

TAMORA
PIERCE

SONG OF THE LIONESSE



ALANNA
THE FIRST ADVENTURE

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About the Book

Alanna has always craved the adventure and daring allowed only for boys; her twin brother, Thom, yearns to learn the art of magic. So one day they decide to switch places. Disguised as a girl, Thom heads for the convent; Alanna, pretending to be a boy, is on her way to the castle of King Roald to begin her training as a page.

But the road to knighthood is not an easy one. As Alanna masters the skills necessary for battle, she must also learn to control her heart and to learn who her enemies are. Filled with swords and sorcery, adventure and intrigue, good and evil, Alanna's first adventure begins . . .

Song of the Lioness - Alanna

The First Adventure

Tamora Pierce

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1

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. ‘“Sit 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 their 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 these two. 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* wasn't 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. What 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 pout - 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 dark and unfriendly to people from the South, to Alanna and Thom it would always be home.

At mid-morning 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 to 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 foot 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 yer father say?'

'Why should he ever know?' Alanna asked. 'Coram, you know Thom doesn't want to be a knight. I 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. When 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. 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 that 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 snores 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 woke 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 "Alan" now?'

She yelped with joy and skipped from the room.