

THE WAY TO A MAN'S HEART

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Talona the Terrible folded her sinewy arms across her mighty armor-plated bosom and glared at her opponent. "Just what do you mean by coming to class at this hour, young lady?"

Amaryllis pressed her lips together, forcing back the same words which had gotten her in trouble a good twenty-eight times since her arrival at the school. Every single one of those times she had been reproved before all her fellow students and made to stop the school pig. Therefore, instead of the angry retort "I am Princess Amaryllis, you muscle-bound crone!" she meekly replied, "I'm sorry, Swordmistress, but on the way to class I thought I heard a cry for help coming from Rushy Glen, so I went to investigate, for extra credit."

"Ah!" said Talona, uncrossing her arms and leaning forward on the podium which creaked and cracked at the joints in protest "And did you think, child, that I am unaware that the only presence in Rushy Glen at the moment is one Hamid, a travelling merchant and master of Hamid's Caravan of Discounts?"

Amaryllis cringed and blushed, mortified, while her classmates sniggered. "I-I was only looking at the daggers. He has a fine selection of the new models for distant Goristan, and at prices that just can't be beat!"

Talona sighed. "Shopping. I might have known. You can take the princess out of the castle but you can't take the urge to shop out of the princess. Well, shopping is not the proper occupation for any serious swordswoman, let me assure you."

"But I'm not a serious-"

"Hush!" All the instincts of a seasoned fighter snapped into action as Talona leaped the length of the classroom to clap a sword-calloused hand over Amaryllis's mouth. Darting her eyes to left and right as if seeking skulkers in the shadows, the veteran hissed, "Do you want the surviving minces to hear you? Their agents are everywhere. These are cutthroat times."

"Mo mah miff may mid?" Amaryllis said as well as she was able.

"So what if they did?" Talona echoed. "Mark my words well, lass: If they did, I promise you that you would face the deepest doom, the saddest fate, the most dreadful curse that ever can befall a woman." She lowered her voice so that it sounded even more portentous: "You would have to stay single forever!"

A gasp of involuntary horror shook the assembled student body, causing chainmail-clad bosoms to heave until the jingling sounded like the charge of a bellringers' choir, out for blood.

As for Amaryllis, at the very mention of possible spinsterhood she collapsed in a dead faint.

She awoke to the sounds of a heated argument between Talona and one of her fellow students, a lady named Gethina.

"-Sovereign Essence is the best remedy for swoons available without a wizard's prescription, that's why!" Gethina was saying, waving a small yellow bottle dangerously near the Swordmistress's lace.

"Vorn's Sovereign Essence can bring back the dead for all I care," Talona shot back, smacking the unlucky bottle out of Gethina's hand. "I still would never have it under my roof. It is manufactured solely by the Witches' Auxiliary of the Council Sorcerous as a fund-raising item. One of the principal ingredients, as any ninny Knows, is consomme of frogskin. Out of simple good taste and sensitivity I refuse to stock it in the school infirmary, and I am surprised that you-a princess born!-would be in possession or such filthy brew, let alone suggest using it!"

"Oh, don't be surprised. Teacher." Santorma's nasty, insinuating voice came scraping at the edges of Amaryllis's returning consciousness. "Gethina never had a hope of finding a decent husband before the great disaster, so why should she care a fig for the rest of us now; or for good taste?"

"That's a lie!" Gethina flashed a scathing look on Santorma. "Before the disaster I was engaged to be married to Prince Reston of Beverlita."

Santorma's scornful laugh was every bit as nasty and insinuating as her voice. "More like Princess Beverlita of Reston, if you set my drift, and don't you just. I hear tell that he looked much like a frog to start with that the witches didn't need to cast more than half the frog spell over him before boiling him down for consomme."

Gethina let loose a bloodcurdling shriek and threw herself on Santorma. Swords flashed and met in midair. The classroom rang with the alarm of steel biting steel, and the grunts and curses of the combatants.

Talona clapped her hands rapidly to get the attention of the other girls. "All right, ladies, you know the drill: Papers out, pencils flying; I'll be collecting your observers' notes on this skirmish afterwards."

Pucina, lately princess of Treb, raised her hand. "Will we be getting graded on this?"

"Only if both of them survive," Talona replied. "If one or both dies, you will write a five-page essay on the winning strategy, due tomorrow."

