

DELPHINE OF MORIA

CHAPTER I: The Ebony Warrior

I

There are two roads to Torkertown. One, the shorter and more direct route, leads across a barren upland moor, and the other, which is much longer, winds its tortuous way in and out among the hummocks and quagmires of the swamps, skirting the low hills to the east. It was a dangerous and tedious trail; so Delphine of Moria halted in amazement when a breathless youth from the village he had just left overtook her and implored her for God's sake to take the swamp road.

"The swamp road!" Delphine stared at the boy. She was a tall, gaunt woman, Delphine of Moria, her darkly pallid face and deep brooding eyes made more sombre by the drab Puritanical garb she affected.

"Yes, ma'am, tis far safer," the youngster answered to her surprised exclamation.

"Then the moor road must be haunted by Satan himself, for your townsmen warned me against traversing the other," Delphine said.

"Because of the quagmires, ma'am, that you might not see in the dark. You had better return to the village and continue your journey in the morning, ma'am," the man said.

"Taking the swamp road?" Delphine asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

Delphine shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. Then, she said to him, "The moon rises almost as soon as twilight dies. By its light I can reach Torkertown in a few hours, across the moor."

"Ma'am, you had better not. No one ever goes that way. There are no houses at all upon the moor, while in the swamp there is the house of old Ezra who lives there all alone since his maniac cousin, Gideon, wandered off and died in the swamp and was never found—and old Ezra though a miser would not refuse you lodging should you decide to stop until morning. Since you must go, you had better go the swamp road."

Delphine eyes the boy, piercingly and the lad squirmed and shuffled his feet.

"Since this moor road is so dour to wayfarers," Delphine said, "why did the villagers not tell me the whole tale, instead of vague mouthings?"

"Men do not like to talk of it, ma'am. We hoped that you would take the swamp road after the men advised you to, but when we watched and saw that you didn't turn at the forks, they sent me to run after you and beg you to reconsider."

"Name of the Devil!" Delphine exclaimed sharply, the unaccustomed oath showing her irritation; "the swamp road and the moor road—what is it that threatens me and why should I go miles out of my way and risk the bogs and mires?"

"Ma'am," said the boy, dropping his voice and drawing closer, "we be simple villagers who like not to talk of such things lest foul fortune befall us, but the moor road is a way accurst and hath not been traversed by any of the countryside for a year or more. It is death to walk those moors by night, for it's been found by some score of unfortunates. Some foul horror haunts the way and claims men for his victims."

"So? And what is this thing like?" Delphine asked.

"No man knows. None has ever seen, it and lived, but late-farers have heard terrible laughter far out on the fen and men have heard the horrid shrieks of its victims. Ma'am, in God's name return to the village, there pass the night, and tomorrow take the swamp trail to Torkertown."

Far back in Delphine's gloomy eyes a scintillant light had begun to glimmer, like a witch's torch glinting under fathoms of cold grey ice. Her blood quickened. Adventure! The lure of life-risk and drama! Not that Delphine recognized her sensations as such. She sincerely considered that she voiced her real feelings when she said:

"These things be deeds of some power of evil. The lords of darkness have laid a curse upon the country," Delphine said. "A strong man is needed to combat Satan and his might. Therefore I go, who have defied him many times."

"Ma'am," the boy began, then closed his mouth as he saw the futility of argument. He only added, "The corpses of the victims are bruised and torn, Ma'am."

"See what I got on my back? Demons fear it. This evil you speak of shall fear it as well," Delphine said. And then, she went her way down on the long and dark road that went ever on and on during the brink of Night. She stood there at the crossroads, sighing regretfully as she watched the tall, rangy figure swinging up the road that led toward the moors.

The sun was setting as Delphine came over the brow of the low hill which debouched into the upland fen. Huge and blood-red it sank down behind the sullen horizon of the moors, seeming to touch the rank grass with fire; so for a moment the watcher seemed to be gazing out across a sea of blood.

Then the dark shadows came gliding from the east, the western blaze faded, and Delphine of Moria struck out, boldly in the gathering darkness. The road was dim from disuse but was clearly defined. Delphine went swiftly but warily, Greatsword and her Bow and Arrow at hand. Stars blinked out and night winds whispered among the grass like weeping spectres. The moon began to rise, lean and haggard, like a skull among the stars.

