

# To Catch a Merchant Princess Ch. 04

By Darkniciad

Published on Stories Space on 11 May 2013

An attack in the night interrupts her budding relationship, and puts her on the run once more.

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/fantasy/to-catch-a-merchant-princess-ch-04.aspx>

Reader discretion advised. The story you are about to read contains mature content that some may find offensive. By choosing to read this piece, you agree that you are 18 or older and do not object to content of a sexual nature. Alicia sat cross-legged beneath a cherry tree in the garden, blissfully savoring a few of the ripe fruits, plucked directly from the tree. As with the day before, her parents were simply too stunned by her sudden shift in behavior to articulate their disappointment. She knew the reprieve wouldn't last long, but she planned to take advantage of every moment. A beam of sunlight shone upon her spellbook, open in her lap. The spell to soothe sore and chafed nipples from nursing a child intrigued Alicia because it had potential to cure the same caused by her often elaborate and uncomfortable wardrobe. Though still a little weary from her late night in the city, she still felt giddy from the trip – and the subsequent reunion with Thakkor. She could still see the look in his eyes as he stood with her in the moonlight at the servant's gate. For a moment, she'd thought for certain that he was going to kiss her. In fact, she'd actually felt irritated when he didn't, instead returning to the city after saying that he hoped to see her there the next evening. Enough of that. Study, Alicia, she silently chided herself as her body reacted to the memory of his face and how badly she'd wanted that kiss. Her recent lapse in manners would eventually fade from her father's mind – taking up with a vagabond sellsword certainly would not. The words of the spell she studied were quite similar to the other two spells she'd mastered, and Alicia found that this magic came to her easily. After only an hour or so, she felt confident that she knew a little over half of the spell. The encouraging results pushed her even harder, reducing her world to the spidery words on the pages before her – until the snake slithered out from under a patch of violets on the opposite side of the path. Whether alerted by the sound, a flash of movement in her peripheral vision, or pure intuition, Alicia looked up from her book just as the serpent appeared on the path. She recognized the venomous reptile by its copper-colored head and attempted to scoot back, around the tree. The action caused the snake to rear its head up in an ominous posture. Alicia froze in place, her eyes locked on the snake. Her hand rested against her spell pouch, providing her with a possible solution. With slow, minimal movements, she withdrew one of the miniature arrows from inside the pouch. The snake remained in front of her, well within striking distance, seemingly daring her to move. Alicia raised the arrow in front of her, prompting another frightening change in posture from the serpent.

