I am an inveterate collector of stories. It is my avocation, my life’s work, my web, my all. I have been able to parlay my love of tales into a fairly comfortable living, often by chasing the stories clients have asked me to chase, by discovering the truths hidden in legend.

This isn’t one of those cases. This was history that happened before all eight of my eyes, by chance. Or perhaps by providence.

I was outside the Gate of Hope along with a few hundred of my former neighbors and other refugees when I first laid eyes on Squire Duma. She was a human, unhelmeted among the armored Knights of the Sanctum guarding the gates, and as far as I could tell she was our only ally.

We refugees had poured across the countryside, flooded around the water spire and empty houses of Gatesurb, and washed up like driftwood before the silver-and-pearl ramparts of the gate. Behind us—too close behind us, in my admittedly biased opinion—swarmed the omnicidal aliens I had dubbed “Gorgers.” We had no idea where they came from, no idea how to communicate with them, and no clear picture of what they wanted, except that they ate everything in their path, from the tree in which I had lately made my home to a few of my unfortunate neighbors. Safety in the floating city of Brighthaven was all we had in mind when we came to the Gate of Hope, but to hear the knights speak, we might as well have been an invading army ourselves.

“We cannot simply open our gates to everyone who might wish to enter,” thundered one knight, his halo bright gold above his silvered armor. “The resources of the Sanctum are not limitless.”

“Who is to cull the worthy from the unworthy?” asked the human woman in her white armor.

“Squire Duma, you forget your place,” said the knight.

“And you forget our teachings,” snapped Duma, jabbing a finger into the steel of the knight’s breastplate. “Enlightenment is not for the Sanctum. It is for everyone.”

“You would question my knowledge of our sacred scriptures?” the knight boomed.

“If I must,” said Duma. She gestured across the gathered multitudes, myself included, and to the now-empty village beyond the square. The farmers and villagers that dwelt in Gatesurb had abandoned it even before the first refugees arrived; they were already inside Brighthaven, I had no doubt. “Each one of them could reach enlightenment.”

“You know full well that few of them will,” said the knight, now in a quieter, kinder tone. “The path we walk is a hard one, Duma. Few will reach the end.”
She looked away. “True. But not one of them will if they all die at the hands of the enemy that follows them.” She turned to look up at the city of Brighthaven above. The bridge from the Gate of Hope to the city proper rippled above her, a ribbon of golden light. When the gates were open, travelers, pilgrims, and residents would rise along that golden ribbon as if borne aloft by invisible hands. But now, those gates were shut and the golden bridge was a faint shimmer against the light of the setting sun. “How many already in the city might never transcend their flesh and blood? How many in our order? The gates were not closed to me.”

The knight placed a massive, gauntleted hand on her shoulder. “Have no fear, Squire Duma. You will manifest the halo in time, I am confident.”

She knocked his gauntlet aside. “That isn’t my concern, Champion. The Sanctum offers enlightenment to all. Let them walk the path, or not, but they must first live long enough to make the choice. How are we to bring the people of the Crucible out of the dark if we hide our light from them? If we turn them away at our gate?”

Another knight rested his lance on the white marble flagstones. “We could send the Grey Monks among them, let them sort those most worthy from the others. Surely we have space for some.”

“You aren’t listening!” Duma exploded. “There is no ‘worthy’ or ‘unworthy!’”

“Throw open the gate?” the newcomer said in wonder. “Is that what you propose, Duma? Let these refugees infest our streets?”

“A few hundred innocents is hardly an infestation, Sir Palaenon,” said the champion.

“What if one of these ‘innocents’ should prove false, Duma?” Palaenon turned his helmet to survey us, and though his face was nothing more than the same armor plates as all the knights, I felt a wash of disapproval flow out from him. “What if one of them is a thief, or worse?”

“Brighthaven has a city watch, and thieves enough of her own,” Duma said. “We needn’t hand these unfortunates the keys to the cathedral, but surely we can offer them a safe haven until the danger has passed?”

“I agree that we are scarcely in danger from this…” I swear I could hear him consider the word “rabble,” then discard it as impolite. “From these poor souls,” finished the champion. “But think of the precedent we set, Duma. Should all who are hungry or afraid come running to us?”

“And why not?” Duma asked. “The Sanctified Scroll was a comfort to me when I was alone and afraid. Walking this path has shown me a way to be a person of whom I can be proud. Let them come to us, let them eat at our table, let them find shelter behind our walls.”

“And when our granaries are exhausted?” asked Palaenon. “We enlightened spirits no longer require sustenance, but you creatures of flesh and blood do.”

“Let them work in our fields and shops, let them join their strength to ours! Each new convert is more than a mouth to feed, Sir Palaenon. Their spirits are holy, just as much as yours.”

