

Dust
to
Dust©

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This is an original short story and has
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Rose stepped through the rotting wood gate and frowned at the dust that billowed up around her worn boots. In all the years, she had never seen an inhabited town worse maintained. Buildings in varying stages of decay filled her sight, and she wondered how the locals could frequent them without constant fear of collapse.

Then again, maybe they didn't expect to live much longer anyway. Of those she watched shamble across the fractured cobblestone streets, none appeared under ninety years of age. Their groans, made with the mere effort of dragging their bodies around, punctuated the otherwise silent air. Rose sympathized. Though not half their age, after decades of battle and hardship she felt just as old.

"Is this Albern?" she asked a shriveled, hunchbacked woman pushing a cart about which huge flies buzzed. "It isn't on any maps, but I heard it was around here."

The woman turned her head slowly towards Rose, a dazed look in her barely open eyes. She blinked a few times, then, without saying a word, averted her gaze and continued walking.

Rose put hands on her big hips and sighed. This was probably Albern, all right. Her luck was too bad for it not to be, unless it was instead some monster-ridden trap waiting to drink her blood. Not that it couldn't be both, of course. Even the weather seemed less than inviting here, if today's gloomy skies represented the norm.

She looked over the mysterious letter written in dirt that had brought her here and frowned. *Heroine of the thousand scars*, it said, *your new life awaits in Albern*. What did she need a new life for? She had her beloved husband and kids, a fair number of friends and far more than enough fame. She did also have ugly scars beyond counting and numerous chronic pains, but she could live with that. Though tempted to ignore the message, she feared whoever sent it would not leave it at that. Many had forced her attention by making trouble with her family. Such was the price of having a reputation.

Rose tried to confirm her location with the other folks outside, who responded with the same glassy-eyed silence as the first woman. Everyone here couldn't be like this just because they were old, could they? In frustration, she started peeking into doors and windows. Maybe if she found a tavern, or some other kind of gathering spot...

But everything that might have once been such proved deserted.

Stepping back from another musty abandoned barroom, Rose wiped at a forehead sweaty with aggravation. This had better not be somebody's idea of a game. If they wanted to contact her, she would much prefer the direct approach.

There must be a library somewhere, or at least some place where records were kept. At this point, no one should care if she accessed it.

She headed to the middle of town, and to her relief a large faded building came into view. Unusual though Albern might be, common sense still seemed to be of some use here. Upon entering, she found the lobby deserted. Probably the rest of the building too, given the room's disused appearance. No matter, assuming relevant information remained. She stepped behind the front desk, opened a drawer to reveal a stack of papers, and began sifting through them.

A number of pages in, Rose stopped with a start. Inexplicably, all of them were blank.

What was going on? Was this a trick, and if so by who? Rose remembered the shuffling near-cadavers she had seen and wondered if they were ghosts. Maybe, she thought with a shudder, this entire town was a ghost. But she had fought, and conquered, ghosts before.

She went to the second floor. The interior appeared more like a residence than a public building like a town hall, and she hoped something of use might yet be found in the master's rooms. A journey through cobwebbed halls and creaky doors left her standing inside a wide, huge-windowed bedroom. Once it must have been extravagantly furnished, but time had passed such that its fine fabrics had rotted away and its once brilliant metals become tarnished with rust.

Before the broken center window stood a huge lens, hazy after long exposure to the elements. Rose passed it by, at first not realizing how it made the view of the town different. Then her mind caught up to her eyes and she stepped back. Through that great lens, she spotted a previously unseen tower looming at the rear of town. She looked around the lens. The tower was nowhere to be found. Again she stared into the

lens. The tower was back.

Rose gazed skyward and exhaled. She didn't like towers. Towers, along with castles, mountains, and caves, were among the kinds of places she tended to get very wounded. Still, she would most likely have to go there to get some answers. But how would she navigate the tower if it were normally invisible to sight?

She drew her sword and struck a piece off the big lens, then picked it up and looked through it. The tower stood beckoning.

After a search of the premises revealed nothing else of interest, Rose left for the tower. A colossal structure built of massive stones and broader at its base than even the manor she had just visited, it provided a sharp contrast to the humble settlement that lay at its feet. Carvings of scenes no doubt significant in Albern's myths or history covered its brown facade, which seemed only slightly smoothed, even enhanced, by time's gradual assault.

Just to see if she could, Rose took the piece of lens away from her eye and tried to touch the now invisible wall. Her hand passed right through where it should have been. Did one need to see the tower to interact with it? She raised her lens and tried again. This time, cool stone stopped her hand.

She walked before the arching door. Though it seemed to be open, she could see nothing inside save darkness. What was this? She thrust her sword into the portal and withdrew it; it seemed to be fine. Taking a deep breath for courage, she entered.

