough of its handiwork to understand its power. No castle could hope to stand against such a monster, and the implications of that for the people of the plains were frightening even to Adella.

Up ahead, there was the faintest glimmer of light, showing that a side shaft intersected the main passage, and she was relieved to have normal vision again. There was more than a trace of elvish blood in Adella's veins which empowered her with some sight even in total darkness, but she was always happier when she had real light with which to see. That, too, distinguished her from other thieves.

Bloodseeker paused again, but this time it was looking up at the ceiling of the shaft. Cautiously, Adella peered forward, and her trained eyes picked up the tiniest of trip wires perhaps two inches below the top of the shaft, a trap designed to catch a two-legged rat. She froze immediately, knowing a false move here would mean certain death, and she studied the offending wire by the dim light filtering from the passage beyond. It took only a few moments to assure herself that whatever it triggered, the wire itself was no more than a simple trip, the sort of problem Adella had faced countless times before. She tugged ever so gently on it, her trained fingers determining on which side it was anchored, and then, holding the active side taut, she cut the wire.

Dropping the dagger, she pulled a sliver of wood out of the sleeve of her dress and tied the end of the wire to it, releasing it with a painful delicacy to rest against the side of the shaft. The wood held. Adella smiled in the half-light like an artist admiring her newest work, for traps were designed to be thief-killers and this one would never fulfill its purpose. Then she moved forward.

She peered around the corner to the source of the light, a narrow opening with heavy iron bars blocking the way. Adella grinned. Even the fools who had designed this backwater castle had known the ventilator shafts were an inviting avenue for thieves, and this was their way of taking precautions. Guards, traps, and bars, the three defenders of every horde. But guards had a way of being moved suddenly, traps were never as good as the designers hoped, and a few drops of dragon's blood would eat its way through any iron. The gold was as good as hers.

She pulled herself closer to the opening and then froze again, only this time not from any tripwire.

Voices!

The Demon take the luck! Those thrice-damned Northings had beaten her to the horde! A dozen angry oaths rose to her throat, but she swallowed them down again, forcing herself to be calm. Rage was an extravagance she could not afford at this point. But it was hard. Three months of planning, of playing a serving maid to learn the castle's routine, the dangers, the bribes, the scouting, and finally joining the bloody battle in the courtyard in a hopeless attempt to beat back the invaders, all for nothing.

As she got herself back under control, she realized the voices were talking calmly, certainly not the triumphant cries of a gang of looting barbarians. With a small surge of hope,

she put Bloodseeker on her shoulder and inched her way forward, straining to hear what was being said.

"...as you promised. This room alone holds more gold than I could have gathered from the Northlands in a full year."

The tone was harsh, loud, and masculine, using the tongue of the Northings with which Adella was roughly familiar, though many words were lost on her. But the voice that answered it sent a shiver up her spine. Cold and echoing, it came from no human throat, and she felt an almost instinctive urge to back away from it.

*And this is but a...of the wealth and power yet to come.*

"I'll grant the...has more than proven its worth," the first voice answered. "And I can use the quick destruction of Carthix Castle as a lever against the other states of the plains. But will its power last to Jalan's Drift and beyond?"

Jalan's Drift?! Adella blinked, the thought staggering. The Northings were planning to cross all the Plains of Alencia and assail the Drift itself?!

*That is still to be seen, the dark voice said. But you must husband its strength and resist any attempt to control it further. Such...will only drain its...and divert it from the course we have set. And you must not waste opportunities.*

"What do you mean?"

*The halls of this castle ring with the dying screams of the captured...as your warriors make bloodsport and gamble their loot on the outcome. There is a more valuable use for those prisoners.*

"True. But my men have suffered greatly during the crossing of the mountains, and they will fight better after a night's play. There is still a hard...before us."

*Your warriors mean nothing beside the... You have seen its power. Nothing can stand against it. Only you can bring it to a stop with your foolishness.*

Despite her reluctance, Adella felt a pressing need to see who was speaking. She edged herself slowly forward, thankful for the silencing effect of the satin dress.

"...without doubt. For my men will have to hold this land after the...passes, and that may prove to be a long and hard task. Your...will have ample opportunity to prove itself before we reach the Drift," declared the first voice as Adella peered through the bars of the shaft.

The room was stone-lined with a single door of heavy iron in the far wall, and all around the room were locked chests, perhaps thirty total. Adella didn't need to see the contents to know she had indeed reached the main treasury of the castle, the goal she had been seeking for three months now.

