
The Lone Traveler

Chapter One

It was The Lone Traveler bitterly cold, and the howling wind kept trying to push The Lone Traveler its way through the entrance of the narrow cave, sending snow showers deeper and deeper into the interior and threatening to close the entrance completely. She had used most of the dead branches and dry bracken she had gathered on the small The Lone Traveler fire near the back wall of the cave, and now resorted to using dried dung someone had previously stored in the cave. Although it burned well and provided some small measure of warmth, the stench it produced was irritating to the eyes and nose.

She was dressed in a sturdy close fitting soft doublet above her cotton tunic, and wore a stiff jerkin of boiled leather sewn to sheep's skin as an outer garment. The short chain mail hauberk that had covered the jerkin lay in a heavy pile next to her saddle and harness. Near the flickering fire a figure lying on a pile of furs and pine boughs squirmed and moaned and fidgeted in his sleep. He was one year above her age, five and ten years, but he was of royal blood, and he suffered from a wound to his shoulder, which had festered causing his sickness.

In a separate corner of the cave lay her other companion, snoring lightly and occasionally twitching a leg or wing, reacting to unknown dreams. He was her companion, her savior, her friend and her protector. He was very large for his kind, bigger than two work horses and much longer in the body and neck, and he possessed a massive thirty foot wing spread. She called him Whiff, not only because he often blew smoke from his snout, but also because he produced an unpleasant sulfuric odor when he belched. He was a great white dragon, one of the few dragons left in the kingdom of Camalund.

Who was she? She was Analia, a young woman of four and ten years, a fugitive, accused of murder, kidnapping, and grand theft. The Lone Traveler As the heavy smoke and fatigue lulled her into deeper thought, she reflected back on the few short years when it had all began.

Analia was aware that she was exceptionally different than most other girls, stronger, faster, smarter, and to hear the boys tell it, even prettier. When she grew old enough to ask her parents why they had named her Anomalia, her father scoffed. "Tis from the olden language in the Sacred Book of Mysteries, back when men flew the skies and traveled to the moon inside iron birds and lived in castles that reached to the clouds," he stated. "It comes from the word Anomaly and means something that differs from what is standard, normal, or expected."

"Legends made up by dreamers, jesters, and scribendi," her mother harrumphed, folding her arms across her heavy bosom as if to challenge her father's words.

"I guess I must have been The Lone Traveler quite different from other children?" Analia had inquired. She much preferred to use her own version of her unusual name and, to her hidden

delight, it also irritated her father.

“You were found in a muddy field after the worst storm in centuries, wrapped in a blanket inside a cracked and smoking boulder like an oyster on the half-shell,” he emphasized. “If that doesn’t deviate from the norm, I’m the King’s fool, I am.”

Hers was a poor family, living in a small village of dirt farmers, grubbing from season to season to earn a meager existence, always just one crop failure or war away from starvation. From the time she reached her three year name day, Analia was taller, faster, stronger, and smarter than any child in her village than any other child of that age. When she reached her two and ten year, the villagers had had enough of her rough ways and they were frightened by her unusual origin and superior abilities, so, something had to be done.

“It’s a wandering demon that lives inside her,” the village elder told her father over cups one early evening at a small work table in the yard. “No normal girl of two and ten years can best boys who are four and ten years. No normal girl can recount the entire Book of Mysteries by heart as she can, especially since the Vicari taught her to read in only one evening’s setting. And would you just look at her,” the elder remarked, turning his head to observe Analia as she drew a bucket of water from the nearby well. “At two and ten she is a woman full grown, she is.” Despite his age, the village elder still possessed excellent vision.

Analia was indeed tall for her age, and it was obvious that she would be better than average in height when she was fully mature. A crown of shimmering auburn hair covered her head and gently cascaded down her back. Her eyes were an unusual light violet color, almond shaped, but large and canted upwards giving her a fairy look. Her nose was classical The Lone Traveler but short and slightly turned up at the end. Her mouth was small, but she possessed generous sensual lips. Her small breasts were yet to fully develop, but her slim torso and shapely hips indicated that she would soon evolve into a strikingly beautiful woman.

“Get on with your question or be on your way.” Her father spat, picking up his cup and taking a generous gulp of what passed for locally grown wine. “You’re here for a reason, you are, otherwise you wouldn’t be avoiding me eyes.”

“The village council believes it would be best if your daughter was elsewhere,” the village elder bluntly answered. The Lone Traveler “The local Vicari has indicated that the Vicarus at Castle Point is in need of another acolyte and will happily take her under his pious wings. She is, after all, still chaste and would be very well taken care of.”

