
AMANDA'S QUEST

KINGDOM OF TORRENCE

BY D.M. STODDARD

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to locales, events, business establishments, or actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental; the name Garrett is used in honor of a fan but does not reflect actual events.

Kingdom of Torrence

Reno Nevada

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I would like to thank my family and friends for their support and encouragement for me to complete this story that I offer for your reading pleasure. Special thanks to my wife and children from whom I stole time to complete this book.

As an author I enjoy creating worlds and storylines for readers, but it can become confusing in terms of grammar, logic, consistency, and many other important parts needed to deliver a story. For this, I have beta readers who read my drafts, helping me remain logical and consistent while reassuring me that what I am creating continues to be entertaining. My editor, who was so flexible and supportive during some very strenuous times, gave me guidance on grammar, structure, vocabulary, and other components that make meaningful words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters, and ultimately this book. When you write, when you create a story, you do not necessarily concentrate on the proper word or format. These are the people who have attempted to keep me honest:

Editor

Toni Rakestraw
Rakestraw Book Design

Beta Readers

C.V. Stoddard, H.K. Gilbert,
E.M. McCuskey, and D.R. Bagley

I am glad to publish Amanda's Quest for your enjoyment.

SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In honor and memory of his namesake, Prince Garrett faces unforeseen challenges and, just when things appear to be at their worst, he is thrown from his horse in the midst of battle. As his men race to gather around him the prince continues to battle on, facing his own, personal Goliath.

Inspiration to write, just like inspiration to push through life's challenges, comes from a variety of sources. To the latter, when life's challenges have become overly burdensome and I have thought I could take no more, I have found inspiration from the personal battles of others who have faced far greater adversities. Thinking to myself if they have such strength and determination then I must certainly be able to conquer my day. Thank you for showing me the way.

In Memory of

Christina Maria Miarecki
May 8, 1965 – May 1, 2015

Garrett Allen
August 8, 1999 – April 24, 2015

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I should confess that I choose to use the word “Elve” rather than “Elf” despite my editor’s advice; every time I read “Elf” I envision a Christmas character rather than a fantasy character from the forest. I also struggle with the term “teleport” or “teleportation.” When I read the word “teleport” I immediately think of some space craft waiting to beam the character off the surface of Dendür. So, magical properties project rather than transport or teleport. Please grant me a little creative license as I paint a picture of the world of Dendür for your entertainment.

By D.M. Stoddard

CHAPTER 1

NEW BEGINNING

Amanda stood at the bow of the ship, her long blonde hair blowing freely in the wind, her feet solidly planted on the deck as it rose and fell beneath her, and her hands grasping the rail as the water of the winter sea sprayed up into the air each time the bow dove into the next wave. Her journey had begun.

She was enjoying the salty mist of the ocean spray as she reflected on the events that had set her on the voyage to Ornholtz alone. She felt refreshed and empowered, and somehow the ominous quest before her seemed more achievable.

It had started months before with a promise that had ensured Rhonda's wounds would be treated. But with only a year to complete the blood debt, she had to go on alone while her friends ascended Terrace Xul. As if returning the Horn of Valhalla to the Grand Thief in Torrence within the year was not challenging enough, traveling through the Crispten Mountains in the winter had been slow and now she was behind.

If I don't acquire the horn within the year, the guild will kill us all, she thought.

The Crimson Pommel was the strongest guild in Torrence. Nothing lay outside of their influence. There was no place the guild could not reach except maybe the Order of One. Even the outlawed magical scholars known as the Triad were wary of the guild's influence. Amanda knew the guild's strengths and weaknesses all too well. She was, after all, their greatest thief. But not even Amanda was fully aware of the extent of the guild's power. As she stood at the rail she wondered if their influence reached into the northern kingdom of

Haithenbeurn. The ship hit another wave, causing her to take a step in order to regain her balance.

If the guild had someone in Haithenbeurn they would have used them to acquire the horn. Instead they are forcing me to 'recover' it, she concluded as the spray washed over her again.

The smell of the salty water was refreshing, but the bearskin she wrapped over her black leather jacket and tight pants was getting soaked by the sticky water of the fjord.

It can't be that difficult, she decided.

Leaving Jerrod had not been easy for her. He was her first and only love. She knew his life was in danger as long as they traveled with Nathaniel, but she counted on the hope that, together with their friends, they could all survive Nathaniel's treachery.

That morning she had remained hidden in the cargo hold while her friends frantically searched for her. She heard their voices calling for her until they accepted that she was gone, and then she heard the horses being offloaded as her friends prepared to ascend the Steps of Terrace Xul. Once the ship began moving forward, Amanda pulled her hair back into a ponytail in anticipation of trouble before slipping out of her hiding place to find the captain.

The crew, who was rushing about setting the ship in motion for the wind to catch the sail, had not noticed the sound of Amanda's kneehigh boots stepping on the thick wood deck as she moved towards the stairs up to the main deck with cat-like motion.

When Amanda stepped up on to the maindeck the crew was busy adjusting the sail, tying off rope, or at the helm guiding the course of the ship while the captain pondered over a nautical chart. Amanda chuckled to herself when no one paid attention to her moving towards the captain.

Captain Grogan was a burly man. He was tall and muscular with shoulder length hair and a thick beard. His hands were callused from pulling at oars and, in his earlier years before becoming a merchant sailor, pulling at fishing nets. His calculating mannerisms, developed over years of bartering furs for supplies between Ornholtz, Dorindril, and the other cities on the fjord, influenced every action he took.

