

# Manon

by Paul Comstock

Thunk... The throwing knife sunk deeply into the wood on the far wall of the palatial study. Another knife sliced its way through the wall and landed almost in the same spot as the first knife. "Ahhh.....", a scream was heard, and then several other knives joined the first two in the wall.

The scream aroused interest from one of the servants of the large house, and a short and balding old man barged into the study. "Mistress, I heard a scream. Are you alright?"

A very attractive female dressed in skin tight jerkins colored in a dark black sat on top of an oaken desk in the far side of the study, head down on the table and hands folded over the top. She was moaning when the old man entered, and was obviously in some kind of distress.



The servant was in what was a definite fighting stance when he entered the study. His name was Llawen, and he had known the young girl sitting at the desk for most of her short 23 years of life. She had done well, surviving the treacherous life of an assassin which she had been born into. She had been named after his wife, Manon, and he had always taken care of her.

"Manon, I heard your scream, but I see nothing to cause such. Are you OK?"

The young lady lifted her head, and smiled at the older man. "I'm sorry, Llawen. I did not mean to frighten you, but I'm so damned bored!" She made another guttural sound, and flung another knife at the wall with the rest.

Llawen sighed. He had seen this before, and he had expected it. As with most young people in positions of power, they quickly bored with the day to day tasks. "Now, Manon, surely you didn't expect this new position to be as exciting as the path that took you here?"

"No, but.... I don't really know what I thought. I guess I was so involved with getting here, that I didn't think about what it was I would do once I got here. Everything is working out just the way it was planned. The information network with the beggars and urchins has proved more valuable than I had ever imagined, and Tostig far more efficient than I ever thought possible. We've brought in more gold in the last two months than Rowhit got in the last six before me, and I'm unhappier than I've ever been before in my life."

Llawen laughed, "Ah, Manon, you are still the impetuous young assassins daughter that I have always loved. Your father and mother were my best friends, and many times we saved each other's lives. I always promised your parents to take care of you, and I have enjoyed every minute of the experience. Even with all that though there are times like these that I think I know you better than yourself."

"Yes, you probably do. What should I do? You always seem to know, so tell me."

"It is simple, you need to get out of this stuffy old house and do something real. You need to take on one of those jobs you have been so good at obtaining for our fellow assassins."

"I can't. Who can I trust to run things here while I'm gone?"

He smiled, cocked his head to the side, and lifted his eyebrows in a questioning way. She smiled, "I couldn't ask you to do that, Llawen. It is too much of an imposition, and I owe you too much to ask you to do something like this. This job, it's not something I can ask anyone to do."

"Who said you were asking. I was offering. In fact, I kind of like the idea. I always wanted to be in charge of something like this operation, and this is a good time to start."

"Well, all right", Manon said, somewhat hesitantly as if struggling with her decision, and then smiled, "I can think of no one else I could trust more, or want more to do this for me. Thank you, Llawen", she said as she jumped off the table and hugged him.

He laughed, "You know, you really should find a young man to hold on to like this, rather than an old man like me."

She shoved him away almost angrily, ignoring his statement. It was something she was missing, but she was not about to admit it. She secretly wanted a husband and family, and she would be willing to give up the only life she had ever known as an assassin for it, but with her disposition, it was difficult to find someone she could put up with, or that could put up with her.

"Now, the only thing left is to find a task worthy of my talents."

He sighed. As usual, Manon wanted to avoid the discussion of suitors. It was something that all assassins had difficulty with. By nature, an assassin had to be tough, and was trained not to let emotions affect them. It made them better at their profession, but much more miserable when it came to everything else in life.

Her mother and father had been an exception, and Manon had been the result. They had been very special people, and had managed to love each other, and still be very good at assassination. They worked as a team, and they had perished together, as they had wanted.

Llawen really did not know all the details of what had happened, but he had suspicions that they had been set up, and that was something he had spent the last 18 years trying to prove. He still did not know who was responsible for their deaths, but he had narrowed it down, and he was now very close to finding the truth.

He had always told Manon that her parents had died in an accident rather than on a job. He was afraid that if she knew the truth, no matter how cold she appeared, it would affect her on her missions and eventually lead to her death. By not knowing the truth, he thought that she was actually stronger.