“And I suppose she will fit in well with his other flock of chaste novates at the Convent?” her father grinned. “Anomalia will undoubtedly beat the demons out of them before the first day has waned and rip the pious fool’s holy cock off by dusk. What will his worship say then?”

The village elder shrugged and sat back heavily on his stool. “This is not a request, Barristan. The Vicarus has heard about your daughter, and he demands, with the king’s blessing of course, that she be brought to Castle Point on the morrow. The Vicari will be here by dawn to escort her. I wash my hands of the matter. You’d best advise her to be on her best behavior

and be ready to leave by first light.”

Analia was very surprised to see her father stand and push the village elder’s stool over, spilling him not too gently onto the dirty ground. She was even more alarmed to see him reach for his mule strap The Lone Traveler and threaten to lay it onto the elder’s back lest he leave the yard posthaste. She knew something was wrong when her mother walked from the house and they embraced each other while glancing somberly in her direction.

After explaining his conversation with the village elder, her father took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “There is another option,” he The Lone Traveler finally stated, glancing at her mother who stood in silent tears. “Your mother’s brother runs a school in Dragon Hill. She believes he will be willing to take you in until such time as you reach The Lone Traveler your Maiden Prime. It is a long and dangerous journey, and there will be no one to help you along the way. But, it’s either that or the Convent.”

“I will not go to a place filled with chattering women who thrive on starvation, prayer, and obedience,” Analia flatly stated. “I would rather take my chances on the road.”

The next morning, well before dawn, her long journey and her new life began. It was a short farewell with a slight misting of tears and a splattering of promises. Analia donned the rugged work clothing she normally wore around the farm and placed her single spare tunic and extra under clothes in her kit bag. The The Lone Traveler clean clothing, a small paring knife, food for three days, and a few personal items sufficed to account for all her all worldly possessions.

Analia also carried her stout quarterstaff made from sacred hawthorn wood. Although self-taught, she had learned to use it to her benefit and would rely on The Lone Traveler it for protection from bandits and wolves. The trip to Dragon Hill was expected to last three days, if she averaged at least twenty miles per day.

She made the harsh journey without incident and arrived at Dragon Hill late in the afternoon of the third day during a cold driving rain. She had no coin with which to stay at an inn, however, she needed someone to point out where her uncle’s school was located, and there were few people out and about in the bitter weather. Analia spotted a shingle with a goose painted on it hanging over a The Lone Traveler stout wooden door. The inscription, almost faded out, read, “The Naked Gander.”

As she entered, she was practically overwhelmed by the rancid stench of unwashed bodies, of sour ale, and what smelled like stale urine. Riotous laughter and yelling shook the room. A small bar was set up in one corner; a broad board over three large wooden barrels, and a heavysset man The Lone Traveler was leaning on the bar casually observing the rowdy patrons.

“Beg your pardon?” Analia boldly asked the man. She suddenly noticed a ripe smell coming from him as she drew closer The Lone Traveler to the bar. “I am searching for my uncle. His name is Ryykon Thoragild, and he has a school somewhere around here.”

The bartender cast her leering stare, obviously thinking she was much older than her two and

ten years. "Ryke!" he boomed. "Everyone knows Ryke The Lone Traveler me lady. He owns that fancy King's School on the other side of the river. Just head down to the bridge, cross over, and take the road running along the river to the right. It circles all the way around to his school. Your uncle, you say?"

"Yes," Analia quickly replied. "Thank you, sur for your kind help." She hastened from the inn as fast as she could. The gleam in the bartender's eyes and the lascivious looks on the faces of several of the customers was a The Lone Traveler look Analia had seen before, and she knew it begin and ended with the word lust.

The bridge over the wide river was made of stone and mortar. The dark river was in flood stage, reaching almost to the bottom of the bridge. The The Lone Traveler muddy brown waters flowed fast and dangerous, pushing pieces of trees and other objects in its wake, and an overpowering smell of dung and ashes permeated the air. The muddy road on the far bank wound around a low bluff following the curve The Lone Traveler of the river.

Although dusk was near, she could still see the buildings on the bluff above the road and shortly came to a ten foot brick wall which seemed to go on forever. She eventually came to a large door made of stout black wood ribbed with rusting iron bands. A small watch tower stood on the right side of the door, and a sentry stood hunched over with his cloak covering his head and face. He called down to her before she could clear her throat to speak.

"Wot brings eu out in this awful weather, girl?"

"I am here to see my uncle," Analia replied. "Is this the school of Ryykon Thoragild?"

