

Song of the Lioness

Alanna

The First Adventure

TAMORA PIERCE

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The First Adventure

Books by Tamora Pierce

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In the Hand of the Goddess (Book II)

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~ *Tamora Pierce* ~

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TO CLAIRE,
who made it all finally happen,
AND TO FRANCES,
who told me to talk to Claire

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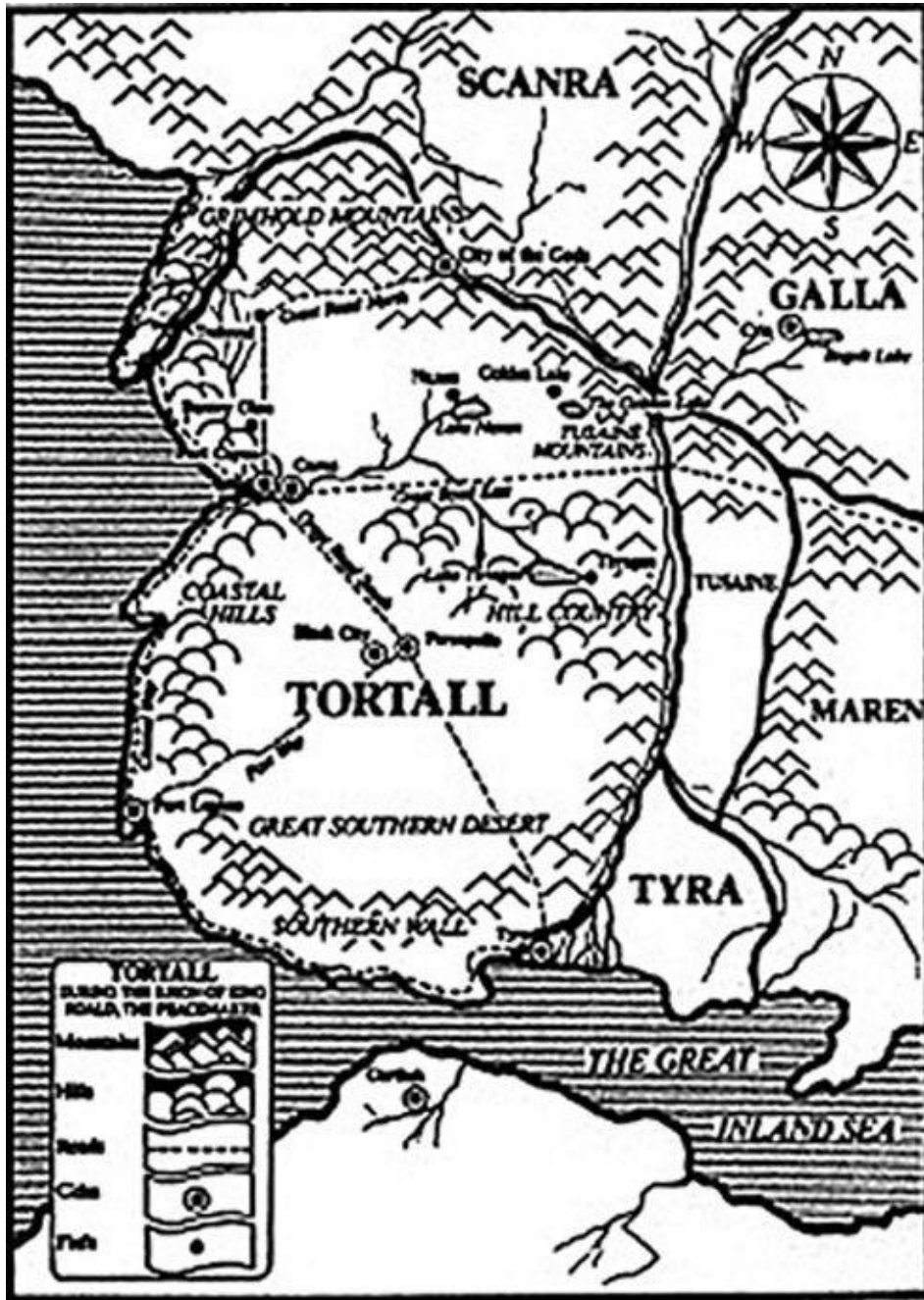
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ALANNA
The First Adventure



Zack



Twins

“That is my decision. We need not discuss it,” said the man at the desk. He was already looking at a book. His two children left the room, closing the door behind them.

“He doesn’t want us around,” the boy muttered. “He doesn’t care what we want.”

“We *know* that,” was the girl’s answer. “He doesn’t care about anything, except his books and scrolls.”

