

D J O'BRIEN

DARK LAIR TRILOGY



BOOK ONE

WYVERN

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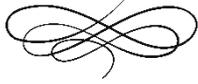
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Dedicated with love to my wife and children.

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Prologue



Amberlay stopped the horse and stared back at the mountains. Watching the flashes of light flaring and dying, a testament to the desperate fight taking place filled her with sorrow.

Artatan, her love, and Grifwen the dwarf mage were standing alone in the pass, holding back the Karesh search party, giving her the time needed to escape.

Tears dripped from Amberlay's cheeks. She would have been by his side at the end but for the babe kicking wildly in her womb.

The Benteer Mountains of Northern Jarro were bitterly cold even in summer. It was now midwinter and a shroud of snow covered the peaks and passes between, magnifying the moonlight, lending the dark a gentler twilight hue. With a heavy heart, she spurred the horse on. Struggling through deep clawing drifts, an hour sped quickly by before the pass opened onto the lower reaches of the mountain from where she could see for many miles out into the flat grasslands of the Northern Plain. All was still and dark, a lone pinprick of light miles away offering the only sign of habitation.

The muscles of her lower back and groin contracted, making her grip the horse's mane and gasp for breath. At length, the pain passed, and she continued on. The flashes on the mountain top were growing dimmer now; his strength was ebbing. She knew it would not be long.

There was little hope of concealing her tracks in the deep snow; her only hope now lay in finding sanctuary. The Karesh were relentless; they'd tracked them from Timberland North, and all the many miles between, all the way out to this lonely and desolate place. Untiring, ruthless, remorseless killers in league with the enemy of all, they would show little mercy.

The horse was at the last of its strength. Leaning forward, Amberlay placed her hands on the sides of its neck. A gentle light flowed, refreshing and energizing

tired muscles, sore limbs. The horse leapt forward, its strength replenished.

The light of the dwelling was closer though still far off, and she could just about make out a last weak flash of light high up in the pass. With her head hanging low, she urged the horse onward, away from the mountains, and away from Artatan. The more she rode, the more the pains returned with vigour, pulsing, squeezing, and robbing her of breath.

Sweat trickled down her brow and back causing fingers of steam to rise and quickly dissipate, she felt no cold.

Away from the slopes, the snow depth was lessening, and she hurried the horse to a trot. The pains were coming regular and strong; she was running out of time.



The convent nestled peacefully in the solitude of the northern hills. The sisters here were self-reliant, their lives dedicated to prayer and inner contemplation.

It was very late, and Mother Superior Thronso was seated at her desk finishing a letter to the head of the order. The rest of the nuns lay fast asleep in their beds.

Loud banging at the main door startled the Mother Superior, her head snapping up, her eyes hard and piercing. ‘Whoever could it be at this hour? We are not expecting any visitors,’ she muttered to herself.

Picking up a candle, she rose from her seat and cautiously walked out into the dark, cold hallway outside her office door. More urgent banging followed. She arrived at the door just as two other nuns appeared from their cells, looks of concern painting their faces.

Sister Magilla even looked frightened. ‘Whoever could it be at this late hour, Mother?’ she asked, wide eyed, her hands covering her cheeks.

‘There’s only one way to find out, Sister. Open the door!’ ordered the Mother Superior.

‘But Mother, what if it’s a beast, or worse?’

‘Beasts of nature don’t knock at doors, child. Now open it and let’s have a look at this late-night caller!’

Magilla pulled back the bolt and eased the door open. Amberlay fell inward onto the stone floor of the hall, curling herself into a ball, gripping at her stomach. She was having strong contractions.

The veins of her neck bulged, and her face was a deep red.

Magilla screamed as the body of the young woman suddenly appeared at her feet.

‘Hush, Sister!’ admonished the Mother Superior. ‘Can’t you see that it’s a woman? And in the last stages of labour, by the look of her. Quickly now, help me bring her into your cell, and make certain you bolt this door again.’

The two nuns helped Amberlay into the warm bed that Magilla had only recently vacated.

The Mother Superior turned to the second nun. ‘Sister Odetta! Go wake, Sister Freena, and tell her we urgently need her expertise. Then bring hot water and towels. Go now, quickly!’ She said, ushering the young nun out of the room and closing the door.

Magilla was standing awkwardly to one side, fidgeting with her hands.

‘Don’t just stand there like a nincompoop, Sister. Get the girl some drinking water!’ ordered Mother Thronso.

Magilla jumped, then nodded, and opened the door to leave.

‘And bring a big basin while you are at it! And bars of soap!’ she called after Magilla’s retreating back.

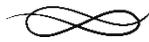
Still curled up, Amberlay was grunting and gasping for air.

Mother Thronso knelt beside the bed rubbing the young woman’s forehead. ‘Easy, child, you will be all right now. Everything will be just fine. You’re safe here with us. Don’t fret, now.’