She whispered the words of the spell, moving her fingers through the few gestures necessary to call up the magic. The magical darts probably wouldn't kill the snake, but they would certainly stun it and make it think twice about coming near her. Just as Alicia completed the spell, she felt a tingle in her thigh that she knew came from the dagger sheathed there. It distracted her for a moment just as she whispered the final word and directed the tiny arrow toward the snake. The arrow vanished, and again Alicia felt the tingle – stronger this time. Curiously, Alicia knew the magic hadn't failed. She could feel it within her dagger. Somehow, the weapon had contained the magic and held it there. With the same slow movements she'd adopted since the snake appeared, Alicia unsheathed the dagger. She pointed it at the snake, concentrating on the strange sensation of magic there. Her magical dart leapt from the dagger, striking the snake right in the head. The creature curled up with a hiss and rolled over on its back, twitching from the bite of the magic. Alicia wasted no time in scurrying to safety. Once a safe distance away, seated on a limestone bench, Alicia examined her dagger. Gwen had suggested that the dagger was made for a wizard, and that certainly seemed to be true. While the ability to hold spells and release them with a thought was useful, it could also prove troublesome if she couldn't learn how to control it. Alicia retrieved another arrow from her pouch, looked around to make sure that no one was around, and cast the spell at a brown, curled leaf lying upon the ground. Again, she felt the tingle from her dagger, but ignored it. When she finished casting the spell, the dart hurtled from her fingers and blasted into the dried leaf. Pleased with the result, she decided to try to contain a spell within the dagger. She pulled one of the miniature candles from her spell pouch and cast the light spell she'd utilized to navigate the servant's corridors the night before. This time, when she felt the dagger reacting to the magic, she opened her mind to the weapon. The tiny candle vanished, and Alicia could feel the presence of her magic within the dagger, awaiting her call. A second casting of the light spell yielded the same results, and Alicia could feel both of the spells distinctly within the dagger. At least I won't have to speak the words of the spell when I sneak out to the city tonight, she thought. Continuing to experiment, she cast another dart spell into the dagger. She could tell the difference between all three spells, and knew she could call up whichever she wished with nothing more than a thought. On a whim, she cast first the fertility divining spell, and then the spell to lessen the pain and discomfort of deflowering into the dagger. With the last, she had a sense from the weapon that it could hold no more. Alicia sheathed the dagger with a wide smile, appreciating Gwen's gift even more, now. She couldn't wait to reveal the secret to her friend. She sheathed the dagger and decided to return to her room to continue studying the new spell. The encounter with the snake made her too uncomfortable with the thought of focusing on her book in the garden again. As she stepped out of the garden, Alicia smiled at the sight of the sun sinking toward the western horizon. She hoped she could remain hidden away in her room as much as possible, because she didn't know if she could contain her anticipation for her venture into the city tonight. With that pleasant thought in mind, Alicia hurried to her room. \*\*\*\* Her mood buoyant, Alicia stepped from her bath and prepared to dress for bed. She considered changing into what she planned to wear into the city, but thought better of the notion. Her mother might decide to finally confront her about her recent behavior, and finding her not dressed appropriately would raise questions she couldn't answer.

Once she toweled dry, Alicia slipped into her silk chemise and retrieved her new spellbook once more. She felt as though she was on the cusp of mastering the spell, and she was eager to do so. Before she could open the book, she heard a knock on the door. Quickly slipping the book beneath her overstuffed pillow, she called out, "Yes?" Kylie answered, "I have some of your laundry." "Come in, Kylie." The young woman entered carrying a woven wicker basket, and Alicia offered to help. After removing her panties from the top of the basket, Alicia's eyes widened at the sight of the clothes she'd worn out last night in the bottom. She'd carefully hidden the clothing away, planning to wash it herself in secret. Kylie whispered, "Your escape didn't go entirely unnoticed. Don't worry, we're not going to say anything. If you plan to go out tonight, it would be nice if you'd tell me, though. The stairs in the servant's corridors are just beyond the wall behind my bed. I entertained all manner of nightmares about ghosts and thieves until I discovered the true source of the sound." "I'm sorry," Alicia apologized with a little smile. "I thought I might go into the city this evening as well. I would truthfully feel much better if you'd let me go with you." Alicia sighed inwardly, not happy about having anyone go with her into the city. Kylie's voice dropped even lower when she whispered, "I know about the young man who walked you home, as well. That secret is mine alone, and I will neither interfere nor speak a word of it to anyone. I'm quite happy for you, actually." "He just offered to accompany me," Alicia quietly protested. Kylie smiled knowingly. "Of course. Will you let me come with you?" Alicia nodded. "Yes." "I'll slip something under the door when I'm leaving and wait for you by the servant's gate." Still not overjoyed with the intrusion on her clandestine excursion, Alicia accepted the necessity. She knew that Kylie would have only found some way to follow even if she'd refused. Kylie took her assignment as Alicia's personal servant very seriously. Her spellbook once more in hand, Alicia sat back against the oaken headboard of her bed to study until the hour grew late enough to make her escape. \*\*\*\* "Got someone with her, she does. A pretty little thing, too." "It is of no matter. The woman is a mere servant. We are prepared for far more dangerous opposition." "We allowed to play with that one, once we got yer prize?" A sigh emerged from deep within the man's hood. "She is irrelevant. Do with her as you will. Should your foolish indulgence interfere with my goal, rest assured that the consequences will be – unpleasant ." "Of course, Milord," the unkempt brigand replied with a wide, evil smile that revealed his yellowed, broken teeth. The hooded man turned toward another in a voluminous robe of dark blue. "You have her, I trust?" "Of course, Lord. My trinket has latched firmly onto her shoe. She will neither discover nor dislodge it." "You will have your payment once she is in my possession. Stand ready and remain hidden until the woman returns from her nocturnal visit to the city. Do not fail me." The brigands surrounding him nodded and grunted their agreement, sounding all too eager for the task put before them. \*\*\*\* The common room of the Dragon hummed with conversation, music, and laughter. Smoke from many pipes hung in the air, made tolerable by breezes from the frequent opening and closing of the door, and open windows near the dark-beamed ceiling intended for exactly that purpose. The smell of cooking wafted from the kitchen – venison this evening. Alicia returned to her corner table with Thakkor after convincing him to join her in a dance, the smile on her face so wide that it felt almost unnatural. Though he had absolutely no experience with dancing, he'd proven more than willing to learn, and caught on quickly. The physical contact

