

Dead Heroes

Nora coughed and spat on the floor, cringing with disgust. Her saliva mixed with dust and grit as it landed, creating a slime she didn't particularly enjoy looking at. She stepped around the muck, and turned her attention back to the alcoves. Books and scrolls were clustered into each alcove in a way that charmed Nora; every stack had its place, organized by someone who came and went long ago. She scanned the alcoves on her right, hoping to find something, *anything*, that could be sold to a collector. A few of the books still had covers, but even then she couldn't read any of their titles—they were just as dusty as the floor.

Several shelves over came a loud thud. Martin must have moved something rather large, for he started coughing too, and the sound rumbled through the underground library. Nora could feel it in her feet, the weight of each cough as they left Martin's body. The ceiling shook. Dust fell to the floor. Books rattled.

"*Damn—Books—*" Martin spat between fits. "*Tryna—Kill—Me—*"

Nora cringed again, and, holding her breath, slipped her hands into an alcove, drawing out a single tome that had caught her eye. A small pocket of dust emerged with the book, but she waited for it to dissipate before breathing again. She knew how to be careful, unlike Martin. After wiping grime off the cover, she could read the title:

THELINDRA OF DAIR

Nora remembered stories about Thelindra of Dair: The Knight of Nine Truths, the Blade of Ages, the greatest hero the South had ever known. Nora had looked up to Thelindra, as had every other girl her age; she'd wanted to be just like Thelindra and become a questing knight. Nora had fought tooth and nail to play swords with her brothers in the yard, just for the chance at becoming good enough to train for real. Then Thelindra went into the Gray Wastes. Nora remembered weeks of waiting, speeches before a funeral pyre, bloodless smoke. Nora squinted in the dust—tears stung her eyes.

But crying was stupid and Nora was *anything* but stupid. She stopped being stupid when she joined the guild. Throw away the sword and pick up the lockpicks. Can never have too many lockpicks.

Down the book went, back into the cluttered alcove. Up came the dust, and more coughing and spitting and swearing. She hated this place. If only they were robbing some dumb noble's house instead of a library in the middle of nowhere, underground.

"Found *anythin'* worthwhile over there yet, Nora?" Martin's voice growled from nearby. Nora thought Martin should've stuck with being a bouncer. It suited him better.

"Nothing here, Martin," said Nora. "Bunch of fairy stories. Let's move on."

Martin's shadow loomed around the corner. "You sure you 'aven't found somethin' fun? You was *awful* excited to see a library when we got 'ere."

Nora sighed, "I'm sure, Martin," she looked back at the alcove and curled her lips. "No one wants any of *these* books."