Persian apologies mean nothing to Tamina, Princess of Alamut, with her city occupied and its defenders dead. But her duty as a Guardian is clear: first she must find out how much Prince Dastan knows about the Dagger of Time...and then she must kill him.

Notes

For my sister, as always.
Chapter 1

There were no torches lit in the outer catacombs, and Tamina carried none, walking in thick darkness with her left hand resting on the wall. She had walked this way with her mother a hundred times and more, and the cool stone was as familiar as the hilt of the Dagger that rested in her belt. The main passageways with their smooth floors and intricate stonework were gone now, collapsed at her own order, but the ancient Guardians who had built the tunnels to collapse at need had wanted their descendants to have an access to the Sandglass even if such dire necessity arose. She blessed them silently for their wisdom as she passed their sealed tombs.

Her feet, clad in soft slippers, barely echoed in the stone of the catacombs. Tamina paused in the dark for a long moment, eyes closed, holding her breath and letting the sound die away. No other footstep or sigh of air came to her, no crash of Persian armor. She was alone.

The Persian army still defiled the walls of Alamut, for all the pretty words their princes could offer of mistakes and amends. Though the main body of the army with its cavalry had pulled out to camp on the western hills where there was some grass for their mounts, Persian archers had taken the places of the dead Alamutian guards and Persian warriors flocked around any building the princes entered. For the city's protection, Prince Tus had said. Until the marriage treaty was formalized. At which point it would be her new husband's troops who guarded the walls. Of course.

Tamina gripped the Dagger more tightly, the smooth glass a comfort in spite of all else. As long as she carried it, she had not yet failed in her sacred duty.

Not this time, at least...

The icy knot below her heart had not faded since the moment when Prince Dastan offered her the Dagger, with halting words that did not match the terrible satisfaction in his eyes. Whatever the Persian prince knew, he had not shared it with his family; no one in the room had lifted an eyebrow at his gift. But the Dagger was empty, its sand spent, as was the vial Tamina wore for emergencies. For that to happen without her knowledge, time had turned back far past the limits of safety.

It was Dastan who had used the Dagger. The knowledge was too clear in his face, in his smug words, for any other conclusion. Somehow, he had breached the Sandglass. She had to see the damage for herself—to judge just how badly her otherself had failed, and how much time there was to do what must be done.

She paused to blink as a fresher draft of air brushed her face. A faint glimmer of moonlight lined the steps of the small temple beneath the city—the ancient place was covered in dust and the work of spiders, purposely neglected, and no one but Tamina herself knew that it hid passages in the catacombs both to the High Temple and to the Chamber of the Sandglass. She let go of the dagger's hilt to greet the smooth metal of the waiting statue, and pressed the hidden trigger.

The stone wall ground slowly apart, and as the opening grew Tamina gasped aloud and raised an arm to shield her watering eyes. On the other side, where there should have been no light at all save for the distant moon, a torch flickered fierce and red.

"I was starting to think I'd be waiting all night, Princess," a voice greeted her, with the tone of satisfaction she thought she could quickly come to hate.

Tamina scrubbed her white sleeve across her eyes and glared, heedless of the pain as the torchlight struck her. "There are more appropriate places to speak with me, Prince Dastan. You can, of
course, command my presence at any time."

"Maybe so, but I couldn't be sure who might overhear," the Persian said, more seriously. He was sitting against the wall of the passage, Tamina saw as her vision cleared, his torch propped up on a convenient bit of stone. More importantly, he was alone. No guards, no servants, no other Persians, just the man she had agreed to wed with his hands spread empty on his knees. He frowned suddenly, looking at her, an oddly concerned expression. "Did you actually come down here without a torch? At night? You don't even have a candle."

She studied him, feeling again an unwilling pang of what could have been friendship, if not for her duty and his actions. "If I brought a torch, someone could follow me."

The prince cast a glance toward the Hidden Bridge. The spark of fear in his eyes spoke of too much knowledge, but the worry in his face was no act. Tamina hardened her heart against that look. What was it that kept calling her to trust this man, when all her duty spoke otherwise?

"The path is easier in the dark, for me," she said honestly. There was no use pretending that he did not know the danger. "I have practiced the pattern elsewhere till I could walk it in my sleep, so that I would not hesitate in an emergency, and a torch puts me off balance."

He shook his head, and scooped up the torch as he stood, in one fluid motion. "You'll have to put up with me lighting your way this time, Princess."

