

TAMORA
PIERCE

SONG OF THE LIONESSE



IN THE HAND
OF THE
GODDESS

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About the Book

Still disguised as a boy, Alanna becomes a squire to none other than the prince of the realm. Prince Jonathan is not only Alanna's liege lord, he is also her best friend - and one of the few who knows the secret of her true identity. But when a mysterious sorcerer threatens the prince's life, it will take all of Alanna's skill, strength, and magical power to protect him - even at the risk of revealing who she really is . . .

Song of the Lioness
The Hand of the Goddess

Tamora Pierce

RHCP DIGITAL

1

THE LADY IN THE FOREST

The copper-haired rider looked at the black sky and swore. The storm would be on her soon, and she was hours away from shelter. No matter what she did, she was going to have to spend the night out-of-doors.

'I *hate* getting wet,' Alanna of Trebond told her mare. 'I don't like being cold, either, and we'll probably be both.'

The horse whickered in reply, flicking her white tail. Alanna sighed and patted Moonlight's neck – she also didn't like exposing her faithful mare to such conditions.

They were on the last leg of an errand in the coastal hills. A forest lay before them; beyond it was the Great Road South and a half a day's ride to the capital city and home. Alanna shook her head. They could probably find shelter somewhere under the trees, if luck was with them.

Clucking to Moonlight, she picked up their pace. In the distance thunder rolled, and a few drops of rain blew into her face. She shivered and swore again. Checking to make sure the scroll she carried was safe in its waterproof wrapping and tucked between her tunic and shirt, Alanna shrugged into a hooded cloak. Her friend Myles of Olau would be very upset if the three-hundred-year-old document she had been sent to fetch got wet!

Moonlight carried her under the trees, where Alanna peered through the growing darkness. If they rode too much longer, it would be impossible to find dry firewood even in a forest this thick. The rain was falling now in fat drops. It would be nice if she could find an abandoned hut,

or even an occupied one, but she knew better than to expect that.

Something hit the back of her gloved hand with a wet smack – a huge, hairy wood-spider. Alanna yelled and threw the thing off her, startling Moonlight. The gold mare pranced nervously until her mistress got her under control once more. For a moment Alanna sat and shook, huddled into her cloak.

I hate spiders, she thought passionately. *I just – loathe spiders*. She shook her head in disgust and gathered the reins in still-trembling hands. Her fellow squires at the palace would laugh if they knew she feared spiders. They'd say she was behaving like a girl, not knowing she *was* a girl.

'What do they know about girls anyway?' she asked Moonlight as they moved on. 'Maids at the palace handle snakes and kill spiders without acting silly. Why do boys say someone acts like a girl as if it were an insult?'

Alanna shook her head, smiling a little. In the three years she had been disguised as a boy, she had learned that boys know girls as little as girls know boys. It didn't make sense – *people are people, after all*, she thought – but that was how things were.

A hill rose sharply to the left of the road. Crowning it was an old willow tree thick with branches. It would take hours for the rain to soak through onto the ground under that tree, if it soaked through at all, and there was room between the limbs and trunk for both Alanna and Moonlight.

Within moments she had Moonlight unsaddled and covered with a blanket. The mare fed on grass under the tree as Alanna gathered dry sticks, branches, and leaves. With some struggle and much swearing – her first teacher in woodcraft, Coram, was a soldier, and she had learned plenty of colorful language from him – she got a fire going. When it was burning well, she gathered large branches

that were a little wet, putting them beside the fire to dry. Coram had taught her all this when she was a child at Trebond, planning to be a warrior maiden when she grew up.

There was only one problem with her ambition, Coram had explained when she told him what she wanted to be. The last warrior maiden had died a hundred years ago. Nobly born girls went to convent schools and became ladies. Boys became warriors, particularly their fathers' heirs, like Alanna's twin brother Thom, who was often reading, generally books about sorcery. Thom was no warrior, just as Alanna - who had the Gift of magic as well as he did - was no sorceress. She hated and feared her magic; Thom wanted to be the greatest sorcerer living.