The boy hit the wall. “I don’t *want* to be a knight! I want to be a great sorcerer! I want to slay demons and walk with the gods—”

“D’you think I want to be a lady?” his sister asked. “Walk slowly, Alanna,” she said primly. “Still, Alanna. Shoulders back, Alanna.’ As if that’s all I can do with myself!” She paced the floor. “There has to be another way.”

The boy watched the girl. Thom and Alanna of Trebond were twins, both with red hair and purple eyes. The only difference between them—as far as most people could tell—was the length of the hair. In face and body shape, dressed alike, they would have looked alike.

“Face it,” Thom told Alanna. “Tomorrow *you* leave for the convent, and *I* go to the palace. That’s it.”

“Why do you get all the fun?” she complained. “I’ll have to learn sewing and dancing. You’ll study tilting, fencing—”

“D’you think I *like* that stuff?” he yelled. “I *hate* falling down and whacking at things! *You’re* the one who likes it, not me!”

She grinned. “*You* should’ve been Alanna. They always teach the girls magic—” The thought hit her so suddenly that she gasped. “Thom. That’s it!”

From the look on her face, Thom knew his sister had just come up with yet another crazy idea. “*What’s* it?” he asked suspiciously.

Alanna looked around and checked the hall for servants. “Tomorrow he gives us the letters for the man who trains the pages and the people at the convent. You can imitate his writing, so you can do new letters, saying we’re twin boys. *You* go to the convent. Say in the letter that you’re to be a sorcerer. The Daughters of the Goddess are the ones who train young boys in magic, remember? When you’re older, they’ll send you to the priests. And I’ll go to the palace and learn to be a knight!”

“That’s crazy,” Thom argued. “What about your hair? You can’t go swimming naked, either. And you’ll turn into a girl—you know, with a chest and everything.”

“I’ll cut my hair,” she replied. “And—well, I’ll handle the rest when it happens.”

“What about Coram and Maude? They’ll be traveling with us, and they can tell us apart. They know we aren’t twin boys.”

She chewed her thumb, thinking this over. “I’ll tell Coram we’ll work magic on him if he says anything,” she said at last. “He hates magic—that ought to be enough. And maybe we can talk to Maude.”

Thom considered it, looking at his hands. “You think we could?” he whispered.

Alanna looked at her twin’s hopeful face. Part of her wanted to stop this before it got out of hand.

but not a very big part. "If you don't lose your nerve," she told her twin. *And if I don't lose mine*, she thought.

"What about Father?" He was already looking into the distance, seeing the City of the Gods.

Alanna shook her head. "He'll forget us, once we're gone." She eyed Thom. "D'you want to be a sorcerer bad enough?" she demanded. "It means years of studying and work for us both. Will you have the guts for it?"

Thom straightened his tunic. His eyes were cold. "Just show me the way!"

Alanna nodded. "Let's go find Maude."



Maude, the village healer, listened to them and said nothing. When Alanna finished, the woman turned and stared out the door for long minutes. Finally she looked at the twins again.

They didn't know it, but Maude was in difficulty. She had taught them all the magic she possessed. They were both capable of learning much more, but there were no other teachers at Trebond. Thom wanted everything he could get from his magic, but he disliked people. He listened to Maude only because he thought she had something left to teach him; he hated Coram—the other adult who looked after the twins—because Coram made him feel stupid. The only person in the world Thom loved beside himself, was Alanna. Maude thought about Alanna and sighed. The girl was very different from her brother. Alanna was afraid of her magic. Thom had to be ordered to hunt, and Alanna had to be tricked and begged into trying spells.

The woman had been looking forward to the day when someone else would have to handle the twins. Now it seemed the gods were going to test her through them one last time.

She shook her head. "I cannot make such a decision without help. I must try and See, in the fire."

Thom frowned. "I thought you couldn't. I thought you could only heal."

Maude wiped sweat from her face. She was afraid. "Never mind what I can do and what I cannot do," she snapped. "Alanna, bring wood. Thom, vervain."

They rushed to do as she said, Alanna returning first to add wood to the fire already burning on the hearth. Thom soon followed, carrying leaves from the magic plant vervain.

Maude knelt before the hearth and motioned for the twins to sit on either side of her. She felt sweat running down her back. People who tried to use magic the gods had not given them often died in ugly ways. Maude gave a silent prayer to the Great Mother Goddess, promising good behavior for the rest of her days if only the Goddess would keep her in one piece through this.