For this very reason, he could not ask for her help in finding the person responsible for her parents death, and the progress had been very slow in the last six years. Manon had proven as proficient and efficient as her parents, and had moved up quickly in the guild. Her position was such that she surely would have known what he had been up to in the last six years if he hadn't have been very careful.

This was the opportunity he needed to complete his investigation. It would get Manon safely out of the way for a few days, and also give him access to the power of the guild and the beggars network. Manon had been right, the beggars network was proving to be the most important part of the guilds operations here, and if they couldn't find the information he needed, he doubted that he would ever find the truth.

"I have just the job. It involves a local mage, who is planning a trip soon. His name is Dulais, He is not to return."

"I've heard the name, but I don't know from where."

"It is not surprising that you know of him. He's very powerful in the local bardic circles. He could very well become the strongest of bards ever. He has gained power very mysteriously, and has been known to seek out and acquire magic items which have great power. The problem with this has been that it appears he has come under the negative and evil power of one of his acquisitions, and in the last six months has offered alliance with the priests of Rheda."

Manon shuddered. The Rhedans were feared by everyone with any sense. What they did to people and animals was inhuman and evil beyond imagination. All assassination jobs involving these priests were carefully considered before they were undertaken. The Caza were feared and hated by so many, that they had developed unbelievable protections.

If it was true that Dulais had allied himself with the Rhedans, then this job may not be easy, and in fact may be impossible. Bards were not necessarily difficult to assassinate unless they were of the highest levels, or unless they had something or someone special protecting them. Lower level bards usually kept close to the druids that trained them, or worked for lords who offered protection, but none that Manon had ever heard of had joined the Saxon Priests of Rheda. Dulais must truly be very powerful to offer alliance to the priests, and Manon could understand why he was wished dead.

"I suppose that our client is anonymous?"

"Naturally. If you fail to eliminate him in any other way than what will appear as accidental, the Cult of Rheda will surely be suspicious and retaliate. A situation which we can not afford."

Manon shifted nervously, and frowned. The job was definitely of interest and did demand the best. She had always claimed to be the best and many agreed. Well, it looked like now was the time to prove it.

Llawen continued, "Normally we would not have accepted this job due to the risks, but this alliance threatens our profits and ability to operate here. The Rhedans are already on the verge of requiring thinning, and if they gain the alliance of Dulais, they may well be impossible to stop. This could be the last chance we will have to get Dulais before the alliance is solidified."

"Where will I find him?"

Pointing to a map on the wall, he identified a mountain range with his finger. "He is said to be headed for a mountain range in the southern region. He has hired a group of mercenaries to accompany him. Thanks to our beggar network, they were able to get one of their own hired on as a mercenary, and he has been reporting back regularly.

"Early this morning, they left for the mountains, so you will have to leave quickly."

Manon smiled, and Lavin could see the old gleam in her eyes. Yes, she was ready, and this adventure would surely be good for the both of them. With any luck, he would have an answer to a question it had taken him a lifetime to find.

"Preparations have been made, and a horse and provisions are waiting in the stables. Now go."

She got up, and turned back to him as she was leaving, "Take care of everything, and thanks. As she was walking out, Llawen could not help but to cry. He was getting old, and his control of emotion was ebbing, but he

didn't care.

Manon took not one, but three horses. She rode one as fast and hard as she could until the horse was exhausted, then loaded the next with her provisions, releasing the first horse, and did the same with the second. It allowed her to travel a bit faster, and she had kept the third and strongest horse for last.

She was careful not to wear this one out, and rested it often. She could see from the signs left by the party ahead of her, that she was not far behind now. The tracks were very clear and easily followed. The party was not worried about being followed, and that made her feel better.

She continued to ride, trying to ride a bit faster than Dulais's party, hoping to pace them until she was ready to make her move. She had a lot of time to think about how she was going to assassinate the bard, and after making several contingency plans, decided that she really would have to wait for a chance to surprise him.

She knew also that she would have to identify the man that was with the mercenaries. She knew that he would be identified by a special code in the way he wore his clothing, and that he was not an assassin, but rather somehow associated with the beggars. When the beggars had found out about Dulais's trip, there wasn't much time, and they had decided to arrange for someone to work their way in as a mercenary.