Fear sparked again, stronger. "Why should I lead you to the Sandglass?" she demanded, stepping back, her feet seeking better purchase for defense. "I will not let you take the Dagger again."

Prince Dastan looked at her, torchlight shadowing a face lined with a weariness deeper than her own for the moment before he forced a smile. "Oh, believe me, if I never have to touch that thing again no one will be happier than me," he promised. "But you're going to check the Sandglass, aren't you? I can tell you what happened."

Tamina desperately needed to know just that, though whether she could believe anything from the Persian who'd stolen the Dagger was an open question. Still, she hadn't expected the offer. Dastan seemed the kind of person who would keep his secrets and laugh about them. "Then tell me here."

With a quiet sigh, he leaned back against the wall, the torch guttering in his hand. "I don't mind that, but you're still not going alone."

Her hand tightened reflexively on the Dagger's hilt. Still, for all that her mind wanted to see the declaration as a threat, the fear in his eyes was too personal and focused squarely on her. Of course he would want her to believe he had grown fond of her, she reminded herself firmly. It might yet be an act. Perhaps he only wanted to know the safe path...though he demonstrably already knew where the Sandglass lay, and there were easier ways down for a man who could command the Persian army to dig for him.

At least the most important answer was one that Dastan should see no need to lie about. "When did you release the sands?"

The prince passed his free hand across his hair in thought. It left a smear of pale dust in dark tangles already sticky with sweat. "It was a very busy few weeks...the night before the end was the next full moon, if that helps." He raised his eyebrows in query. "Why is that important?"

So she had time to spare yet. A moment's relief washed over her like a sudden desert rain, and evaporated as quickly as Tamina looked at Dastan. "Didn't you know it was forbidden?" she
"Yes, of course I knew," the Persian growled, frustration finally overcoming the delicacy he had shown toward her so far. "You told me. I got the whole speech, glass breaking, wrath of the gods unleashed, end of the world—that's why we had to stop my uncle." He advanced a step, and Tamina reflexively backed away as he leaned in. "Trust me, I know exactly how important it was to you to get the Dagger away from him. I watched you—" The words stopped, and Dastan turned and stalked away, but not before Tamina saw his haunted eyes glimmer with tears in the torchlight.

He might be lying, duty insisted still, but she could not force her heart to believe it. Tamina gritted her teeth, pain seizing her breath for a long instant. "You shouldn't have used the Dagger."

Dastan shook his head, tangled hair hiding his face as he stared toward the floor. "In the end I'd lost everyone I...maybe I would have used it, I don't know. But it was mostly an accident, to be honest. I was too slow. My uncle had already put the blade inside, I had to stop him. I didn't intend to open the glass. Too many hands on the Dagger, I suppose." He sighed, guiltily. "But then I thought, if I could just stop him earlier."

Her shell of hard-fought suspicion cracked irreparably at the pain in his voice, leaving her heart undefended. Tamina closed her eyes, tears pricking the darkness for reasons entirely unrelated to the glare of the torch. "You fool," she whispered, and did not know whether she meant the Persian stupid enough to fall in love with her, the Tamina who had let him fall in love and then failed to protect the Sandglass, or her present self. Fool, for letting him explain his reasons. The reasons made no difference.

"Well, the world didn't end," Dastan said defensively, lifting his head to gesture vaguely downward with the torch.

"Have you forgotten already what you did?" she snarled, and fled past him, down the stairs and into the shadows.

The light followed her. "Tamina!" he called, that terrible worry breaking his voice again.

She didn't want to hear it. She couldn't afford so much as a moment's pity, much less the treacherous mire of pain that her heart was quickly becoming. "Follow if you must," she said curtly, and bent to assure herself of the trigger point, then stepped on it. The supports fell into place with reassuring thuds.

She counted the steps and the sharp turns in silence, not bothering to slow down for the prince. If Dastan had come this way before, as he must have, he knew the danger well enough. Tamina half-slid down the spiral stairs, nearly blind with the tears she would not acknowledge.

The light of the Sandglass broke over her, a dim and angry red pierced through with flickers of its usual golden glow. Wind full of sand swirled across her face and hissed against the rocks, thick with warning. A lacework of cracks ran across the Sandglass itself, appearing and disappearing, the light of the sand glowing through them and then vanishing. Tamina could see the central wound, where the Dagger had pierced the protection of the gods.

Dastan came down the stairs in an equal rush, and stopped, a solid warmth at her back. "Well," he breathed, uneasy surprise. "That's different."