She tossed the leaves onto the fire, her lips moving silently with the sacred words. Power from her and from the twins slowly filled the fire. The flames turned green from Maude's sorcery and purple for the twins'. The woman drew a deep breath and grabbed the twins' left hands, thrusting them into the fire. Power shot up their arms. Thom yelped and wriggled with the pain of the magic now filling him up. Alanna bit her lower lip till it bled, fighting the pain her own way. Maude's eyes were wide and blank as she kept their intertwined hands in the flames.

Suddenly Alanna frowned. A picture was forming in the fire. That was impossible—*she* was supposed to See anything. Maude was the one who had cast the spell. Maude was the only one who should See anything.

Ignoring all the laws of magic Alanna had been taught, the picture grew and spread. It was a city made all of black, shiny stone. Alanna leaned forward, squinting to see it better. She had never seen anything like this city. The sun beat down on gleaming walls and towers. Alanna was afraid—more afraid than she had ever been...

Maude let go of the twins. The picture vanished. Alanna was cold now, and very confused. Wh

had that city been? Where was it?

~~Thom examined his hand. There were no burn marks, or even scars. There was nothing to show that Maude had kept their hands in the flames for long minutes.~~

Maude rocked back on her heels. She looked old and tired. "I have seen many things I do not understand," she whispered finally. "Many things—"

"Did you see the city?" Alanna wanted to know.

Maude looked at her sharply. "I saw no city."

Thom leaned forward. "*You* saw something?" His voice was eager. "But Maude cast the spell—"

"No!" Alanna snapped. "I didn't see anything! Anything!"

Thom decided to wait and ask her later, when she didn't look so scared. He turned to Maude. "Well?" he demanded.

The healing woman sighed. "Very well. Tomorrow Thom and I go to the City of the Gods."



At dawn the next day, Lord Alan gave each of his children a sealed letter and his blessing before instructing Coram and Maude. Coram still did not know the change in plan. Alanna did not intend to enlighten him until they were far from Trebond.

Once Lord Alan let them go, Maude took the twins to Alanna's room while Coram got the horses ready. The letters were quickly opened and read.

Lord Alan entrusted his son to the care of Duke Gareth of Naxen and his daughter to the First Daughter of the convent. Sums of money would be sent quarterly to pay for his children's upkeep until such time as their teachers saw fit to return them to their home. He was busy with his studies and trusted the judgment of the Duke and the First Daughter in all matters. He was in their debt, Lord Alan of Trebond.

Many such letters went to the convent and to the palace every year. All girls from noble families studied in convents until they were fifteen or sixteen, at which time they went to Court to find husbands. Usually the oldest son of a noble family learned the skills and duties of a knight at the King's palace. Younger sons could follow their brothers to the palace, or they could go first to the convent, then to the priests' cloisters, where they studied religion or sorcery.

Thom was expert at forging his father's handwriting. He wrote two new letters, one for "Alan," one for himself. Alanna read them carefully, relieved to see that there was no way to tell the difference between Thom's work and the real thing. The boy sat back with a grin, knowing it might be years before the confusion was resolved.

While Thom climbed into a riding skirt, Maude took Alanna into the dressing room. The girl changed into shirt, breeches and boots. Then Maude cut her hair.

"I've something to say to you," Maude said as the first lock fell to the floor.

"What?" Alanna asked nervously.

"You've a gift for healing." The shears worked on. "It's greater than mine, greater than any I have ever known. And you've other magic, power you'll learn to use. But the healing—that's the important thing. I had a dream last night. A warning, it was, as plain as if the gods shouted in my ear."

Alanna, picturing this, stifled a giggle.

"It don't do to laugh at the gods," Maude told her sternly. "Though you'll find that out yourself soon enough."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. Listen. Have you thought of the lives you'll take when you go off performing those great deeds?"

Alanna bit her lip. “No,” she admitted.

~~“I didn’t think so. You see only the glory. But there’s lives taken and families without fathers and sorrow. Think before you fight. Think on who you’re fighting, if only because one day you must meet your match. And if you want to pay for those lives you do take, use your healing magic. Use it all you can, or you won’t cleanse your soul of death for centuries. It’s harder to heal than it is to kill. The Mother knows why, but you’ve a gift for both.”~~ Quickly she brushed Alanna’s cropped hair. “Keep your hood up for a bit, but you look enough like Thom to fool anyone but Coram.”

Alanna stared at herself in the mirror. Her twin stared back, violet eyes wide in his pale face. Grinning, she wrapped herself in her cloak. With a last peek at the boy in the mirror, she followed Maude out to the courtyard. Coram and Thom, already mounted up, waited for them. Thom rearranged his skirts and gave his sister a wink.