“How dare you!” began Sir Palaenon, “My spirit—"
“Enough!” boomed the champion. “We will open the gates. Squire Duma has the right of it. Let these innocents pass into Brighthaven and shelter behind our shields; is that not the purpose of our order?”

The word was passed and the gleaming Gate of Hope opened, the ribbon-bridge to Brighthaven above flaring to new life as the first of the refugees set foot upon it. Knights stood before the crowd, vigilant eyes sweeping them for contraband and gauntleted hands slowing what might have been a crashing wave to an orderly trickle. I decided to wait for the throng to thin out, always leery of being stepped on, but I also lingered to see how the rest of Duma’s drama would unfold.

“Thank you, Champion Anaphiel,” she murmured, watching the pilgrims’ progress.

“This decision is a credit to you, Duma. Thank you for reminding us of our sacred duty.” The knight’s metal gauntlet clanked as he drummed his fingers on the hilt of his sword—an oddly physical habit, I thought, for someone with no corporeal body, only a spirit of energy contained in a metal suit. “There was a time, when I was younger, that—”

He was interrupted by a scream.

Something flickered at the edge of the great plaza, where the trees of Hope’s Garden stood in their silent rows. One of the trees, then another, swayed and toppled. An all-too-familiar shrieking tore through the evening air. Gorgers.

“Hold the line!” Champion Anaphiel bellowed. He lifted his sword, which flared with golden light. Golden wings spread above me and Sir Palaenon landed at Anaphiel’s side. “Champion,” he said, his aura flickering and fading once more. “The monsters are here. We must close the gate.”

“I am afraid so,” Anaphiel agreed, much to my dismay. I edged closer, hoping to at least hitch a ride on one of these knights during their retreat.

“No,” said Duma. She drew her sword, and a halo formed around her.

I had never seen a knight’s halo up close. Duma’s halo took the form of a triangle hovering above her head, with other panels flaring down to protect her shoulders and neck. Her halo was a sacred manifestation of her will as much as it was a defense against harm.

The other knights stepped back. “Duma!” said Palaenon. “You have manifested the holy—”

Anaphiel cut him off. “What, then, Duma?”

“I shall hold them back,” she said. She held her sword aloft and the silver metal of its blade burst into golden energy, the same aura as her halo. “Leave the gate open until the last possible moment.”

“We will,” Anaphiel promised. “But what of you?”

Duma turned to look at the oncoming horde of Gorgers. They had reached the edge of the square, where their talons and endless ranks of teeth flickered as the Gate of Hope’s defenses opened fire with bolts of holy light. She began to run. “Remember me.”
I raced to Anaphiel’s side and climbed up to his shoulder for a better view. Duma’s halo flared brighter and brighter as she hurled herself into the Gorger horde. Her sword flickered and burned through arc after arc, scattering the monsters as she pushed into Gatesurb. I punched three of my legs into the air in glee when she drove her sword into a particularly large and dangerous-looking Gorger, then covered five of my eyes in terror when a pack of the smaller, more nimble beasts knocked her down. She vanished beneath a pile of shrieking aliens, but a golden light bloomed beneath that heaving pile and Duma burst free, scattering Gorgers and bits of Gorgers in all directions. Her halo was brighter than ever, and arcs and crescents of golden light encircled her and sliced through Gorgers even as she recovered her sword.

“Look, Palaenon,” said Anaphiel. “There stands a true knight.”

“What is she thinking?” asked Palaenon. “As heroic as she is, she will delay the Gorger horde for only a minute or two. Even now some race past her.”

“Duma always did see more clearly than you, Sir Knight,” said Anaphiel. He lifted his sword and pointed with its gleaming golden blade. “Behold.”

Duma had reached the water spire. She turned back to face us and raised her sword in a final salute. The blade shone brighter than ever and lengthened, now easily four meters of gleaming golden light attached to a hilt in her hand. She twisted and brought the sword down in a swift cross-cut that smashed through the spire in a single blow.

“She’ll die!” gasped Palaenon.

“She will live forever,” said Anaphiel.

It was as if an ocean had burst in the midst of the farm. A crushing wave of water, soon mixed with Gorgers and debris, exploded outward from the spire. It swept away every Gorger that threatened Brighthaven and left a lake that would take hours for any others to navigate.

The other refugees and I arrived safe in Brighthaven, and over the following weeks combined forces from the Sanctum and the closest Brobnar tribe, led by a pair of archons, exterminated the Gorger threat. Through some magic or advanced technology, one of the archons even re-grew the trees of Cobweb Grove, and I was able to return to my comfortable little house and begin filling it with my writings once more.

As for Duma? Both the knights were right, I think. She vanished that day, carried away in the tide of water. But she will also live on, for here she is, on the page.

She will, in truth, live forever, just so long as we follow her final request: remember her.