

First Test

Tamora Pierce

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Protector
of the
Small



First Test

TAMORA PIERCE


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*To Mallory,
who totally made it happen*

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Lastly and most profoundly, this is for Kelly Riggio. I'm sorry you had to wait so long for it, and hope it is worth the wait.

Entering her room, Kel shut the door. When she turned, a gasp escaped before she locked her lips.



She surveyed the damage. The narrow bed was overturned. Mattress, sheets, and blankets were strewn everywhere. The drapes lay on the floor and the shutters hung open. Two chairs, a bookcase, a pair of night tables, and an oak clothespress were also upended. The desk must have been too heavy for such treatment, but its drawers had been dumped onto the floor. Her packs were opened and their contents tumbled out. Someone had used her practice glaive to slash and pull down the wall hangings. On the plaster wall she saw written: No Girls! Go Home! You Won't Last!

TORTALL BOOKS BY TAMORA PIERCE



The Song of the Lioness Quartet
Alanna: The First Adventure
In the Hand of the Goddess
The Woman Who Rides Like a Man
Lioness Rampant



THE IMMORTALS QUARTET
Wild Magic
Wolf-Speaker
Emperor Mage
The Realms of the Gods



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one



DECISIONS

Alanna the Lioness, the King's Champion, could hardly contain her glee. Baron Piers of Mindelan had written to King Jonathan to say that his daughter wished to be a page. Alanna fought to sit still as she watched Wyldon of Cavall, the royal training master, read the baron's letter. Seated across his desk from them, the king watched the training master as sharply as his Champion did. Lord Wyldon was known for his dislike of female warriors.

It had been ten long years since the proclamation that girls might attempt a page's training. Alanna had nearly given up hope that such a girl—or the kind of family that would allow her to do so—existed in Tortall, but at last she had come forward. Keladry of Mindelan would not have to hide her sex for eight years as Alanna had done. Keladry would prove to the world that girls could be knights. And she would not be friendless. Alanna had plans to help Keladry through the first few years. It never occurred to the Champion that anyone might object.

Alanna half turned to see Wyldon better. Surely he'd read the letter at least twice! From this side the puffy scars from his battle to save the younger princes and princess were starkly visible; Wyldon's right arm was in a sling yet from that fight. Alanna rubbed fingers that itched with the urge to apply healing magic. Wyldon had the idea that suffering pain made a warrior stronger. He would not thank her if she tried to heal him now.

Goddess bless, she thought tiredly. How will I ever get on with him if I'm to help this girl Keladry?

Wyldon was not flexible: he'd proved that to the entire court over and over. If he were any stiffer Alanna thought wryly, I'd paint a design on him and use him for a shield. He's got no sense of humor and he rejects change just because it's change.

Still, she had to admit that his teaching worked. During the Immortals War of the spring and early summer, when legendary creatures had joined with the realm's human enemies to take the kingdom, the squires and pages had been forced into battle. They had done well, thanks to their training by Wyldon and the teachers he had picked.

At last Lord Wyldon returned the letter to King Jonathan, who placed it on his desk. "The baron and the baroness of Mindelan are faithful servants of the crown," the king remarked. "We would not have

this treaty with the Yamani Islands were it not for them. You will have read that their daughters received some warrior training at the Yamani court, so it would appear that Keladry has an aptitude."

Lord Wyldon resettled his arm in its sling. "I did not agree to this, Your Majesty."

Alanna was about to say that he didn't have to agree when she saw the king give the tiniest shake of the head. Clenching her jaws, she kept her remark to herself as King Jonathan raised his eyebrows.

"Your predecessor agreed," he reminded Wyldon. "And you, my lord, implied agreement when you accepted the post of training master."

"That is a lawyer's reply, sire," Wyldon replied stiffly, a slight flush rising in his clean-shaven cheeks.

"Then here is a king's: we desire this girl to train as a page."

And that is that, Alanna thought, satisfied. She might be the kind of knight who would argue with her king, at least in private, but Wyldon would never let himself do so.

The training master absently rubbed the arm in its linen sling. At last he bowed in his chair. "May we compromise, sire?"

Alanna stiffened. She hated that word! "Com—" she began to say.

The king silenced her with a look. "What do you want, my lord?"

"In all honesty," said the training master, thinking aloud, "I had thought that our noble parents love their daughters too much to place them in so hard a life."

"Not everyone is afraid to do anything new," Alanna replied sharply.

"Lioness," said the king, his voice dangerously quiet. Alanna clenched her fists. What was going on? Was Jonathan inclined to give way to the man who'd saved his children?