It was like stepping through a wall of ink. One moment she saw only black, the next she stood just inside a dim high-ceilinged chamber. Indeed, the ceiling was so high she could not see it beyond the darkness. A low fog or mist wafted about her legs, and a smoky smell reached her nostrils. She chanced lowering her lens. Thankfully, her surroundings remained visible.

The smoky smell increased and sharpened to convey a menace that had Rose readying her sword and shield. From the back of the room scuttled a cottage-sized black spider with bladelikey legs and a metallic carapace. Between two pairs of great mandibles dripped sizzling, steaming poison. Where its eyes should have been, twisted

humanoid visages wailed instead.

Rose shivered with a natural fear, but clenched her teeth and darted forward. She had fought bigger and probably stronger. A spray of venom hissed at her face; she ducked and kept going. Oversized claws scythed down, gouging the floor. Despite her bulk and aching joints, she weaved through the hail of strikes and cut at the monster. Her blade passed without resistance through its grotesque visage, and with a shriek it dissolved away into smoke.

Just an illusion?

"Who's there?" Rose yelled, looking around. "Are you trying to test me?"

A red glow lit the air, but without extending the limits of her vision. "If I was," a deep male voice rumbled from everywhere at once, "then you have passed. That was the image of the Hordar, which even the gods feared in times of old. But you apparently do not."

Rose shrugged. "I was a bit scared, but I had little to judge it on. All I knew is I've killed scarier looking before."

"I am not surprised. After all, you are She Who Endures."

Not one to enjoy nicknames that reminded her of all she had suffered, she looked at her feet. "So you've been expecting me, huh? Why am I here?" She scowled. "It had better not be because you want me to be your mate or something, either."

"My mate? No, I would think that to be impossible. But you will be the one to restore the glory of Albern."

That would be the "or something" Rose had been thinking about. "Me, restore Albern? First of all, I don't know anything about running a town. Second"--she recalled the lack of young residents she had seen--"it might be too late for that."

"Albern is not a town. That of which you speak is a mere refuse bin built by the Leshhi over where my capital once stood, to dispose of their elders when they are deemed of no more use. They are a disgrace of a people and do not deserve to share the Albern blood."

Golden illumination filled the room, finally allowing Rose to see the vast domed

ceiling. Painted across it were mountains and valleys, lakes and rivers, forests and plains—an enormous land mass, bordered with blue ocean. "That," the voice said, "is Albern."

"You mean this entire continent was united under the banner of Albern?" Almost inconceivable, considering how many bickering states divided it now. "But it looks different from now... how long has it been since that time, for the earth to reshape itself so?"

"Long indeed. But not too long—never too long for the return of glory."

She shook her head. "I'm not the one you want to help you with that. Like I said, I'm not experienced in leading a town, let alone something much larger than that. And don't you think I'm a bit old to become heir to your kingdom?"

The voice took on a teacherly air, almost like it knew more about her than she did herself. "How old are you? You cannot be more than forty, unless you are immortal."

"That's about right," she said with a frown, "but I'm older than my years." She had survived a lot more than a person had any right to, but not without cost to her wreck of a body.

"Whatever marks of battle you bear, you are still stronger than most people could ever dream of being. Forty is younger than many rulers who have stepped up to replace another, and I believe your inexperience is something you can easily overcome.

"Besides, you were a queen once, were you not?"

Rose spread her arms in a helpless gesture. "I was only queen because the king picked me while delirious on his deathbed, and then only for a couple months! If I thought I could handle it, why did I throw a fight just to give his daughter the crown back?"

"You did not want to keep it. That is not to say you could not."

"I have a family and life where I'm from. You can't expect me just to abandon them for your cause."

"Your family you can take with you. And you have been displaced before."

She groaned. "I don't *want* to attempt restoring a continent-spanning empire.

That's not going to happen in my lifetime unless by force, and I have no desire to lead a war of conquest."

"Perhaps you are unsuited to my purposes. Desire is most important in undertaking the grandest of tasks." He paused. "But do not decide whether you have the desire yet, before you see all I have to show you."

A new glow highlighted a staircase against the far wall. Though not ready to comply with the voice's wishes, Rose felt no inclination to try and flee the tower. She had long been interested in history, and the discovery of such an ancient empire, older than any she was familiar with, intrigued her.

Heading upstairs, Rose wondered if the master of the tower still had a physical form. Through meetings arranged by fate, she had encountered and bested the strongest of an age prior to hers. Yet she wondered if the ruler of an earlier time might be mightier still.

Her arrival on the second floor brought into view another ceiling mosaic. This one depicted a series of scenes much like those she had seen on the outside of the tower, but more detailed and easier to decipher in color. She glanced over meetings of powerful men, nations built, alliances formed, and terrible battles.

