

A Light in the Window



Dan Lutts

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CHARACTERS

COMMONERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

EULAND FAMILY

Sorah, Jedd's grandmother and family matriarch

Marvis, Sorah's daughter and Kald Larkin's wife

Tor, Sorah's brother

Jedd, Marvis's son

LARKIN FAMILY

Cinna, Rill's grandmother and family matriarch

Kendra, Cinna's daughter and Rill's mother

Marc, Cinna's son and Rill's father

Kald, Cinna's son and and Tarri Euland's husband

Tarri, Cinna's daughter

Rill, Kendra and Marc's son

Faith, Rill's dog

NOBLESSE AND THEIR FAMILIES

BERNE FAMILY

Jukka, Alger's father, co-chief mage, and Maude Dejune's husband

Alger, Alger's son and Shalira Estati's husband

DEJUNE FAMILY

Siema, Alyse's great grandmother, Locien Estati's wife, and family matriarch

Maude, Siema's daughter and Jukka Berne's wife

Pilar, Siema's granddaughter, Alyse and Mora's mother, and Degas Spicer's wife

Leoc, Siema's grandson

Alyse, Siema's great granddaughter and Pilar's twin daughter

Mora, Siema's great granddaughter and Pilar's twin daughter

Kate, Alyse's cousin and backwatcher

ESTATI

Ariella, Livia and Troy's great grandmother and family matriarch

Locien, Ariella's brother, co-chief mage, and Siema Dejune's husband

Yulonna, Ariella's daughter and Tolf Belkon's wife

Deuth, Yulonna's son, Adele Svagga's husband, and Garth Svagga's father

Shalira, Ariella's grandmother, Livia and Troy's mother, and Alger Berne's wife

Livia, Shalira's daughter and Ariella's great granddaughter

Troy, Shalira's son and Ariella's great grandson

SPICER FAMILY

Degas, Alyse's stepfather and Pilar Estati's husband

Isabet, Degas's sister

SVAGGA FAMILY

Adele, Garth's mother and Deuth Estati's wife

Brico, Adele's brother and Deuth's brother-in-law

Garth, Adele and Deuth's son

OTHER NOBLESSE

Cato Porta, archmage

Tolf Belkon, Yulonna Estati's husband

BACKWATCHERS AND PROTECTORS

Freyou, Dejune protector

Geoff, Dejune protector

Jade Channer, Mora Dejune's backwatcher

Magnus Roebach, Deuth Estati's backwatcher

Milco Barr, the Estati's chief backwatcher

Palquo, Dejune protector

Yall Throwstarr, Troy Estati's backwatcher

PRIESTESSES AT THE ONE GODDESS TEMPLE

Gilda, assistant chief priestess

Glenissa, elderly priestess

Jillina, young novice

Sybil Raine, chief priestess

HEALERS AND SERVANTS

Kalso, Estati head steward

Lenia, Dejune healer

Lothar, Dejune head steward

THE TWINS

Ulbra Thane, a demigod

Ulbridge Thane, a demigod

ARMY DESERTERS

Ebar

Hilbrand Wistlow

Ord

PLACES

Elustra, the afterworld

Shelar, the underworld

GODDESSES AND GODS

The One Goddess (or Divine Lady), the main deity

The Five Sisters (or the Five Weavers), weave the tapestry of life that determines each woman's and man's life

Naela the Spinner, spins the yarn for the loom

Maela the Yarn Chooser, selects the threads that determine a person's personality and health

Kaerla the Allotter, determines the length of a person's life

Traela the Weaver, weaves the incidents in a person's life

Gaela the Thread Cutter, chooses how the person dies and snips the yarn from the loom to end her life

The Three Judges Three gods – two female and one male – who judge the dead and determine whether they go to Elustra or Shelar

CHAPTER ONE



Flight

TOWARD EVENING ALYSE DEJUNE and her cousin, Kate Dejune, rode along the dirt road into a sleepy town nestled at the edge of a forest and stopped by an inn to water their horses at a trough. The settlement was close enough to Caldon, a half day's journey behind them, that the townspeople didn't pay much attention to two dust-covered teenage girls traveling through the countryside, even if Alyse wore a long-bladed dagger on her right hip and Kate had a sword and dagger belted around her waist.

