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# LEGEND OF JERROD

KINGDOM OF TORRENCE

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*BY* D.M. STODDARD

**LEGEND OF JERROD**

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Kingdom of Torrence

Reno Nevada

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C.V. Stoddard

This has been a remarkable journey which I am glad you were part of.  
Thank you all.

By D.M. Stoddard

# CHAPTER 1

## *THE BEGINNING*

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In some ways, Jerrod very much resembled other seventeen-year-old boys nearing manhood. He clung to unfocused dreams about a future that constantly changed. He dreamt of adventure and riches, of love and lust, of honor and heroism. His impatient, youthful spirit wanted immediate satisfaction, but deep in his soul, he did not really know what he desired. Yet, he sensed his destiny was about to take hold.

The other boys from his village, who worked in their father's fields or stables, or in the taverns or small shops that made up the businesses of Winfred, had similar yearnings. When they could steal away from the responsibilities of their young-adult lives, they gathered together in small groups to act out their shared dreams. Deep in the forest, they gathered to fight with wooden swords, becoming gallant knights who served the king, fighting dragons or leading armies into battle. The reenactments of their dreams were not the playful battles of young boys. The blows of the wooden swords hurt, causing bruises that lasted for days.

Caught up in the desires of wishful dreams, they trained for future conquests, when they would wear shining armor and plumed helmets. They dropped the visors of crudely made helmets, as they charged one another. The crash of their nearly four-foot long, homemade bastard swords on their makeshift, wooden shields echoed through the forest like the snapping of saplings being broken in two by a giant or troll ravishing the forest. Their attacks drove their opponents into the forest floor. They charged against one another again and again, until

one side stood victorious and both sides were exhausted. Then they lay on the forest grass, dreaming of what could be, before returning home to their mundane lives.

When they could borrow or steal horses from their fathers' fields and merchant wagons, they would race. With dreamy eyes, they imagined mighty stallions galloping through the forest over fallen trees and shallow streams, the horses' hooves splashing up water as they plodded through the bed of the stream and over small, round rocks.

Like most young men, they dreamt the victor would win the attentions of a beautiful princess, who was, of course, far lovelier than any of the village girls. None of boys' dreams included marriage or families, and, certainly, none of their dreams included taking over the family business. But the older they grew, the more their numbers dwindled, as they lost members to exactly that fate. A village girl with a captivating smile, seeking a husband and a home distracted one of the group, and suddenly, he found himself taking his place, working alongside his father or father-in-law. The dreams the boys once shared were rapidly fading, like the forest's evening shadows are absorbed by the darkness of night.

Jerrod's father, Andrew, was an honest man. He was not rich in possessions or in the number of friends he held close, but no one from the village had any reason to speak ill of him. In the summer and fall, he worked hard in his mill, supporting his wife and four children with his meager earnings. He sold sacks of flour, which he ground on a stone mill, to the baker and villagers. His only donkey turned the grinding stone. After he had ground the last wheat harvest each autumn, Andrew started hauling firewood to the market. The wood and the sacks of flour he stored in the mill were enough to get the family through the winter.

Marc, Jerrod's older brother, whom he loved dearly, was content to be a miller's son. Marc worked hard in the mill. He enjoyed driving the wagon to pick up grain and to deliver flour to the baker. Marc liked staying home with the family in the evenings, while Jerrod went out hunting with his bow or gallivanting with his friends. Jerrod felt his father saw Marc as the ideal son, one grounded with discipline and dedicated to the family's needs. Jerrod, on the other hand, could do nothing to fulfill his father's expectations.

Jerrod's younger brother, Jason, and his sister, Tracie, tended the single milk cow and fed the chickens that scampered around the mill and their modest

cottage. They did what they could for their age. Occasionally, Jason helped in the mill, filling flour sacks, but he was too young to move the sacks after he filled them or to carry grain to the grinding stones. Jason also helped his mother, carrying water in from the well and wood in for the fire. Tracie helped with the baking, cleaned the cottage, and washed clothes.