Wyldon's eyes met hers squarely. "Your bias is known, Lady Alanna." To the king he said, "Surely the girl's parents cannot be aware of the difficulties she will encounter."

"Baron Piers and Lady Ilane are not fools," replied King Jonathan. "They have given us three good worthy knights already."

Lord Wyldon gave a reluctant nod. Anders, Inness, and Conal of Mindelan were credits to the training. The realm would feel the loss of Anders—whose war wounds could never heal entirely—from the active duty rolls. It would take years to replace those who were killed or maimed in the Immortals War.

"Sire, please, think this through," Wyldon said. "We need the realm's sons. Girls are fragile, more emotional, easier to frighten. They are not as strong in their arms and shoulders as men. They tire easily. This girl would get any warriors who serve with her killed on some dark night."

~~Alanna started to get up. This time King Jonathan walked out from behind his desk. Standing beside his Champion, he gripped one of her shoulders, keeping her in her chair.~~

"But I will be fair," Wyldon continued. His brown eyes were hard. "Let her be on probation for a year. By the end of the summer field camp, if she has not convinced me of her ability to keep up, she must go home."

"Who judges her fitness?" inquired the king.

Wyldon's lips tightened. "Who but the training master, sire? I have the most experience in evaluating the young for their roles as future knights."

Alanna turned to stare at the king. "No boy has ever undergone a probationary period!" she cried.

Wyldon raised his good shoulder in a shrug. "Perhaps they should. For now, I will not tender my resignation over this, provided I judge whether this girl stays or goes in one year's time."

The king weighed the request. Alanna fidgeted. She knew Lord Wyldon meant his threat, and the crown needed him. Too many great nobles, dismayed by the changes in Tortall since Jonathan's coronation, felt that Wyldon was their voice at court. If he resigned, the king and queen would find it hard to get support for their future changes.

At last King Jonathan said, "Though we do not always agree, my lord, you know I respect you because you are fair and honorable. I would hate to see that fairness, that honor, tainted in any way. Keladry of Mindelan shall have a year's probation."

Lord Wyldon nodded, then inspected the nails on his good hand. "There is one other matter," he remarked slowly. He looked at Alanna. "Do you plan to involve yourself in the girl's training? It will not do."

Alanna bristled. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You wish to help the girl, understandably." Wyldon spoke as though the mild words made his teeth hurt. "But you rarely deal with the lads, my lady. If you help the girl, it will be said that you eased her path in some special way. There are rumors that your successes are due to your magical Gift."

"By the Goddess," snapped Alanna, crimson with fury. If the king had not forbidden her to challenge men on personal grounds years before, she would have taken Wyldon out to the dueling court and made him regret his words.

"Alanna, for heaven's sake, you know the gossip," King Jonathan said. "Stop acting as if you have never heard it before." He looked at Wyldon. "And you suggest..."

"Lady Alanna must keep from all contact with the girl," Wyldon replied firmly. "Even a moment's conversation will give rise to suspicion."

"All contact?" cried Alanna. "But she'll be the only girl among over twenty boys! She'll have questions—I could help—" She realized what she had said and fell silent.

King Jonathan gently patted her shoulder. "Is there no other way?" he asked.

Wyldon shook his head. "I fear not, sire. The Mindelan girl will be the cause of trouble as it is without the Lioness hovering over her."

The king thought it over. At last he sighed. "Lord Wyldon has the right of it. You must stay away from Keladry of Mindelan, Alanna."

"But Jonathan—sire—" she pleaded, not believing he would do this.

"That is an order, lady knight. If you cannot accept that, say as much now, and I will find you work elsewhere."

She stared at him for a long moment, lips tight. At last she got to her feet. "Don't tax yourself. I'll find knight's work myself," she told him. "As far from Corus as possible." She stalked out of the room, slamming the door in her wake.

The men stared at the door. Each of them was trying to remember if Alanna the Lioness had ever spoken to Jonathan in that tone before.

Baron Piers and Lady Ilane of Mindelan watched Keladry read the reply from the training master. Tortallan who did not know them well might have thought the man and woman felt nothing, and that their ten-year-old daughter was only concerned, not upset. That was far from true. The family had spent the last six years living in the Yamanis Islands, where displays of deep emotion were regarded as shameful. To get the Yamanis to respect them, they had all learned to hide their feelings. Home in Mindelan again, they still acted as Yamanis, hiding uneasiness and even distress behind still faces.

Kel struggled to reread the letter, afraid to say a word. If she did, her shaking voice would give her away. Instead she waited as she tried to control the anger and sense of betrayal that filled her.