Dismounting, Alyse and Kate brushed road dust off their nondescript commoners' rough woolen pants and vests and white linen shirts, and stretched to ease their aching muscles after hours of hard traveling in the saddle. While Kate watered their mares and refilled their canteens from a small circular fountain in the town center, Alyse stood beside her gazing longingly at the inn as she absent-mindedly fingered her shoulder-length chestnut locks.

Already oil lamps had been lit in the inn's two unshuttered windows facing the fountain, emitting warm welcoming glows. One by one, dancing yellowish flames from candles and oil lamps in the windows of the shops, inn, and homes lining both sides of the road began appearing.

Alyse peered up the road that disappeared into the gloomy forest

beyond the town. The sight of the woods sent dread slinking across her shoulders. “I wish we could spend the night here,” she said wistfully, eyeing the inn. “Except for our trips to the family villa, we’ve never stayed overnight outside the city. To sleep tonight in the forest surrounded by trees and wild animals and Goddess knows what else . . .”

Kate handed Alyse a canteen heavy with water. “We can’t.” Her tone indicated she wished the same thing. “We’ve barely put a half day’s distance between us and Caldon—”

“I know.” Alyse unstopped her canteen and swallowed a mouthful of cool water. “Mora told us she’d delay telling my parents we’d run away. But I bet she went right home and told Grandmother Maude. I can just picture the glee on her face as she’s doing it.”

Kate nodded agreement.

“Then grandmother will expel me from the family and Mora can marry Troy Estati instead of me.” Alyse paused, then added heartfelt words. “And she’s welcome to him.”

Kate wrapped her canteen’s strap around her saddle pommel. “Even if Mora kept her word, and I’m sure she didn’t, she knows we left by the Public Gate. That’s the road to The Marches. It leads to your uncle’s military camp there.”

“We have to reach Uncle Leoc before they catch up to us.” Alyse pushed the wood stopper into the canteen’s mouth. “He’ll protect us.”

“You hope.”

“He gave me his word.”

“He might be the Commander of the Eastern Legions, but he’s also subject to the Magesterium. If they order him to hand you over, he will.”

Alyse tightened her saddle’s cinch, suddenly eager to set off again. “He won’t. Unless he crosses the border into Caldonian territory, the Magesterium can only suggest, not command. Besides, the Magesterium won’t get involved because this dispute doesn’t involve the state. It’s between two families.”

“Which happen to be among the most powerful in Caldon.” Kate

brushed back strands of black hair from her forehead. “It’s the matriarchs who pull the strings in the Magesterium. If your Grandmother Maude and Ariella Estati—”

“The Dejune and Estati matriarchs won’t involve the Magesterium. And Uncle Leoc won’t hand me over to my grandmother. He’ll smooth things over.”

Kate looked unconvinced.

“Besides you,” Alyse said, “Uncle Leoc is the only person in the whole world I trust. He’ll keep his promise.”

Kate shrugged. “It’s too late now for second thoughts. We have to see this through and hope your uncle keeps his word.”

“He will.”

Kate eyed the forest, creases of apprehension working their way into her face. Alyse was relieved to see that her cousin was just as frightened of the forest as she was.

“Let’s get going.” Kate mounted her gray mare. “We have lots of distance to cover.”

Alyse swung into her saddle, then pointed her mare’s head toward the forest. She and Kate started off at a walk.

A couple of passersby eyed them curiously, but one elderly man stepped into the street, blocking their path. “You girls headin’ into the forest?”

“That’s *our* business,” Alyse said.

“That’s Malagnar Forest yonder.”

“So?”