The house had a high, peaked, thatched roof, which allowed for a loft over the dining and kitchen area. Off to one side of the main room, two doors opened into separate bedrooms. Jerrod's parents occupied the larger room, while Marc slept in the smaller one. A large, stone fireplace warmed the dining, kitchen, and loft areas, while also providing a place for his mother, Annalisa, to cook.

Unlike Jerrod and his friends, Marc had decided at a young age that he wanted to become a miller. When Marc informed his family that he intended to propose to the baker's daughter, the family greeted his announcement with unbridled excitement. Gabrielle was a nice girl, about Jerrod's age, pretty, soft-spoken, and well-mannered. Everyone in the village liked her. But, the pending wedding meant Gabrielle would come to live with Marc's family, crowding the already modest cottage. Eventually, the newlyweds would have their own children. Jerrod's desire to fulfill his dreams was accelerated by his anxiety over the lack of living space.

Jerrod's joy for his brother conflicted with his panic to escape, confusing him. He had longed for the adventures his dreams promised him, and Marc's announcement pushed Jarrod into deciding it was time to leave. He dreaded telling his father. Although he could hardly contain his excitement over the coming adventure, he loved his family deeply and would miss them terribly. But he could not escape the feeling the time had come for him to leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Amanda sat on the rooftop, overlooking Torrence. Neither moon was full, but they still provided enough light to see the city. The thatched roofs of the inn district spread out in front of her, the warehouses lying beyond that. To her right sat the king's castle and the cathedral. To her left stood a mixture of markets and residences. Noise from the nearby taverns drifted through the night air. Here and there, the sound of footsteps on the cobblestone streets echoed up into the night air.

Sitting on the roof, Amanda appeared, even to the keenest eye, as nothing

more than a silhouette against the night sky. Her long, blonde hair, held by a thin, black leather headband, hung loosely down her black jacket to the middle of her back. Her jacket fit tightly over her busty, yet athletic figure. Her knee-high, black boots covered her tight black pants. A gold dagger with a crimson pommel hung at her left hip.

She had been on her own for as long as she could remember. She could recall her mother's death, but nothing before that. When her mother died, she waited, but no one came. Most children without parents ended up on the street, surviving as best as they could. They typically became pickpockets, or worse, and for young girls, life on the streets often turned out worst of all. But Amanda had been lucky. After two nights on the street, she met an older man who could hardly walk, and who was in desperate need of a protégé to support him. He needed someone to "recover" items for him. In trade, he offered to provide her with a safe home.

Her protector turned out to be an aging thief who could no longer perform the tricks of his trade. Samuel had once been a revered member of the Crimson Pummel, a thieves' guild some people hired to complete delicate tasks for a nominal fee. But in his aging years, Samuel was falling from the guild's grace, so he had taken up freelance "recovery" work to support himself. Occasionally, he would take a job that promoted the interests of the guild. As Amanda learned from the master thief, she, too, joined the guild. She learned quickly and became one of its best recruits, and now, as she sat on the roof, she was already a legend.

The thieves' guild was one of the most influential sects in the kingdom. They were not strong enough to stop a king's edict, but they could slow the implementation of such. They could influence the gods' clerics and the high-ranking officers in both the King's Guard and the King's Legion. Most other guilds yielded to the Crimson Pummel. Even the Triad, an outlawed group studying the magics, did not confront them openly. Only one thing remained beyond the guilds' influence: the new religion, known as the Order of the One.

The city was Amanda's for the taking, yet she felt neither happy nor sad. "Content" best described how she felt. She knew all the city's secrets, but no one knew anything about her. Even the Crimson Pummel did not know where she lived. When they wanted to talk to her, they set out a secret sign, and she would go to them. Her beauty opened doors; her ability to "acquire" anything she desired gave her power. No secret or treasure was safe from her. No item could be kept out of her reach. But she had never known love.

Her protective instinct, her lack of trust, isolated her and kept others from getting too close. She had grown up seeing the evils of men. Her "occupation" required her to exploit man's vulnerability, but, determined not become a victim of someone's fleeting desire or conquest, she never got too close.