Alanna frowned and took food from her saddlebags. She didn't want to think about Thom now, when she was tired and a little lonely.

She sneezed twice and looked up, sharply scanning the clearing beyond the screen of willow branches. When supernatural things were about to happen her nose itched; she didn't know why. And now the feel of the clearing had changed. Quickly she shoved the cloak back, freeing her arms. Searching the darkness with wide violet eyes, Alanna loosened her sword, Lightning.

Moonlight whickered, backing against the willow. 'Something wrong girl?' Alanna asked. She sneezed again and rubbed her nose.

A sound came from the trees behind her. She spun, unsheathing Lightning in the same movement. The sound was repeated, and Alanna frowned. If she didn't know better, she would swear something had *mewed* out there! Then she laughed, sliding Lightning back into its sheath, as a black kitten trotted through the branches sheltering her from the rain. It mewed eagerly when it saw her, its ratlike tail waving like a banner. Staggering over to Alanna, the tiny animal ordered her to pick him up.

The squire obeyed the kitten's command. Cuddling it against her shoulder, she searched her saddlebags for her blanket.

'How did you get here, little cat?' she asked, gently toweling it dry. 'It's a bad night for anyone to be out of doors.'

The kitten purred noisily, as if it agreed. *The poor thing is skin and bones - not someone's pet*, Alanna reflected. Wondering what its eyes looked like, she lifted its chin with a careful finger, and gulped. The black kitten's large eyes were as purple as her own.

'Great Merciful Mother,' she breathed with reverence. Settling by the fire, she fed her guest as she thought. She had never heard of a *cat* with purple eyes. Was it supernatural? An immortal, perhaps? If so, she wasn't sure she wanted anything to do with it. She had troubles enough!

His stomach full, the small animal began to wash vigorously. Alanna laughed. Violet eyes didn't make a creature supernatural. Weren't she and Thom proof of that? This cat certainly behaved like a normal animal. Thinking of something, she lifted her new pet's tail and checked its sex. Satisfied he was a male, and ignoring his protests against the indignity, Alanna settled him on her lap. The kitten grumbled for a few moments, then settled himself. She leaned back against the willow's broad trunk, listening to the animal's very loud purr. *It'll be nice to have a pet to talk to*, she thought sleepily.

The sneezes hit her, five at once, blinding her momentarily. Swearing like a guardsman, Alanna wiped her watering eyes. When she could see, a tall hooded stranger was standing beside her fire!

Alanna jumped to her feet, her sword unsheathed and ready, spilling the yelling cat to the ground. She stared at the newcomer, fighting to calm herself. She had no right to

attack this – man? woman? – simply because she had been surprised.

‘May I be of service?’ she gasped. The kitten was tugging on her boot, demanding to be held once more. ‘Hush,’ she told it before looking at the stranger again.

‘I saw your fire through the trees.’ The newcomer’s voice was husky and soft, like the wind blowing through the treetops, and yet somehow Alanna was reminded of a pack of hounds belling in the hunt. ‘Would you permit me to warm myself?’

Alanna hesitated, then nodded. The stranger threw back the concealing hood, revealing a woman – the tallest woman Alanna had ever seen. Her skin was perfectly white, setting off slanting emerald eyes and full red lips. Her hair was unbound, falling loosely below her shoulders in black, snaky locks. Alanna gulped. The woman’s face was too perfect to be quite real, and she settled before the fire with boneless grace. She watched Alanna as she sat down clumsily again, her amazing green eyes unreadable.

‘It is odd to see a youngling alone in this place,’ she said at last. Her mouth curved in a tiny smile. ‘There are strange tales about this tree, and what passes beneath it.’

The kitten jumped back into Alanna’s lap and purred. Alanna stroked it nervously, never taking her eyes away from her visitor.

‘I was caught by the storm,’ she answered carefully. ‘This was the first shelter I found.’ *And now I’m sorry I found it,* she added to herself. *I don’t like surprises!*

The woman looked her over carefully, still smiling that hooded smile. ‘And so, my daughter, now you are a squire. Within four years you will be a knight. That doesn’t seem so far from now, does it?’