“There’s brigands holed up in there. Wise travelers don’t pass through Malagnar Forest except in groups. And they avoid it at night.” The man pointed to the inn. “I’d stay there tonight if I was you.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Alyse said.

With a shrug, the man stepped aside. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Moving past him, Alyse urged her bay mare into a trot. Kate kept pace beside her.

“Travel fast,” the man shouted after them. “And don’t stop for

nothin'."

As soon as Alyse entered the forest, tall pines and trees bristling with leaves loomed up on either side of her, creating a partial canopy that threw the road into shadow. Alyse recalled the man's warning and her heart tightened with dread. She'd never been this far east before and she'd never heard of Malagnar Forest. She suppressed a shudder. The forest's name sounded ominous.

Alyse didn't go too far along the dirt road, riding side by side with Kate, before Kate suggested stopping. Alyse peered uneasily at the darkening woods. "I thought we were riding straight through."

"We are," Kate responded. "But we should eat first and give the horses more of a breather. We won't get any more food or rest until we reach the other side of the forest. And Goddess knows when that'll be."

Dismounting, Alyse and Kate led their mares behind a clump of bushes a short way off the road and tied the reins to branches. Then they unfastened feedbags from their saddles and fed the horses. Afterward they settled down on a fallen tree trunk with their own travelers' fare—a loaf of crusty bread, a large hunk of cheese, and a leather wine pouch.

They ate in silence as the sun began its slow descent behind the forest canopy. Hoots came from somewhere nearby, sending shivers down Alyse's spine. She traded nervous looks with Kate. Then, as if on cue, they both laughed.

"We're city girls through and through," Alyse said.

Kate bobbed her head in agreement. "Take some poor villager and put her in the city and she'd be just as frightened."

"Rill told me once that he goes into the woods hunting With Jedd—" Alyse stopped abruptly as memories of her last encounter with Rill Larkin flooded her mind. Or, rather, memories of what he'd done to Dayson Florens, the wine shop owner she'd treated at the One Goddess Temple.

Rill had beaten up the old man to force him to sign over the larger share of his business to the Estatics for not repaying money he'd borrowed from them. Rill's lust for becoming a mage had made him into

an Estati thug.

Alyse exchanged a quick glance with Kate, who appeared just as troubled by the dark thoughts Rill's name had conjured up.

"At least Jedd had the good sense to walk away from it all," Kate said.

"Yes." Alyse couldn't hide the sadness in her voice. "And it's too bad Rill didn't walk away too. Deep down, he's a good person. But the Estatis have led him astray to get back at his mother."

Leaves rustled off to their right. Kate jumped to her feet, half drawing her sword. Alyse gripped the handle of her dagger. She held her breath, listening for more sounds and peering at the dark, dense foliage. The mares snorted and pawed the leaf-covered ground. An animal's high-pitched scream erupted from deeper in the forest. The horses snorted again and jerked at their reins, making the leaf-covered branches bend.

Alyse and Kate swapped fearfully.

"What was that?" Alyse asked in a tense whisper.

"An invitation to be off," Kate replied.

Alyse and Kate hastily unfastened their mares' reigns from the branches, led them back onto the road, and continued on their way at a trot. Soon sunset turned into twilight and eventually into darkness. To Alyse's relief, the moon was full and the partial canopy of branches and leaves allowed its pale light to shine through, revealing the contours of the road as a barely visible carpet running between thick walls of blackness.

Even though they were halfway through First Fruits, the hottest season of the year, the air grew chilly and Alyse took her light woolen cloak from her saddlebag and wrapped it around herself. After a while she lost all sense of time and distance traveled as her body moved in rhythm to her mare's gait. The sounds of the horses' hooves on the hard-packed dirt weren't loud enough to deaden the terrifying barks, screeches, screams, and howls that continuously erupted in the woods. Fear clutched at Alyse each time she heard them.