\* \* \* \* \*

Andrew was working in the mill one night, when Jerrod came to find him.

"Father?" Jerrod said.

Andrew continued cleaning the mill's grinding stone and did not look up. "Yes?"

"Marc will be married in the spring, and Gabrielle will come live us, won't she?" he asked for confirmation.

"I suppose," Andrew answered, as he finished with the stone and picked up a broom.

"Father?" Jerrod said again.

The serious note in his son's voice made Andrew pause in his work and glance up. After a brief moment's consideration, he leaned the broom against the wall, sat down on a stack of flour bags, and gave Jarrod a compassionate look.

"Father, there is hardly enough room for the six of us now, and what about the extra food?"

"We'll get along. We always do. A bigger garden. A little more hunting. And perhaps a little more business, if we can manage it. Maybe we could sell to the baker in Colberton. I hear their mill is too small." Andrew paused. "Is that what is really troubling you, son?"

Jerrod gulped, drew in a a deep breath, and then released it.

"I am old enough now that I need to find my future. You know I do not want to be a miller. I have been thinking for a long time," he paused, closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them. "I think I should go to Torrence."

Andrew had anticipated the day this conversation took place. He gathered his thoughts, trying to recall the speech he had practiced in his mind so many times. He was concerned his son's dreams would lead to unhappiness. Jerrod wanted to be a leader among heroes, but Andrew worried reality would only allow his son to become a foot soldier. The army offered nothing but hard work, directed by some cruel, company Captain. However, now that the moment

had arrived for Andrew to speak his mind, only the end of his prepared speech seemed important.

He looked at his son with compassionate understanding. Jerrod's shiny, azure blue eyes reflected his troubled thoughts. The boy, who would turn eighteen after the first of the year, chewed on his lower lip.

*"He is so young! His whiskers aren't even coarse yet. They're still the soft hairs of a boy. My boy."* Andrew reflected lovingly on memories of Jerrod growing up.

"Son, I just want you to be happy. Do you think you will find happiness in Torrence?"

"I don't know," Jerrod answered quietly, looking down at his feet. "I don't know. I just know I won't find it here."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jerrod knew nothing about the capital. What he thought he knew came from rumors spread by his friends and from village gossip. Most people imagined Torrence as a large, glimmering city where everyone prospered. Jerrod gave little thought to how everyone could be so wealthy and successful.

The king lived in Torrence, protected by his personal guard, known as the King's Guard, and by the larger, standing army known as the Legion. The Order of One also had an army of religious soldiers. The Order, who believed magic was typically used for evil purposes, sought to protect the people with the might of their swords and the virtue of their priests. They passively opposed the religious beliefs common to the kingdom. Their army of holy knights was very strong. The Order was growing, and as its following expanded, the older beliefs began to disappear.

The stronger knights and soldiers, those who did not follow the Order, were selected for the King's Guard. Soldiers who had not accomplished great deeds or who did not come from noble families and were deemed less worthy for lack of experience were drafted into the King's Legion as foot soldiers.

The life of a common soldier was hard, but not bad, if you sought that sort of life. A common soldier's lifestyle was much less rewarding than that of a knight, but in the peaceful environment of Torrence, neither knight nor footman was threatened.

Soldiers in all the armies stood watch in guard posts two or three times a

day. They spent a couple of hours just standing there, watching life pass them by. They spent the remainder of their day in combat training; cleaning and oiling their weapons and armor; cleaning the training grounds, stables, and barracks; and tending to the knights' horses.

Jarred subscribed to the common belief that a man could easily get into an army, and once he did, the opportunity to become a squire or knight's apprentice came quickly. And once a man became a squire, he advanced to the status of knight. Jerrod accepted the common belief as fact, without reservation or thought. And he based his future on these "facts". Once he reached Torrence, he believed someone would immediately recognize his valor and launch him toward knighthood.