Alanna opened and closed her mouth several times with surprise before biting her lips together. The ‘squire’ part was easy; beneath her cloak she was wearing the royal uniform, as was required when squires went abroad

without their masters. But the woman had called her 'my daughter'; the stranger knew she was a girl, even though she was dressed as a boy with her breasts bound flat! And her own mother had died years ago, when Alanna was born. Suddenly she remembered that she had heard the woman's voice before. Where? At last she made the safest answer she could.

'I don't want to seem rude, but I'd rather not speak of the Ordeal,' she said flatly. 'I'd like not to *think* of it, if possible.'

'But you must think of it, my daughter,' the woman chided. Alanna frowned. She had almost remembered . . . 'When you undergo the Ordeal of Knighthood, many things will happen. You will become a knight, the first woman knight in more than a hundred of your years. You will have to reveal your true sex soon after that; your own nature will not let you remain silent for long. I know well how much you hate living a lie before your friends at the palace.'

Alanna stiffened. She had remembered that voice. Jonathan had been a boy, dying of the Sweating Sickness. The palace healers said there was no hope, but Alanna - only a page then - had gotten Sir Myles to convince them to let her use her healing Gift. The sorcery causing the fever was too much for the magic she knew, and in the end she had appealed to the Great Mother Goddess. She had heard a voice that hurt her ears - a woman's voice that sounded like a pack of hounds in full cry, like the huntress urging them on. And she had heard that voice again, only a year ago, when she and Jon were trapped in the Black City. They had called on the Goddess to help them, and she had told them what to do.

'That's impossible,' she whispered, her voice shaking. 'You - you can't be—'

'And why not?' the Mother asked. 'It is time we talked, you and I. Surely you know that you are one of my Chosen.'

Is it so strange that I have come to you for a time, my daughter?’

Life is difficult enough with the gods meddling in it, Myles had told her more than once. But they will meddle. All we humans can do is hope they tire of their meddling soon and leave us alone!

Alanna clenched her chin stubbornly. ‘I never asked to have conversations with the gods,’ she informed the immortal on the other side of the fire.

‘Indeed, you ask very little.’ The Mother nodded. ‘You prefer to do all you can by yourself. But events for you in the next few years will determine your life’s course, and you have no living mother to advise you.’ The kitten jumped from Alanna’s lap and ran to the Goddess, mewling angrily. The woman picked him up in a graceful hand, stroking his fur with scarlet-painted nails. ‘She will be all right, Small One. She only needs a moment or two to adjust to her fear.’

‘I am *not* afraid,’ Alanna snapped. Emerald eyes caught and held hers, until she swallowed and looked away. ‘All right – I’m afraid. But it won’t do me any good to give into it, will it? I mean, you’re going to talk to me, and I can’t prevent you, so I may as well accept it.’

The Goddess nodded. ‘You learned your lessons as a page well,’ she approved. ‘But you have three fears that you have *not* accepted.’ When Alanna said nothing, she went on. ‘You fear the Ordeal of Knighthood. You have feared it since you kept vigil during Prince Jonathan’s Ordeal during this last Midwinter Festival.’

Alanna looked into the fire. Seeing that it was burning low, she busied herself with putting more wood on the flames. In her mind she saw Jonathan stumble out of that iron-barred Ordeal Chamber, his face gray. He had looked at her without seeing her – Jonathan! Sometimes even now his eyes went dark and blank, and she knew he was remembering the Ordeal. Her voice shook as she said, ‘He looked like some part of him *died* in there. And then Gary

had his Ordeal the next night, then Alex, and then Raoul – and they *all* looked that way.’ She shook her head, not looking at the Goddess. ‘They’re none of them cowards. Whatever happened, if it was so bad for them—’ She drew a deep breath. ‘Jon wakes up at night, *screaming* sometimes. And it’s the Ordeal he dreams about, though he isn’t permitted to tell me more than that. If the Ordeal is that bad, I won’t pass it. I won’t, and then it will all go for nothing: three years as a page, four as a squire, the lying, everything. It’ll be for nothing.’ She stared into that unreadable face. ‘Won’t it?’