Maude stopped Alanna as she went to mount the pony, Chubby. “Heal, child,” the woman advised. “Heal all you can, or you’ll pay for it. The gods mean for their gifts to be used.”

Alanna swung herself into the saddle and patted Chubby with a comforting hand. The pony, sensing that the good twin was on his back, stopped fidgeting. When Thom was riding him, Chubby managed to dump him.

The twins and the two servants waved farewell to the assembled castle servants, who had come to see them off. Slowly they rode through the castle gate, Alanna doing her best to imitate Thom’s posture—or the pout Thom would be wearing if he were riding to the palace right now. Thom was looking down at his pony’s ears, keeping his face hidden. Everyone knew how the twins felt at being sent away.

The road leading from the castle plunged into heavily overgrown and rocky country. For the next day or so they would be riding through the unfriendly forests of the Grimhold Mountains, the great natural border between Tortall and Scanra. It was familiar land to the twins. While it might seem dangerous and unfriendly to people from the South, to Alanna and Thom it would always be home.

At midmorning they came to the meeting of Trebond Way and the Great Road. Patrolled by the King’s men, the Great Road led north to the distant City of the Gods. That was the way Thom and Maude would take. Alanna and Coram were bound south, to the capital city of Corus, and the royal palace.

The two servants went apart to say goodbye and give the twins some privacy. Like Thom and Alanna, it would be years before Coram and Maude saw each other again. Though Maude would return to Trebond, Coram was to remain with Alanna, acting as her manservant during her years at the palace.

Alanna looked at her brother and gave a little smile. “Here we are,” she said.

“I wish I could say ‘have fun,’” Thom said frankly, “but I can’t see how anyone can have fun learning to be a knight. Good luck, though. If we’re caught, we’ll both be skinned.”

“No one’s going to catch us, brother.” She reached across the distance between them, and they gripped hands warmly. “Good luck, Thom. Watch your back.”

“There are a lot of tests ahead for you,” Thom said earnestly. “Watch *your* back.”

“I’ll pass the tests,” Alanna said. She knew they were brave words, almost foolhardy, but Thom looked as if he needed to hear them. They turned their ponies then and rejoined the adults.

“Let’s go,” Alanna growled to Coram.

Maude and Thom took the left fork of the Great Road and Alanna and Coram bore right. Alanna halted suddenly, turning around to watch her brother ride off. She blinked the burning feeling from her eyes, but she couldn’t ease the tight feeling in her throat. Something told her Thom would be very different when she saw him again. With a sigh she turned Chubby back toward the capital city.

Coram made a face and urged his big gelding forward. He would have preferred doing anything

escorting a finicky boy to the palace. Once he had been the hardest soldier in the King's armies. Now he was going to be a joke. People would see that Thom was no warrior, and they would blame Coram—the man who was to have taught him the basics of the warrior's craft. He rode for hours without a word, thinking his own gloomy thoughts, too depressed to notice that Thom, who usually complained after an hour's ride, was silent as well.

Coram had been trained as a blacksmith, but he had once been one of the best of the King's soldiers, until he had returned home to Trebond Castle and become sergeant-at-arms there. Now he wanted to be with the King's soldiers again, but not if they were going to laugh at him because he had a weakling for a master. Why couldn't Alanna have been the boy? *She* was a fighter. Coram had taught her at first because to teach one twin was to teach the other, poor motherless things. Then he began to enjoy teaching her. She learned quickly and well—better than her brother. With all his heart Coram Smythesson wished now, as he had in the past, that Alanna were the boy.

He was about to get his wish, in a left-handed way. The sun was glinting from directly overhead—time for the noon meal. Coram grunted orders to the cloaked child, and they both dismounted in a clearing beside the road. Pulling bread and cheese from a saddlebag, he broke off a share and handed it over. He also took the wineskin down from his saddle horn.

"We'll make the wayhouse by dark, if not before," he rumbled. "Till then, we make do with this."

Alanna removed her heavy cloak. "This is fine with me."

Coram choked, spraying a mouthful of liquid all over the road. Alanna had to clap him on the back before he caught his breath again.

"Brandy?" he whispered, looking at the wineskin. He returned to his immediate problem. "By the Black God!" he roared, turning spotty purple. "We're goin' back this instant, and I'm tannin' yer hide for ye when we get home! Where's that devils' spawn brother of yours?"

"Coram, calm down," she said. "Have a drink."

"I don't want a drink," he snarled. "I want t' beat the two of ye till yer skins won't hold water!" He took a deep gulp from the wineskin.