He had sailed the Fjord of Menduran all of his life, but he had never set passengers off at the pier below Mount Thoradan. He wanted to ensure their

course was set directly for Ornholtz and had not noticed Amanda walking up beside him.

With one hand resting on the crimson pommel of the dagger hanging from her belt, Amanda reached out to touch Grogan's shoulder.

"Captain," Amanda addressed the older man.

Grogan pulled back slightly, startled by Amanda's presence on his ship.

"Good morning, Captain. I require passage to Ornholtz and I'm willing to pay my way."

Amanda had taken a small bag of coins and gems out of the inner pocket of her leather jacket and began tossing the bag up and down playfully. The coins inside the bag made an enticing sound. She smiled coyly as her chilling blue eyes fixated on the much older man.

"You were gone?" the Captain responded with a puzzled look on his bearded face. "Your friends were looking for you. What are you doing here? How did you get on my ship?"

"I stayed aboard, but that shouldn't matter to you. I need to go on to Ornholtz as soon as possible and I can pay," Amanda answered, still playing with the bag of coins.

"What was it you said? You wanted nothing to do with Terrace Xul. Nor do I," she continued.

Your companions will have to face the wizard without you. Take care who you travel with. That one has a dark soul that brings death, Amanda recalled the witch's warning.

It was Grogan's gruff voice that brought her attention back to their conversation.

"And what is it worth to you?" he asked.

They bartered over several small gems before Amanda had gone to the bow to watch as the ship sailed north-by-northeast across the great fjord. Grogan watched as Amanda undid her ponytail, allowing her long blonde hair to blow in the breeze.

Not the wife of a sailor, he thought, admiring the curves of her athletic build.

Now, standing alone at the bow, Amanda's thoughts turned to the peaceful, moonlit nights in Torrence when she sat alone on the rooftops listening to the city's sounds and pondering what was going on below her skyline perch. Sitting there calculating the best ways to enter various establishments, she had been a distant observer, safely out of reach of the kingdom's affairs. Nothing could

touch her. At the bow of Grogon's ship the feeling that nothing could touch her had returned, calming her mind.

Amanda pulled the bearskin Lady Lieisa had given her tight around her shoulders, fondly remembering their visit to Lithlillia, but her thoughts quickly returned to the task at hand. Haithenbeurn. An obscure northern kingdom rumored to be barbaric. Other than knowing that Ornholtz would be her entry point, she really knew nothing about the kingdom along the Nasdrawuen coast.

If I fail my friends will die, if Terrace Xul doesn't kill them first, the anxiety crashed back into her consciousness.

Is that you, my love? Are you watching us sail away? Or am I just imagining it? Amanda thought as she stared forward, into the wind, into the adventure lying before her as if she were trying to see through the darkness of the night. *Good bye my love.*

By the time her friends had reached the mountainside cottage along the steps of Terrace Xul, the ship and its stowaway had sailed to the middle of the fjord, a day and a half away from Ornholtz.

Grogan took pleasure watching Amanda standing at the bow of his ship. He wondered what she was thinking as she stared across the waves.

When Amanda had smiled at him while bartering for passage, she had completely disarmed him. At that point she could have had anything she wanted with her secretive nature, her fair skin, and full lips.

And those chilling blue eyes. She is more woman than any other living on the fjord, or in Haithenbeurn, for that matter. More than a king's wife, I'll wager. Definitely worth giving up the sea for if she were willing to sleep warmly at your side, but no sailor would be able keep her, he thought.

The dangling scabbard of Amanda's long sword caught Grogon's eye. He noted that the scabbard hung from a *frog*, two smaller belts that looped down from her belt attaching to the scabbard at the top and a little further down.

Not one to be trifled with, either. That blade isn't hanging there as an ornament.

The captain committed to memory that she rigged her sword as if she were an experienced warrior.

Why have you left your friends to climb Mount Thoradan alone while you sail to Ornholtz, little one? Perhaps you are less the fool. The thought made him chuckle.

But why travel alone into the northern kingdom? Her decision to secretly continue on without letting her friends know was curious.

“Make sure the crew knows to give Amanda a wide berth. I think anyone who crosses her course will come away the lesser for it,” Captain Grogon ordered, looking at his First Mate.

The sooner I land her safely at Ornholtz the better for all of us.

* * * * *

In the warmth of her cottage, Felicia had watched the image of Amanda reflecting on the surface of the oil in the brass basin sitting on the table before her. As she watched the image, she stroked the black cat sleeping on a pillow next to her. She had not been surprised by Amanda’s secret departure from Terrace Xul. She stirred the oil with a long fingernail and the image shifted to Jerrod as he glanced over his shoulder looking down towards the fjord, while he wondered about Amanda.

Felicia was intrigued. Jerrod’s longest love had sailed on a ship to Ornholtz in order to pay a blood-debt while his newest love rode next to him. And the thought that the wizard, Nathaniel, rode with them made her chuckle aloud. Felicia knew Jerrod would be tempted by the Fates and that delighted her even more, but in the end, he would stand alone.

“There is no stopping Nathaniel now, Sasha,” Felicia said softly.

We shall see, the familiar thought back to her. *We shall see.*

“Do you think you know more than me?” Felicia questioned the cat aloud.

I think humans are resilient and love is triumphant, Sasha thought as the black cat changed into a panther. *I would not underestimate Jerrod or dismiss his love for Amanda.*

“But what about the druid princess?” Felicia teased.