"It is not the reply we expected," Baron Piers said at last. He was a short, stocky man. Keladry had his build, delicate nose, and dreamy, long-lashed hazel eyes. Her brown hair was several shades lighter than his. When Kel did not reply he continued, "His declaration of ten years ago was that girls could become pages. Nothing was said of probation then."

"Keladry?" asked her mother. "You can say what you feel. We are no longer among the Yamanis. She was a thin, elegant woman, taller than her husband by nearly a head, with hair that had gone white very early in life and a deep, musical voice. All Keladry had from her was height. At the age of ten the girl was already five feet tall and still growing.

It took Kel a moment to register what her mother had said. She tried a smile. "But, Mama, I don't want to get into bad habits, in case I go back with you." She looked at Lord Wyldon's letter again. She had expected to be a page when her parents returned to the Yamanis Islands in eighteen months. From

the tone of this letter, perhaps she ought not to count on that.

"It isn't right," she said quietly, even fiercely. "No boys have probation. I'm supposed to be treated the same."

"Don't give your answer yet," Baron Piers said quickly. "Take the letter with you. Think about what it says. You're not hasty, Kel—this is a bad time to start."

"Reflect as if you have all of time, even when time is short," added her mother in Yamani. "Be a stone."

Kel bowed Yamani-style, palms flat on her thighs. Then she went to find someplace quiet to think.

First she went to her room beside the nursery. That wasn't a good choice. Two of her brother's young families lived at Mindelan. With the children and their nursemaids next door, there was enough noise to drown out trumpets. No one had seen her creep into the room, but her oldest nephew saw her leaving it. Nothing would do for him but that she give him a piggyback ride around the large room. After that, all of the older children wanted rides of their own. Once that was done, the nursemaid helped Kel to escape.

She tried to hole up by the fountain in the castle garden, but her sisters-in-law were there, sewing and gossiping with their maids. The kitchen garden was her next choice, but two servants were there gathering vegetables. She stared longingly at her favorite childhood spot, the highest tower in the castle, and felt a surge of anger. Before they had gone to the islands her brother Conal had teasingly held her over the edge of the tower balcony. Until that time she had visited the top of that tower at least once a day. Now the thought of it made her shudder.

There were hundreds of places she might use around the castle, but they were all indoors. She needed to be outside. She was trying to think of a place when she remembered the broad, shallow Domin River, which ran through the woods. No one would be there. She could sit by the water and think in peace.

"Miss?" called a voice as she strode through the inner gate in the castle wall. "Where might you be going?"

Kel turned to face the man-at-arms who had called to her. "I don't know."

The man held out a small horn. "If you're not going to the village, you need one of these." He spoke carefully. The baron and his family had been home only for three months, and the people were still not sure what to make of these strange, Yamani-like nobles. "They told you the rule, surely. Any time you go outside the castle or village, you take a horn. You never know when one of them monsters, centaurs or giants or whatever, will show its face."

Kel frowned. The legendary creatures that had returned to their world five years before had a unnerving way of showing up when they were least expected. For every one that was harmless and willing to get on with humans, there were fistfuls that weren't. Bands of men-at-arms now roamed throughout the fiefdom, searching for hostile visitors and listening for the horn call, which mea

someone was in trouble.

I'm not going very far, she wanted to argue, but the Yamanis had taught her to obey a soldier's commands. She accepted the horn with a quiet thank-you and slung it over one shoulder. Checking that Lord Wyldon's letter was tucked securely in the front of her shirt, she left the road that led from the castle gate and headed through their orchards. Once past the cultivated trees she entered the woods, following a trail down to the water.

By the time she could see a glint of silver through the trees she had worked up a mild sweat. The day was warm and the walk was longer than she had thought it would be. When a rock worked its way into her shoe, she sat on a log to get it out.

"It's not right," she muttered to herself, undoing the laces that held the leather around her ankle. "You're a page for four years. That's how it's been done for centuries. Now they're going to change it?" When she up-ended the shoe and shook it, nothing fell out. She stuffed a hand inside, feeling around for the stone. "And just because I'm a girl? They ought to treat me the same. All I want is the same chance as the boys. No more, no less. That's right, isn't it?" She winced as a sharp edge nipped one of her fingers. Working more carefully, she wiggled the bit of rock out of a fold in the leather. "Probation is not fair, and knighthood training has to be fair."

The stone was out; her mind was made up. If they couldn't treat her the same as they would the boys, then she wasn't going to settle for a half portion. She would have to become a warrior some other way.