"Thom's on his way to the City of the Gods with Maude," Alanna explained. "She thinks we're doing the right thing."

Coram swore under his breath. "That witch *would* agree with you two sorcerers. And what does your father say?"

"Why should he ever know?" Alanna asked. "Coram, you know Thom doesn't want to be a knight. He can do."

"I don't care if the two of ye want t' be dancing bears!" Coram told her, taking another swallow from the skin. "Ye're a girl."

"Who's to know?" She bent forward, her small face intent. "From now on I'm Alan of Trebond, the younger twin. I'll be a knight—Thom'll be a sorcerer. It'll happen. Maude saw it for us in the fire."

Coram made the Sign against evil with his right hand. Magic made him nervous. Maude made him nervous. He drank again to settle his nerves. "Lass, it's a noble thought, a warrior's thought, but it'll never work. If ye're not caught when ye bathe, ye'll be turning into a woman—"

"I can hide all that—with your help. If I can't, I'll disappear."

"Yer father will have my hide!"

She made a face. "Father doesn't care about anything but his scrolls." She drew a breath. "Coram, I'm being nice. Thom wouldn't be this nice. D'you want to see things that aren't there for the next ten years? I can work that, you know. Remember when Cook was going to tell Father who ate the cherry tarts? Or the time Godmother tried to get Father to marry her?"

Coram turned pale. The afternoon the tarts were discovered missing, Cook started to see large, hungry lions following him around the kitchens. Lord Alan never heard about the missing tarts. Who

the twins' godmother came to Trebond to snare Lord Alan as her next husband, she had fled after only three days, claiming the castle was haunted.

"Ye wouldn't," Coram whispered. He had always suspected that the twins had been behind Cook's hallucinations and Lady Catherine's ghosts, but he had kept those thoughts to himself. Cook gave himself airs, and Lady Catherine was cruel to her servants.

Seeing she had struck a nerve, Alanna changed tactics. "Thom can't shoot for beans, and I can't. Thom wouldn't be a credit to you. I will, I think. You said yourself a grown man can't skin a rabbit faster'n me." She fed her last piece of bread to Chubby and looked at Coram with huge, pleading eyes. "Let's ride on. If you feel the same in the morning, we can turn back." She crossed her fingers as she lied. She had no intention of returning to Trebond. "Just don't rush. Father won't know till it's too late."

Coram swigged again from the skin, getting up shakily. He mounted, watching the girl. They rode silently while Coram thought, and drank.

The threat about making him see things didn't worry him much. Instead he thought of Thom's performance in archery—it was enough to make a soldier cry. Alanna was much quicker than her brother. She rarely tired, even hiking over rough country. She had a feel for the fighting arts, and there was something that never could be learned. She was also as stubborn as a mule.

Because he was absorbed in his thoughts, Coram never saw the wood snake glide across the road. Alanna—and Coram's horse—spotted the slithery creature in the same second. The big gelding reared almost throwing his master. Chubby stopped dead in the road, surprised by these antics. Coram yelled and fought to hold on as his mount bucked frantically, terrified by the snake. Alanna never stopped to think. She threw herself from Chubby's saddle and grabbed for Coram's reins with both hands. Dodging the gelding's flying hooves frantically, she used all her strength and weight to pull the horse down before Coram fell and broke his neck.

The gelding, more surprised than anything else by the new weight on his reins, dropped to all fours. He trembled as Alanna stroked his nose, whispering comforting words. She dug in a pocket and produced an apple for the horse, continuing to pet him until his shaking stopped.

When Alanna looked up, Coram was watching her oddly. She had no way of knowing that he was imagining what Thom would have done in similar circumstances: her twin would have left Coram to fend for himself. Coram knew the kind of courage it took to calm a large, bucking horse. It was the kind of courage a knight needed in plenty. Even so, Alanna was a girl....

By the time they arrived at the wayhouse, Coram was very drunk. The innkeeper helped him to bed while his wife fussed over "the poor wee lad." In her bed that night, Alanna listened to Coram's snoring with a wide grin on her lips. Maude had managed to fill the wineskin with Lord Alan's best brandy, hoping her old friend might be more open to reason if his joints were well oiled.

Coram awoke the next morning with the worst hangover he had ever had. He moaned as Alanna entered his room.

"Don't walk so loud," he begged.

Alanna handed him a steaming mug. "Drink. Maude says this makes you feel better every time."

The man drank deeply, gasping as the hot liquid burned down his throat. But in the end, he *did* feel better. He swung his feet to the floor, gently rubbing his tender skull. "I need a bath."

Alanna pointed to the bath already waiting in the corner.