Then suddenly, Delphine stopped short. From somewhere in front of her sounded a strange and eery echo—or something like an echo. Again, this time louder. Delphine started forward again. Were her senses deceiving her? No!

Far out, there pealed a whisper of frightful laughter. And again, closer this time. No human being ever laughed like that—there was no mirth in it, only hatred and horror and soul-destroying terror. Delphine halted... she was not afraid, but for the second she was almost unnerved.

Then, stabbing through that awesome laughter, came the sound of a scream that was undoubtedly human.

II

Delphine started forward, increasing her gait. She cursed the illusive lights and flickering shadows which veiled the moor in the rising moon and made accurate sight impossible. The laughter continued, growing louder, as did the screams. Then sounded faintly the drum of frantic human feet. Delphine broke into a run.

Some human was being hunted to death out there on the fen, and by what manner of horror God only knew. The sound of the flying feet halted abruptly and the screaming rose unbearably, mingled with other sounds unnameable and hideous. Evidently the man had been overtaken, and

Delphine, her flesh crawling, visualized some ghastly fiend of the darkness crouching on the back of its victim crouching and tearing. Then the noise of a terrible and short struggle came clearly through the abysmal silence of the night and the footfalls began again, but stumbling and uneven.

The screaming continued, but with a gasping gurgle. The sweat stood cold on Delphine's forehead and body. This was heaping horror on horror in an intolerable manner. God, for a moment's clear light! The frightful drama was being enacted within a very short distance of her, to judge by the ease with which the sounds reached her.

But this hellish half-light veiled all in shifting shadows, so that the moors appeared a haze of blurred illusions, and stunted trees, and bushes seemed like giants. Delphine shouted, striving to increase the speed of her advance. The shrieks of the unknown broke into a hideous shrill squealing; again there was the sound of a struggle, and then from the shadows of the tall grass a thing came reeling — a thing that had once been a man—a gore-covered, frightful thing that fell at Delphine's feet and writhed and grovelled and raised its terrible face to the rising moon, and gibbered and yammered, and fell down again and died in its own blood. The moon was up now and the light was better. Delphine bent above the body, which lay stark in its unnameable mutilation, and she shuddered; a rare thing for her, who had seen the deeds of the Evildoers and Witch-Hunters.

Some wayfarer. She supposed. Then like a hand of ice on her spine she was aware that she was not alone. She looked up, her cold eyes piercing the shadows whence the dead man had staggered.

She saw nothing, but she knew — she felt—that other eyes gave back her stare, terrible eyes not of this earth. She straightened and drew her Greatsword, waiting. The moonlight spread like a lake of pale blood over the moor, and trees and grasses took on their proper sizes. The shadows melted, and Delphine saw! At first she thought it only a shadow of mist, a wisp of moor fog that swayed in the tall grass before her. She gazed.

More illusion. She thought. Then the thing began to take on shape, vague and indistinct. Two hideous eyes flamed at her—eyes which held all the stark horror which has been the heritage of man since the fearful dawn ages—eyes frightful and insane, with an insanity transcending earthly insanity. The form of the thing was misty and vague, a brain-shattering travesty on the human form, like, yet horribly unlike. The grass and bushes beyond showed clearly through it.

Delphine felt the blood pound in her body, yet she was as cold as ice. How such an unstable being as that which wavered before her could harm a

man in a physical way was more than she could understand, yet the red horror at her feet gave mute testimony that the fiend could act with terrible material effect. Of one thing Delphine was sure; there would be no hunting of her across the dreary moors, no screaming and fleeing to be dragged down again and again. If she must die she would die in her tracks, her wounds in front. Now a vague and grisly mouth gaped wide and the demoniac laughter again shrieked but, soul-shaking in its nearness.

And in the midst of that threat of doom, Delphine deliberately levelled her long Sword and swung it around, once. A maniacal yell of rage and mockery answered the report, and the thing came at her like a flying sheet of smoke, long shadowy arms stretched to drag her down. Delphine, moving with the dynamic speed of a famished wolf, swung her Greatsword with as little effect, and she charges quickly towards the beast and she uses her Blade and thrusts into the centre of the misty attacker. The blade sang as it passed clear through, encountering no solid resistance, and Delphine felt icy fingers grip her limbs, bestial talons tear her garments and the skin beneath.

And the Deadly beast went slowly before Delphine and she pulls the Sword out from its Stomach and its Blood stains the ground.

"I've had enough of you... Hellish Beast," Delphine said.