Kel sighed and put her shoe back on. The problem was that now she would have to wait. The Queen's Riders took volunteers when they were fifteen or older. The queen's ladies, those who were expected to ride, handle a bow, and deal with trouble at Queen Thayet's side, went to her in the fifteenth year as well. And who was to say Kel wouldn't be living in the Yamani Islands by then?

One thing she knew: convent school, the normal destination for noble girls her age, was not her choice. Kel had no interest whatever in ladylike arts, and even less interest in the skills needed to attract a husband or manage a castle. Even if she did, who would have her? Once she'd overheard her sisters-in-law comment that no man would be interested in a girl who was built along the lines of a cow.

She'd made the mistake of repeating that comment to her mother, when Kel's plan to be a page had first come up. Her mother had gone white with fury and had put her daughters-in-law to mending several years' worth of old linens. It had taken a great deal of persuasion for Kel to convince her mother that her quest for knighthood did not mean she wanted to settle for second best, knowing she would never marry. Getting Ilane of Mindelan to agree to her being a page had been a negotiation every bit as complicated as what her father had done to get the Yamanis to sign the treaty.

And see the good that did me, Kel thought with disgust. Lord Wyldon offers me second best anyway, and I won't take it. I could have saved my breath talking Mama around.

She was ready to get to her feet when the sound of bodies crashing through the brush made her look

up. Gruff voices reached her ear.

"Hurry up!" a boy growled from near the river. "Do you want us t'get caught?"

"The Cow's at home," replied a second boy's voice. "She stays there all morning."

Kel stood, listening. If they were on the look-out for her, then they were up to something bad. Just three months she had taught the local boys she was someone to respect. Kel grabbed a sturdy fallen branch and ran toward the voices. Racing into open ground between the trees and river, she saw three village boys. They were about to throw a wriggling cloth sack into the Domin.

Her mouth settled into a tight, angry line; her hazel eyes glittered. "Put that down!" she cried.

The boys whirled, startled, dropping their burden on a half-submerged tree limb. One of the boys punched the smallest in the shoulder. "Home all morning, eh?"

Kel shouted, "I know all of you! And you know the law in Mindelan—no killing of animals without the baron's leave!"

The biggest, taller than she by half a head, advanced. The other two were right behind him. "Who do you think you are to make us stop, Cow?"

The Yamanis had taught her well. She waded into the boys, using her club as an equalizer. She whacked them in the belly so they couldn't breathe, and on the collarbones and biceps so they couldn't raise their arms. One youth punched her face; he caught her on the outside of one eye. She changed her grip on her branch and swept his feet from under him, then stood on one of his arms.

Another lad grabbed a branch and swung at her; she blocked it with hers, then rammed the length of wood into his stomach. He doubled over, gasping. Kel shoved him into the third boy. Down they went in a tumble. When they untangled themselves, they ran. Their comrade also chose to make his escape.

Kel looked around for the sack. The current had tugged the tree limb on which it rested out into the deeper, faster water at the center of the river. She didn't hesitate, but waded into the water. Kel was a good swimmer and the river here was fairly shallow. She doubted that whatever small creatures were struggling in the sack could swim.

Movement on the far bank made her look up. What she saw made her halt, cold water rushing around her thighs. Something black and strange-looking walked out from under the shelter of the trees. It looked like a giant furred spider nearly five feet tall, with one difference. The thing had a human head. It stared at Kel, then grinned broadly to reveal sharp teeth.

Her flesh crawled; hairs stood up on her arms and the back of her neck. Spidren, she thought, recognizing it from descriptions. Spidrens in our woods.

Like most of the legendary creatures that now prowled the human realms, they were virtually immortal, immune to disease and old age. They died only when something or someone took pains to kill them. They fed on animals and human blood. No one could get spidrens to make peace with

human beings.

The thing reared up on its back legs, revealing a light-colored shaft at the base of its belly. From the spidren squirted a high-flying gray stream that soared into the air over the river. Kel threw herself to one side, away from the gray stream and the sack she was trying to catch. The stuff was like rope. She realized it was a web when it fell in a long line across the surface of the water. It had missed her by only a foot. The spidren bent and snipped the rope off from its belly spinneret with a clawed leg. Swiftly it began to wind the length of web around another clawed foot. As it dragged through the water, the sticky thing caught on the cloth sack. The spidren reeled in its catch as a fisherman might pull in a line.