She took note of a young, spiky-haired man, who even in painted form seemed to call to her. He slaughtered countless foes in battle, more than any other shown, but outside of combat appeared a pillar of reason, always mediating conflicts and checking uneasy tempers. Even huge figures she took for gods turned to him for advice and help. More and more, she realized him to be the hero of the story.

"Are you him?" Rose asked. "Did you build Albern?"

"Yes. What you witness above is my tale."

Rose's neck was starting to get stiff from looking upward so much, but she smiled. He did not seem evil, if the pictures depicted truth; and she did feel a truth to them, though how she knew not.

Stairs like a coiled snake took her around the second floor and up to the third, where the tale continued. The young warrior became a champion and then a king, con-

verting as many enemies to his side as he slew. Along the way he fell in love with a foreign princess. He killed her father, but she forgave him and they were wed. Soldiering on, he united the continent. Then came the fourth floor.

The gods turned on him.

Displeased with the blending of their peoples, the deities of the land sought to overthrow the empire. The king's life began to remind Rose of hers. Like her he faced overwhelming foes, monstrous children of the gods, and eked out victory on the stubbornness of his will alone. Like her he gained the distrust of his people, lost many friends, and saw those who remained die trying to help him. Like her he watched helplessly while his first love fell in battle.

Like her he prevailed. As she had overcome evils whose powers rivaled gods, he defeated his divine foes and secured his kingdom once more. And like her, he found love again. His new queen gave him children, and they lived in bliss.

"We have a lot in common," Rose said. "But even from the beginning, you had the charisma I don't. Maybe we'd make good friends, but I couldn't be another you."

"You have not seen the end of my story yet. Keep going."

She continued to the fifth floor, wondering if more troubles lay ahead for him. That was the case for her, for her trials had never really ended. Always, another struggle loomed in the near future.

Her suspicions proved correct. Later in his reign, the king's daughter fell for the son of a rebellious lord. When the two factions engaged in battle, she gave her life shielding her love from her father's blade.

Enraged, her brother attempted to seize the throne. The king refused to kill his son, but one of his generals did it for him. Not long after, his wife hanged herself.

"Damn," Rose whispered, tears of pity misting her eyes. "Your life was worse than mine." Of course hers was not over yet, but she prayed she would never meet such tragedy. Losing an unborn child to a blade through her gut had been more than enough.

On the sixth floor, Rose saw the king dedicate the rest of his life to strengthening his kingdom. With the death of his family, the drive to make his creation last became his sole purpose for living.

He failed. Upon making it to the red-lit seventh floor, Rose saw the end result of all his efforts. He died young, poisoned by a servant of the fallen gods, and within months the infighting of his kingdom tore it apart.

"Why did you show me all this?" Rose asked softly. She reached out in sympathy towards the likeness of the king, more trusting of him after he'd allowed her to see his unhappy ending. "You can't have thought a tale like this would encourage me to follow in your footsteps."

"How could I not show you? I will not try to deceive you. My path is a difficult one, but I believe one can avoid the pitfalls that were my undoing. Your heart, at least, may be greater than mine still."

"I don't see how that would have helped. Fate itself seemed to be against you."

"And you have not outright defied fate before? Destiny ordained that you choose between the lives of your children and the world. But you saved them both, didn't you?"

She shook her head. "I did that by killing the demon lord the prophecy said my children would bring back to destroy the world. You were strong enough to defeat the gods, but that didn't help you avoid your greatest woe. In any case, I just don't want to be your heir."

The tower shook, and the mist about her feet rose to hip level. A thick granite throne materialized within it. Seated upon it was the king, holding a massive tapering sword. He looked about her age and rugged, but his brow seemed thicker and his skull more prominent than those of any modern man.

He stood, red light reflecting off the gray scales of his armor like drops of blood. "Only here can I manifest. But if I wear your body, I will be free to walk the earth once again."

She stepped back. "What? Do you mean... what I think you do?"

"I do not want to," he said in an earnest tone. "If you agree to help me achieve

my goal, I will allow you to leave."

"Why do you want to restore your empire so bad? It's been thousands of years. The past is gone, can't you just let that be?"

The red lighting of the room pulsed angrily, and his voice rose. "It should have lasted. After all I strove, it should have lasted!"

Under his fiery glare, Rose averted her gaze. "Maybe this continent just isn't meant to be united. Your will held it together while you lived, but it couldn't remain so for long."

"Your will can hold it too."

"I won't live forever either."

"Then I will find another body to wear when I am done with yours."

He charged, sword raised to strike. Right before reaching her, he disappeared. Sensing movement at her back, she spun and hopped back just in time to parry his slash as he reappeared behind her. Upon contact between their blades, he vanished. Materializing high in the air, he fell into a downward chop that drove her to a crouch when she blocked. She wrenched his sword down and aside, kicked at his legs. Before her sweep could touch him, he blinked out again.