Pucina's eyes widened. "For the love of all the gods, you two, don't die!" she shouted.

By the time Amaryllis had managed to pick herself up off the floor and borrow a pencil, set-to was over. Both combatants had survived, though both were also bleeding from a number of superficial wounds, besides which Santorma sported a shiner. Their teacher observed them with an expert's eye and pronounced, "Not bad. Neither one of you would have lasted five minutes against one of the girls from my old regiment, but you fight well enough to deceive a prince who wants to have a swordmaiden for a wife."

Santorma did not accept her teacher's praise graciously. She spat a gob of blood studded with a couple of her smaller teeth and decreed: "I quit." She touched her blooming black eye and added, "If our remaining princes have gotten so cursed finicky about having to wed a swordmaiden, then I say to the netherpit with them! I'm going home. First I'm going to have a nice, hot bath, then I'm going to marry my father's swineherd, and then I'm going to bribe as many minstrels as it takes to spread some cockamamie fairy tale about how he was really a prince in disguise. And I will personally slice the head off anyone who says anything different!" She unbuckled her sword-belt, let it fall to the floor, and gave it a savage kick before stalking out.

A short silence followed this scene. At last Talona remarked, "Well! I suppose the rest of you are going to follow that pathetic example." Her eyes swept her remaining students, including Gethina, who was still standing in the middle of the floor, breathing hard.

"Not bloody likely," Amaryllis muttered.

"What was that?" Once more Talona sprang-this time in the purely figurative sense. "Spit up, young lady! If you have something to say, say it so that the whole class can hear."

For an instant, Amaryllis toyed with the idea of making up another lie. Then she dropped it. The one about Rushy Glen hadn't worked worth spit. She knew she was a poor liar, and besides, she was angry. Why shouldn't she be able to come late to class because she'd stopped to browse at Hamid's? Why couldn't she indulge in her favorite occupation anymore, simply because it wasn't proper for a sword-maiden? She opened her mouth to speak and what came out of it was as honest as her heart could make it:

"I said not bloody likely! And you know why it's not bloody likely as well as we all do. Santorma's father is the richest king for leagues around and she's his only child! If any one of our fathers had half his money and if any of us were our kingdom's only heir, we'd be out of place so fast it would melt your buckler! But we're not rich and we're not sole heirs, so we can't marry swineherds and turn them into princes. That would be a picnic. But, oh no, we've got to marry princes, only there are hardly enough of them to go around since the Witches' Auxiliary turned so cursed many of them into frogs!"

"It wouldn't be so bad if they'd just left it at turning them into frogs," Pucina sighed. "Then we could kiss them, break the spell, and they'd have to marry us. But as soon as they become frogs, those odious witches nab them for the brewing of their triply-damned Vorn's Sovereign

Essence! You can't kiss a cup of frog consommé."

"You can," Amaryllis corrected her. "But you don't get bang-all for your trouble."

"I blame the government," said Princess Rika of Yellowcrag. "If the Interkingdom Alliance hadn't cut off all funding for the black arts, the Council Sorcerous wouldn't have slashed the budget for the Witches' Auxiliary and they never would have needed to start such an aggressive fund-raising project in the first place."

Talona held up a chiding finger. "No politics in class," she said. Then she returned her attention to Amaryllis. "Whining never helps, whether you're princess or swordswoman. In a free market economy, the laws of supply and demand become the facts of life. Our remaining princes know they can afford to be picky; you can not. Not if you want to become a bride. At the moment, it strikes their fancy to marry only swordmaidens. It's become a bit of a status symbol with the boys, really. We ought to be pleased that they're no longer afraid of strong women. Now as I see it, you have three choices: Wait for princess brides to come back into style-" (Amaryllis looked dubious) "-leave this school and accept a life of single cursed-nothing-" (Amaryllis looked aghast) "-or sit down, shut up, and do your work!"

Amaryllis sat down and shut up, but that was as far as she was going to go. While the other ladies scribbled their evaluations of the recent combat and Gethina helped herself to the contents of the first aid kit, Amaryllis sat idly in her place until Talona noticed her lack of industry.

"Why aren't you writing?"

"I can't. I didn't get to see the fight. I was still pretty groggy for most of it."

Talona snook her head. "Tsk-tsk. What did I say about whining?"

The veteran swordswoman's condescending tone was just too much for Amaryllis to bear. She leaped to her feet and shouted, "I quit too!"