To Alyse, it seemed as if the journey through the gloomy, sinister

forest was taking forever. She was an occasional rider, not a frequent one. And she'd been in the saddle for so long that the muscles in her buttocks, thighs, and legs sent out sharp pains in time to the drumming of her horse's iron-shod hooves against the road. Alyse was about to suggest a halt to Kate when movement at the edge of the woods up ahead caught her attention. Surprised, she drew in on her reins. Beside her, Kate's horse reared up with a wild whinny.

"Brigands!" Kate shouted, drawing her sword. "Don't stop. Ride!"

Alyse dug her heels into her mare's flanks as dark figures charged into the road from both sides of the forest.

"Unhorse 'em!" a rough voice shouted.

A hand closed on Alyse's leg. Whipping out her dagger, Alyse stabbed the hand. The attacker yelped in pain and let go. Then murky figures brandishing swords and clubs surged around her mare, trying to wrest Alyse out of the saddle. Alyse slashed at them wildly. But as soon as one attacker fell away two more seemed to replace her. Frantically, Alyse tried to kick the horse into a gallop but more brigands barred the way. The mare reared, almost unseating Alyse. Suddenly Kate appeared swinging her sword at the attackers and opening a path for the mare.

"Ride!" Kate yelled.

Alyse dug her heels into the mare's flanks and the horse exploded into a gallop.

A dark form lunged at Alyse as the mare sped by. Alyse cut at the brigand with her dagger, slicing through flesh and bone. The attacker screamed and stumbled back.

And then Alyse broke free of the brigands. Her first thought was for Kate.

Galloping hoof beats sounded behind her.

"Keep going!" Kate cried.

Alyse rode furiously for a long time, with Kate chasing after her. Alyse's heart beat fiercely against her ribcage, striving to outrun the furious beating of her bay's hooves against the ground. In her mind, she felt the brigand's hand on her leg. A shudder swept through her body. *If he'd unhorsed me—* She kicked the thought from her mind.

He hadn't.

Kate drew up beside her and they rode together. After a while, Kate slowed down to a trot and Alyse matched the pace. Finally, Alyse pulled in on her reins. Kate did too.

"Are you all right?" Alyse asked as she strove to get her breathing under control.

"Just a few nicks," Kate said. "I think we surprised them with our spirited defense."

"You did. Not me." Alyse raked her fingers through her chestnut hair in frustration. "I feel so vulnerable with just a dagger. I appreciate you teaching me how to use one. But when we get to Uncle Leoc's, I want you to teach me how to use a sword."

"You have your Kinesi magic."

"No!" The force of Alyse's outburst astonished even herself. She lowered her tone but kept it firm. "I won't use Kinesi magic. Or any other magic except Healing magic. Besides, I don't know how to summon the kinesi power. I can only access it in times of stress. Sometimes not even then. And I don't know how to control it."

"If you learned how to summon and control it, you could use it whenever you wanted."

Alyse shook her head doggedly. "I won't use Kinesi magic."

"Kinesi magic can be better than a sword for some things. You've shown me that."

"I won't use it."

"Why?"

Alyse urged her mare closer to Kate's and spoke in a tone teeming with determination. "Magic is the root of all that's wrong in the world. First and Lesser Families raiding and killing one another for their charms and staffs. Conscripting fledging mages who don't receive patrons at the bidding or who don't join the legions or the sea service. And this ages-long war with Gaetan. We started it because we wanted to recover the charms and staffs Toran the Usurper took with him when the Caldonians rebelled against him and he fled the city to found Gaetan. Also—"

Kate put up a hand as if to ward her off. "All right. Point made. I'll

teach you how to use a sword.”

They broke free of the forest a little after dawn and stopped to eat a quick meal by the edge of the woods. Both girls’ buttocks and thighs were sending them agonizing streaks of fire. Alyse applied healing hands to ease Kate’s aching muscles.

“I wish you could use healing hands on yourself,” Kate said as they waited for the magic to take effect.

“So do I,” Alyse responded. “But a healer can’t heal herself. Only others.”

“We’ll take more frequent breaks so you can stretch your legs,” Kate told her.