"It is not too late to change your mind," he said.

She leaned aside from a stab at her face and ducked when he whipped his blade sideways. "I won't give up my freedom. Why would I submit, when I know what you're doing is wrong?"

He nodded appreciatively. "Then fight your best, and see if you can stop me!"

Two of him seemed to appear, flanking her. Yet she detected which was real by feeling the displacement of air he made and deflected his attack once more. His images split into four; still she found him. Their blades, real and illusionary, flashed like dancing sunbeams. But though she was able to defend his attacks, he never stayed still long enough for her to hit back.

"How do you plan on possessing me if you kill me?" she asked. "I take a lot of punishment to put down, and my body probably won't be in any condition for use once

your sword finishes me off."

"This sword will not harm your flesh," he said with a jab at her neck. "Rather it will burn away your soul, leaving me an ideal vessel."

Rose dodged, deflected another stab from the side when he teleported again. "You think? You might be surprised how hard it is to get used to the pain this body's always in."

"Pain does not matter. Sacrifices do not matter. Only success matters!"

Ducking a high slash, Rose tried to strike back. Her thrust at his gut passed through empty space. "Why does it have to be me? Why can't you find someone else?"

A dozen jumping images of him surrounded her, slashing at her head. She managed to parry the real attack and kick at his chest.

"Because you are perfect!" he said, melting into the air. "If we had lived in the same time, we might have been soulmates. As we did not, you can be me!"

He took flight and swooped at her like a hawk. She blocked a powerful cut, and was pushed back a few steps before he vanished.

He reappeared yards away and pointed his suddenly glowing blade at her. A blinding stream of bluish energy shot forth. She tried to block with her sword, but it flowed around her blade and crashed into her chest and middle. Agony swallowed her mind. It felt like being bathed in lava and having it pumped into her insides. She staggered back, collapsed to her rump. The king lifted a foot to step forward.

In that instant, she threw a dagger.

The king avoided it easily by teleporting. His reappearance before her, however, brought him into the direct path of a rising uppercut with her shield. He reeled. Her followup with the sword just missed slicing into his chest.

He backpedaled and went to one knee, stabbing into the floor as he did. Somehow, the front of his blade burst from the ground beneath her and tore into her leg. No blood flowed, but she shuddered with the unbearable heat that filled her head and chest. Why couldn't he follow some physical laws, dammit?

Again he lunged in. Rose rallied enough to raise her sword, but feared continued

defense would only prove futile. She could hardly hit him back, and if things kept going that way she would be dead. She had to do something different...

Instead of dodging his next thrust, she stood still and let his huge blade impale her through the chest.

"Sorry," he said, and she believed him.

"Don't need... to apologize yet." She grasped the blade piercing her with both hands. "That sword's an extension of your soul, isn't it? You thought to overpower my will with your own. But didn't you say my heart might be stronger than yours?"

Holding it within herself with shaking hands, she *willed* his sword to break. The pain resembled molten steel inside her breast, but she had survived the actual thing before. Cold, she thought. If you are heat, I am cold! Her agony started to lessen, and the blade jutting from her chest grew dull. Then, with a sound like a thousand breaking windows, it shattered. The king stumbled back. She collapsed to her side, clutching her chest. But there was no wound.

The king stood before her, relaxed with hands at his sides. She noticed his skin turning gray. "I am glad you won," he said.

She stared in puzzlement. "Glad? Why? Didn't you want to restore your kingdom?"

He gave a sad shrug. "I did and I didn't. Part of me wanted to rest with my family, but there are those who still worship me as a god and I could not ignore my faithful's pleas. Thank you for taking that choice out of my hands."

"Thank you? I..." Rose didn't know what to say. All her sympathy for him came rushing back, and she almost regretted defeating him.

"Don't feel bad," he said, crumbling away into dust. "You have granted me freedom. The real reason I chose you was because you were the only one I thought had a chance of beating me. Farewell, She Who Endures." And he was gone.

Rose watched the tower blur and fade around her. Apparently, it had been only a figment of his imagination. Moments later she was plummeting through the air, and after the long fall a hard impact jarred her spine. Sitting up, she found herself on bare

grass at the edge of town. She hoped that with their god's exit, the king's worshipers would give up their quest to restore his empire. If they didn't, though, she still hoped they would not make it her problem.

She Who Endures was a pretty good nickname, Rose decided. She might even have tried to get it popularized, if she cared about such things. Rubbing her back to relieve the pain, she came to her feet and looked towards home.

Not all heroes got happy endings, so she would have to make the best of the time she had. She looked forward to sharing the story of Albern with her friends.

The End

A large, light gray letter 'B' graphic that serves as a background for the text 'The End'. The letter is stylized with a thick stroke and a slight shadow effect.