Unable to afford to buy a horse for his journey, Jerrod decided to walk. Torrence was several days' walking distance from Winfred. The road to the next village was not much more than two dirt paths, beaten down by wagon wheels. He had travelled that portion many times. The cart track wound through the woods and over or around gentle hills covered in long grass. Jerrod thought the entire journey should be an easy walk that would take the better part of a week, but while the road would proved easy, the trip would turn out to be more tiring than he had imagined.

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the winter Jerrod planned for the trip. He decided to carry a small pack of supplies. Although he was average height, his muscular build allowed him to easily carry a pack with a week's supply of rations. He would pack light: one change of clothes, a couple deerskins sown together to make a lean-to to sleep under, and some food. He would strap the two tent poles to the side of the pack and carry a water pouch over his shoulder.

Small rabbits shot with his bow would make up his evening meals. A deer would provide more meat than he could manage, and woodland birds, which might offer a more tender meal, would be too time consuming to hunt. To supplement his meals, he would pack some bread and dried meats and fruits.

There were two villages along the road to Torrence. The first, Raven's Knob, lay only a long day's hike away. It would take at least two more days before he made the second village of Oakwood. He was uncertain how long the last leg of the trip into Torrence would take. A day, possibly two, was his best estimate. He

planned on sleeping under his deerskins each night and gathering water from the streams along the way. He figured the trip would be over a hundred miles and take at least five days to reach the kingdom's capital.

Jerrod was a good shot with his longbow. The only other weapon he owned was a knife, nearly a foot long, with a sharp edge on both sides, which tapered to a point. The knife handle was polished wood, with an iron *quillion* and pommel. He typically carried the knife tucked into his right forester's boot on the outside of his leg.

Jerrod had planned his journey throughout the winter, while Marc and Gabrielle planned for their wedding. The families fretted over the young couple, largely ignoring Jerrod and his siblings. Not that his mother and father loved the younger children any less, but the spring would bring a celebration which everyone in the village would get swept up into. The bride's family had even requested the presence of a bard, a travelling minstrel, to sing at the event.

\* \* \* \* \*

The winter months had dragged by. After Marc and Gabrielle married, she did, in fact, come to live with the Millers. Gabrielle helped with the motherly chores, while Marc continued to work in the mill. She was pleasant, everything a new bride living with her in-laws should be, but her presence still frustrated Jerrod. He felt trapped and anxious.

It was a cool, spring morning when Jerrod stepped out of his parents' doorway and took up the journey to Torrence. His father and Marc were already working in the mill. Jason and Tracie were off in the forest. The morning's dewdrops still glistened on the tree leaves when his mother reached up to kiss him goodbye. She played with the tight curls around the back of his left ear where his thick, golden hair curled around the base of his neck. She hugged him tight, trying to steal a last impression of what she was sure would be the last time she would see her son. Tears swelled in her eyes as she buried her face in his chest.

Annalisa watched him disappear up the wagon trail they called a road. Jerrod, dressed in deerskin pants and a linen shirt under a heavy leather vest, walked briskly away from his home without looking back. She thought fondly of how the village girls giggled with admiration when he walked by, validating

her belief that Jerrod was indeed, cute. Another tear crept down her cheek as she watched her son begin his quest for manhood.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jerrod did not have to pass through Winfred as he headed for Raven's Knob. Nor did he pass any of his friends' cottages. They would undoubtedly already be at work with their fathers. He had said his goodbyes in their glen the night before. All his friends made empty promises to follow soon, but he alone was pursuing the dream. A sense of relief filled him at not having to walk past their homes. His relief mixed with excitement as he left Winfred and the boyhood life he had known.

Walking down the road in his knee-high boots, laced tight to his legs, he held his longbow in one hand and carried a quiver of arrows and a water pouch slung over the opposite shoulder. His backpack weighed him down a bit, but not enough to slow his step. He looked more like a hunter going on a weeklong expedition than an adventurer seeking fame and fortune. He was young and inexperienced.