* * * * *

Far above the Fjord of Menduran and far enough away not to be seen, the winged horses had taken turns watching for signs of Rhonda, the druid princess of Lithlillia and the half-Elven daughter of Lady Lieisa. While the wizard’s dragon circled above Mount Thoradan they had not been able to move closer.

The dragon had protected her master diligently and her need for food caused her to circle relentlessly.

When the winged herd sent their report to Lady Lieisa, they had only been able to offer that Rhonda had most likely entered Terrace Xul. They had assumed she was safely with her companions, but they had not been able to reach her mind. Rhonda was too far away. Consequently, their report had offered little information and less comfort.

* * * * *

As Amanda undressed in the confines of the small cabin, a strange series of feelings washed over her. Thoughts of her love for Jerrod, her promise to complete the blood-debt, and her determination to finish that quest within the remainder of the year in order to protect everyone from the wrath of the Crimson Pommel twisted in her mind. Fraum, her recent mentor, desired she refrain from thievery, or at least, for her to stay out of "trouble" as he put it. The question whether her friends would survive Nathaniel's treachery tormented her conscience.

Stop it! Focus on the tasks at hand, she thought as she pulled on a clean pair of black leather pants and hung the sea-soaked pants she had been wearing out to dry.

Amanda knew if she allowed herself to become distracted she might give herself or her intentions away at a crucial moment. She was on her own in a foreign kingdom without a friend. Too far away to expect assistance from anyone.

After changing, Amanda went through her pack, checking her possessions. The treasures she had collected on the journey from Torrence were all still there. She pulled her thieves' tools and climbing gear out of the pack to dry and then turned her attention to her bow and quiver of arrows. With great care, she began oiling her sword and daggers. The dagger with the crimson pommel, the jeweled dagger she found in Tilhelm Keep, and the silver dagger the witch, Felicia, had given her.

When she was finished she paused to twirl her dagger in her hands. Playing with the silver-colored blade of the crimson pommeled dagger, she contemplated her life. For the first time she found herself questioning her position in the guild.

What does being the best thief in the guild offer me? I answer to the Grand

Thief. I do his bidding. My past accomplishments for the guild were not enough to buy care for Rhonda. I had to agree to this blood debt, Amanda pondered.

And I am alone.

She felt sure the crew was too scared of Captain Grogan to enter her cabin or rummage through her belongings. He had accepted her as a passenger and taken her money, which ensured her safety and that of her belongings. Nathaniel had paid handsomely for their group to travel in a large cabin from Dorindrill to the Steps of Terrace Xul beneath the shadow of Mount Thoradan. She paid less and got less, but the smaller quarters suited her fine.

Putting her dagger away, Amanda began practicing the dance-like exercises that Fraum had started teaching her on their journey. Like her master, at times she moved slowly. When she did, her muscles trembled with strength. The next moment she exploded through a series of rapid strikes, blocks, and kicks. In the months that she had practiced with the monk, Amanda's speed had quickened.

When she was done with her exercises she sat down and picked up the dagger she had "recovered" from Tilhelm Keep. It was the first opportunity she had had to examine the ornamental dagger. Semi-precious stones were embedded on either side of the hilt. From her experience dealing with such items, Amanda concluded the dagger was used primarily for meals. She had seen similar weapons on the belts of wealthy merchants at banquets. She appraised the gems as marginally valuable.

Everyone wants to wear a weapon. It makes them feel powerful, important. This is the least valuable of my collection, she concluded.

After partially repacking her bag, Amanda stuck it in the corner under the climbing gear. Then she leaned her bow and quiver of arrows in front of both. When she was done, the pile of her belongings seemed unremarkable. After spreading her wet bearskin out to dry, she laid down for her first night's sleep alone in many months, her sword lying at her side.

The next morning was crisp and cold. The sky was clear, the pale blue color of winter, as the wind steadily pushed their vessel onward. The crew pointed out another hump of a sea creature which breached the surface once, but the monster, whether it was a giant barracuda or serpent, did not come any closer.

"Praise Aegir," Grogon mumbled the prayer to the Asgardian god of the sea under his breath.

Amanda remembered the devastation of the attack as she watched for the creature to return. Silently, Amanda wished Rhonda was present to communicate

with the creature, to steer it away from a confrontation. The absence of a druid on board bothered her, but to the merchant sailors it was a normal risk. Amanda wondered how well the sailors could fight off an attack, but when she asked Grogan, his answer was disheartening. More ships were lost than survived encounters with such monsters.

As dusk fell upon the fjord, the lights of Ornholtz came into view. The lamps of the city went up the hill away from the shore line. The shadows of the Ragnaugh Mountains and Mount Ornholtz loomed behind the city. Amanda could just see the pine forest on the lower ridges. It was long after nightfall when the ship finally eased up to the pier. Very few men from Ornholtz came to assist the late arriving vessel in mooring to the bollards.

"By the Fates," Amanda whispered.

The captain, who knew his crew was unsettled from the voyage, allowed them to go ashore for the night in celebration of another safe arrival. He knew it would mean a late start offloading the cargo in the morning, but that would give him time to negotiate the sale of his cargo and barter for goods to sell on the return journey. He would also be able to spend some time finding a jeweler to sell the gems Nathaniel had paid him without the crew waiting impatiently for his return. The more time he had, the better price he should get for the stones.