Manon hated to admit it, but she was glad to have someone in the camp. It would make the job easier if she could find some way to work out a plan with this mysterious beggars friend.

She was deep in thought, riding along the same path as her target, when she heard the sound of horses and men ahead. It was lucky that they weren't trying to be quiet, or she could have easily run right into them. She quickly left the path, and went into the sparse wood and brush off to the side of the path. She tied and left her horse in a safe place where she could return to it.

Carefully sneaking through the brush, she moved up to the group ahead of her. They had stopped in a good and defensible area, and it was easy to see that whoever was in charge of the mercenary group knew what they were doing. It would be difficult to avoid the sentries that had been placed, but not impossible.

As was usually the case, the sentries were placed to identify and stop a threat from groups or large animals rather than from an individual with her training. Anything, like herself, which could sneak through these defenses could easily be dealt with with the rest of the group in the camp.

She knew that trying to take her target out now would result in failure, or her death, or possibly both. The risk was too great, and she agreed with Llawen. The risk to her guild would be very much at risk if she failed to make it appear as an accidental death, so she just observed.

There were a total of ten mercenaries and Dulais. She spotted six of the mercenaries in the camp along with Dulais, They were milling around, taking care of horses and stretching their bodies. She did not notice any of them with the clothing that was to identify her contact, and hoped that nothing had happened to him.

She decided that now was not the time to do anything. Rushing in could be disastrous, and she knew that patience was something to be valued. She was not naturally a patient individual, but had been trained to be so, and this time her training won out. She still had time, as the mountains loomed ahead, but were still at least a

days ride ahead, so she waited for them to rest, and when they moved out again, she returned to her horse and followed.

They made good time and again camped in a defensible position, making it difficult to get close. This time though, she got lucky enough to find where her contact was posted on lookout. The bad part was that he was posted over a scraggly rock outcropping, and the only way she would get close was to climb up a fifty foot rock face.

Sighing, she waited for the blackness of night as it was only twilight, and then started climbing the rocks. One handhold then another, reaching and scrambling in the dark, each grab a tedious venture. If she made too much noise, the plan would fail. Even bits of falling rocks and debris would bring an unwelcome amount of attention to her.

She knew she was as quiet as she could have been, but when she reached the top, her contact and ally knew she was there. "It took you long enough! My relief will be here soon. We don't have much time", he said as he grabbed her arm and pulled her up.

"You try climbing up a fifty foot cliff without falling and being as quiet as I was, and then you can comment!" she said, irritated at the brashness of this man.

"Shh... Can't you be quiet. These guys are the best, and even as good as I am, we would both surely be dead if they hear us."

She was getting really irritated now at the ego of this guy. "How good you are? If you remember, this is my job, not yours. All you're here to do is to..."

"SHUT-UP", he whispered as loudly as a whisper could be. Manon was surprised to find that she did shut up. The tone was commanding, and Llawen was the only other person that had been able to do that to her.

"Good. Now I don't have much time, but tomorrow we will enter the cave at the twin spires. That should be about noon. Dulais is not in the least bit trusting of anyone, and expects traitors, so I can make no moves openly. I doubt he will allow anyone to venture into the cave with him, and will expect the rest of us to guard the entrance. He brought along ten men, so there must be something very dangerous here. I haven't been able to find out much about what he's after because Dulais does not talk to us lowly mercenaries, but I do know he is after some cursed artifact, and it is in the cave."

She waited patiently, as her temper was rising, but she had listened to everything he had said. She then waited until he had stopped talking, and then said quite strongly, "If you're through now, I have something to say to you. You are an insolent man, and one I would gladly and easily kill in other circumstances, but for now we must work together. I warn you that we now have a personal score to settle, and I will be settling it. No one talks to me this way, and..."

There was a crackling in the underbrush, and they could hear low mumbling coming towards them. "Yah sure. Whatever you say. That's my relief coming, and you'll have to go. Tomorrow, I'll create a diversion which should allow you to sneak into the cave and take care of Dulais. Then you make some noise, and I'll rush in, and we'll fake me and him dying. The mercenaries won't risk their necks if they think their benefactor is dead, and they'll leave. If not, well be in a good position to defend ourselves. Now get out of here before they get here!"