made Alicia feel giddy with delight. Kylie had left Alicia to her man almost immediately upon entering the Dragon, seemingly content to see her safely inside. That suited Alicia well, quelling her fears that the other woman would hover protectively over her the entire evening. From what Alicia could see, her personal servant was garnering no small amount of male attention herself. "That was actually sort of fun. I probably looked like a complete idiot, though," Thakkor said as he pulled out Alicia's chair. He then chuckled as he walked to the opposite side of the round table to sit down. "Nonsense. You did quite well for your first time. Dancing isn't all that different from fighting, when you think about it. You just practice until you get it right, and then you can do it without thinking." Thakkor took a drink of his beer, and then wiped the foam from his closely cropped beard and mustache, having learned early in the evening that Alicia found the sight of foam in his facial hair amusing to a point that she couldn't ignore it. "Never really thought about it. It's been a long time since my Pop was whacking me on the head when I set my feet wrong, but I felt about the same way out there a minute ago as I did then." Without even realizing what she was doing, Alicia twirled one of her golden curls between her finger and thumb. She did notice Thakkor paying attention, though. Her heart thudded in her chest as he admired her – his gaze unthreatening, not lewd as were those of so many men, and filled with touches of wonder. "I am quite sure you will find it easier each time." "Well, I have a good teacher – and a beautiful one at that." Alicia's rapidly beating heart skipped one beat upon hearing him say those words. She blushed, almost overwhelmed by his first unquestionably romantic compliment. "Thank you." "Just the truth. If dancing is like fighting, I'm not sure I'd want to square off in a fight with you. You float like your feet aren't even touching the floor out there." He hiked his thumb toward the area in front of the musicians set aside for dancing. "Alicia, it's after midnight." Alicia turned toward the voice to find Kylie wearing an apologetic smile. Alicia glanced at the water clock above the bar and sighed, seeing that Kylie was telling the truth. She then looked back at Thakkor and said, "I suppose I should be going." "Want me to walk you home?" "I'd love that," Alicia answered. The widening of his smile made her tingle all over. "I think I'll stay for a bit since you have someone to walk you home – if that's okay?" Alicia turned back to Kylie, knowing full well that the young woman was giving her space. "That's fine. Thank you for accompanying me to the city. I had a good chat as we walked. We will have to do it again soon." "Perhaps tomorrow," Kylie responded with a knowing smile and a wave. She then returned to the bar and the men doing their best to attract her attention. "I could do with a walk in the night air to get all the smoke in here out of me, anyway," Thakkor said as he stood. He stepped over to pull out Alicia's chair, and then offered her his hand to help her rise. Alicia couldn't fight her blush, or her grin. Every story she'd ever read about knights in shining armor flashed back through her head, thoroughly embodied in the handsome man standing before her. For a few seconds, the couple stood staring into each other's eyes, and then Alicia acted on impulse, maintaining her hold on his hand as she stepped toward the door. Thakkor's remark about floating felt very real to her as she walked hand-in-hand with him across the hardwood floor. His grip was somehow both strong and gentle at the same time. His expression took on an almost boyish cast, a sharp contrast to the confident, seasoned warrior she knew. Alicia didn't need one ounce of womanly intuition to know that he was enamored of her, it was written on his face as plainly as words on a