"You turned back time," Tamina said, her voice harsh as the wind. "The world hasn't ended yet."
Chapter 2

The Persian prince stared over her shoulder at the wounded glass, the slow-rising storm, and half-swallowed a barracks curse that most people did not say around princesses. At least seeing the Sandglass had knocked the smug satisfaction from him, Tamina thought darkly.

Although the records spoke of other times in the thousand years of Alamut's history when desperate priests or Guardians had done the forbidden and cracked open the Sandglass, Tamina had never seen such damage with her own eyes. It was worse, far worse, than she had expected. The glowing column had been the center of her life since before she could remember, and the visible proof of her failure was a painful twist in her gut, like a child guilty of breaking something too precious to understand.

"Tamina, I'm so sorry," Dastan breathed. The torch fell from his hand, to gutter on the stone of the spiral stairs, its failing light an echo of the burning sands.

The name was hers, but she suspected that the desperate words were meant for the Tamina who was forever gone. Apologies mattered no more than reasons, in the end. Still, Tamina half-turned, as much to avoid seeing the Sandglass as to watch the flicker of despair across the Persian's face. "There must be some way to fix it," he said, with a fragile determination that lifted to a note of query.

Her hand was clenched tightly enough on the Dagger that the imprint of its hilt bit into her palm. She had an advantage of speed, but he was the stronger, and there would be no second chances with the Dagger empty. "There is," she acknowledged.

"Let me help—whatever you need." The smile that tugged at his face was pained but honest. "All of Persia is at your service. My father won't say no."

Even a prince could never buy anything that would make a difference to the Sandglass. Tamina shook her head, unable to meet his eyes. "Not all the gold in Persia will mend this."

Dastan grew very still, with a warrior's coiled focus. "What, then?" he asked, as deceptively soft as the hiss of the sand. "The gods have only ever accepted one kind of bargain," Tamina said. Her heartbeat thundered above the sound of the wind, and throbbed in the hand that grasped the Dagger. Now, duty cried, while the Persian hadn't quite understood, while his concern for her would make him hesitate to defend himself...

She didn't move, and then his sword-calloused hand closed immovably on her wrist and it was too late. "Is this something else that only a Guardian can do?" Dastan's breath was a softer wind at her ear.

Except for knowledge of the hidden pathways, there was only one thing related to the Dagger that was reserved to Guardians alone: returning the gift to the gods. The other Tamina would have tried to reach the Temple of the Stone. It was the only way to keep the Dagger safe, and indeed Tamina meant to flee there herself. But not until the Sandglass was whole again.

"Find another Guardian, Tamina," the Persian said. The tone of an order made her stiffen. "I won't let it be you."

"There is no other," she spat. "Not since you stole the Dagger from my cousin." The reminder gave
her new strength to harden her resolve.

"Your cousin?" The rising tone of guilt in the words startled her. Hadn't he known?

But she layered acid into her voice, the better to force him away. "To whom would I entrust the Dagger save a Guardian? Thanks to you, Varil has five broken ribs and may never wake, Prince Dastan."

His grip faltered. Tamina dug her other thumbnail into his wrist and twisted free, stumbling back onto the fragile spar of rock that connected the stairway to the Sandglass itself, and the wind roared around her.

The Persian lurched forward as though bound to her with invisible cords. Stepping away in instinctive response, Tamina felt the edge of the rock crumble under her foot, her balance tilting for an endless moment. Dropping to a crouch to avoid the force of the wind, she scrambled away from the treacherous edge and the prince with equal haste.

"Tamina, don't!" Dastan cried. Her precipitous retreat had frozen him with open hand straining toward her, eyes wide in horror as the light of the Sandglass flickered over his face. A memory of horror, and fear for her safety, not his own. Tamina didn't need to ask how her other self had died.

Strange. She'd always had nightmares of falling...

"Don't," he said again, soft and desperate now. "Please, Tamina...I can't lose you again."

Shifting her grip on the Dagger, she tried to see that plea as the arrogance she'd despised in him, but it held too much pain. Couldn't the Persian have kept being the swaggering idiot she had hated at first sight? Wasn't it enough that he had filled her city with soldiers and set loose the wrath of the gods, without also laying ruin to her heart?

He was trembling with the memories and completely off his guard; she could not have contrived a better chance if there were months to do it. Yet Tamina did not move. Duty, yes, still and always, but it was impossible now to see Dastan only as her enemy, and she could not bear the deceit that made him stare at her with that remembered horror.