"Fine." Talona was unperturbed. "No refunds on the remainder of this semester's tuition. Good luck to you." Without further ado she turned her back on the simmering student swordmaiden and told the rest of the class to hurry up and finish their reports.

"I'll show you!" The princess' cheeks were flushed with anger, her dainty hands were flying. "I'll find a prince and I'll convince him that I'm a real swordmaiden without any more of your stupid schooling and I'll marry him! So there! Nyah! What do you think of that?"

Talona's head slowly came around. "Fine," she said quietly. "You try that. May I suggest the kingdom of Egrel as the best place to start? Its most conveniently located prince Desiderius is reputed to be handsome enough, and he's an only child, so you can be fairly well assured

becoming queen in time."

Amaryllis frowned. "Why are you telling me all this? Why do you want to help me?"

"Because no matter how much information I give you, you won't succeed. You'll be found out first, and the news will echo throughout every civilized land. In that way, you shall serve as an object lesson for the rest of your classmates and I shall never be troubled to maintain discipline again. I ought to thank you for services rendered."

The princess' lily brow creased even more. "What if I'm not found out?"

"Not found out? You?" Talona's laugh was like the cawing of a crow. "Dear child, even the most pudding-brained of princes can tell when a sword-maiden is faking it."

Amaryllis stalked out of Talona's School for Swords-women while her erstwhile teacher passed down the rows of benches and trestle tables, collecting papers. She was so furious she went about a mile past Rushy Glen before she realized that she now had all the time in the world for shopping.

"Damn," she muttered. "Now what? I can't go back home. Daddy will be a bear when he hears about the tuition, and my sappy half-sister Villanella will start yapping again about how she should've been the one sent to school. As if she'd ever land a prince, sword-maiden or otherwise. With the face that old camel's got, she'd better pray I do marry Prince Destino, because the way she'll ever get a man is if I'm queen of somewhere-or-other and I can order some poor soul to wed her on pain of death. And even then I'll have to persuade him!"

With these and similarly charitable observations falling constantly from her lips, Amaryllis walked some five miles before reaching a major road, flagging down a passing haywain, and hitching a ride. As she jounced along on the seat beside a driver who smelled marginally fresher than the school pigs, Amaryllis had time enough to reflect upon her situation, as well as to adjust the hang of sitting so that her sword did not smack her thigh black and blue. She gave thanks when she learned from the lout that it was as Talona had said: The kingdom of Egrell was not too far away. In fact, they would reach the royal castle-town by sunset.

"What business ye got there, arh?" the fellow inquired.

Amaryllis decided that if she were going to impersonate a woman warrior, there was no better time like the present to begin the charade. She put on Talona's grimmest face and replied frostily, 'My business is mine own, and doom perhaps to he who pries into it too closely, unbidden.

"To him," said the driver.

"I beg your pardon?" Amaryllis' mask of cold pride not only dropped, it shattered, and she

almost slid off the seat.

" 'Sdoom perhaps to him who pries into it too closely unbidden. Damn and blast, but ye swords-wenches otter know yer grammar better'n that, I'm thinkin', arh."

Amaryllis suppressed a little thrill of delight. He thinks I'm a real swordmaiden! Assuming a more kindly tone, she said, "Your pardon, good churl. Perchance it will do no harm to make you privy to the cause that brings me unto yon fair city. I am a poor but honest sellsword, laid out of work since the perishment of my last employer."

"Doesn't say much for yer skill wi' the blade then, if ye let yer last boss die. Looks like carelessness."

"Uh, mmm, er-he did not die through any lack of vigilance on my part," Amaryllis said swiftly. "His wife poisoned him whilst they were, uh-"

"Say no more." The driver nodded knowingly. "Well, no fear: Yell find work aplenty once we reach the town. What'd ye say yer name was?"

"I am Amar-Amar-" Suddenly the princess realized that her given name sounded too soft and mooshy to be associated with a swordmaiden of her supposed redoubtability. "I am Amar-the-the Amazing," she said, making a fast judgement call that sounded only a little lame.

The bumpkin, however, accepted it without demur and even remarked, "Aye, an' amazing are, that's for certain, arrh." Unfortunately he was staring at her chainmail-cupped breasts, not her swordarm, when he said it.