“But our pursuers—”

“Probably haven’t set out until this morning. We have a good lead on them. So I think we can afford to go a little slower.”

Remounting, Alyse and Kate continued riding.

As the sun climbed into the sky, they began passing farmers riding in wagons piled with produce or firewood or leading donkeys or mules carrying loads, and fellow travelers on foot or on horseback. The road brought them through a combination of woodlands, hills, and open land dotted with small farms, a few large prosperous ones, and an occasional inn. Every so often a crossroads split off from the main road but Alyse and Kate continued east. At one point, a brook four spear lengths wide followed alongside them, babbling over rocks and flowing under fallen tree limbs, before veering off into the countryside. Once, Alyse spotted a young teenage girl fishing by the stream using a rod made from a stick, and envied her carefree attitude.

Around midmorning they passed through a village. By this time, both girls, who hadn’t slept since the night before they left Caldon, were dozing in their saddles.

“We have to take more than short breaks,” Alyse said. “We need to sleep.”

“Soon,” Kate told her. “We’ve got to make sure we can’t be overtaken.”

In the early afternoon they entered a prosperous-looking town

where they stopped to buy a flask of weak beer and a couple of cold meat pies for themselves, and grain for the horses. A short distance out of town they spotted a stand of trees and shrubs on a knoll that provided good concealment.

“Now we can sleep,” Kate said.

As Alyse swung down from the saddle, she stifled a groan from the pain that lacerated her buttocks and thighs, and hobbled around to ease her muscles. Meanwhile Kate unsaddled and fed the horses and by the time she began brushing them down, Alyse, her muscles finally loosened up, came over to help. Afterward they greedily devoured the pies and drank the beer. Then they laid their cloaks on the ground and stretched out on them, thankful for the warmth of the afternoon sun.

Alyse fell asleep instantly . . .

And was awoken by Kate shaking her shoulder. “Get up!”

Alyse’s heart leaped in panic. “W-what?”

“We overslept.”

Alyse yawned and stretched. “Is that all?”

“It’s almost evening.”

Blinking to sharpen her focus, Alyse spotted the sun drifting down toward the horizon.

“We need to get going,” Kate said.

After saddling the horses, Alyse and Kate resumed their journey. They traveled all night, the soft moonglow lighting their way like a constant beacon as they trotted through sleeping hamlets, villages, and towns. A few times fright seized Alyse’s heart when she heard horses approaching and she and Kate hurried off the dirt road to find whatever concealment they could. But the riders always passed by without noticing them. When dawn broke, the cousins stopped to rest and eat. Then they remounted and kept going all morning and into the afternoon, taking short breaks and stopping once in a town to buy food.

In the evening they happened upon a large, two-story inn by a crossroads near an ancient red oak. In the faltering light, the sign swaying in the warm, gentle breeze said RED OAK INN. The unshut-

tered windows glowed with friendly lamplight and a plume of smoke curled up lazily from one of the two chimneys until it faded into the darkening sky. Several horses were hitched to iron rings set in stone blocks and a few wagons were parked near the stable beside the inn, their horses waiting patiently in their traces. Music, singing, and laughter drifted out through the unshuttered windows.

“This place looks cheery enough,” Alyse said. “Let’s stay here tonight. Besides, I can’t go any farther.”

“Neither can I,” Kate said.

As the girls dismounted, the stableboy—who couldn’t have been older than twelve—ran up to them and asked if they’d like him to take care of their horses. Kate handed him some coppers and instructed him to feed and brush down their mounts. After wiping the road dust from their clothes, the cousins put on their cloaks, slung their bulging saddlebags over their shoulders, and went into the inn.

The large common room was bustling with activity. Trestle tables were occupied by all sorts of commoner travelers, from merchants to farmers to wayfarers. A wandering bard stood near the unlighted hearth strumming a mandolin and singing a rousing song. Some guests were singing along with her, waving their beer mugs in time to the music, while others were talking boisterously or focused on eating or simply listening. Many of the men and women clustered around the square tables along the walls ignored the commotion, preferring to chat among themselves.