"My life would seal away the Dagger, but that is no use here," she admitted, and forced herself to meet his gaze. She did not want to see the affection she had not sought turn to betrayal and enmity, but else she did not think she could make herself carry out her duty. "All the ancient records say that only the blood of one who loosed the Sands can mend their harm."

Dastan shaped a soundless breath of understanding, and straightened, hand falling to his side, his face abruptly blank and shuttered. It was foolish for Tamina to feel it as rejection. She touched the blade guard with one thumb, reviewing paths the Persian might choose. She did not think it likely he would run; when he tried to take the Dagger, she would be ready.

"Do I have to stay dead?"

Tamina blinked at the blunt question, which had been nowhere among the reactions she'd anticipated.

Hands loose at his sides, Dastan smiled wryly at her. "I did say whatever you need," he reminded her, stepping slowly forward, gaze shifting to the wounded glass. "This is my fault. If that's what it takes, I'm not going to run away. But do your gods require-will you be able to use the Dagger afterward, for me?"
Her eyes closed against a prickle that was surely the wind. Did he really have to be so gods-cursed noble about this? She could not answer his offer with a lie. "I don't know." The Dagger's hilt felt damp against her palm. "The mending must be complete before the Dagger will work, and if it takes too long, you will be...past the Dagger's reach." The holy records never even brought up the question, because on the very few occasions a Guardian had failed so completely as to allow such peril, it had been hard enough to find the one responsible in time without also taking the risk of dragging him back to the city alive. Heart's blood was sufficient, for the gods or for the Sandglass itself.

But Dastan was offering, as sincerely as any Guardian might, which was surely reason to hope the gods might have mercy. "I will try," Tamina pledged, and accepted his hand as aid to rise.

He didn't grab for the Dagger. She had begun, against her best judgment, to trust he would not. They both found somewhat safer footing on the ledge beside the spiderwebbed crack.

Dastan turned to put his back against the glassy surface, and slid down it to rest, knees bent. He looked up at her, gold-red light flickering over his hair, and Tamina found her mouth dry with more than the taste of sand. Was this better, or worse, than the ambush she had thought would be necessary?

"There are a couple of things I should tell you first," he said, "to use, in case." The smile he offered seemed no less bright than the one he'd given her on their introduction, with as much unspoken behind it. "I've been avoiding my brothers for hours to give myself time to think of a way I could possibly have discovered Nizam's plot without divine foresight, and I haven't found one yet. But I imagine you'd handle things more gracefully."

"Let us hope so," she murmured, lowering the Dagger a fraction. In spite of the urgent need to know more about the man who had stolen and returned the city's sacred gift, Tamina had gathered only the roughest outline of the confrontation between the Persian royals, and that mostly from Prince Tus. No one except Persians had been close enough to hear the details, and Persians were not yet willing to gossip with her usual sources. She did know, however, that Dastan had accused his uncle of treachery with virtually no evidence. The older man had conveniently supported the claim by attacking Dastan, the crown prince had intervened, and Nizam was now dead.

She had more than half suspected that Prince Dastan was simply removing an obstacle from his own plans for the Dagger and for Alamut. But then, at the time Tamina had rather hoped Dastan a villain, for the sake of her own conscience. Now she was grateful for even an instant's reprieve, and her gut fluttered with protest against her sworn duty.

The source of all the day's grief scowled absently downward, his silver tongue apparently failing him for a moment. "The spy," he said after a moment, tone uneasy. "The one who told Nizam about the Sandglass...it's one of your priests. You recognized him, before."

Betrayal stung sharply in her throat as she swallowed the truth in his words. Bad enough for the ignorant Persians to have risked the world, but one of those sworn to defend the Sandglass, who had known the magnitude of the danger from every day's meditation?

Worse, she knew instantly who it had to be, and the new sorrow weighed heavy on her. "I will find him," she promised Dastan, closing her eyes. Karid's young wife had died in a difficult first birth some months ago, the child dead with her; the priest, distraught and in despair, was sent to his surviving family, banned from the High Temple and the Sandglass Chamber for his time of mourning.

When Tamina was first learning the roles of a Guardian, Karid had been the novice who whispered
irreverent jokes and slipped her dried dates when her mother looked away. She had blessed his
wedding, prayed over his wife and unborn child. And now, she supposed, he would go to join
them. She suspected he would welcome it.