He was making his fifteenth try at steering the conversation back to the subject of now she managed to stand up straight with those things when they passed beneath the city gate-

-and were nearly swept right out again in a flood-tide of thundering, screaming, terrified citizens. The haywain was an island in a human sea, the oxen tossing their heavy heads as they whitened their eyes, the driver standing up on the footboard, whip in hand, unsuccessfully trying to make the stampeding crowd keep their distance from his beasts.

And then it was over. They were all alone on the inner side of the city gate, staring down the desolate street to the castle mount. Amaryllis gaped. "What was all that about?"

Before the driver could answer, the princess heard the sound of approaching hoofbeats. From a side-street came a white stallion and mounted on his back was the handsomest man Amaryllis had ever seen. Early training had stressed the importance of self-control in royal swordmaidens, but this was an exceptional case. Amaryllis did not know how exceptional until she felt a tiny drop of something warm and wet on the back of her hand and realized that she was drooling. She hastily wiped her mouth and prayed that the glorious young man had seen not

Her prayers went unanswered: He had seen her. He was doing a fair amount of drooling himself.

"If this kingdom survives the horror presently upon us," he said in one of those deep, resonant voices that command respect and carry for miles, "then when it is over I shall ordain a special thanksgiving service to praise whatever power has brought a creature such as you into my realm." He slid gracefully from the saddle and knelt in the dust beside Amaryllis' side of the haywain.

She scrambled from her place to urge him back to his feet. "Noble sir, do not abase yourself before me. I am but a humble swordmaiden, Amar the Armigerous."

"Thought ye said 'Amazing,' " the driver grumbled. No one paid him any mind.

"A swordmaiden!" The young man's eyes lit up. He clasped her hands to his breast in exultation. "This is a deliverance! Know, fair warriorress, that I am Prince Destino. Know that I have fallen in love with you at first sight. Know likewise that if you will have me, I would make you my bride. Know besides all of the above that whether or not you accept my offer of matrimony-

"Oh I do! I do!" Amaryllis cried.

"-that I would still offer you a lucrative dragon-slaying contract to-you do? I mean, you marry me?" Amaryllis nodded hard enough to snap the neck of a lesser woman. "Ah, joy! Then I shall ride back to the castle to bring my parents the happy news while you ride forth to slay the wicked monster who-

"What?" said Amaryllis. And also: "Monster? Slay?" And last but not least: "Huh?"

"Why yes, my beloved." Prince Destino gave her a melting look. "The dragon. I'm sure I mentioned it. It appeared sometime this afternoon in the castle courtyard where I was entertaining my fiancée, the Princess Dimity of Yither."

For a reason known best to herself, Amaryllis heard only one word of the prince's last sentence: "Fiancée?"

Destino sighed. "An alliance contracted when we were both in our cradles. We were not supposed to wed for another two years, but what with the recent upheavals affecting eligible princes, her father insisted we rush ahead with the marriage; 'Before you give me a grandchild that's a damned tadpole,' was the way he put it. Princess Dimity of Yither is a very-

"Don't tell me about Dimity!" Amaryllis looked hot enough to set the whole haywain ablaze. "Dimity is my stupid cousin, and a more graceless, stubborn, overbearing girl you've never

seen!"

"Your... cousin?" The prince chewed this over. "But she's a princess, and you-"

"My father lost his throne to barbarian hordes from the north," Amaryllis said rapidly. "and all my kin perished in the assault. I alone survived, an infant, rescued by my aged nurse. She's dead now too. There's no one left to tell you any different, so don't bother asking around."

"A swordmaiden, a disinherited princess, and the chosen of my heart!" Prince Destino was in ecstasies. "And once you've rescued her, I am sure that the princess Dimity's father will make no trouble about annulling the old contract, out of gratitude for his child's life. Oh, that couldn't be better! All you have to do now is slay the dragon."

"I'm honored that you consented to let me come along to watch you at work," Prince Destino said as he and Amaryllis rode towards the mountains.

"It was my pleasure, my lord," Amaryllis replied. Curse it anyway I she thought. If I'm going to die, I might as well take him with me. I refuse to let that cow Dimity get her claws back on him! She sat a little taller in the saddle and tried not to think of how dragon fire was going to feel on the vast expanses of skin her scanty-though-spectacular armor left unprotected.

"Yonder lies the dragon's lair," said the prince, pointing to a yawning cavern at the foot of a mountain that was much too close for Amaryllis' peace of mind.