Opposite the front door, a heavyset man in a soiled apron worked behind a counter that ran half the length of the room. He filled ceramic beer mugs and wine goblets from a bank of wooden barrels and handed them to customers at the bar or to a teenage serving girl to bring to the tables. The people at the counter appeared to be familiars because they bantered good naturedly with the man, whom they called Deek. A sharp-faced woman came out of a door by the staircase to the second floor carrying two wooden trenchers full of stew topped with thick slabs of bread and headed toward a table.

“Is that man, Deek, the innkeeper or just a servant?” Alyse whispered to Kate. “I’ve never been to an inn before.”

“How would I know?” Kate whispered back. “I’ve never been to one either.”

Inhaling deeply to settle her jittery nerves, Alyse walked up to Deek. “Are you the innkeeper?”

Putting his elbows on the counter, Deek leaned toward Alyse, his gaze taking in her plain commoner clothes. Alyse wrapped her cloak closer to her body, but not before Deek spotted the dagger belted to her waist. Then his eyes slid to Kate and performed the same inspection, lingering on the sword and dagger partially hidden beneath her cloak.

“I am,” he said.

“Ya got a room for two?” Alyse cringed inwardly at her poor attempt to sound like a commoner. She’d never tried imitating their speech patterns before. And neither had Kate who was brought up speaking like the noblesse. “A private one.”

The trace of a smile plucked at the corners of Deek’s lips. “A private room for two, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Deek stroked the sides of his mouth with a thumb and forefinger. “Just so happens I got one private room left.”

“We’ll take it,” Alyse told him. “Your stableboy’s already tendin’ to our horses. We want supper too. What ya got for food?”

“Stew. Stew. Or stew.”

Alyse couldn’t hide her disappointment. She didn’t like stew. “That’s all?”

“Bread comes with it. Is there anything else you’d like?”

“A bath. Have two tubs taken up to our room. We wanna bathe before eating.”

“This here is a *public* inn,” Deek said, amusement in his voice. “The washrooms with tubs are communal. One for women. One for men. You take your baths there or stay dirty.”

“All right. How much?”

Deek fingered his stubbly chin again, calculating. “Let’s see now. Private room for two. Baths for two, including soap and towels. Supper and breakfast for two. Stabling two horses for one night.” Deek

named a price, which Alyse knew was much too high. He smirked at her, a challenge in his eye.

Futile anger burned in Alyse because she knew he wouldn't budge. "Very well." She nodded to Kate. "Pay the man."

Kate took the money from her belt purse and handed the coins to Deek.

He pocketed them, then leaned across the bar, putting his face so close to Alyse's she could smell his bad breath. He spoke in almost a whisper. "A word of caution. The two of you might be dressed like commoners. And you did a fair job of talkin' like one. But you gotta work on your el-lo-cution more. Here's a tip. Only a noblesse has her servant hold her money and pay the bills."

"My mother's a merchant," Alyse said sharply.

Deek handed Alyse a wry smile. "Maybe. But she didn't teach you no common sense. You don't display a heavy purse in a public place. That can prove dangerous for two young girls traveling by themselves, even if one is a backwatcher."

"I'll keep that in mind. Now we'd like to go to our room." Alyse held out her hand, palm up. "The key."

"Key?" Deek guffawed and slapped the counter, causing nearby patrons to glance at him. He leaned toward Alyse again and spoke softly. "Here's another tip. To further your ed-u-cation. Public inns have common sleeping rooms, which ain't got no locks. But I can tell that you're used to fancier ways than us common folk. So I gave ya the one room that can be barred from the inside. When you're in the room, I suggest ya keep the door barred at all times."

"Thank you," Alyse said. "I'll keep that in mind."