Grogan had decided to keep the gems Amanda had paid for himself. He seldom held out from the crew, but as he grew older he tried to store away a savings for his retirement. When the ship was securely moored he released the crew, leaving the ship nearly empty, and sat down at his desk for some sailors' grog.

Outside, in the shadow of the night, the silhouette of a woman in tight black leather slipped over the side of his ship and onto the pier. She moved like a mountain lion, swift and strong, fierce yet agile. Her long, blonde hair pulled back into a pony tail held in place with a leather headband, bounced as she moved straight into the shadows of Ornholtz and disappeared into the city. Only her foot prints in the snow indicated she had passed, but there was no one lingering in the cold winter night to notice.

The warehouse district, and its inns and taverns, were considered the less savory part of the city. During daylight the pier commerce mixed merchants with passengers. Warehouses, where traders did business with the ship captains and local merchants, were built down as close to the pier edge as possible, but anyone wishing to travel by sea had to approach each ship and ask to speak with

the captain to barter passage. Unlike Dorindril, the city lord did not involve himself with the business. But at night, only the drunk sailors in nearby taverns occupied the less savory district.

Amanda had learned on the voyage that in Ornholtz women rarely traveled alone, particularly at night, but the adventure made her feel at home. She felt exuberant, sneaking through the city unnoticed. For a moment it was as though she wandered Torrence, secretly observing the city she felt she owned.

She moved from doorway to doorway, listening at each to the drunken banter of the men in the tavern. It was a mixture of sailors and dock workers drinking away the frustrations of a long voyage or the demands of family life. Amanda could hear patrons inside the taverns boasting of great feats and toasting at the end of magnificent stories. When cheering erupted, Amanda envisioned the brutes inside in an arm wrestling contest. Perhaps there were games of dagger throwing.

She watched the few passersby from the shadows. Bearded men, most of them overweight, passed from tavern to tavern, their heavy fur boots trudging through the snow. They wore pants, shirts, and furs pulled over their shoulders and tucked into wide leather belts to keep them warm.

Even in a peaceful surrounding the men of Orholtz carried heavy swords they called *langsax*. The weapon, which was shorter than the long swords from Torrence, seemed slightly wider with flat pommels and short cross guards. Amanda was more interested in the single-sided axes with eight inch long, curving blades that some men carried in place of the *langsax*. The axe blades were flat along the top, but on the bottom curved back towards a two foot long handle, ideal for throwing.

She already knew she could not enter into the taverns or conduct business dressed in thieves' leather armor and carrying a long sword. To reach the king's city of Theasendür she would need to blend into the culture around her. She would have to become a citizen of Haithenburn. So, before returning to Grogan's ship, she went deeper into the city where she found a merchant district. And there, Amanda broke into a store to steal some traditional women's clothing.

In the store she saw mostly yak furs, but there were a few bearskins and an occasional wolf-skin. She had not seen a yak before and wondered what the animal looked like, but from the size and shape of the fur she assumed it was similar to the cattle in Torrence. She also found large, square bags with a single woven strap long enough to hang from a woman's shoulder. Amanda packed a

bag with local clothing before leaving a gem on the counter and stealing back into the shadows of the street.

By the early morning hours the inn taverns quieted and the sailors returned to Grogan's ship to sleep off their drunkenness. It was easy for Amanda to return to her cabin with her spoils without being noticed, so easy she was able to take the gangway back onboard without being observed. Like everyone in the city, the ship's crew was asleep.

After sunrise, as the captain was preparing to go sell his cargo, there was a knock on his door.

"Come in," Grogan barked.

A local woman stepped through the door. She was ordinary looking, nothing remarkable. The heavy yak-wool sweater and skirt with gray leggings concealed Amanda's figure. Her long hair, pushed up under the colorful striped knitted cap, did not give away her identity. Had it not been for a golden dagger with a crimson pommel on her belt and the bow and quiver, Grogan never would have guessed her identity.

"Amanda?" he asked, not yet certain who he was looking at.

"I wanted to thank you for your hospitality and discretion, Captain," Amanda responded, pleased that her disguise had worked so well on someone who knew her. "I trust my arrival on your ship will remain a secret."

The captain nodded yes.

Amanda held her bow and quiver out to the burly, older man.

"I want you to have my bow," she started. "They will raise unwanted attention to me where I am going. They have provided me good service. I hope they will do the same for you. I have also left a few things in my cabin. Mostly rope. Do what you want with it."

After saying their goodbyes, Grogan watched her pick up a long bedroll and a large wool travel bag. Watching Amanda walk up the stairs to the main deck, he realized that she was leaving as mysteriously as she had arrived. He really knew nothing about her or her intentions but he would always remember the image of her at the bow of his ship, the wind blowing through her long blonde hair.

"Urd, keep her safe. She is a good person and deserves your watchful eye," Grogan prayed quietly to the Asgardian goddess of fate.

Amanda headed into Ornholtz. She had discovered that, beyond the wharf district that had been built along the sea-line, there were inns, shops, and the beginnings of homes. The buildings were bigger, and the farther they lay from

the wharf district, the better they were kept. The best shops and inns appeared to be near the center of the city.

Amanda decided to visit shops in the richer district with the intent of obtaining a room nearby. As she walked through the city observing how the inhabitants, particularly the women, behaved, she learned their ways so she could mimic their habits. The relaxed atmosphere in the streets made her integration into their culture easier.