Kel brought the horn up to her mouth. She blew five hard blasts and might have continued to blow until help came, as the spidren gathered up the sack. It discarded its web with one clawed foot, held the sack with a second, and reached into it with a third. The beast grinned, its eyes never leaving Kel as it pulled out a wet and squirming kitten.

The horn fell from the girl's lips as the spidren looked the kitten over. It smacked its lips, then bit the small creature in half and began to chew.

Kel screamed and groped on the river bottom with both hands for ammunition. Coming up with a stone in each fist, she hurled the first. It soared past the spidren, missing by inches. Her next stone caught it square in the head. It shrieked and began to climb the bluff that overlooked the river to its left, still holding the sack.

In the distance Kel heard the sound of horns. Help was on its way—for her, but not for those kittens. She scabbled for more stones and plunged across the river, battling the water to get to the same shore as the monster. It continued to climb the rocky face of the bluff until it reached the summit just as Kel scrambled onto the land.

Once she was on solid ground, she began to climb the bluff, her soaked feet digging for purchase in soft dirt and rock. Above, the spidren leaned over the edge of the bluff to leer at her. It reached into the sack, dragged out a second kitten, and began to eat it.

Kel still had a rock in her right hand. She hurled it as hard as she had ever thrown a ball to knock down a target. It smashed the spidren's nose. The thing shrieked and hissed, dropping the rest of its meal.

Kel's foot slipped. She looked down to find a better place to set it and froze. She was only seven feet above the water, but the distance seemed more like seventy to her. A roar filled her ears and her head spun. Cold sweat trickled through her clothes. She clung to the face of the bluff with both arms and legs, sick with fear.

Leaving its sack on the ground, the spidren threw a loop of web around a nearby tree stump. When it was set, the creature began to lower itself over the side of the bluff. Its hate-filled eyes were locked on the girl, whose terror had frozen her in place.

Kel was deaf and blind to the spidren's approach. Later she could not recall hearing the monster

scream as arrows thudded into its flesh, just as she could not remember the arrival of her brother Anders and his men-at-arms.

With the spidren's death, its web rope snapped. The thing hurtled past Kel to splash into the river.

A man-at-arms climbed up to get her, gently prying her clutching fingers from their holds. Once when Kel was safely on the shore, seated on a flat rock, was she able to tell them why she had tried to kill a spidren with only stones for weapons. Someone climbed the bluff to retrieve the sack of kittens while Kel stared, shivering, at the spidren's body.

Her brother Anders dismounted stiffly and limped over to her. Reaching into his belt-pouch, he pulled out a handful of fresh mint leaves, crushed them in one gloved hand, and held them under Kel's nose. She breathed their fresh scent gratefully.

"You're supposed to have real weapons when you go after something that's twice as big as you are," he told her mildly. "Didn't the Yamanis teach you that?" During the years most of their family had been in the Islands, Anders, Inness, and Conal, the three oldest sons of the manor, had served the crown as pages, squires, then knights. All they knew of Kel's experiences there came in their family letters.

"I had to do something," Kel explained.

"Calling for help and staying put would have been wiser," he pointed out. "Leave the fighting to real warriors. Here we are." A man-at-arms put the recovered sack into his hands. Anders in turn put the bag in Kel's lap.

Nervously she pulled the bag open. Five wet kittens, their eyes barely opened, turned their faces up to her and protested their morning's adventure. "I'll take you to our housekeeper," Kel promised them. "She knows what to do with kittens."

Once the animals were seen to and she had changed into a clean gown and slippers, Kel went to her father's study. With her came a small group of animals: two elderly dogs, three cats, two puppies, a kitten, and a three-legged pine marten. Kel gently moved them out of the way and closed the door before they could sneak into the room. Anders was there, leaning on a walking stick as he talked to their parents. All three adults fell silent and looked at Kel.

"I'll do it," she said quietly. "I want the training, and the right weapons. Anders was right. It was stupid to go after a spidren with stones."

"And if they send you home at the end of a year?" asked Ilane of Mindelan.

Kel took a deep breath. "Then I'll still know more than I do now," she said firmly.

Piers looked at his wife, who nodded. "Then we'd best pack," said Ilane, getting to her feet. "You leave the day after tomorrow." Passing Kel on her way to the door, her mother lightly touched the eye the village boy had hit. It was red, blue, and puffy—not the worst black eye Kel had ever gotten.

"Let's also get a piece of raw meat to put on this," suggested the woman.

The next evening, Kel made her way to the stables to visit her pony, Chipper, to explain to him that the palace would supply her with a knight's mount. The pony lipped her shirt in an understanding way. He at least would be in good hands: Anders's oldest son was ready to start riding, and he loved the pony.