Deek summoned the serving girl, who led them upstairs and down a dim hallway, which had windows at either end, to the next-to-last door on the left. Weak light from the setting sun filtering through the unshuttered window barely lit the room. The furnishings were plain and simple. A bed large enough to sleep three people. A nightstand on either side, each with an oil lamp. A clean chamber pot. A wash stand with a bowl, a pitcher of water, soap, and towels. And pegs along a wall for hanging clothes. The single window looked

out onto the stable and the woods beyond. There was no fireplace, and Alyse thanked the Goddess that they were traveling during First Fruits instead of the colder seasons of Reaping, Sleeping, or Awakening.

Kate closed the door while Alyse lit a lamp using flint and steel. “It’s almost a two-week trip to your uncle’s camp. But a few more nights at inns with prices like this one’s and we’ll be broke before we reach it.”

“I know,” Alyse said glumly.

“And only the Weavers know what other expenses we’ll have to pay for before we get there.”

“Like food.”

“Maybe we should spend the nights in the woods from now on.”

“Or try harder to pass ourselves off as commoners,” Alyse said quickly. “We can work at it. Perhaps starting with our e-lo-cution.”

She and Kate giggled.

“That’ll take some doing,” Kate said.

“We can practice while we’re bathing.”

After their baths, Alyse and Kate put on their extra set of clothes and went to the common room to eat. They found an isolated table in a corner and sat across from each other.

The serving girl brought them wooden trenchers of chicken stew with slices of wheat bread on top and ceramic goblets of watered wine. While they were eating, anxiety crawled up Alyse’s spine on spidery legs because she sensed that she and Kate stuck out in the noisy room like a pair of signal beacons. Whenever she glanced furtively around, though, everyone appeared to be more interested in the bard’s songs or in their own conversations or food and drink than in two teenagers eating chicken stew.

After chatting for a while, Alyse and Kate turned their attention to the minstrel who was singing about two ill-fated lovers whose families were dead set against their marrying. Alyse wished she had a lover who would defy his family to marry her instead of having to flee a prospective husband who wanted to make her his wife against her will. Tuning out the bard’s words, Alyse imagined what her lover

would be like—

Kate touched Alyse's arm, then grinned and laughed, as if Alyse had said something funny.

Alyse gave her an odd look, puzzled by Kate's bizarre behavior. "What—"

"Don't look now," Kate said, still grinning but her voice tense. "Two men at a table behind you have been eying us for some time now."

Alyse's shoulders turned into gooseflesh but she managed to giggle back at Kate. "Do you recognize them?"

"No," Kate said, laughing. "One's wearing an eye patch and the other has pockmarks all over his face. Ugh! They're definitely not anyone we want to know."

"Do you think they mean trouble?"

Kate grinned. "Well, they definitely seem interested in us. Let's finish eating and go up to our room. But don't hurry. And whatever you do, don't look at them. Let them think we haven't noticed."

At Kate's first words, Alyse's appetite had vanished. But she forced herself to continue eating, leisurely spooning her now-tasteless stew into her mouth. When she and Kate finished, they returned to their chamber. Kate barred the door.

"We'll leave first thing in the morning," Alyse said. "Before breakfast. If those men mean trouble, we'll be long gone before they wake up."

Alyse and Kate climbed into bed fully clothed, leaving only their boots on the floor, and slipped their unsheathed daggers under their pillows. Despite the anxiety that looped around her like the coils of a snake, Alyse—exhausted from two days of travel—quickly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

And all too soon, Kate shook Alyse's shoulder. "It's time to go."

Alyse yawned and stretched. Through the thin walls on either side came sounds of snoring. Golden light from a rising dawn trickled through the window. Kate buckled on her sword belt. Then she and Alyse slung their saddlebags over their shoulders, picked up their boots, and quietly stole along the corridor and down the stairs

on stockinged feet. Sounds of someone working in the kitchen filtered through the closed door. The front door was barred. Kate quietly lifted the heavy length of wood from the slats and they stepped outside into the warm morning air.