She observed strong men who were fighters, hunters, soldiers, sailors, blacksmiths, and dock-men. There were a few weaker men, too. Men who apparently made a living managing liveries, warehouses, and the few businesses needed to run a city. When the stronger men interacted with those appearing weaker, the stronger men always dominated the encounter.

Most of the women she observed were those venturing out alone to shop. And there were lesser women who worked in the taverns passing out the ale and inevitably ending up on some man's lap. The lesser women were exploited for their looks and the men's pleasure, and discarded later when they lost their looks to age with less consideration than dogs turned out to feed upon scraps.

The taverns served ale. There was no wine or mead, nor any other drink that might be considered manly. They ate pork, yak, chicken, and fish served mostly with potatoes. Dairy, such as butter and cheese was also available, but milk, which was also available, was never served to the men in a tavern. The only women eating in the taverns were accompanied by husbands, brothers, or their fathers, and children always accompanied them.

The sight reminded Amanda of Horis and his city. They too were chauvinistic. The men of Dorindril had angered her, but she had been able to restrain herself from striking them down and liberating the women. Amanda took a deep breath. Now, she was faced with an entire kingdom of chauvinists and what appeared would be many weeks of travel.

Near the center of Ornholtz Amanda found a lapidary. When she was the only one in the shop, she showed the merchant a few of the gems she was carrying, bartering a sale to obtain some local money. The money would not draw unnecessary attention to her during her quest. She repeated similar sales twice more to obtain a modest amount of local coins that would cover the anticipated cost of her trip.

According to the Crimson Pommel, she would find the Horn of Valhalla in the king's lodge in Theasendür. Her best guess was that she would need to pay

for travel, rooms, and food before reaching the king's city. The primary form of winter travel between the cities was by ship along the Coast of Nasdrawuen.

It would be easier to just ride into the cities. There are no walls so my entry and departure would not have been noted, but it's winter. Now I will undoubtedly be seen getting off the ship. But I think this disguise will suffice, Amanda concluded.

Immersing herself into the community, Amanda waited for Grogan's ship to sail. Once he departed there would be no evidence where she had come from, making it more certain her new identity would remain intact. Until that time she needed a room where she could eat and stay without raising suspicion. There were several modest inns nearby that promised to provide a suitable hideaway.

As she neared the first suitable inn a large man grabbed her arm and pulled her into an alleyway. The bearded brute towered over her. In his large hand was a double edged dagger with a blade that was nearly a foot long and two inches wide. The steel blade was thicker in the middle, tapering gradually down to the outer edge.

Sturdy but cumbersome, constructed for the battle field rather than single combat, Amanda concluded.

Her sword would have easily overpowered the dagger, but even in the alley, the risk of drawing unwanted attention was too great. As the brute pulled her farther into the alley, Amanda allowed Fraum's teachings to take control of her reaction. She submitted, letting him pull her in. When they passed out of sight of the street, Amanda stepped past the man, using his weight and momentum to pull him off balance. Grabbing his wrist as she passed, Amanda pushed the back of his upper arm with her free hand, causing the already off-balanced man to tumble face first into the alley wall.

The would-be thief hit the wall and then stumbled back towards the center of the alley as he tried to regain his balance. Like the continuing motion of the dancers at a festival, without hesitating Amanda brought her knee up towards his chest and then snapped her foot outward, driving the ball of her foot deep into his chest. The large man flew backward, striking the wall a second time. Jumping forward and thrusting the side of her foot into his chest, Amanda's movements continued as the smooth flow of a choreographed dance. Under her foot her assailant's ribs sounded like saplings breaking under the great stress of being bent to the ground. The man slid down the wall to rest on the alley floor.

"I don't want any trouble from you," Amanda warned.

"I'm going to break you in half and leave you dying in the snow," the assailant growled in anger, struggling to push himself to his knees.

He drew his *langsax* as he stood up, leaning against the wall as a crutch. When he swung the sword at her chest, Amanda dropped to one knee, letting the blade pass over her as she drew her dagger from her belt. She plunged the point of the dagger deep into his groin next to his leg and then jumped back as the man fell to his knees. The tip of his sword fell to the dirt as he stared up into her cold eyes.

Amanda looked down on the helpless brut, considering that she could not afford to let the man live to identify her as a foreign warrior. Worse yet, she could not afford to be pursued for assaulting the would-be thief. If word spread of a search for his assailant it would most likely increase the vigilance of those who guarded the horn.

It's best if you die here, Amanda thought.

Jumping around her large attacker, Amanda covered his mouth with her free hand, and pulling his chin to the side, exposing his neck, she drove the dagger upward into his skull behind his ear. The man's body went limp instantly and he fell face first to the ground.

Blood from the carotid artery began spurting out of his neck in pulses with the last beats of his heart as blood from the iliac artery finished gushing down his pant leg. Amanda stepped back, watching his death.

I'm not an assassin. This should not have been necessary. Your death is on the guild, she thought.

Removing her blood-soaked wool sweater, Amanda grabbed the bearskin from the ground and pulled it around her shoulders. After wiping her dagger off on the bloody sweater, she threw the soiled clothing over the man's face and left the alley in the other direction.

Moving back into the stream of shoppers, Amanda assumed the walking speed of the surrounding crowd. In the first store she came to she bought an olive-drab sweater and a new knit cap. She also bought a couple of wooden bracelets to accent her disguise. She shopped casually, but before returning to the street Amanda carefully observed the crowd.

