# Prologue

# 3208 AF

The flames were thick on the ground as they spread about the village, burning away its buildings like a cleansing fire, but it didn’t feel that way to the woman who strode through the town. Instead it was like a corrupting flame, destroying what people had worked to build. This was the truth of it, but for some reason she’d never seen it before.

She passed a mirror, cracking and bubbling from the heat. Enough of it remained to show her image: naturally dark blue hair that curled about her neck and shoulders; grey eyes that usually showed little emotion; a slightly weary look to her features as if she rarely got enough sleep. Her bright, shining golden plate armor was splattered with blood, tainted almost red. Her white cape was stained as well, sections of it having soaked up the blood. At her side was her constant companion, Merciless, a broadsword kept in its scabbard at all times outside of combat; it was a necessity if she was to follow orders.

*Orders*… For some reason the woman’s eyes narrowed at the word. She’d never had this reaction before… The mirror seemed to capture her thoughts and attention, leading her back through her memories.

*“Knight-Commander Enyo!” a soldier shouted, running up to her. “Lord Faust wants to see you immediately.”*

*She nodded, making her way to the keep without hesitation. On that day, her expression was… nothing? Had she always been so devoid of emotion, and simply never noticed it? In her struggle with the voices that tore her in either direction, had she cravenly chosen to cast aside all decision?*

*“Ah, Isabella,” Lord Faust, King of a newly ‘unified’ Areya (due mostly to Isabella’s power) said with a smile. His favorite tool, his favorite pet; had she always been such? “Your great power is needed once again, my dear. The people of High Falls have decided they want their* freedom*,” he said, speaking the last word as if it was a personal insult to him. “They’ve started a rebellion. You are needed to end it; make an example of them so we may keep peace in our lands.”*

*And she had agreed, as she had always agreed. When he’d needed a town conquered in the first place through violence? She’d gone herself, destroying the defenders without effort. When an opposing king had demanded a duel with his strongest fighter? She’d broken the poor fool without even needing to draw her sword. And when people rose up against Lord Faust, against his tyranny, she was the boot that stomped them back down.*

*She took a contingent of soldiers. They wouldn’t be needed but it was standard practice. She reached High Falls in a day’s time, cold grey eyes scanning its buildings...mostly wood, very little stone. The land of Areya wasn’t very advanced, technologically. Not like the lands far to the East, where travelers said an empire had arisen and advanced to create buildings that touched the sky, and strange carriage-like vehicles that travelled without horse or magic.*

*Lord Faust had been right; the people were gearing up for rebellion. The place was awash with activity as hundreds of people ran back and forth between buildings with simple weapons and supplies. High Falls was built atop a cliff; it had a wonderful view, but it was bordered on one side by a sheer drop thousands of feet, and on another by raging rapids that led to the waterfall the town was named for.*

*In short, though the town was large, there was only one escape route. Having been told to make an example, Isabella set her soldiers up along that path, blocking it. No one would be leaving.*

*Two voices spoke in her mind as they anticipated the coming release. Idly, she wondered which one would take command today, but it didn’t matter to her. As she entered, the town commotion died down; they recognized the woman, and they knew why she’d come.*

*“The Golden Butcher,” one man breathed, beginning to step back in fear.*

*“Knight-Commander Enyo is here!”*

*“It’s Isabella of Two Faces, here already!”*

*Isabella stood in the middle of the main road as cries of her titles and name spread across the town. Some ran away, others chose to run towards her screaming about their freedom or oppression or other such nonsense. In her experience, the weaker you were, the more you talked; the strong tended to act rather than jabber on.*

*The first man that reached her was young; he had only patchwork leather armor and a simple iron sword. Why he thought he could kill her she would never understand. She swung her sword, still in its scabbard; the impact shattered his blade and sent shards flying as the swing continued unimpeded, slamming into his chest and hurling him away.*

*Cries of surprise met her, as if these people didn’t truly believe in her power until now. More fighters were coming, some better equipped and prepared. Soon she had slipped into the dance of battle, gliding around blades and polearms and arrows. Her strikes shattered weapons and armor and bones, but they kept coming, their numbers growing. Finally, it was time.*

*Isabella launched herself into the air in a high arc, coming down a fair distance away from the dozens of fighters. She lifted her sword before her and could tell by their eyes that they’d heard the stories. She watched them for a few seconds (fear, determination) before drawing the blade.*