‘Prince Jonathan made you his personal squire, knowing you were a girl,’ the Goddess replied. ‘You have learned there is a world outside Trebond. You can ride; you can use a bow; you can fight with knife and sword and spear. You can read a map. You manage your fief through Coram while your brother studies. You can write and speak in two tongues not your own; you can heal one who is sick. I think you must answer your own question – is it worth what you have done?’

Alanna shrugged. ‘It is now. It won’t be if I fail. Sometimes I wake up in the dark sweating, and I’m going to scream, except I don’t. That would bring Jon into my room, and we agreed he shouldn’t, not after we go to bed for the night. And all I can remember of the dream is that they’re closing that iron door behind me, and I’m in the Chamber, and I can’t see a thing.’

‘A dream is only a dream,’ the Goddess murmured as Alanna looked skeptical. She added softly, ‘Would it be so terrible if Jonathan *did* come to offer you comfort?’

Alanna blushed. ‘Of course it would. He – well, there’s nothing like *that* between us. I don’t want there to be.’

‘Because you fear love,’ the Goddess told her. ‘You fear Jonathan’s love and the love of the Rogue, George Cooper. You even fear the love of Myles, who only wants to be your

father. Yet what is there for you to fear? Warmth? Trust? A man's touch?

'I don't *want* a man's touch!' Alanna shouted. Horrified, she put out her hands in a gesture of apology. 'I'm sorry. I meant no disrespect. I just want to be a warrior maiden and go on adventures. I don't want to fall in love, especially not with George or Jon. They'll ask me to give them parts of *me*. I want to keep me for myself. I don't want to give *me* away. Look at my father. He never really got over my mother's death. They told me when he died last month he was calling for her. He gave her a part of himself, and he just never got it back. That's not going to happen to me.' She drew a deep breath. 'What's my third fear? I may as well hear it now and get it over with.'

'Roger, Duke of Conté.' The Goddess's voice was low, soft, and deadly.

Alanna froze. Finally she said carefully (and very quietly), 'I have no reason to fear Duke Roger. None at all.' Then she put her head in her hands. 'I don't have any *reason* to fear him - but I do.' If she had doubted her visitor's identity, the fact that she was being so frank - almost against her will - convinced her. 'I *hate* him!' she yelled suddenly, lifting her face from her hands. It felt good to say it, after all this time. 'You know what I think? The Sweating Sickness. It drained every healer who tried to cure it. It struck only in the capital, nowhere else, and Jon was the last one to get it. They *knew* it had to be sorcerer's work. They sent for Duke Roger to help, but *none* of them - the king, Myles, Duke Gareth, Duke Baird - none of them thought Duke Roger might have created it! Thom says Roger is powerful enough to've sent it from as far as Carthak, where he was, and Thom ought to know.' Alanna stood and strode around inside the shelter of the willow, her hands linked tightly in her belt. 'When Roger tested me for magic, my head felt all funny, as if someone had been digging through my brain

with a stick. Thom wrote me he was being watched up in the City of the Gods. And last summer—'

'Last summer?' the Goddess prompted.

'I don't think Jonathan would have gone *near* the Black City if Roger hadn't gathered us all to warn us about how dangerous it was. Jonathan's very responsible about being the Heir; he wouldn't risk his life foolishly. But Roger was wearing a great blue jewel around his neck. He twisted it while he talked to us, and the light bouncing off it made me sleepy, till I stopped looking at it. It seemed to me that Roger was talking only to Jonathan, *daring* Jon to go to a place where Roger knew he could get killed!'

She sighed and settled back against the tree, feeling better than she had in a long time. 'I can't say anything to Jon. I tried to, once, but he got angry with me. He *loves* Roger. So does the king. Roger's handsome, young, clever, a great sorcerer. *Everyone* thinks he's wonderful. No one stops to think that if something happened to Jonathan, Roger would be the heir. No one but me, that is.'

'What will you do about this third fear?' the Goddess wanted to know. She shooed the kitten off her lap.