The Guardians had failed and the priesthood was corrupted...perhaps it was time the Dagger went
back to the gods. If a prince of Persia vanished within her city, she might have no other way to
protect either her people or the Dagger.

Though she certainly knew better than to mention that to Dastan.

"And the other thing," the prince said, with a pained frown, "is that I don't know whether Nizam
has told his allies about the Sandglass at this point, or not. He was working with Hassansins, an
order of trained killers. They aren't even supposed to exist anymore, but obviously they're in league
with Nizam."

Tamina nodded slowly. "And you cannot warn your father, because you have no evidence that they
do exist."

He huffed a breath in faint amusement. "I wouldn't believe any of this myself if I hadn't lived it.
Father approves of religion, but he doesn't believe in miracles or magic. Besides, even if I thought
he would listen, it isn't my secret to tell."

"I would find it very disturbing to lay such a temptation as the Sandglass before any king, however
noble-hearted," Tamina agreed. Any outsider, she would have said, even a few moments ago. Yet
somehow she could not see Dastan as a threat, not any longer.

Far above them, the glass cracked a fraction more, and the hiss of the wind grew measurably
louder. Dastan turned his eyes upward, and grimaced. "Time to save the world, I suppose."

Even for a Guardian, time did not ever stop. There was only, by the mercy of the gods, an
occasional second chance.

Prayer was a thing of incense and ritual, done to assure the gods that humanity remembered their
mercy and was grateful. But whatever the popular faith of Alamut said about the Guardians having
the ear of the gods, Tamina did not think the gods cared particularly one way or another. The world
was as nothing to them, and the Guardians only an amusement.

Perhaps the creator-god of the Persians might be more inclined to protect Dastan.

*Please*, Tamina prayed in silent desperation, to whatever gods might be listening. *I beg you will let
him live.*
Chapter 3

The Sandglass shed its blood-red light over Dastan, as he blinked up at the point of the Dagger. Tamina closed her eyes for a long moment.

She could not now reinforce the walls of her heart, and it was too late even to try; Dastan had slipped inside, as easily as he had opened Alamut's gates.

Her duty had not changed, would not, though it might destroy them both. Dastan's life, or the world. She was a Guardian.

"I will undo it if I can," she pledged, a feeble promise against the roar of the wind, stepped closer, and knelt with him.

Dastan smiled at her, with no smugness, no attempts at charm or sarcasm to shield him from her now. "I know you will," he said, and reached to grip the Dagger, his fingers warm between hers. "Let's make this quick—"

It happened before she was ready, though she would never have been ready. The Dagger's point, never sharpened by human hands, held an edge fine enough that Tamina barely felt the first impact. A jarring scrape told her that the angle had been just a fraction off. But by the time it registered, the warmth that covered her hands was not from living skin, and the crimson staining her sleeves was not the light.

Heart's blood, and Tamina moved. There was no time for guilt or grief, not now.

His eyes should never look so empty.

But the Dagger was buried in the fractured glass before Dastan's last breath escaped.

The hilt of the dagger was red, with a dull glow like heated glass, full of something like blood or sand or both. The color inside began to slip away as she watched, entering the Sandglass.

She had ten breaths, Tamina knew, the Dagger could undo at least ten breaths of time, but past that measure lay uncertainty. Impossible not to count them, gasping and half-choked; surely they came faster than the usual count, surely there was yet time, but as the tenth slipped from her she felt tears tracing cold paths down her face.

The sands flared a deep, molten red in the cracks of the glass, red that matched the stains on her sleeves. She could see the damaged glass mending, working back toward the first impact and the Dagger, but so slowly! Twelve breaths, thirteen, and still the cracks reached thrice her height and the hilt was empty.

Eighteen, and at last the glass sealed over, light glimmering pure and golden. Sand began to filter, glittering, into the Dagger—not enough yet, not enough, though her heart and her hands ached to free themselves of Dastan's blood. She would need the full count, no half-measure.

On the gasp of her twenty-first breath, the sands filled the hilt, their swirl frozen by their own weight, and Tamina jerked the Dagger free and clicked its release in the same motion. The Sands caught her up, whirling about her in tame mimicry of the Great Storm.

Tamina watched the Sandglass, not quite strong enough to turn her gaze to Dastan yet. She had been almost certain that the mending would not be affected by the unwinding of time, that the
damage would remain healed just as the sands themselves did not return. Almost certain, but this was a thing never attempted before, and if she were wrong...