The happy chirping of birds in the branches of nearby trees welcomed them. Alyse studied the trees and bushes, searching for tell-tale signs of the two men. Quick movement among some trees caught her attention. Her heart stopped. And then beat again when a fox trotted into view with a squirrel in its mouth.

Alyse sent a triumphant smile to Kate as they pulled on their boots. "We gave them the slip."

When they reached the stable, Kate opened one of the doors partway and they sidled through the gap. Fortunately the door to the hayloft was open, allowing enough sunlight inside for the girls to see. Alyse hastily saddled and bridled her mare and tied her saddlebags into place, then led the horse out of the stall.

Kate emerged from the adjoining stall at the same time. "I'll open the door all the way," Kate said, handing her reins to Alyse.

Before Kate could take a step, a hand gripped the partially open door and opened it wider.

Kate's hand dropped to her sword.

Two men came through the gap. They wore expensive but well-worn clothes. The taller man wore an eye patch. The shorter man had a pock-marked face and hefted a battle axe menacingly.

"Well, well," Eye Patch said. "The chickens are flyin' the coop."

The men stepped forward a few paces.

Drawing her sword and dagger, Kate placed herself in front of Alyse.

Just then several more figures came through the doorway and fanned out on either side of Eye Patch and Pock Face. They were dressed in the what looked like discarded, threadbare trappings of noblesse and noblesse commoners. They were armed with various weapons.

Pock Face hefted his battle axe. "A backwatcher. As soon as I seed them two girls last night, I knowed one was noblesse and the other

her backwatcher.”

Eye Patch’s lips curved up into an unpleasant grin. “The little no-blesse’ll fetch us a tidy sum.”

“Run!” Kate hissed. “Go out the back while I keep them busy.”

Alyse drew her dagger. “Not without you.”

“Don’t be a fool. Flee!”

Two men sprang at Kate with their swords. She parried their blades and the three of them danced back and forth across the floor planks fighting. Instead of helping their two companions, the others watched the three battle as if they were observing a sports contest instead of a desperate life-or-death struggle. When one of the men stumbled away wounded, one of the onlookers replaced him.

“That’s right,” Eye Patch said. “Wear her out. She might be young but she won’t last forever.”

“Tag team match,” Pock Face said, laughing gruffly.

Eye Patch sneered at Alyse, then nodded at Pock Face. “Time to take the golden goose.”

Pock Face walked toward Alyse. The smirk on his lips told her he thought she was easy prey. When he reached for her, she slipped under his arm and thrust her dagger into his side.

He stumbled away, clutching the wound as blood flowed through his fingers. “She stabbed me! The little bitch stabbed me!”

Alyse charged the brigands fighting Kate. She knifed one in the back. With a shout, the brigands on the sidelines raced toward her. She spun around to face them but someone came up from behind and put his arm around her throat. Another seized her knife hand and twisted. Alyse struggled, but the arm around her neck cut off her air and the fingers pressing her wrist felt like the jaws of a tightening clamp. Her hand opened unwillingly, and the dagger struck the floorboards with a *clunk*.

Unsheathing his dagger, Eye Patch went to Alyse, wrapped his fingers around her chestnut hair, and drew her head back, exposing her neck. He placed the blade against her neck.

Alyse’s breath stuck in her lungs and she dared not move.

“Drop your weapons, girlie,” Eye Patch called to Kate. “Or I’ll slit

her throat. Your patrons won't like that, eh?"

Kate's opponents stepped back out of sword range. Kate looked toward Eye Patch, keeping her sword and dagger up.

Eye Patch dragged the blade lightly across Alyse's neck, making her heart freeze. She could feel blood trickling down her skin.

Eye Patch leered at Kate. "Want more blood?" He positioned his knife to make a deeper cut.

Kate threw down her sword, her face a combination of anger and disgust.

"And the dagger."

The knife clunked on planks.

Two brigands seized Kate by the arms. A third walked up to her, sword in hand, and shot Eye Patch a questioning look.

Eye Patch nodded. "Kill her."