"And... who... are you? You that walks on this Earth and carries your blade and soaks the tip of your Sword with the Blood of Demons?" The Demon asked.

"Me... I am your Executioner. You reek of fear and you kill innocents who walk this road," Delphine said. "I am the one who walks on this Earth and hunts the Creatures of Darkness. And when I'm done with you, you will beg for forgiveness. Mankind ill needs an unholy Monster such as yourself."

"You cannot triumph here, fool! You have no comprehension with what you are up against. You will taste my Claws and you will feel them rip through your body until you are dead. But enough talk, have at you!"

The Beast began to charge quickly towards Delphine and she started to charge quickly towards the Beast and a Duel emerges.

III

The Beast charges towards Delphine and he uses his Claws and he tries to attack Delphine and she blocks all of his attacks. Then, Delphine swings her Greatsword and she also tries to attack the Demon and he also blocks her attacks. Both Delphine's And The Demon's Claws began to be clashing with each other, each blow was like a bolt of lightning. They clashed openly and quickly and each swing of their attacks began to shake the ground and were

like a Hammer going through the tip of a Nail. They clashed and they did not miss each other as they kept clashing and swinging their Weapons and none of them gave in.

Again, The Beast charges towards Delphine and he uses his Claws and he tries to attack Delphine and she blocks all of his attacks. Then again, Delphine swings her Greatsword and she also tries to attack the Demon and he also blocks her attacks. And again, Both Delphine's Greatsword And the Demon's Claws began to be clashing with each other, each blow was like a bolt of lightning. Delphine was not one to simply give in to her enemies and she was not one to surrender, for she would fight on to the very end. They clashed and they did not miss each other as they kept clashing and swinging their Weapons and none of them gave in.

Yet Again, The Beast charges towards Delphine and he uses his Claws and he tries to attack Delphine and she blocks all of his attacks. Then yet again, Delphine swings her Greatsword and she also tries to attack the Demon and he also blocks her attacks. And yet again, Both Delphine's Greatsword And the Demon's Claws began to be clashing with each other, each blow was like a bolt of lightning. Delphine lived a life of darkness and despair and her only purpose in this cursed world is to defeat the Demons Of Hell in any form that they are in. They clashed and they did not miss each other as they kept clashing and swinging their Weapons and none of them gave in.

Once more, The Beast charges towards Delphine and he uses his Claws and he tries to attack Delphine and she blocks all of his attacks. Then once more, Delphine swings her Greatsword and she also tries to attack the Demon and he also blocks her attacks. And once more, Both Delphine's Greatsword And the Demon's Claws began to be clashing with each other, each blow was like a bolt of lightning. Delphine did not know what her fate would be, but she definitely knew that she must hunt, fight and kill until she seeks and defeats The Grim Reaper. They clashed and they did not miss each other as they kept clashing and swinging their Weapons and none of them gave in.

Then, the Battle ceased for a brief moment, for each stood still and decided to catch their breath before battling each other again.

"You just don't get it, do you? I have walked in limbo for many years and I have never been here to fight back against the living," The Beast said.

"And what's that got to do with me?" Delphine asked.

"You have proven yourself to be a formidable Warrior, but even you will never see the sun shine on this Earth, again!" The Beast shouted. And then, the Battle commenced again, for Delphine and the Beast decided to duel against each other after a brief moment.

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IV

They clashed and they did not miss each other as they kept clashing and swinging their Weapons and none of them gave in. Then again, the Battle

ceased for a brief moment, for each stood still and decided to catch their breath before battling each other again.

"You have nothing against me... my body is far stronger than you believe. Those who fight against me, never live to tell the tale," The Demon said.

"I have never ran away from my enemies. I have fought many Demons such as yourself and I have been victorious against them," Delphine said.

"You are nothing new from the other men that I have devoured. However, you're the first in a very long time to put up a worthy fight!" The Demon shouted.

And then, the Battle commenced yet again, for Delphine and the Demon decided to duel against each other after a brief moment. The Beast charges towards Delphine and he uses his Claws and he tries to attack Delphine and she blocks all of his attacks. Then, Delphine swings her Greatsword and she also tries to attack the Demon and he also blocks her attacks. Both Delphine's And The Demon's Claws began to be clashing with each other, each blow was like a bolt of lightning. They clashed openly and quickly and each swing of their attacks began to shake the ground and were like a Hammer going through the tip of a Nail.

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