"I thought I might find you here," a voice said as Kel fed Chip an apple. She squeaked in surprise. For a man with a limp and a cane, Anders moved very quietly. "You know we'll take care of him."

Kel nodded and picked up a brush to groom the pony's round sides. "I know. I'll miss him all the same."

Anders leaned against a post. "Kel..."

She looked at him. Since the incident on the river the day before, she'd caught Anders watching her. She barely remembered him before their departure to the Islands, six years ago—he had already become a knight, handsome and distant in his armor, always riding somewhere. In the months since the return to Mindelan, she had come to like him. "Something the matter?" she asked.

Anders sighed. "Do you realize it's going to be hard? Maybe impossible? They'll make it tough. There's hazing, for one thing. I don't know when the custom started, but it's called 'earning your way.' It's just for the first-year pages. The senior ones make you run stupid little errands, like fetching gloves and picking up things that get knocked over. You have to do it. Otherwise it's the same as saying you don't have to do what the older pages did, as if you think you're better than they are. And older pages play tricks on the young ones, and some of them will pick fights. Stand up for yourself, they'll make your life a misery."

"In the rules they sent, fighting isn't allowed."

"Of course it's forbidden. If you're caught, they punish you. That's expected. What you must never do is tattle on another page, or say who you fought with. That's expected, too. Tell them you fell down—that's what I always said. Otherwise no one will trust you. A boy told when I was a page. He finally left because no one would speak to him."

"But they'll punish me for fighting?"

"With chores, extra lessons, things like that. You take every punishment, whatever it's for, and keep quiet."

"Like the Yamanis," she said, brushing loose hairs from Chipper's coat. "You don't talk—you obey."

Anders nodded. "Just do what you're told. Don't complain. If you can't do it, say that you failed, not that you can't. No one can finish every task that's given. What your teachers don't want are excuses, or blaming someone else, or saying it's unfair. They know it's unfair. Do what you can, and"

take your punishment in silence."

Kel nodded. "I can do that, I think."

Anders chuckled. "That's the strange thing— I believe you can. But, Kel—"

Kel went to Chip's far side, looking at Anders over the pony's back. "What?"

The young man absently rubbed his stiff leg. "Kel, all these things you learned in the Islands..."

"Yes?" she prodded when he fell silent again.

"You might want to keep them to yourself. Otherwise, the pages might think you believe you're better than they are. You don't want to be different, all right? At least, not any more different than you already are."

"Won't they want to learn new things?" she wanted to know. "I would."

"Not everyone's like you, Kel. Do what they teach you, no more. You'll save yourself heartache that way."

Kel smiled. "I'll try," she told him.

Anders straightened with a wince. "Don't be out here too long," he reminded her. "You're up before dawn."

Unlike normal dreams, in which time and places and people did strange things, this dream was completely true to Kel's memory. It began as she knelt before an altar and stared at the swords placed on it. The weapons were sheathed in pure gold rubbed as smooth and bright as glass. She was five years old again.

"They are the swords given to the children of the fire goddess, Yama," a lady-in-waiting beside Kel said, awe in her soft voice. "The short sword is the sword of law. Without it, we are only animals. The long sword is the sword of duty. It is the terrible sword, the killing sword." Her words struck a chord in Kel that left the little girl breathless. She liked the idea that duty was a killing sword. "Without duty," the lady continued, "duty to our lords, to our families, and to the law, we are less than animals."

Kel smelled burning wood. She looked around, curious. The large oil lamps that hung from the temple ceiling by thick cords smelled of perfume, not wood. Kel sniffed the air. She knew that fires were terrible on the Yamani Islands, where indoor walls were often paper screens and straw mats covered floors of polished wood.

The lady-in-waiting got to her feet.

The temple doors crashed open. There was Kel's mother, Ilane, her outer kimono flapping open, her thick pale hair falling out of its pins. In her hands she carried a staff capped with a broad, curved

blade. Her blue-green eyes were huge in her bone-white face.

"Please excuse me," she told the lady-in-waiting, as calm and polite as any Yamani in danger, "but we must get out of here and find help. Pirates have attacked the cove and are within the palace."

There was a thunder of shod feet on polished wood floors. Swords and axes crashed through the paper screens that formed the wall behind the altar. Scanrans—men already covered in blood and grime—burst into the room, fighting their way clear of the screens and their wooden frames.

An arm wrapped tight around Kel's ribs, yanking her from her feet. The lady-in-waiting had scooped her up in one arm and the swords in the other. Faster than the raiders she ran to Ilane and Mindelan.