Women took their time shopping at vendor's carts with their children while others stepped in and out of the shops. Here or there a gruff, bearded man pushed through the street, but there were no soldiers racing to the nearby alley. No alarm or panic indicating the body had been found. As a small group passed

by the doorway, Amanda stepped out into the street, immediately blending in. She traveled through the crowd, moving from one group to the next without raising suspicion.

Two corners down from the sweater shop, Amanda stopped to buy some ale and cooked meat in a tavern. She was hungry. The male patrons seemed to ignore her, but the innkeeper's scowling expression indicated his disapproval. As she sat waiting for her meal she listened to the gossip. The conversations around her varied greatly, but she learned the overland road between Ornholtz and Morganwray, which was typically very difficult to travel in the deep winter snow, had been closed for days. Others spoke of how the shipping had slowed for the winter. From what she heard, Amanda finalized her plan to barter passage along the Coast of Nasdrawuen to Theasendür.

A winter voyage seems to be in my destiny. The thought nearly made her giggle.

After finishing her meal she worked her way up the street towards a local inn. Avoiding the largest inns, where a perception that she was wealthy might cause staff to scrutinize her comings and goings in the name of better customer service, Amanda found a modest sized inn to obtain lodging. The sign of the inn read Odin's Hytte.

Odin's Hytte, meaning Odin's Cottage, was a two-story inn with windows and two entrances. The kitchen was near the back entrance. A large stone fireplace split the tavern from the kitchen. The front entrance was on the other side of the tavern. A split-log staircase opposite the fireplace led up to the preferred, second floor guest rooms, but Amanda did not want to risk being cornered upstairs. There were only a couple of guest rooms on the first floor. The rooms, near the back entrance across from the kitchen, were typically used for patrons who had become too drunk to stumble home. The sounds from the kitchen and tavern filled the rooms, but they suited Amanda's needs perfectly.

This will do nicely, Amanda thought, satisfied with her find.

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Jerrod had not told anyone when Amanda disappeared into the night, but waited for the morning when his companions discovered she was gone. He felt it was her place to tell them if she had wanted them to know, but she had snuck off in the darkness of night, just like the thief Nathaniel had accused her of

being. Jerrod was not really certain he even understood her reasoning. Before she left she had warned him about Nathaniel, but none of them could have anticipated Nathaniel's treachery.

They had gone into the Lost Kingdom without her in hopes of finding the treasure Nathaniel had promised. Now a small portion of that treasure lay strewn across the white marble floor of Agganon. Only a moment before they had been sealed in a secret treasure room, deep in Terrace Xul, but the instance Jerrod moved the silver dial of the beautifully polished, mossy-green artifact, they had appeared in the middle of the octagonal building.

Agganon, the portal of the Olympian gods, was empty, void of other life. Around them white marble columns with veins of gray supported heavy marble beams that held up the stone ceiling above. Between the columns and the outer marble wall a hallway circled the room. In every other side of the outer walls were double doors made of heavy dark wood inlaid with gold. Despite the lack of life, the polished floor looked as though it had just been cleaned. The room was brightly lit by golden lamps that extended from the outer walls and from four golden lamps that were placed near the center of the floor, but there was no one there to light them or refill the oil. The strange, empty room was breathtaking.

"Agganon!" Fraum gasped.

For fifteen feet around them gold coins, gems, golden statues, goblets, and other treasure spread across the cold floor. The two golden braziers they had been sitting between in Terrace Xul were also there. The braziers' flames still burned as they as though they still sat in the secret treasure room of the Lost Kingdom, but the cavernous walls of the secret treasure room were gone, replaced by the lavish marble of the temple.

Fraum, Jerrod, and Drin stood up while Rhonda continued sitting, but she paused from treating Imelrinn. Fraum's light brown monk's robe was marked with burns from the forks of lightning that had arched from Nathaniel's staff. Drin's white tunic that covered his chain mail was similarly singed. Even Jerrod's chain mail showed scorch marks where a fork of the magical lightning had struck him, but the fire that had nearly killed Imelrinn had not scorched him. Rhonda was the only one who had not been struck by the lightning or burned by fire.

She tried to comfort her Elven guardian as he lay on the floor. His burns were severe. Most of his clothing was burned. His exposed skin was blackened

and charred, and much of his blond hair had been burned away. His pointed ears and high cheeks were like white ash where they were not already covered with blisters.

"Agganon," Fraum repeated again as he turned around slowly.

The light and temperature of the room was welcoming, but the lack of any sound was eerie. It was so quiet they could hear each other breathing. Time seemed to freeze as the reality they were no longer in the Lost Kingdom of Terrace Xul set into their minds. Relief that they were no longer trapped by the Rahjin slowly gave way to anxiety over their unknown surroundings.

"By the Fates," Jerrod whispered, causing Drin to shoot a disapproving glance at him.

Jerrod was caught up in the moment. He had entered a strange environment using a magical artifact. Vast wealth lay at his feet. His first thought was to share the moment with Amanda, but she was gone. As he imagined Amanda's coy little smile, he looked down into Rhonda's pleasant, half-Elven eyes, confusing him more than ever.

While the others began adjusting, Fraum took in the majesty of the structure surrounding them, and then he glanced back at his companions. He began to realize they did not recognize the name, Agganon.

"This is the ancient gateway to the gods of Olympus. Through those eastern doors the gods came and went from our world." Fraum's scholarly excitement resonated through his voice.