She knew she was going to die-she had told herself so over and over, in hopes that repetition would numb her to the awful fact-but somehow, now that the fact was becoming more and more irrefutable with every step her horse took, she simply could not face it. Maybe it was the fast-fading smudge of smoke she saw emanating from the cavern; maybe it was the sight of bleached bones and human skulls strewn at all-too-frequent intervals along the path; maybe it was the stench of carrion and cold, old reptile that clung in an ever-thickening cloud around this whole unhallowed place. Whatever it was, she could not bear it.

She felt another tiny drop of something warm and wet on the back of her hand. She knew this time it was not drool, but a tear. It was joined by others, and others still, until by the time she and Prince Destino were within shouting distance of the dragon's lair her eyes were streaming while she fought to swallow her sobs.

She very nearly succeeded. Only one escaped. The prince turned at the sound and his eyes grew wide. "Why-why Amar, you're-you're crying?"

That was it. That was a word too much. Every single sob and moan and bleat of despair the princess had been bottling up inside her demanded its freedom. What's more, every single

one of them got it.

"Oh my goodness!" The prince was frantic. He pulled his horse up alongside of hers and with a great deal of fuss managed to haul her from the saddle to sit sideways across his lap. She buried her face against his shoulder and bawled. He regarded her dumbstruck for a while then carefully pronounced, "I see it all, now. Oh, my dearest, how could I have been so blind! Not only are you bold of mien and strong of arm, you are also tender of heart. You fear that while you are in the process of slaying yon beast, some fatal harm might come to me before I had convinced it to be entirely dead. Such is the epic scope of your love! Well, don't you worry your pretty little head about it." He set her on her feet and reined his horse several paces away. "You go ahead and take care of business; I'll wait over here."

Still snivelling and wiping her nose on the back of her hand, Amaryllis went back to her horse to fetch her sword. She was no longer afraid of dying. At this moment the strongest emotion filling her bosom was the bitter realization that her old teacher, Talona the Terrible, had been right: It didn't pay to fake it. Thus armed with an unshakable who-gives-a-damn attitude, she entered the lair of the beast.

The dragon's cave stank worse on the inside; that was logical. The bones were thicker than she had expected. Amaryllis had not come away from Talona's school entirely ignorant; she knew how to hold her sword as she picked her way through the mounds of ribs and skulls and femurs. She tried to stalk her prey quietly, but the bones would rattle so, and whenever her sandalled foot touched one she could not restrain a little Ick! of disgust.

She thought she was finally getting used to stepping on the horrid things when she missed her footing on a particularly steep mound of skulls and fell flat on her rump in the midst of them. This time her reaction was no genteel, maidenly Ick!; it was a scream that dislodged several quarts of bats from the cavern roof.

The echoes of that shriek had not died down before Amaryllis heard a familiar voice inquire, "Are you quite done?" She blinked her eyes in the murk. Could it be-?

"Over here, stupid," came a second voice, also no stranger. Amaryllis could hardly believe what she saw. There on the cave floor, basking on a pile of gold and jewels fit to choke a basilisk, was her cousin Dimity. Not a sword's-length away lay the dragon. The dragon's body was that is. The monster's severed head was elsewhere, dangling from the hand of Talona the Terrible.

"What took you so long?" Dimity asked, tossing rubies into the air and letting them patter down on her satin skirts like a very expensive rain.

"You saved her!" Amaryllis cried. She ignored her cousin, focusing all her surprise (and a good measure of pique besides) on Talona. "You want the prince for yourself!"

"Hardly, child," the swordswoman replied, setting the grisly trophy aside. "You see, when you left my school, I realized that your father made me insert a rather nit-picky clause into our contract, stating that in case of the student's death, a pro rata share of the semester's tuition would be refunded. It never said a thing about whether you died at school or away. Since I'd told you to try your luck here in Egrel, I gave the girls a long weekend and came after you. Well, no sooner did I reach the capital than I heard of the dragon."

"And she knew you'd head right for it, like a fly to-"

"Shush, Dimity."

Princess Dimity shrugged. "Truth is truth. Everyone in the family knows that Amaryllis is desperate to get married, don't ask me why."

"I happen to like children," Amaryllis snapped. "I'd like to have several. Do you mind?"