Sister Freena burst through the door. She was heavysset, and of middling years, well used to tending the sick and delivering babies in the small villages of the district. ‘I came as soon as I was told, Mother,’ she blustered. ‘Do you know how much time there is between contractions?’

‘About two minutes, Sister.’

‘Then she is almost ready,’ Freena acknowledged, pulling back the blankets covering Amberlay.



Three hours later, a baby’s cry echoed through the halls of the old nunnery. The Mother Superior was cleaning the child as Sister Freena tended to the patient. Amberlay smiled as the boy was finally placed into her arms. She kissed his head, her tears flowing.

‘Congratulations, my dear; you have a healthy son. Have you chosen a name for him?’ asked Mother Thronso.

‘Yes... Brinn. After his grandfather,’ Amberlay said, stroking Brinn’s wispy black hair. Her tears dropped onto the baby’s face, making him blink and turn away.

‘And what of the father, my dear? Who is it we should contact?’

Amberlay looked up at the faces of the smiling nuns. Magilla was cooing at the baby and Freena was pouring a glass of water for her to drink. ‘I can’t thank you all enough for what you have done to help me.’

The nuns all smiled and nodded. ‘There is no need to thank us,’ Freena replied, handing Amberlay the glass. ‘It is a blessing that you came to us.’

Amberlay smiled, but it was clear that she had something on her mind.

‘Please don’t be offended, but I would like to speak to Mother Thronso alone,’ she said.

The two nuns simply straightened and nodded their acceptance before leaving the two women alone.

Amberlay looked down at her son’s face again. His eyes were deep brown, almost black just like those of Artatan, but his hair was like her own, raven black. She managed to tear her gaze from her boy’s face at last, looking up at the Mother Superior, taking in a deep breath.

‘As you can see, Mother, I had no choice but to come here to you. But I’m afraid to say that I have put you all in great danger.’

The old nun’s face became serious. ‘How so, child?’

‘Creatures of the dark, even now, track me here to this place. They will show little restraint if they arrive and find me here.’

The Mother Superior did not appear fazed. She waved her hand as if to instantly dismiss any notion of danger. ‘Our walls and doors are strong and not easily breached,’ she voiced. ‘Besides, we have witnessed times of conflict before; we are more prepared than you might know, so please do not fret, child.’

‘Your doors will not be a hindrance to those that follow,’ said Amberlay. ‘They will smite them in a trice. Because of this, I must leave your midst immediately; I could never forgive myself if they were to hurt you on my account.’

‘That’s preposterous! You are in no condition to travel! And what of the newborn? He will not survive the cold. The babe must rest awhile here, and build strength. I beg of you, give it a few days at least.’

Amberlay hugged Brinn close to her and kissed his head again, fresh tears falling. ‘Will you take him into your care, Mother? I wouldn’t ask if I were not at my last. Whence I go, he cannot travel.’

‘Is there no other way, child? What of the baby’s father?’

‘Dead upon the mountain, his head a trophy hanging from a Karesh saddle.’

The old nun sat back on her haunches for a moment. ‘I would argue, but I see the truth of your words in your eyes. I am sorry for your pain that is so clear to see. But you have my word; I will protect your babe as if he were my very own.’

Amberlay’s body shook as she wept. ‘Thank you, Mother.’



Rummaging through her saddlebags, Amberlay handed the old nun two bags of gold coin of unknown mint. Then she donned her armour, belted on her sword, strapped a quiver of many arrows to her back, and finally, grasped a bow in her left hand.

She was transformed, a warrior’s steel shining in her eyes.

‘I go now, Mother, and shall not return. Love him as I would have.’

The Mother Superior held Brinn in her arms, holding him close to her bosom to prevent the chill air from seeping into his tender bones. She nodded, no words

coming forth.

She appeared every inch maternal, already so protective of her small charge.

Amberlay took a strange gold medallion of a crouching panther from her bag, and placed it inside the baby's blanket. 'For when he comes of age.'

'I understand. He will be safe; have no fear.'

'There's one thing more that you must do for him, Mother. I am sorry to ask for more.'

'By all means, child, speak it. Nothing is too much trouble for the babe.'

'They will smell my scent emanating from his skin and come here. You must bring him into your deepest cellar; surround him with herbs and strong-smelling flowers. Thorn-root would be best since they cannot abide its fragrance. You must do this as soon as I leave.'

'I will see to it.'

Amberlay bent down and kissed her son one last time, then sprang up into her saddle. 'I will lead them a merry dance, and extract a heavy price, before I am done.'

'Go with the blessings of the gods, child. I hope we will meet again.'

'Not in this life, Mother.' Turning the horse, she rode out of the courtyard and into the hills, and never returned.



Over the following weeks, farmers found many grave mounds along the route she had taken. Some were opened and discovered to contain the bodies of foul-looking wicked creatures never before seen in the lands of Jarro. But Amberlay was never seen again.

High up on the mountain, a Karesh chieftain was leading what was left of his company back across the Benteer Pass. Tied to his saddle were three heads, one a dwarf while the others were not. The young lovers were together again.

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