Drin quickly glanced around the room, his eyes snapping from door to door as his square jaw began to tighten. He was obviously uncomfortable with the knowledge he was in an Olympian temple. Rhonda's gaze was far less panicked as she slowly looked around. But Jerrod was not interested in the room. He looked down at the artifact he held in his hand and then he looked up at the others. They shared a look of bewilderment before Fraum reached out, taking the green stone from Jerrod.

"I'll hold this for safe keeping. Maybe the scrolls in the monastery have some history on the artifact," Fraum explained.

Once again reality pressed on them like the eddies of a swift river. The wealth around them was more than they could ever spend. Jerrod's dream of fame and fortune, and the answer to Drin's knighthood had been secured.

"And what of all this?" Drin gestured towards the assorted treasure.

"One thing at a time. We are in the Anacoztli Mountains far to the east of

the Plains of Demeter. Let's figure out our food and water first. We'll have time for the treasure later," Fraum suggested.

"We should not be here. This is not the place for me. The Order would not approve!" The powerful jaw line of Drin's square face locked.

They all turned to look at him. The young Initiate of the Order of One, hoping to be a knight at the end of their adventure, was uncommonly shaken by the surroundings. His heavy, thick eyebrows were raised into an arch above his dark, widely opened eyes.

"I am not sure we have much of a choice," Jerrod pointed out, trying to calm his older friend.

"This is a place of worship for the misguided who have not yet accepted our teachings. It is an unholy place." Drin looked around as if anticipating some hidden attack to strike at him.

Rhonda rose from Imelrinn's side, stepping towards Drin.

"And where does that leave druids who worship nature and not one of the flatlanders' gods?" she challenged.

"You are lost," Drin snapped with a sense of superiority in his voice. "I pray for you nightly, but yours is not a true religion." He looked down at her over the high bridge of his olive colored nose.

"That is a lot of compassion for someone with such contempt for non-believers," Rhonda said angrily.

"If you hate us so much, why did you save me in the Black Forest in the first place?"

"You are human," he paused, realizing Rhonda was half-Elven.

He realized his mistake immediately, but it was too late. The words were out. He had spoken as thoughtlessly as a child angered by his playmates.

"You deserved help and you are my friend." Drin tried to overcome his thoughtless words.

"Whom you apparently don't approve of!" she whipped back in anger as her green eyes began to glow.

A small breeze began to rise, swirling around inside the octagonal building. Rhonda's light brown hair began to lift from her shoulders as the temperature in the room began to drop.

The vivid image of Rhonda in the battle of Sismin Summit rushed into Jerrod's consciousness. The scene had been permanently etched in his mind. Rhonda's slightly thin body floating in the air before a field of dead giants

was unforgettable. Her awesome power scared him. Imelrinn was the only other person to have seen the devastation.

Jerrod stepped between Rhonda and Drin.

"Let's not start a religious war in front of the gates of Olympus," Jerrod said to her as he gently grabbed her waist. "We don't need Ares descending from Olympus to answer a call to war," he urged, looking back and forth between Rhonda and Drin,

"If such a man even exists," Drin said in disgust, not thinking his comment might further antagonize the situation.

"It takes all types," Fraum said calmly as he laid a hand on Drin's shoulder.

The young Initiate took a step back, looking intently at the older man. Fraum's skeletal face was expressionless.

"For the part of life's journey that we have shared over the last few months you have witnessed many things that no one would have believed. Dead trolls getting up out of the dirt to attack again. A dragon killing a beast with its will..." Fraum stopped.

The monk, who they had first known as a scholar, once again observed his three younger companions. Years of study in the monastery's library had made him wise. Years of meditation had made him peaceful.

"Wouldn't it be better to keep an open mind about our friends? Life would certainly be boring if we were all the same." Fraum chuckled.

Drin looked at the older man. His bald head and sparkling, almond-shaped eyes calmed his soul. The monk's sense of peace was contagious. Drin did not resist Fraum taking him by the shoulder to turn him towards the western doors.

"Let's see what's outside," Fraum said softly.

They walked together across the room. When they reached the western doors, Fraum put his back against the door and turned to face Drin.

"The wonderful thing about a new door," Fraum paused as he began to push the door open with his back, "is that it opens new opportunities."

The door swung open, exposing a spectacular, panoramic view. From the mountain top where Agganon was built on the western side of the Anacoziel Mountains they could see a lower range of foothills to the west. Beyond the foothills stretched the great basin. Everything was covered in white snow. In the distance a great, icy blue river seemed to stand still, reflecting the blue winter sky like the reflection of a mirror as the river flowed south through the eastern edge of the great basin.

Fraum and Drin stepped out of the octagonal building into the snow. Behind them the jagged peaks of the Anacoztel Mountains loomed upward. Valleys of deep blue and cold gray scratched away the mountainside channeling the chilling, winter air downward to press against their chests. Their laborious breath created gray clouds each time they exhaled. Fraum ignored the cold, enjoying the view for a moment before he turned to his young friend.

"If it is snowing in Torrence, are you having a good day?" Fraum asked.

Drin looked at the old man, puzzled by his question. "What?"

"Why let something out of your control affect you? We are here together. All of us. We have saved each other over and over again. We have risked our lives for each other so many times. Standing in a building with friends will not jeopardize your beliefs." Fraum paused to look again at the mountains. "Aren't they beautiful?" the monk said, nearly whispering.