page. No words passed between the couple as they walked through the darkened city streets and out the gate, though both certainly spoke volumes with their eyes. Alicia's mind raced, wondering if he might kiss her at the servant's gate this time. The thought of that nearly made her swoon, and it was all she could do not to stop, stand up on her tiptoes, and kiss him. She quickened her pace unconsciously, and Thakkor matched her perfectly. Moving almost as if one, the pair passed out of the circle of light from the city, toward Alicia's home. About halfway between the city and her father's estate, Alicia felt a chill run up her spine – and not a pleasant one. At her side, Thakkor tensed, his expression darkening and his eyes roaming the moonlit countryside. "What is it?" Alicia whispered. "Something isn't right out here. I don't know if I heard something, or saw something, or what. Stay close, and be ready to run if I tell you." Thakkor released her hand and reached for his sword. At that very moment, men burst from small copses of fir trees on either side of the road. Thakkor snapped his sword in front of him, doing his best to put his body between the men and Alicia. Propriety forgotten, Alicia drew her dagger, adrenaline surging through her body in a torrent as she set her feet, warily watching the men approaching. She barely heard it, but Alicia recognized the cadence of someone casting a magic spell somewhere nearby. She had just enough time to warn, "Magic!" before the spell wrapped around her. In a flash of light, she and Thakkor vanished, leaving behind four very confused men with bared swords. \*\*\*\* "Where are they? What have you done, you incompetent fool?" The masked man snarled, cuffing the wizard next to him hard in the side of the head. "I... I don't know. I cast a simple sleep spell. I assure you that I cast it correctly, and I have no idea what happened." "Find them!" The masked man ordered his men. "Find her with your magic, if you can manage to do so without causing another catastrophe," he then growled to the wizard. "Of course, Lord. At once." \*\*\*\* Alicia jumped, staring at her dagger in fright. The weapon spit arcs of purple lightning, but she felt nothing when the miniature bolts touched her skin. She did feel her stomach churning, though. At her side, Thakkor looked no less surprised, or green. "What the hell?" He quietly asked, letting his sword drop. "What was that? Where are we?" "I don't know," Alicia replied, recognizing nothing as she stared off into the horizon, which seemed to stretch out forever. In every direction, fields stretched out to the horizon, occasionally broken by the ghostly specter of what she assumed were trees and bushes. Thakkor groaned and held his stomach. "Well, at least we don't have a bunch of swords pointed at us. I feel like my beer's about to come back up, though." Alicia nodded. "I feel nauseous as well." Thakkor sheathed his sword, but didn't tie the peace knot, revealing that he certainly didn't think that the danger was over. "I think we're out somewhere on the Great Plains. Never seen anyplace this open except for there." "But how?" "Like you said – magic. Doesn't make much sense, though. If I was going to magic someone somewhere, I'd at least be there waiting for them." "I believe it was an accident. My dagger is magical, and I think it interfered with someone's spell." "So far, it looks like a stroke of good luck. I'll take lost in the wilderness at night over staring down swords any day." Thakkor looked up into the night sky and studied the stars until he found his bearings. "Well, I'm pretty sure I'm right that we're on the Great Plains. That means that Freeland is north." He pointed off in one direction and continued, "So we need to head that way, and look for some sort of shelter." "How far away is Freeland?" Alicia asked, feeling strangely alive