Coram glared at her from beneath his eyebrows. "Go order breakfast. I take it I'm to call ye 'Alanna' now?"

She yelped with joy and skipped from the room.



Four days later they rode into Corus just after dawn. They were part of the stream of people entering the capital for the market day. Coram guided his horse through the crowds, while Alanna tried to keep Chubby close behind him and still see everything. Never in her life had she encountered so many people! She saw merchants, slaves, priests, nobles. She could tell the Bazhir—desert tribesmen—by their heavy white burnouses, just as she spotted seamen by their braided pigtailed. She was lucky that Chubby was inclined to stay near Coram's gelding, or she would have been lost in a second.

The marketplace itself was almost more than a girl from a mountain castle could take. Alanna blinked her eyes at the bright colors—piles of orange and yellow fruits, hangings of bright blue and green, ropes of gold and silver chains. Some people were staring as openly as she was. Others shoved their goods under people's noses, shouting for them to buy. Women in tight dresses eyed men from doorways, and children ran underfoot, sneaking their hands into pockets and purses.

Coram missed nothing. "Keep an eye to yer saddlebags," he called back to Alanna. "There are some here as would steal their own mother's teeth!" He seemed to be directing this comment at a tall young man standing near Alanna.

The lean young man grinned, white teeth flashing in his tanned face. "Who, me?" he asked innocently.

Coram snorted and kicked his horse onward. The man winked one bright hazel eye at Alanna and vanished into the crowd. She watched him until someone shouted for her to watch herself. She wondered if he really was a thief. He seemed very nice.

They left the marketplace, taking the Market Way up a long, sloping hill. This led them through districts where rich merchants lived, up past the villas of even richer nobles. The crossing of Market Way and Harmony Way marked the beginning of the Temple District. Here the Market Way changed its name, becoming the Palace Way. Coram straightened his saddle. After his years of soldiering, this was like coming home.

Alanna saw countless temples as they rode through the district. She had heard that a hundred gods were worshiped in Corus. There were enough temples for that many, she thought. She even saw a troop of women dressed in armor, the guard of the Temple of the Great Mother Goddess. These women were armed with great double-headed axes, and they knew how to use them. Their duty was to keep men from ever setting foot on ground sacred to the Great Mother.

Alanna grinned. Someday she would wear armor too, but she wouldn't be confined to temple grounds!

The ground suddenly rose steeply. The Temple District ended here. Above them, crowning the hill was the royal palace. Alanna looked at it and gasped. Ahead of her was the City Gate, carved with thousands of figures and trimmed with gold. Through this gate in the palace wall, kings and queens came down to the city on holy days. Through this gate the people went to see their rulers on Great Audience Days. The Gate was as high as the wall it pierced: a wall lined with soldiers dressed in the royal gold and red. Behind the wall, level after level of buildings and towers rose, up to the palace itself. The area had its own gardens, wells, stables, barracks and menagerie. Outside the wall on the other side lay the Royal Forest.

All these things Alanna knew from her father's books and maps, but the reality took her breath away as a paragraph written in a book never could.

Coram led the way to the courtyard beside the stables. Here servants awaited the arrival of guests to show them to their rooms, to guide the arrivals' servants and to take charge of the horses. One such servant approached them.

Coram dismounted. "I'm Coram Smythesson, of Fief Trebond. I've come with Master Alan of Trebond to begin his service at Court."

The hostler bowed. A royal page rated some respect, but not the respect a full-grown noble would

get. "I'll be takin' th' horses, sir," he said, his voice thick with the accent of the city. "Timon!" he called.

A slender young man in royal livery hurried up. "Aye, Stefan?"

"One fer his Grace. I'll see t' the bags."

Alanna dismounted and hugged Chubby for a second, feeling as if he were her last friend. She had to hurry to catch up with Timon and Coram.

"Ye'll show his Grace the proper respect," Coram growled in her ear. "A wizard with a sword, he is and a better leader ye'll never meet."

Alanna rubbed her nose anxiously. What if something went wrong? What if the Duke guessed?

She glanced at Coram. The man was sweating. Alanna gritted her teeth and thrust her chin forward stubbornly. She would see this through.

~

The New Page

Duke Gareth of Naxen was tall and thin, with dull brown hair that fell into his muddy brown eyes. Though he was plain looking, there was something commanding about him all the same.

“Alan of Trebond, hm?” His voice was thin and nasal. He frowned as he opened the seal of Alanna’s letter. “I trust you will do better here than your sire. He was always at his books.”

Alanna swallowed hard. The Duke made her nervous. “He still is, sir.”