Drin relaxed as his lungs took in the cold mountain air. He reflected on the covenant of the Order. Their intention to convert everyone, one village at a time, to their belief was working. In Torrence the Order was already larger than all the other temples combined, even the temple of Zeus, and they were beginning to influence the king. How could his presence in a pagan temple deter their goal?

"You are a hero, Drin. We will all be called heroes," Fraum said as he tucked his hands into the sleeves of his light brown robe.

Drin contemplated the thought as Fraum watched him. Being watched had never bothered him before, but somehow Fraum's examination of his life in that moment of time made him question his own beliefs.

He is truly wise, the young knight-to-be reflected.

"We have fought beasts and recovered great wealth. Others will praise our success for more than it is." Fraum waited again, allowing Drin to digest thoughts one piece at a time.

I have completed a gallant quest defeating horrible beasts and I am returning unimaginable riches in order to be deemed worthy of knighthood, Drin reflected.

"Yes, I suppose," Drin answered softly as he stared to the west, overlooking the vast emptiness of the great, snow-covered basin.

"Keep in mind that it is more important what we do afterward," Fraum advised.

Drin looked at Fraum again.

There is only the Order, he thought.

"What are you suggesting?" Drin asked.

Fraum looked back through the open door to where Rhonda knelt next to Imelrinn. Jerrod squatted nearby, trying to comfort both of them.

"Compassion and patience are also virtues of a hero," Fraum counseled.

"The Order may not tolerate other religious beliefs but they are your friends," Fraum said, nodding towards the group inside. "Nothing is absolute. To fully accept them you must also accept their beliefs, and respect both. It is our compassion that defines us as humans." The older man stared into Drin's soul.

* * * * *

Inside, Jerrod and Rhonda turned their attention to Imelrinn. The Mountain Wood Elve was badly burned, causing him great pain. Rhonda's fretting over her guardian was apparent.

There will be scarring, Rhonda thought.

"I don't know what herbs may grow around here, particularly during winter," Rhonda said aloud, trying to calm down.

She glanced up at Jerrod, the fire returning to her eyes as she relived Drin's statement. Rhonda shook her head slightly before refocusing on Imelrinn.

"I don't know if I can heal him!" Rhonda said as she looked up at Jerrod again, tears swelling in her eyes.

For the first time since he had known her, Jerrod sensed panic in Rhonda's voice.

"I will see what I can find. Please stay with him," Rhonda begged.

Jerrod watched as Rhonda rushed towards the northern doors and then he sat down with Imelrinn. Jerrod reached out and gently touched the Elve's burnt shoulder.

"How are you, my friend?" he asked.

A strange sensation swept through Jerrod's body. He could feel his touch gently warming Imelrinn's shoulder.

At first the warmth burned nearly as bad as the fire Nathaniel had cast upon him, causing Imelrinn to wince, but the pain quickly subsided. As it did, the damaged skin burnt off, igniting the remnants of his shirt, which smoldered and fell away. The fine ash drifted away like glitter thrown into a light breeze.

The ancient Elve looked at the young flatlander in amazement. Something was different. Jerrod's silver hair still curled around the back of his ears and the

base of his neck. His round face, button nose, and shiny azure-blue eyes were still the same as those of the eighteen year old boy he had met on the Plateau of Kronese, but the heart and soul of the boy were not the same. It was not just a man of Torrence who sat next to him.

You are developing some extraordinary powers, Imelrinn thought.

"I don't know," Jerrod answered the unasked question as if he had heard the Elve's thoughts.

Imelrinn watched him speechlessly.

"Things are starting to happen. I don't even think about it. It's more like my desires are answered before I realize what is happening," Jerrod tried to explain.

"That's like the connection druids have with nature. Their connection draws upon the powers of nature. It is not really magic. It is a channeling of the power of nature through their bodies," Imelrinn responded.

It was Jerrod's turn to stare. Magic was still a wonder. Jerrod had seen Nathaniel's wizardry and illusion magic. He had also seen Rhonda's druid "magic." To him Rhonda was just as powerful, just as threatening, when she was surrounded by nature as Nathaniel was at the onset of a battle.

"Unlike wizards, druids call upon natural phenomena, plants, storms, lightning, or worse. Wizards have to study their magic spells. Some magic even requires components for spells. Have you ever studied magic?" the Elve asked.

Jerrod innocently shook his head no.

Jerrod continued healing Imelrinn's remaining wounds, not knowing how he was accomplishing the task. Each time he touched the guardian Jerrod grew more tired and the ancient Elve grew healthier.

When Rhonda returned, the only evidence Imelrinn had ever been injured was his lack of clothes and his burnt hair. He stood shirtless in his leather pants and boots. His shirt and riding robe had burnt away. His once long, braided hair had been burned down to almost nothing. Imelrinn moved as though nothing had ever happened, but Jerrod slept on the floor with his head resting on his riding cloak. She watched Imelrinn pick up his fur and slide it over his shoulders.

"What happened to your wounds?" Rhonda asked in bewilderment.

Imelrinn nodded towards Jerrod.

"I don't understand. What happened?" she pressed.

"It's Jerrod. He healed me. He doesn't know how and I don't know what to tell you," Imelrinn answered softly.

When the others returned, Imelrinn dismissed his wounds as having been fleeting due to the quick recovery of Elven metabolism. The answer satisfied Drin, but Fraum looked at him quizzically.

Later, when they were able to speak privately, Jerrod and Imelrinn decided to keep the secret of his growing power between themselves.



