

Winter's Labyrinth

Dana Alexander

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Winter's Labyrinth is a fast and entertaining fantasy novel whose inventive world is richly built.

A warrior will either fulfill her destiny to save humankind or plunge the world into further darkness in the fourth volume of Dana Alexander's epic fantasy series, The Three Keys.

From its opening paragraph, action dictates the pace of *Winter's Labyrinth*. In a direct continuation from the events of *Flight of the Feathered Serpent*, Sara and her dedicated team of immortals continue the search for the final key that will unlock the enveloping darkness that threatens Earth and Ardan. Their travels take them deep into the Egyptian jungle and the Underworld, where their pursuit by the Dark Lord Tarsamon in the City of Souls threatens to derail Sara's journey. At the same time, Sara must contend with ill health, a battle for her soul, and a surprise revelation that will change the future that she and her immortal love, Kevin, have fought so hard to bring to fruition.

A rapid-fire succession of action sequences alternates with the slower and quieter romantic moments between Kevin and Sara. Steamy romantic shifts provide some respite from the story's frenetic pace. The plot mixes Egyptian folklore with Tolkeinesque fantasy well, and its rich worldview is one of its greatest strengths.

Sara, who's evolved from a wallflower to become a bona fide action heroine, shows confidence in her decision making; her instinctual propulsion toward action contrasts with Kevin's strong, heroic lover's instinct. Halfway through the story, the tables are turned as Kevin assumes a more domestic role while Sara, armed by her desperation to fulfill her destiny, charges headfirst into action. When Kevin acts more as a rescuer, he seems less dimensional. Secondary characters act in supporting roles with the exception of Horus, the truth-bearing Egyptian immortal whose intentions are ambiguous.

Short, punchy sentences help to control the pace while longer, more introspective lines help to establish an emotional undercurrent. Sara's narration drives the story forward, although chapters alternate with Lord Tarsamon's perspective, which gives the story its tension and intrigue. A good balance exists between exposition and dialogue. While the pursuit of and from Tarsamon plays a huge role in the plot, his actual dialogue is minimal. Rather, Tarsamon's presence serves as a device to move the narrative forward.

The Underworld setting is not so much sinister as it is atmospheric. Skeletal necromancers and soulless spirits face off against shape-shifting gods, humans, and elves in an Egyptian jungle populated with hidden pyramids. The contrast of light and shadow, real and unreal, forebodes the story's clash between life and death.

While the book assumes knowledge of previous series titles, it also functions as a standalone book, if with a few missing details about characters' evolutions. This tightly plotted story ties together loose threads but ends on a cliffhanger, leaving the fates of the characters somewhat unknown.

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NANCY POWELL (October 15, 2019)

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