The lady tumbled to the ground. Kel slid out the door on her belly. Turning, too startled to cry, she saw the lady at her mother's feet. There was an arrow in the Yamani woman's back.

Ilane bent over the dead woman and took the swords. Hoisting them in one hand, she swung her weapon to her right and to her left. It sheared through the heavy cords that suspended five large oil lamps. They fell and shattered, spilling a flood of burning oil. It raced across the temple in the path of the raiders who were running toward them. When their feet began to burn, they halted, trying to put the fire out.

"Come on!" Kel's mother urged. "Hike up those skirts and run!"

Kel yanked her kimono up and fled with Ilane. They skidded and slipped over the polished floors of their Yamani sock-shoes, then turned down one corridor and another. Far down one passage they saw a new group of Scanrans. Kel and her mother ran around a corner. They tried another turning—it led to a dead end. They were trapped. The walls that now blocked them in on three sides were sturdy wood too. They could have cut their way through paper ones.

Ilane turned. Scanrans armed with swords or axes blocked the way out.

Ilane thrust the gold swords into Kel's arms and pushed her into a corner, then stood before her. "Get down and be quiet!" she said, gripping her weapon in both hands. "I think I can hold them off with this."

Kel put the swords behind her and huddled. The men came at her mother, laughing and joking. A Scanran. She peeked around the edge of her mother's kimono. At that moment Ilane swung the blade of her staff—glaive, Kel remembered as it swung, they called it a glaive—in a wide side cut, slicing one pirate across the chest. Whipping it back to her left, she caught another of them in the throat. Blood struck Kel's face; even dreaming, she could smell it. Breathless, the sheathed swords poking into her back, she watched her mother lunge and retreat, using her skill and her longer weapon to hold the enemy off. Ilane killed a third and a fourth attacker before a squad of guardsmen raced around the corner to finish the rest.

When the pirates were dead, Kel's mother turned and reached a hand down to her. "Let's go find your father," she said quietly.

Kel grasped the hand, and let her mother pull her to her feet. Then Kel gathered up the golden swords that had been trusted to them.

When they faced their rescuers, the guards knelt as one. They bowed low to the woman and the girl, touching their heads to the bloody floor.

Kel woke, breathing fast, her eyes shining. Her heart raced; she trembled all over. The dream was not scary; it was exciting. She loved it. She loved that it had all been real.

I want to be like that, she told herself as she always did. I want to protect people. And I will. I will. I'll be a hero one day, just like Mama. Just like the Lioness.

Nobody will kill two kittens in front of me then.



two



NOT SO WELCOME

Wyldon of Cavall nodded to Baron Piers, but his eyes were on Kel. He looked her over from top to toe, taking in every wrinkle and spot in her tunic and breeches and the fading bruise around her eye.

Kel met his gaze squarely. The training master was handsome, for all that he was completely bald on top. He wore what was left of his light brown hair cropped very short. A scar—so red and puffy, it had to be recent—ran from the corner of his eye across his right temple to dig a track through his hair to his ear. His right arm rested in a sling. His eyes were brown, his mouth wide; his chin was square with a hint of a cleft in it. His big hands were marked with scars. He dressed simply, in a pale blue tunic, a white shirt, and dark blue hose. She couldn't see his feet behind the big desk, but she suspected that his shoes were as sensible as the rest of him.

Even the Yamanis would say he's got too much stone in him, she thought, looking at the scuffed toes of her boots. He needs water to balance his nature. Peering through her lashes at the training master, she added, Lots of water. A century or two of it, maybe.

Wyldon drummed his fingers on his desktop. At last he smiled tightly. "Be seated, please, both of you."

Kel and her father obeyed.

Wyldon took his own seat. "Well. Keladry, is it?" She nodded. "You understand that you are here on sufferance. You have a year in which to prove that you can keep up with the boys. If you do not satisfy me on that count, you will go home."

He's never said that to any boy, Kel thought, glad that her face would not show her resentment. He shouldn't be saying it to me. She kept her voice polite as she answered, "Yes, my lord."

"You will get no special privileges or treatment, despite your sex." Wyldon's eyes were stony. "I will not tolerate flirtations. If there is a boy in your room, the door must be open. The same is true if you are in a boy's room. Should you disobey, you will be sent home immediately."

Kel met his eyes. "Yes, sir." She was talkative enough with her family, but not with outsiders. The chill that rose from Wyldon made her even quieter.

Piers shifted in his seat. "My daughter is only ten, Lord Wyldon. She's a bit young for that kind of thing."