The Duke looked at her sharply, not sure if she was being pert. “Hmph. So I would suppose.” He smiled and nodded at Alanna’s servingman. “Coram Smythesson. It’s been a long time since the Battle of Joyous Forest.”

Coram bowed, grinning. “I didn’t think yer Lordship’d remember. That was twenty years ago, and I was but a lad myself.”

“I don’t forget it when a man saves my life. Welcome to the palace. You will like it here—though you, boy, will work hard.” Duke Gareth turned his attention back to Alanna. “Sit down, both of you. They obeyed. “You’re here, Alan of Trebond, to learn what it is to be a knight and a noble of Tortall. It’s not easy. You must learn to defend the weak, to obey your overlord, to champion the cause of right. Someday you may even be able to tell what right is.” It was impossible to tell if he was joking, and Alanna decided not to ask.

“Until you are fourteen, you will be a page,” the Duke went on. “You will wait on table at the evening meal. You will run errands for any lord or lady who asks you. Half your day will be spent learning fighting arts. The other half you will spend with books, in the hope that we can teach you how to think.

“If your masters think you are ready, you will be made squire when you are fourteen. Perhaps a knight will choose you as his body squire. If so, you’ll tend your master’s belongings, run his errands, and protect his interests. Your other lessons will continue—they’ll be harder, of course.

“When you are eighteen, you’ll undergo the Ordeal of Knighthood. If you survive, you will be a Knight of Tortall. Not everyone survives.” He held up his left hand, revealing a missing finger. “I lost this in the Chamber of the Ordeal.” He sighed.

“Don’t worry about the Ordeal now. You have eight years to think about it. For the present, you will live in the pages’ wing. Coram rooms with you, but I hope he’ll be able to serve the palace guard in his free time.”

Coram nodded. “I’d like that, yer Grace.”

Duke Gareth smiled thinly. “Excellent. We can use a man of your ability.” He looked at Alanna once again. “One of the older pages will sponsor you and show you how things are done. You’ll be in his charge until you are familiar with the palace and your duties. If you are obedient and work hard, you won’t see me often. Misbehave, and you’ll learn how harsh I can be. When you prove yourself worthy, you will be granted free time to go into the city. And make no mistake—you’ll earn every privilege you get three times over. You are here to learn chivalry, not to have a good time. Timon”—Alanna realized the servingman had been in the room all along—“take them to their room. Make sure the boy is properly clothed. Also, a guardsman’s uniform for Master Smythesson.” The Duke measured Alanna with his eyes. “I expect you to begin serving at dinner in five days. You’ll wait on

me. Have you any questions?"

It took all her strength to say, "No, your Lordship."

"A duke is called 'your Grace.'" The older man smiled and held his right hand out to her. "It is a hard life, but you'll get used to it."

Alanna kissed his hand timidly. "Yes, your Grace." She and the two men bowed and left the Duke's presence.

The pages' wing stretched along the west side of the palace, standing near the walls that overlooked the city. Here Timon showed Alanna and Coram two small rooms, where they would live during Alanna's time as a page. Someone had already placed their baggage inside the door.

Their next stop was with the palace tailors. Realizing they would measure her for her page uniform, Alanna felt sick. Her mind whirled with visions of being forced to strip, of being caught and sent home in disgrace before she had even had a chance to start.

Instead a scowling old man whipped a knotted cord around her shoulders and hips, calling out the number of knots it took to circle Alanna to his assistant. Then he laid the cord along the length of her right arm and then her right leg. He sent the anxious-looking apprentice scurrying into a storeroom while he measured Coram in the same rapid style. The apprentice returned with an armful of clothing. He was instantly sent after boots and shoes while the grumpy old tailor shook out a gold tunic and held it up to Alanna. The bright garment could have easily fitted a much larger youngster.

Coram fought to hide a grin. "Isn't it a wee bit big?"

The tailor glared at the servingman. "Boys grow," he barked, shoving the whole pile of boots and clothes into Alanna's arms. "It's their natures." He turned his scowl on Alanna. "You rip 'em, you mend 'em," he said. "Don't let me see you for at least three months."

Alanna followed Coram and Timon out, her knees weak with relief. Her secret was still safe!

Timon took them to the huge kitchens for a luncheon and spent the afternoon showing them around the palace. Alanna was lost in no time. She didn't believe Timon when he told her she would soon learn her way around. The royal palace could hold several Trebonds, and more people lived there than Alanna had ever seen before. She learned that many nobles had suites in the palace. There were also quarters for foreign visitors, a servants' wing, the throne and council rooms, ballrooms, kitchens and libraries. It all made her feel extremely small.