*The red flame erupted first, encasing her body in an ethereal fire that flickered angrily without burning. Her scream split the air; she would never get used to the pain a State Change caused, but she had long ago accepted it. Her grey eyes took on a crimson hue and her blue hair shifted to a similar, blood-red color. The scabbard disappeared as her sword grew in size, turning black and changing shape into a wickedly-curved two-handed sword. She brought the heavy blade up and rested it on her shoulder, scanning the terrified crowd with crimson eyes.*

*Then she moved.*

*The blood spray was the first thing they noticed, oddly; only moments later did they realize Isabella was in the middle of them, no longer standing several dozen feet away. Finally they watched the four men splitting into two pieces that hit the ground with wet thumps. That’s when the screaming started from the onlookers. “Demon! It’s a demon!”*

*Some of the fighters, to their credit, still attacked, but at this display of stupidity Isabella couldn’t even summon pity for them. She whipped her blade in an arc that took the heads of three attackers. Her blade once more shattered weapons, pierced armor, separated bone and tendon and muscle, and still they fought. She didn’t notice when the fires started; as far as she could tell she’d destroyed some blacksmith’s forge, showering sparks and molten metal everywhere.*

*The wooden buildings caught alight and the fires spread quickly, aided by the cheering soldiers who began fanning out a bit, tossing torches onto homes and killing those who tried to run. Isabella paid them no heed; she was caught in the dance, avoiding blade and arrow and responding with brutal strikes that sent limbs and bodies flying.*

*The main force scattered as she began walking through the burning town, cutting down those she could find. She left her Demonic State and returned to her normal form, sheathing her blade and continuing her search. They would leap out and attack her but she had no trouble with these ambushes. A frown was on her face now; she didn’t know why they kept fighting. Their situation was hopeless, their deaths inevitable; why not simply accept it?*

That was how she’d found herself here, staring at a mirror in a crumbling house, an expression of surprise on her features as she realized there were tears on her face. Crying…? Since when did she cry? She shook her head, yelling in rage as she smashed the mirror to pieces, sending glass shards in all directions. Something was happening to her, something she didn’t like.

She heard some of the soldiers she’d brought with her, laughing and joking about the people they’d killed, bragging about the ways they’d done it. She usually felt the same way. It became like that, if you did it enough...a game. They weren’t really ‘people’ anymore, only targets... animals. She tried to remind herself of that as she flicked some blood from her hair. A sound behind her, a sword cutting air, caused her to spin around rapidly, lashing out with her own weapon.

A simple iron sword went spinning up into the air, coming down to stab into the ground beside her. A second, just as fast strike came down at the attacker she’d just disarmed. Blue eyes. She stopped because of blue eyes. The girl that stood before her couldn’t have been more than eight years old. What had she done to cause an eight-year-old to try to kill her?

*What have you done? You’ve done a lot of things. Your cruelty has been quite thorough,* interjected one of the voices in her mind – that of her Angelic personality.

***And entertaining!*** Her Demonic personality responded. ***Don’t act all innocent now, not with the evidence right in front of you, that’s just pathetic. Just look at the results of your work and enjoy it!***

Her grey eyes examined the girl who shook with fear; it was unlikely that she would attack anyone under ordinary circumstances. Eyes filled with tears. Sad? Hands covered in blood but not her blood, she had no injuries. Family death? Parents, probably. She looked shaken. Both parents? If one were alive they’d have a hold on her. A new orphan, then. This wasn’t new, wasn’t unusual; Isabella had created many orphans. But something was wrong this time, different. That wall that kept all her emotions away had finally cracked. Unfortunately that had other effects, as well.

***This new freedom is interesting, isn’t it? We should do something with it!***

*Let me have more control! I refuse to let you continue this slaughter!*

Shut up! Shut up shut up shut up! Isabella began to panic as the voices started to overwhelm her.

***The slaughter is the best part! Kill the girl while the others are watching, I’d like to see their reactions.***

*This is the last time your sinful influence shall be allowed!*

The voices in her head were louder now. Both of them yelled at her, tearing at her psyche, her mind, her soul. She gripped her head in her hands, shaking it back and forth as if she could shut them up that way. The little girl was scared, even asked what was going on. Nearby soldiers asked Isabella if she was okay, but she couldn’t answer either of them.

The two additional “personalities” in her mind fought for control and their struggle shredded everything Isabella had built up. It was finally too much; she’d done this for too long. Her mind simply couldn’t take the strain anymore, and finally, that wall shattered.