He turned his head again toward the approaching relief, and practically shoved her back down the cliff, which made her very angry, but also giving her no time to argue. She knew when to be quiet and keep her mouth shut, but she vowed to get even with this man.

The next day she followed the band to the twin spires just as she had been told, seething in fury most of the way. No one had been able to make her this angry, and it was a good thing that it took awhile to get to the spot. It wouldn't do to let her emotions enter into this. Dulais might prove to be a very difficult adversary, and she would need all of her skill to finish him off.

By the time she they had reached the spires, she was almost under complete control again, but it had taken her most of the morning to do so. She didn't like being told what to do, and in fact was not used to it, but she had to admit that the plan looked good. She wouldn't have been able to do this alone, and the insolent fool was competent if nothing else.

She waited until they were near the cave entrance. Luckily, the mercenaries had no choice of their location this time, and there were plenty of cracks and crevices where she could crawl up close to the entrance to be ready to sneak in. She waited there for what seemed like hours before her companion made his move.

She had plenty of time to observe her comrade during this time, and found herself liking the man, despite his attitude. He was young and very well built. Solid frame, big but not too big, and very graceful. She also found him to be handsome, but she was not willing to admit that even to herself and fought off the feeling.

When the man made his diversion she was ready, regardless of her emotional state. He gave a sign that she understood, and made herself ready. Soon, he made some excuse and disappeared around a stone outcropping, which ensued a series of yelling and screams along with the very loud sound of an avalanche.

The diversion worked, but only to a degree, as all but two of the men ran around the outcropping to see what was going on. After the others had disappeared, Manon threw two knives in quick succession into the throats of the two remaining guards, snuffing their screams. She decided that this was the quickest and easiest way to take them out.

She then dragged their bodies into the cave, and hid them in some dark crevasses where they would not be likely to be seen. This took several minutes, which increased her chances of being caught, so she hurried almost to the point of carelessness to get the bodies hidden.

By the time she was done, she was huffing from the exertion, but she was also smiling. There was nothing like comrades disappearing with no traces in mysterious circumstances to scare veteran fighters like these. They were always superstitious, and things like this only helped to upset them.

She then headed into the cave, stopping regularly to listen for signs of Dulais. This was something she hadn't considered, and it could prove to be a problem. She wasn't worried about getting out as she knew exactly where she was and could retrace her steps, but if she couldn't find the mage, she would be in trouble and the plan could easily fail. It seemed the last two months had caused her to get a bit rusty.

She searched for several minutes, always listening and constantly hearing the usual strange noises which emanated from caves such as these. Drips of water falling from ceilings and stalagmites. Animal noises, and scurrying things like snakes and other likely creatures, but no sounds from Dulais.

She was getting almost desperate when she stumbled over a stone, and formed it to be marked. From then it

was easy. Thank the gods, she thought, that Dulais was not good with remembering directions.

The going was easy from then on, as all she had to do was follow the path as marked. The going was actually easy in the cave, and at first she passed by the crevice where the mage had gone through, and had to go back and look closer.

It was a well hidden entrance into a large cavern in the middle of the underground maze, and opened up to reveal a large cavern which was unnaturally lighted by some kind of magical orb near the ceiling. She put out her torch as she had no need of it right now, and it would only slow her down.

Stretched out before her was a treacherous rock bridge which looked dangerous to cross, and none too sturdy. She could see Dulais standing before some kind of altar, making gestures, and mumbling some kind of incantation. He was performing some kind of ritual, and concentrating solely on it, as was normal where magic was concerned.

It was a good opportunity to sneak up on him, and take him out. She made her way cautiously along the bridge, and was within a few feet of Dulais when she noticed that the altar was glowing. It looked like the spell was almost done, and she would have to act quickly if she was to succeed without difficulties.

She took out her dagger, and lunged at Dulais, piercing his outer cloak at the exact point where his heart would be, but finding that she had only struck through clothing but no flesh. Dulais was not here any longer, only his clothes.

She looked around wildly, hoping an attack would not be coming unexpectedly, when she noticed that the altar had a door or cover in it, and that it was now opening. What came from its interior was a hideous green, and slimy thing which looked to be about ten feet tall, and four feet wide. It made her tremble, and she was scared.

The fear did not last long, but it was long enough. She was rarely afraid of anything, but this thing was something else. It screeched and moaned, and then started to talk almost intelligibly. "GrrWh....ooo?"