His pace remained steady throughout the first day. He stopped occasionally in the shade to rest. Beams of sunlight pierced the forest's canopy here and there. The weather stayed pleasant, neither hot nor humid. When he came to a brook, he emptied his pouch and refilled it with cooler water from the stream. He idled there for a bit, sitting on the bank, pondering what might come farther down the road. This slowed his progress, and night fell before he could reach Raven's Knob. But still invigorated by his dream, he walked on, breathing in the cool night air, fully committed to his journey. As he walked, he gazed up at the stars where they pierced through the forest canopy. The two moons, not yet full, rose over the forest.

He was tired when he finally reached the outskirts of Raven's Knob. The late night air had turned cold, and he did not feel like setting up camp, so he took refuge in a stable on the outer edge of the village.

The next morning, a swift boot and a gruff voice woke him.

"What are you doing in my stalls?"

"What?" Jerrod said, struggling to wake up, confused, at first, by his surroundings.

"What are you doing in my stalls? Get out of here!"

The bearded man grabbed for a pitchfork, as Jerrod struggled to his feet, grabbed his belongings, and stumbled out the stable door.

“Sorry,” he yelled back over his shoulder.

When Jerrod was out of sight of the stable, he stopped to arrange his belongings. He pulled some bread out of his pack for a quick, cold, morning meal. The bread settled his stomach, and the cool water from his pouch helped fill the emptiness. He thought of home, wondered what his mother was serving, and then quickly pushed those images out of his mind.

It would not be the last time he thought of his mother’s cooking, the warmth of their cottage, or how safe he felt at home. His love for his family was deep; he drew strength from their love and the knowledge that he could always return home.

After gathering up his belongings, he once again started down the dirt wagon path toward fame and fortune. The trip continued at much the same pace, with his idle walk and distractions that he allowed to further slow his pace. The warmth of the day made wearing the vest uncomfortable, but the shoulder straps bit at his skin if he only wore a shirt.

The next morning, he bow fished at a small lake and had a late morning meal, resulting in a late start. Despite the promise of good weather, the afternoon skies grew dark with clouds and threatened rain by nightfall.

As he had done the preceding evening, Jerrod moved away from the road to camp. Under the silhouette of a bluff rising above him against the darkening sky, Jerrod picked the most suitable site he could find to set up camp. Despite his best efforts, the chilling wind blew through his lean-to style tent. The night’s drizzle put out the campfire, and the ground nearest the edge of his tent became damp. Jerrod slept near the back of his shelter, cold but dry.

The morning sun on the bluff was brilliant. The dark gray rock loomed over Jerrod, partially covered by grass, bushes, and trees. Years of rain had washed away parts of the bluff, leaving the rock across the top to protect the ground and creating a plateau where the surrounding dirt had been washed away. A nearby outcropping captivated Jerrod’s curiosity.

He considered investigating, and as he had less than a day’s travel before he reached Oakwood, Jerrod gave into his boyish curiosity. . He enjoyed daydreaming about the outcropping as he walked up the hill. His imagination teased at him and he embraced the temptation with delight.

*"Maybe I will find a bear's cave or a gold mine,"* he thought with delighted enthusiasm.

After climbing the sandy hill, he idled away the rest of the morning, walking along the base of the bluff, backtracking to the east as he looked for a place to ascend through the rock face. When he found a narrow gap, he followed it to the top. Once there, he walked back toward the west, gazing over the forest from the bluff's edge. When he finally reached the outcropping he spotted Oakwood off in the distance.

It was mid-day, when he decided to return to camp to pack up his things, so he could reach the village by sunset.

On his return, he found a path below the bluff that appeared to offer a quicker route back to camp. The trail seemed more direct, leading down into the forest, rather than skirting the base of the bluff as the trail he had followed that morning. Following the path back toward his camp, about halfway down, he found a large tree blocking the main route, which caused the path to split. A newer, more traveled trail turned upward, back toward the bluff, circling around the fallen tree. The other option appeared far less traveled. More narrow and overgrown, the less travelled trail turned downward, running along the trunk of the massive tree and through the middle of a large, gaping hole separating the trunk into two parts. Jerrod paused.