Her scream was one of anguish, the sound of not only physical or emotional pain, but the pain of the soul. The soldiers and the little girl jumped back in terror and surviving rebels stared at her from their hiding places, neither group knowing what to think. Isabella fell to her knees, trembling. It felt like her mind was being pulled at by wild dogs, her soul being torn piece by piece. The pain was excruciating, but the worst part was that she felt…she felt it… for them.

Emotion; that powerful force she’d ignored for so long refused to go unheard now. Her grey eyes opened, no longer devoid of emotion but full of it, overcome by it. Tears streamed down her cheeks as the face of every person she’d ever killed flew past her eyes. The dam had broken and she had no idea how to close it again; her mind was too damaged, now, for such control. She fought for breath, fought the feelings of horror and fear and… guilt.

Guilt. She’d killed so many. She brought her hands down, looking at the blood covering her golden gauntlets. Only now did she realize it had bothered her all along, she’d simply shut it out. It was like she’d just awakened from a nightmare and realized everything she’d done was real. Her gaze darted around the town, taking in the burning and collapsing buildings, the blood, the bodies in the streets, the young girl. Men, women, children, animals, every living thing was bleeding or burning, and it was caused by her hand.

This was all too much for the little girl, who took off running in fear. The soldiers raised crossbows, taking aim at the small running form as if they were hunting a deer. Isabella moved before she could think about it, pulling the simple, almost crude iron sword from the ground, the one the girl had attempted to kill her with, and dashed forward as a blur, appearing in front of the men as if from out of nowhere. The one in front’s eyes widened, his surprise almost causing him to shoot her. “Knight-Comman-“

Her scream of rage and pain cut him off. His blood, and that of the other two with him, sprayed into the air as their now-lifeless bodies hit the ground. Every eye turned to her in shock. Her grey eyes were full of hatred and sorrow now, along with a new madness, and still the tears hadn’t stopped. Her body was shaking as her shoulders rose and fell with her deep, ragged breathing. None of them had seen her like this before; no one had ever seen The Golden Butcher break.

She moved like lightning, cutting her way through more soldiers. Eventually they realized they had to fight back, that she was mad, but it didn’t matter and they knew it. She destroyed them without difficulty, hacking each one down whether they resisted or not. At the end of it she stood in the middle of a pile of bodies, dripping with blood and panting heavily. The iron sword in her grip had chinks and dents but it had held strong.

The survivors of the town came out slowly, staring at her in fear and confusion. None of them knew what to think and she couldn’t tell them as she was as lost as they were. Iron sword still gripped in her hand, Isabella turned and scanned the town. She found the little girl beside her parents’ bodies, as she expected. She knelt down, ripping her cape from her back and laying it over the bloody forms. The girl watched her nervously, but after a moment they both simply watched the blood soak into the cape until not a trace of white was left.

After several minutes, Isabella lifted her cape again, staring at its new, blood-red color. She hooked it back to her armor, giving the girl a final look. She had nothing to say and briefly considered taking the girl with her, but she knew the survivors here would give her a far better life...so she left her. She left her and she started walking, leaving the town and walking for a day straight, making no stops. She was met at her city with confusion, having arrived covered in blood and with no soldiers, but she gave no explanations to anyone.

She walked straight through the city to the keep and walked in without pausing for a step. Lord Faust met her in the hall, confusion written on his own face. “Isabella…? What is this? Have you…” He trailed off as he noticed the look in her eye and the fact that she was continuing towards him, sword in hand. He backed up a step, but before he could call the guards Isabella moved.

The iron sword pierced the king’s chest, erupting out his back as if it met no resistance. His eyes widened in shock as she lifted him bodily into the air with bared teeth and a glare full of hatred. She then turned and threw him off the sword and through the keep’s doors. The wood splintered outward and his body hit the road outside, bouncing a ways before coming to rest.

Soldiers and citizens alike stared in surprise and horror, looking from the body to Isabella as she stepped back out into the sunlight. No one made a move to stop her as she walked down the road past the lifeless body of her former king. She continued past hundreds of curious onlookers, guards and soldiers, all of them moving out of her way and making no attempts to say anything to her. It was just as well, as no one had any idea what to say.

She made her way along the road and continued out of the city heading east. Isabella of Two Faces left the country of Areya and did not look back.