"That it be. Your uncle would be working for Master Thoragild, would 'e?"

"My uncle is Rykkon Thoragild."

"Well now, let's be getting eu out of this foul weather and in to see your uncle," The Lone Traveler the sentry replied in a suddenly hasty tone of voice. He obviously did not want to take chances just in case the waif was truly the Master's own kin. Within a few minutes the huge gate opened exposing a stout portcullis behind it. The sentry, or sentries, as there were now two of them, cranked the portcullis up allowing her entry.

"Shanks will escort eu to the Majordomo," the first sentry stated, pointing at a squat and powerful looking man wearing chain mail and a shining half helm. "Can't leave me post, ye know."

She surveyed her surroundings on the way to a huge building made of stone and mortar. It looked like a castle or bastion without the battlements, towers and moat. There were walls everywhere, so she was unable to see much of anything. As they entered through a main door, a man standing just inside took charge of her, dismissing the wet sentry to return to his post. The Majordomo was dressed in a brown knee length tunic over which he wore a stiff doublet of boiled leather. He wore heavy leather boots that came up to mid-calf. The soles were studded

with nails; they clanked on the stone flooring as he guided her up a wide set of stairs.

The Majordomo knocked on a large door down the hall on the second floor. She heard the word, come, from the inside, muffled by the heavy door. As she entered the large room, Analia was impressed with the overall tidiness and organization. The walls were decorated with beautiful tapestries depicting what appeared to be major battle scenes, weapons of various types were hung with a keen eye to decor, and full suits of armor stood in corners and The Lone Traveler places of honor. A very large man sat behind a sturdy table The Lone Traveler covered with parchment, ink and quills. He was blowing onto a small document to dry the ink. The Majordomo walked over and whispered in his ear, then bid Analia to come forward. He stood as she approached his presence.

“You presume to be my niece, Anomalia?” The Lone Traveler he asked, his bushy brown eyebrows riding up on his forehead.

“Analia, if it please you lordship,” she replied. “I am not an anomaly as the first name implies. Yes, I am the daughter of your sister, Ingrid and The Lone Traveler her husband Barristan, and I am two and ten years of age. I am sent here seeking reprieve from the clutches of a lustful and greedy Vicarus.”

“A bold wench,” Ryykon stated, winking at his Majordomo and dismissing him at the same time. “Please sit and apprise me of you plight, Analia. Have you broken your fast this day?”

“Indeed I have not, Ser Thoragild.”

“Hunkle. I insist you refer to me as your Hunkle,” he replied, motioning to his The Lone Traveler Majordomo before he could leave the The Lone Traveler room. “Have food and drink brought for my niece,”

Analia quickly discovered that he talked with a minor lisp, thus the hunkle instead of uncle, but she quickly warmed to his gentle tone of voice, his quick humor and kind disposition. As she ate the cold mutton and cheese and dark bread, she told him what had forced her to The Lone Traveler flee her family and a little about The Lone Traveler herself.

Her uncle slowly sat back in his chair and let out a soft breath. “What am I to do with you?” It was more a question to himself rather than to her.

“I could join your school and learn,” Analia eagerly suggested. “I am a quick learner, and I am very good The Lone Traveler at most everything I attempt. I am a very fast runner, I weld a wicked quarterstaff, and I can out wrestle most of the young boys in my village.”

Her uncle raised his left eye brow. “You don’t know what kind of school I run, do you?”

Analia hunched her shoulders in a negative gesture.

“I train Squires, Lord lings, and Dragons,” he replied.

“Dragons,” she whispered.

“Dragons,” Her uncle smiled, amused by her suddenly reverent expression. “And minor Lords and young Squires. I will have Manfred show you to your chambers little lady, and we will talk of this more on the morrow. I have important dispatches I must finish before I retire.” He picked up a bell from his desk and rang it. The The Lone Traveler Majordomo, or Manfred as he had named him, appeared at the door followed by several young housemaids and one burly one. He had obviously anticipated their need. They quickly ushered her out of the room and down towards the end of the long hall.

For the next few weeks, Analia was lost in a daze of exciting, adventurous and amazing sights, sounds, and events. Within the large compound, squires learned the art of swordplay, quarterstaff, archery, riding and a large number of other weapons of war. Big burly men-at-arms, or housecarls they were called, pushed them steadily until they dropped from exhaustion. After the long hard days of physical exertion, they were taught how to take care of their weapons, equipment, horses, and the ladies and scribendi of the school taught them reading, writing, dancing, heraldry, and social etiquette.

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