At first, he considered going up around the tree, taking the more established path, but something pulled at him to take the other, and go downward along the tree trunk. The urge tugged at his consciousness as if he had little will to do anything but follow the more obscure path downward.

The tree trunk was over three feet thick. The edges of the gap in the middle were jagged and burned as though, long ago, the trunk had exploded then burned. As Jerrod stepped through, a whitish object at his feet caught his attention. He stepped back in surprise. With his back to the tree, he glanced around. His heart pounded. Partially covered by the underbrush lay the skeletal body of what looked like an ancient warrior.

The skeleton was bleached white with age. Only a few scraps of a faded gray colored material clung to the bones, but Jerrod clearly recognized them as the remnants of a knight's uniform. A large branch pierced through the rib cage where the dead man's heart had once been. The skeleton's outstretched hand held a long, thin, dirt-encrusted object. Jerrod leaned forward.

"A sword!" he silently exclaimed.

The grimy sword measured roughly four feet long and had a ten-inch-long handle crowned with a spherical knob that resembled a three-inch-round dirt clod. Encased in dirt, the sword did not seem to be much better than the wooden ones Jerrod and his friends had crafted for their boyish battles, but at least it was metal.

Jerrod looked around, half expecting to find someone watching him. Then he slowly leaned over the knight's bones and reached for the sword. As Jerrod's fingers touched the blade, a shiver ran up his arm and through his body. As he lifted it out of the skeleton's clenched, bony fingers, he peered into the skull's eye sockets. A calming sensation flowed over him, like the slow rise of warm water in a tidal pool.

The sword weighed more than he had imagined. He hit the broad side of the blade against the splintered end of the tree trunk once or twice, knocking off some of the dirt. Then he lifted sword skyward, pausing to, point the end of the weapon toward the sun. He was filled with a strange uncertainty. Did the moment only seem like an eternity, or had an eternity actually pass in that fleeting instant?

The sword looked remarkably common. A square, brass *quillion* crossed between the *ricasso*, the upper part of the blade, and the handle, protecting its wielder's hand in battle. The brass was about two inches wide where it crossed the *ricasso* but flared out at the ends to about three inches in width, creating a concave shape designed to further protect the hands from an opponent's sword sliding up the blade toward the handle. The *quillion* was thicker at the blade and tapered off at the ends.

The dirt-clod-like shape at the end of the handle broke away to reveal the brass and crystal pommel. A three-fingered talon with a dewclaw held a crystal sphere in place. Jerrod rubbed the sphere, removing a little more dirt. Swirls of dark and medium blue twisted together as bright white lines of light, like lightning crackling across a night's sky, rolled through the sphere. Was he imagining what seemed like dense vapors in the crystal? He rubbed his eyes with his free hand. "*Perhaps I'm more tired from this venture than I realized.*"

He looked down at the bleached bones, thinking about the knight's tragic end, the pain he must have endured when the branch ruptured his chest cavity. He wondered if the poor fellow had already died before the massive tree trunk delivered a crushing blow. Who was he? Why was his sword drawn? As Jerrod looked down, pondering his thoughts, he noticed an amulet on a chain around

the skeleton's neck. He knelt to gently remove the intriguing piece, careful not to disturb the skull.

The amulet was about two inches in diameter and also encased in dirt. Jerrod scratched the dried mud away with his thumbnail to find an etching of a rather nondescript eye. For lack of a better option, he slipped the amulet over his head. The chain felt cool against his skin.

\* \* \* \* \*

She watched the crystal before her where moments before a image faded into a white mist that quickly dissipated into nothingness. Her thoughts centered on what she had just seen. Her deep blue unsettling eyes had fixated on the image of a young boy, barely into manhood, who stood on a path partially blocked by a fallen tree. She had passed her hand over the crystal, just before the boy turned to walk downhill along the tree. She had watched as he discovered the skeletal body, its hand still clasped around the dark handle of a dirt covered sword.