The Sandglass bathed the Chamber in gold light, strong and unchanging, as though it never had been cracked. Her otherself stood with the Dagger embedded, bitter tears rolling swiftly up her cheeks.

Merciful gods, let there be no reason to shed them a second time.

The other Tamina sprang back to one knee, blood on her hands—and then Dastan's hand lifted with hers on the shining, unstained Dagger, and Tamina could breathe again.

In the same moment that the sand vanished, she snatched away the Dagger, spinning violently away before Dastan could catch the hilt again.

He blinked at her, a moment's pained confusion melting to joy. "It worked?" Dastan looked up, the light of the sealed Sandglass catching in his eyes.

Tamina returned the Dagger to her belt, and dared to smile at the Persian. "The damage is gone." She hesitated, still wary of giving away too much, but what secrets had she now? "I am—pleased that the gods did not demand your life."

Dastan grinned, bouncing easily back to his feet. "Me too, Princess, me too." He offered an open hand, and she gladly accepted, the press of calloused skin driving away the remembrance of hot blood.

The bridge from the Chamber was slightly awkward to maneuver hand-in-hand, but Tamina did not let go, and Dastan's grip showed no sign of slackening.

The torch Dastan had dropped earlier still flickered on the stairway, and he scooped it up with his free hand. "I've been meaning to ask," he said, as though searching for any subject besides what had just passed between them, "your priests probably aren't going to be too happy about this marriage thing, are they?"

Tamina's steps slowed, bringing Dastan perforce to pause with her, because she was not letting him go.

The marriage. She had forgotten, having agreed to it with the sole intention of getting close enough to the Persian prince to kill him and mend the Sandglass.

That done, and no Persians seeking revenge, the only reason to let the marriage-treaty go forward was Dastan himself.

She thought perhaps it was reason enough.

But that was not what Dastan had asked.

"I think," Tamina answered, tasting each word for truth as she released it, "that once I declare you a Guardian, no one will have any cause at all to object."

Now it was Dastan who halted in his tracks. "A Guardian?" he demanded incredulously. "Me? Tamina, meaning no offense, and of course I'm grateful to be alive, but I don't actually like your gods. At all."

"Ah, well," Tamina said lightly. "Fortunately for us both, liking the gods has never been required of
the Guardians. The first Guardian was rather emphatic on the subject."

Most religions had behind them all the eloquence of the philosophers and poets. Alamut's first Guardian had been an unschooled girl not yet twelve, who had invented her own symbols to record what the gods had told her, and eloquence had little part in the holiest writing.

_The gods laughed at me_, the Guardian-child had written, charcoal-figures on a cave wall, _and I lived._

_If I return the Dagger and my life, the Sands count twice every day I guarded it, and then the world dies._

_If the Sands are unsealed, the world dies._

_The gods wait for me to fail._

_Guard the Dagger. Guard the Sands._

Tamina, like every Guardian before her, had entered the secret chambers of the Temple of the Stone and learned to read the symbols. The fact that they were childish caricature made the message all the more personal, one child to another, down the centuries.

She wondered what Dastan would think of the ancient message. It had been a very long time since anyone joined the Guardians as an adult, but Dastan had given his life to protect the Sandglass and the world, and the Dagger had accepted and given it back. No matter how her priests would argue, he _was_ by definition a Guardian.

Though his idea of strategy seemed to be finding where the most danger was, and throwing himself there. She would have to break him of that. Guardians could not risk themselves so recklessly.

Complementary nightmares of death and a shared sacred duty were not, perhaps, the best foundation on which to build a marriage, but a tower of sand that occasionally ate away at the stone surrounding it was certainly not the best foundation for a city. One built where one must, and repaired as necessary.

He was still staring at her, in bewildered dismay. "Tamina, are you sure you've thought about this? I'm not exactly the holy temple _type._"

There were going to be some unhappy people in Alamut, not least her cousin Varil. But if anyone was fit to make the gods laugh, it was certainly Dastan. "You do want to be my husband, don't you?" Tamina asked, and didn't wait for him to answer. "This way." She moved forward, onto the well-memorized safe path back to the surface passages.

"All right," Dastan surrendered, and followed in her footsteps. "But I hope you know what kind of Guardian you're getting."

Her feet were as certain of their path as ever, but she was nevertheless dizzy with relief—and joy. Tamina's laughter echoed off the stone, carefree as it has not sounded since her mother's death. "I would accept no other, Dastan."

(end)

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