In the middle of the room stood the first speaker, a giant of a man whose head was only inches beneath the seven-foot ceiling, and his broad shoulders with their trailing black cape seemed to fill half the room. He wore no gauntlets, but his massive arms were encased in silvery armor, while his torso and legs were covered with black chain-mesh. His head was bare of helm, leaving his long black hair to fall unhindered to his shoulders, and his face bore the cruel ferocity which must have made even the Northings flinch. Worst of all, however, were his eyes. They were gleaming red, as if stained by all the bloodshed they had witnessed, and Adella knew them by rumor: the Burning Eyes of Alacon Regnar, the Tyrant of the Northlands, whose gaze no one could endure.

In his hands, the Tyrant held a large rod of green stone whose head was carved hideously into the shape of a demon's face with glowing rubies set in the eye-sockets, and Adella found herself even more disturbed by that strange scepter than by the Tyrant's eyes. Bloodseeker

crawled from one shoulder to the other to get a better view. There was no sign of another speaker in the room, but she felt oddly certain that the man had been speaking to the scepter itself.

And in confirmation, the great rubies flashed red light, and the cold voice said, *We are overheard. A spy has penetrated your defenses.*

With one motion, Adella put her hands against the sides of the shaft and shot herself backwards, knowing her life might now be measured in seconds. But in that instant before her arms pushed against the walls, the Tyrant looked up, and his red eyes locked on her blue ones, rage staring into cool defiance. Then she was gone, turning herself at the intersection and dragging herself down the shaft as fast as her arms and legs could drive her. With the need for caution and silence at an end, she moved with surprising speed, her strong, slender body charging through the stone, Bloodseeker waddling quickly behind her. Rousing the castle might actually help to cover her escape, the half-drunk Northings bumping into each other, but that was only if she could get out of this rat-hole quickly.

She came to the exit and flung herself head-first through the opening, rolling skillfully as she hit the floor and coming to a ready crouch. A wise precaution. Two Northing warriors stood nearly within reach and two more were hurrying down the corridor towards her.

"Here's a sweet treat," the one Northing growled, reaching for her arm. "Come, bitch. We've plans for you."

Adella shrank back against the wall, feigning terror in order to give the two additional guards a little more time to close. Her right hand rose to the shaft from which she had just emerged, and the little rat with the green eyes scurried obediently onto her open palm. The

warrior reaching for her suddenly found himself staring at the stump of his arm as Bloodseeker slashed down, returned at last to its true form: a gleaming silver bastard sword with ebony hilts.

Before another breath could be taken, Adella spun and slashed down at the second guard, cutting through armor and flesh and killing him instantly; though no drop of blood fell to the floor. There was a sizzling sound, and a trail of red steam rose from the body as the blood boiled and soaked into the blade of the great sword. She charged the remaining two guards, catching the first before he could flee. Her first blow crashed through the haft of his war axe, but barely cut through the tough leather of his surcoat. Desperately, the man lunged at her, trying to wrestle her to the ground, but Adella nimbly pirouetted like a fine dancer, ducked under his arms, and struck back blindly over her own shoulder, Bloodseeker unerringly thrusting into the man's exposed back and piercing his heart. The final guard was already fleeing, having no desire to face either woman or sword, but a single gesture brought the probing dagger into Adella's hand, and she sent it flying expertly down the corridor into the warrior's back. There was no need to check the kill.

Ignoring the carnage around her, Adella turned her attention to the sword that now pulsed with a faint red glow. Delicately, she moved her hand along the blade as if to caress the steel, careful of the great heat that was radiating from it.

"Come, my lovely," she whispered to the sword. "Come. Give me my share."

Steadily the red glow began to grow, turning rapidly into a blinding red light, and when it had vanished again, the figure of Adella had disappeared, and in her place stood a Northing warrior, similar in appearance to the dead lying on the floor.

"Very nice, my lovely," she whispered again, now with a gruff Northing's voice.



There was no time to lose. She knew the spell would not last long, and she must be out of the gates before it dissipated. She grabbed a hide from the belt of one of the fallen and partially wrapped Bloodseeker in it, making it look like just another bit of plunder, then she picked up a war axe to complete the disguise.

As she hurried down the hallway, her mind went back to the conversation she had overheard in the treasure room, and a faint smile came to the bearded lips of the barbarian. Even though she had gotten no gold, she was leaving with something that just might compensate her for her lost opportunity. All she needed now was to find someone who was willing to buy it.