She had felt the boy's excitement, sensed his rapid breathing, read his thoughts. She smiled, pleased that her manipulation to draw the boy to the sword had worked. Filled with satisfaction, she had watched until the boy put something around his neck. At that moment, she had lost contact with his mind. The boy's image remained in the mist, but the mental connection that had existed was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jerrod found nothing else of value amongst the knight's remains, so he gathered the bones and buried them just above the tree where the knight had met his end. After putting stones over the burial mound, he took a moment to pray to Ares, the god of war, before he started down the hill again.

At camp, Jerrod put the sword on his blanket before starting a fire. Then he set out the last of his salted meat, cheese, and unleavened bread. He began to boil herbal tea on the fire and ate slowly while he worked to remove the remaining dirt from the old sword. As he cleaned, he discovered gold inlay and three octagonal emeralds in each side of the *ricasso*. The inlay formed five oval rings, two petals, and two stems that curled around to the outer emeralds. The designer had used pink gold for the petals and greenish gold for the stems. The

emeralds, one at the top of the figure and one at the end of each stem, were deeply inset in the steel.

There was much that Jerrod did not yet know about magic. He did not know of its power or of its demand on human fortitude. And he did not know the sword's gems were magically held in place.

Jerrod was amazed to find that there was no rust anywhere on the sword. Even the black leather wrapped around the handle still looked new. Feeling a deep sense of contentment, he climbed under the lean-to and settled in to sleep, one hand resting on the sword.

Moonbeams showed through the forest where the beams could penetrate the canopy as Jerrod lay with his eyes closed, listening to the forest sounds. He mostly heard owls and crickets, but occasionally, the sound of a larger animal passing close by caused him to focus his hearing a little more.

He was comfortable in the forest, but the feel of the sword's handle in his hand allowed him to sleep more soundly than he had in months. He dreamt of conquests and glory, but his dreams did not include the actual battle, just the triumphant return. He stood before the citizens of Torrence in a knight's plate armor, his sword raised over his head. A hero everyone cheered.

After rising early the next morning, Jerrod started off without a meal and was nearing the village before mid-afternoon. As he walked he did not realize he was hungry, still feasting on the excitement of finding the sword. His dreams of glory seemed so much closer.

At the village, he paid for room and board at the inn. After eating bread and honey and a small piece of roasted pork, which he washed down with ale, Jerrod retired to the first bed he had seen since he left home. Sleep came quickly, despite his aching feet, and he snuggled beneath the blanket, happy to pass another night in a glory-filled dreamland.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cloaked man stole through the dark, Torrence alleys, taking care to hide his face deep beneath a hood. He slumped to conceal his true height as he slithered from shadow to shadow, blending into each one to pass unnoticed. Deeper and deeper into the city's more disreputable neighborhood, he wound down toward the wharf along the small, river harbor.

When at last he stopped, a short, heavysset man called out in a gruff, impatient voice.

“You have arrived, my lord. I have what you seek.”

“Quiet, fool!” He scorned the little man. “Show me what I have come for!”

“Do you have the payment we agreed upon?” Rollie dared to ask. “All things for a price.”

“It is too late for you to doubt me, and you know it. I will give you what you deserve, provided you have what you promised. If not, it won’t matter to your corpse!”

The shadowy figure stepped toward the short little man. In the shadows, they made the exchange. Only the jingle of coins in a small purse gave any indication they completed their transaction.

“Thank you, my lord,” Rollie said.

“Keep close, Rollie. I may have need of your services soon.”

“At your service, as always, my lord,” Rollie said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. After a moment, he added, “For a price!”

Rollie laughed deeply, as he shook the purse again.

“Your silence is costly, but it guarantees your life and our continued business,” the figure whispered. “Stay loyal and silent, fool. I warn you. One word and it will be your last!”

Then the man stole back into the shadows from whence he came.

Rollie watched him disappear wondering to himself what end might come if he ever crossed the dark man. He quickly reminded himself that was one thing that he must never do!