The voice was commanding and powerful. Manon did not understand the meaning, and was speechless. The monster repeated its question, but this time much more clearly, "Wh..ooo rrrrrrr..... youuuuu?"

Manon was overcome by the voice, and answered truthfully, "Manon, and you would be."

"Weeee... rrrrr... Dulaisgromlindruvlin..... Mmmmasterrr offff all.... th....ing....sssssssssss. Whyyyy rrrrrr... youuuuuu here....?"

Jirulu shook her head trying to get some measure of control back, and found that she was able to do so, but with difficulty. This thing was evil whatever or whoever it was, and no one controlled her! This thing must die!

She screeched in rage, and dove toward the creature, leaping and tumbling over its head. She lunged toward the creature, and drove her razor sharp dagger at its throat, but only managing a light flesh wound as the weapon skidded off its slimy hide.

She landed safely behind the monster and on a ledge of the altar. This wasn't going to work. There was no way she was going to penetrate the flesh of this thing. Her only advantage was that she was faster. She would have to try to get it to fall into the huge crevasse below. To do that, she would have to get it off balance at a point on the bridge where she could push it off.

Once again, she leaped over the creature, but this time it, managed to rake its claws across her shoulder. The pain was incredible, and it made her miss her landing badly. She managed to roll on the walkway, and scrambled up and hobbled along it toward the point in the bridge that she wanted. The monster followed.

When she got to the intended point, she waited for the thing to get there. Even though it was slow, it was terrifying and very impressive. It lumbered along the bridge, having an obviously difficult time of staying on. When it got to the point where it was almost in front of her, and on the narrowest part of the bridge, it was moving very slowly.

Manon jumped at the monster, and forced it to lose its balance, but it quickly regained it. Manon was in great pain, but managed to kick the creature again. This time it teetered and fell off the bridge into the crevasse below.

She had succeeded, she hoped. That thing was tough, and she had doubts whether even a fall like this would kill it for sure, but she hoped it had. This was not something she wanted to meet up with again. She took a few minutes to recover, and picked up Dulaiss clothing, using it to help stop the bleeding in her shoulder.

Making her way back toward the entrance was almost nightmarish, as the pain was becoming a dull ache and her resistance to it was wearing off, but she made it back, being careful not to let anyone see her. She had made cuts in Dulaiss clothing and had soaked it in blood. It would look to most anyone as if Dulais had been literally torn out of his clothing, and eaten by something. At least she hoped it would.

To finish the effect she cut off one of the hands of one of the mercenaries she had killed earlier, and added it to the clothing. She then waited and listened to the conversation at the cave entrance.

Her comrade was arguing with the rest of the mercenaries. He was saying he wanted to enter the cave and see what had happened to the two other guards, but the others were arguing about it. She decided now was the time to do her thing.

She was trained to mimic most voices, and she had heard Dulais speak a little while watching in the last few days, and the cave should cause enough variation to be believable.

Starting in a lower voice, and then increasing the pitch, she managed to make it sound as though Dulais was running up the tunnel toward the entrance, being chased by something horrible. She yelled and screamed in a pitch which would have been similar to what Dulais would have sounded like, and hoped for the best.

When she was almost screaming at the top of her lungs, she heard her comrade yell outside that he was going in to save his benefactor. As he yelled, he ran into the cave entrance, and she could clearly see him, followed closely by only one other brave soul closely behind. He was brave. Too bad he had to die, she thought as she flung one of the knives into the mans chest as he rounded a corner and was out of sight of those outside.

Her comrade ran in, and stopped close to where she was standing. He then yelled, "Dulais! We're here to help you", he then paused briefly, followed by his terrified voice shrilling and shrieking, "What the hell.... ARGGGGGG..... Look out..... Noooo..... Run, quick get out..... grghhhrrrgr.... I'm finished... Save yourselves!"

Manon then hobbled as close to the mouth of the cave as she dared and threw Dulaiss clothing and the cut off arm out of the cave entrance. She could hear the scrambling of men and horses as the mercenaries took off.

"Well, that worked out all right. I assume you succeeded since you are still here?"

"Yes, now lets get out of here."

“OK, but I thought we had a score to settle?”