'Watch,' Alanna said wearily. 'Wait. Mostly watch him as carefully as I can. George - the thief - he'll help. Thom's helping, as much as he can.' She had rarely felt this tired in her life. 'And if Roger is what I suspect, I won't stop until I've destroyed him.'

The Goddess nodded. 'Then you are dealing with this fear, my daughter. Time will end your fear of the Chamber of the Ordeal, and your fear of love. Well, who knows what may happen to change your mind?'

'Nothing will change my mind,' Alanna said firmly.

'Perhaps.' The Goddess reached into the bed of the fire and drew out a single red-hot coal. 'My time with you comes to an end. Take this from my hand.'

Alanna swallowed hard. This was asking a bit much, even for a goddess. She looked up and met the Mother's eyes

with her own. Slowly, trembling, she reached out and took the coal.

It was cold! Startled, she nearly dropped it. Looking at it, she saw that the ember seemed to burn within a crystal shell. There was even a tiny loop in the crystal, just big enough to permit a chain to pass through. The ember flickered in its shell, its hot red glare fading to a soft glow.

The Goddess rose. 'The Chamber is only a room, though a magical one, and you will enter it when the time comes. Duke Roger is only a man, for all he wields sorcery. He can be met and defeated. But you, my daughter - learn to love. You have been given a hard road to walk. Love will ease it. Much depends on you, Alanna of Trebond. Do not fail me!'

Remembering her manners, Alanna jumped to her feet. 'I won't fail you,' she promised, her hand closing tight around the ember. 'Or at least, I'll try not to.'

'A goddess can ask no more.' The Mother looked down at the little black animal sitting now by Alanna's feet. 'Guard her well, Small One.'

The kitten mewed in reply as Alanna glanced at him. Was there more to her new pet than she had thought?

The Goddess held out her hand. 'Wear my token, and be brave, But remember - I did not jest when I said there are strange tales about this tree. Do not stray beyond your fire!' She smiled. 'Fare well, my daughter.'

Alanna kissed the immortal's hand, feeling weird energy jolt through her body. She stepped away, shaking her head to clear it. 'Fare well, my Mother.'

The Goddess walked over to Moonlight, caressing the mare for a moment and talking to her in a soft voice. Then she raised her hand to Alanna a last time, and she was gone.

Suddenly Alanna could barely keep her eyes open. It was a struggle to lay out her bedroll and to bank the fire, but she forced herself to perform the chores. Thinking about the strange conversation she had just had would have to

wait. When she tumbled into her bedroll at last, the kitten was already inside.

‘Don’t snore,’ she ordered it sleepily. The kitten replied that he would not snore if she did not. Alanna nodded in agreement and went to sleep, tightly clutching the crystal ember.

It was a relief to get back to the palace the next day, back to familiar places and familiar friends. She still missed burly Coram, managing Trebond for her and Thom until she won her knight’s shield, but there was no help for that. With Lord Alan dead and Thom not caring about anything but his studies, this arrangement was for the best, at least until Alanna was ready to begin adventuring. Then she would want Coram with her.

On her first night back she was feeding her new kitten his evening meal when she heard voices in Jonathan’s room just before he knocked on her door.

‘It’s your overlord, Squire,’ Jonathan called. It was their private phrase that meant *There are people with me*. ‘Let me in!’

Alanna opened the connecting door, and Jonathan entered with their friends Gary and Raoul.

‘We came to see if you wanted to go down to the Dancing Dove with us and visit George,’ Gary told her. ‘How about it?’

Alanna’s face lit up. She hadn’t had a long visit with the King of the Thieves since just before her father died, nearly six weeks ago. She was pulling on her boots when Raoul exclaimed, ‘Great Mithros, a cat! What are you doing with one of *those*? It probably has fleas.’

Jonathan stopped to let the kitten sniff his fingers. ‘Can’t you tell a sorcerer’s familiar when you see one?’ he joked. ‘And do familiars *have* fleas?’ Picking the tiny animal up, he saw its face. His own sapphire-blue eyes widened. ‘Goddess!’