"My experience with females is that they begin early," the training master said flatly. He ran his blunt-tipped finger down a piece of paper.

"It says here that you claim no magical Gift," stated Lord Wyldon. "Is that so?"

Kel nodded.

Lord Wyldon put down the paper and leaned forward, clasping his hands on his neatly ordered desk. "In your father's day, the royal household always dined in the banquet hall. Now our royal family dines privately for the most part. On great holidays and on special occasions, feasts are held with the sovereigns, nobles, and guests in attendance. The pages are required to serve at such banquets. Also, you are required to run errands for any lord or lady who asks.

"Has she a servant with her?" he asked Kel's father.

"No," Piers replied.

"Very well. Palace staff will tend her rooms. Have you any questions?" Wyldon asked Kel.

Yes, she wanted to say. Why won't you treat me like you treat the boys? Why can't you be fair?

She kept it to herself. Growing up in a diplomat's house, she had learned how to read people. A good look at Wyldon's square, stubborn face with its hard jaw had told Kel that words would mean nothing to this man. She would have to prove to him that she was as good as any boy. And she would.

"No questions, my lord," she told him quietly.

"There is a chamber across the hall for your farewells," Wyldon told Piers. "Salma will come for Keladry and guide her to her assigned room. No doubt her baggage already is there." He looked at Kel. "Unpack your things neatly. When the supper bell rings, stand in the hall with the new boys. Sponsors—older pages who show the new ones how things are done—must be chosen before we go down to the mess."

After Kel said goodbye to her father, she found Salma waiting for her in the hall. The woman was short and thin, with frizzy brown hair and large, dark eyes. She wore the palace uniform for women servants, a dark skirt and a white blouse. A large ring laden with keys hung from her belt. As she took Kel to her new room, Salma asked if Kel had brought a personal servant.

When the girl replied that she hadn't, Salma told her, "In that case, I'll assign a servant to you. We'll bring you hot water for washup and get your fire going in the morning. We also do your laundry and mending, make beds, sweep, and so on. And if you play any tricks on the servants, you'll do your own laundry and bed-making for the rest of the year. It's not our job to look after weapons, equipment, or armor, mind. That's what you're here to learn."

She briskly led the way through one long hall as she talked. Now they passed a row of doors. Each bore a piece of slate with a name written in chalk. "That's my room," Salma explained, pointing. "The ground floor here is the pages' wing. Squires are the next floor up. If you need supplies, or special cleaning and sewing, or if you are ill, come to me."

Kel looked at her curiously. "My brothers didn't mention you."

"Timon Greendale, our headman, reorganized service here six years ago," Salma replied. "I was brought in five years back—just in time to meet your brother Conal. Don't worry. I won't hold anything against you."

Kel smiled wryly. Conal had that effect on people.

Salma halted in front of the last door in the hall. There was no name written on the slate. "This is your room," she remarked. "I told the men to put your things here." She brushed the slate with her fingertips. "Your name has been washed off. I have to get my chalk. You may as well unpack."

"Thank you," Kel said.

"No need to thank me" was Salma's calm reply. "I do what they pay me to." She hesitated, then added, "If you need anything, even if it's just a sympathetic ear, tell me." She rested a warm hand on Kel's shoulder for a moment, then walked away.

Entering her room, Kel shut the door. When she turned, a gasp escaped before she locked her lips.

She surveyed the damage. The narrow bed was overturned. Mattress, sheets, and blankets were strewn everywhere. The drapes lay on the floor and the shutters hung open. Two chairs, a bookcase, a pair of night tables, and an oak clothespress were also upended. The desk must have been too heavy for such treatment, but its drawers had been dumped onto the floor. Her packs were opened and the contents tumbled out. Someone had used her practice glaive to slash and pull down the wall hanging. On the plaster wall she saw written: No Girls! Go Home! You Won't Last!

Kel took deep breaths until the storm of hurt and anger that filled her was under control. Once that was done, she began to clean up. The first thing she checked was the small wooden box containing her collection of Yamani porcelain lucky cats. She had a dozen or so, each a different size and color, each sitting with one paw upraised. The box itself was dented on one corner, but its contents were safe. Her mother had packed each cat in a handkerchief to keep it from breaking.

That's something, at least, Kel thought. But what about next time? Maybe she ought to ship them home.

As she gathered up her clothes, she heard a knock. She opened her door a crack. It was Salma. The minute the woman saw her face, she knew something was wrong. "Open," she commanded.

Kel let her in and shut the door.

"You were warned this kind of thing might happen?" Salma asked finally.

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