The sun was setting as they quickly unpacked. Coram changed into clean clothes in his own room while Alanna slowly laid out her new uniform. She noticed her hands were shaking.

"Alan?" the servingman called.

She opened her door. Coram was ready to go.

"Well, la—lad?" he asked. His dark eyes were kind. "How shall we work this? Th' boys are changin' for dinner."

She tried to smile. "You go on." It was hard making her voice sound relaxed. "I'll be fine."

"You're sure?"

"Of course," she replied stoutly. "Would I have said so if I wasn't?"

"Yes," was the calm answer.

Alanna sighed and rubbed her forehead. She wished he didn't know her so well. "Best now as late as Coram. I'll be all right. Really. Go on."

He hesitated for a moment. "Good luck—Alan."

"Thanks." She watched him leave and felt lost. Locking the door—it wouldn't do for someone to come in unannounced—she reached for her shirt.

When she was fully dressed, Alanna stared at her reflection in the mirror. She had never looked so fine. The full-sleeved shirt and hose were bright scarlet against the cloth-of-gold tunic. Sturdy leather shoes covered her feet; her dagger and purse hung from a slim leather belt. True, the clothes were

little large, but she was too dazzled by the colors to care.

~~There was one thing to be said for such a bright red and brighter gold: the royal uniform gave her~~ the courage to unbolt the door and step into the hall. She couldn't have done it in her battered old clothes. Several boys saw her and hurried to spread the word: There's a new boy in the palace. Suddenly the pages' wing was very quiet. Everyone came to inspect the newcomer.

Someone behind Alanna grabbed her. She spun. A tall, gangling boy of nearly fourteen looked her over, a sneer on his thick mouth. He had cold blue eyes and sandy-blond hair that flopped over his forehead.

"I wonder what this is." His crooked teeth made him spit his s's. Alanna wiped a drop of saliva from her cheek. "Probably some back-country boy who *thinks* he's a noble."

"Leave him alone, Ralon," someone protested. "He didn't say anything to you."

"He doesn't have to," Ralon snapped. "I bet he's some farmer's son trying to pass for one of us."

Alanna blushed a dull red. "I was told pages were *supposed* to learn manners," she murmured. "Whoever told me that must've been mistaken."

The boy grabbed her collar, lifting her off her feet. "You'll do what you're told," he hissed, "till you earn the right to call yourself a page. If *I* say you're the goatherd's son, *you* say, 'Yes, Lord Ralon.'"

Alanna gasped with fury. "I'd as soon kiss a pig! Is that what *you've* been doing—kissing pigs? Or *being* kissed?"

Ralon threw her against the wall, hard. Alanna charged, ramming into his stomach and knocking him to the floor. Ralon yelled and shoved her off him.

"What is this?"

The young male voice was clear and forceful. Ralon froze; Alanna slowly got to her feet. The watching boys made way for a dark-haired page and his four companions.

Ralon was the first to speak. "Highness, this boy was acting as if he owned the palace," he whined. "King of the castle, he was, and he insulted me like no gentleman insults another—"

"I don't think I spoke to you, Ralon of Malven," the boy called "Highness" said. His bright blue eyes fixed on Ralon's. The two boys were about the same height, but the dark-haired boy seemed to be about a year younger and much more commanding. "Unless I'm mistaken, I told you not to talk to me at all."

"But, Highness, he—"

"Shut up, Ralon," instructed one of the boy's friends. This one was big, with tightly curled brown hair and coal-black eyes. "You've got your orders."

Ralon stepped out of the way, red with fury. The boy who seemed to be running things looked around. "Douglass." He nodded to a boy who had been there all along. "What happened?"

A stocky blond page stepped forward. His hair was still wet from washing. He was the one who told Ralon to let Alanna alone.

"It was Ralon, Jon," Douglass said. "The new boy was just standing here. Ralon started on him—called him a country boy, said he was a farmer's son. The new boy said he thought we were here to learn manners. Ralon grabbed him and said the new boy had to do whatever Ralon told him to do, and say 'Yes, Lord Ralon.'"

The boy called Highness looked at Ralon with disgust. "I'm not surprised." He turned his bright eyes back to Alanna. "Then what?"

Douglass grinned. "The new boy said he'd as soon kiss a pig." The pages started to giggle. Alanna blushed and hung her head. Ralon's behavior was bad, but hers wasn't much better. "He said it looked as if Ralon had been kissing pigs. Either that or being kissed himself."

Most of the boys listening laughed outright at this. Alanna could see Ralon's fists clench. She had made her first enemy.

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