"You can have all of mine, while you're at it," Dimity replied. "I don't much care for the sticky little things. In fact, that was the one part of marriage I was dreading. Oh, and the royal ceremonies, and dressing up all the time, and organizing banquets, and redecorating the castle and-"

"We get the idea, my dear," Talona said. She turned to Amaryllis once more. "As I was saying, once I knew there was a dragon in the case, I was certain you'd go after it, whether or not you had a hope of killing it. You'd do it just to show me, wouldn't you?"

Amaryllis' head drooped. She nodded.

"I thought so." Talona was satisfied. "You have spirit, child; keep it. Just don't go letting anyone shove you into situations you lack the training to handle."

"I owe you my life," Amaryllis said. She didn't sound very happy about it.

"Pshaw!" said Talona. "By the time I found the dragon's lair, the hard work was done for me: The dragon lay steeped in a sleep so deep that it never knew when my sword came down on its neck. Just look at the size of the monster! If I had met it when it was fully awake, it might have been another story altogether; and not one I would have liked, I can tell you!"

"It... slept?" Amaryllis was puzzled. "But-"

"I did it," Dimity announced casually, standing up amid the heaps of treasure. "First I pretended to be the typical fraidy-cat princess and then, when the dumb beast thought it had nothing to fear from me, I managed to mix a little of Vorn's Sovereign Essence into its last meal." She reached into the silk pouch at her belt and withdrew the familiar yellow bottle. "Sent the monster straight to dreamland. Great stuff. A hundred and one uses. I never leave

home without it."

Amaryllis didn't know whether to be appalled or revolted. "You touched the dragon's lair? But it eats-it eats-"

"Hey, if I hadn't done it, I'd have been the dragon's next meal," Dimity responded hotly. "I'd rather be alive than dainty any day!"

Amaryllis dropped her sword, covered her eyes, and began to cry. Talona and Dimity rallied 'round, patting her on the back and making comforting noises. Amaryllis shrugged them off violently. "Stop it!" she cried. "Leave me alone! You ruined my life, the pair of you!"

"Stopped you from getting lollolled, yes, I can see how that would ruin your Me," Talona said dryly.

"Don't you see?" Amaryllis wailed. "Now Prince Destino will know I'm not a real swordmaiden and he'll marry Dimity!"

"No, he won't," said Dimity and Talona in perfect harmony.

The ride back to Talona's School for Swordswomen was a pleasant one. The ladies, mounted on fine steeds that were the gifts of a grateful prince, enjoyed the scenery and each other's company. When they reached a likely spot, they dismounted to have lunch. Unpacking their panniers, well packed with the leavings of the wedding banquet, they licked their lips in anticipation over the fine feast before them.

It did not take them long to devour it almost to the crumb. Sated, Talona leaned her back against an oak and sleepily said, "You know, my dear, if this is the career for you, you must allow me to help you pick out a nice suit of armor."

Dimity laughed and patted her satin skirts. "Not a chance! I get more protection wearing a gown than I'd ever get from that silly chainmail kilt and halter you wear."

"It's traditional," Talona said. "People expect swordswomen to dress like this."

"Well, thank goodness for tradition! It was all that kept Prince Destino from believing that I'd done for the dragon. Of course I could never overcome any sort of monster; just look at the way I dress!" She laughed louder.

Talona clicked her tongue. "Men."

"People," Dimity corrected her. "Men don't have the market cornered on ridiculous

assumptions. I don't mind; it makes life interesting. So-" She shifted to a more comfortable position "-how long do you think it'll take me to master the sword?"

"Are you sure you want to, dear?" Talona cautioned.

"If I'm going to follow a career as a fighting woman, I want to be prepared for it, and I don't want to depend on the swords of strangers when I need a little backup," Dimity replied.

Before Talona could speak, they heard a rustling sound from the thicket "Merciful heavens!" the swordswoman exclaimed. "What have we done, stopping here? Do you know what this place is, child?" Dimity shook her head. "It's called Rushy Glen, and that means-that means"

"Rushy Glen? I know what that means! Amaryllis told me. YeeHA!" Dimity sprang from the grass and vaulted into the saddle. She felt a brave and defiant battle cry rising to her lips. With a wild howl she made her horse rear and paw the air as the bold words rang from her lips: "Hamid! A Hamid! Let's... go... shopping!"

And the realms rejoiced as their new protector galloped on into legend, her boon companion Talona the Terrible at her side, and a short stop at Hamid's Caravan of Discouragement on the way.