despite the complicated circumstances. "If we're on the northern edge of the plains, about four days. If we're anywhere south of there..." He trailed off and shrugged. "Plenty of water out here, lots of game, and edible plants. We may not be terribly comfortable until we get back to civilization, but we shouldn't have to worry about eating." Alicia smiled, thinking that several days alone with the handsome warrior wasn't an unpleasant prospect. "I'm glad you know how to live off the land. I'm afraid my education is rather lacking in that area." "Looks like there may be some trees up ahead, and we need to go that way anyhow. Good chance we can find what we need to make a shelter, or maybe even a dry cave that isn't already inhabited." Alicia turned away and sheathed her dagger, though she was tempted to do it in full view of Thakkor. "Shall we go, then?" Thakkor laughed. "That's the spirit. You ever consider taking up the life of a vagabond sellsword?" If it meant being with you – in a heartbeat, Alicia thought, and almost immediately blushed a vibrant red. Fortunately, the pale light of the moon hid her embarrassment. "My father would have an apoplexy." Thakkor signaled for Alicia to follow, and started out as soon as she did. "My Pop did when I decided to sell my sword instead of taking up with the city guard. He got over it. Fathers do that, though it may take a while." "I'm not so sure about mine," Alicia responded in dismissive tones, wary that the tall grasses could conceal snakes, or any number of dangerous animals. "I may need to beg your Pop for a job when we get back. Fantil's never going to take me back after vanishing like this." "Trouble seems to follow me wherever I go of late." "C'mon now, where's that spirit of adventure you had a minute ago?" Thakkor asked, taking Alicia's hand and raising it high as the couple walked. Alicia had no trouble smiling. "You are right, of course. Let us adventure." The adventure, however, involved little more than a stroll across the seemingly endless sea of rolling grasslands. Alicia quickly wished she was wearing her practice uniform rather than a blouse and skirt, because even if the tall grasses didn't hide dangerous animals, numerous plants determined to cut and scratch her bare legs certainly lurked there. Alicia ignored the discomfort and kept pace with Thakkor. He'd walked slowly at first, but picked up speed when it was obvious that Alicia could keep up. The woodlet he'd mentioned loomed ever larger, until the couple finally reached the small woods. A wide trail led into the trees, culminating in a large circular clearing at the center. Thakkor turned to Alicia and smiled. "Good news, I know this place. We're at the far north edge of the plains." "That is welcome news," Alicia agreed, thinking that the clearing within the trees actually looked inviting. "Not much in the way of comfort here, but the weather looks good, so we can probably bed down on some pine needles." The handsome warrior's choice of words sent a rush of aroused heat flooding through Alicia's body, centering in her loins. She stepped closer to him, lost in his blue eyes, her lips slightly parted. Fortunately, the couple's intent gaze meant that they were not looking directly at the flash of brilliant light when the brigands appeared. "Kill him. Take her," Alicia heard a cultured voice demand. Alicia pulled her dagger just as Thakkor intercepted an attack from the first of the four swordsmen. Steel rang out on steel, shattering the quiet of the night, accompanied by the grunts and snarls of the battle-joined. A cry of pain erupted a moment later as Thakkor's parry opened a wound in the first attacker's arm. He had no opportunity to press the attack, as he had to defend against a second swordsman an instant after inflicting the cut. One of the men reached for Alicia, but she turned away from his grasping hand and slashed. Her

fine, sharp dagger opened the man's palm and his wrist. With an almost womanish scream, the man dropped his sword and grabbed his wrist, which was spurting blood at an alarming rate. The fourth swordsman, previously seeking an opportunity to attack at Thakkor's back while the other two kept the warrior occupied, turned on Alicia when his wounded fellow fell back. She feigned a stab with her dagger and the man stumbled backward, obviously surprised and wary. A gurgling cry accompanied one of the other murderous men collapsing to the ground. Thakkor's bloodstained sword instantly whipped into a parry of his second opponent's blade. Recognizing the danger of the quick, skilled warrior, the man facing Alicia turned on Thakkor. The unkempt swordsman leapt toward Thakkor, his blade raised high for a double handed cut. Alicia only realized she was moving when she felt her dagger bite into flesh and jar against bone. The man screamed in pain, twisting away and wrenching Alicia's dagger from her hand. Seeing the movement in his peripheral vision, Thakkor took advantage of having pushed his other opponent back to snap the hilt of his sword into the stabbed man's temple. The blow caused the man to stumble toward Alicia, and she reacted with the only weapon she had available. She brought her knee up hard into his crotch, and he crumpled to the ground with a whimper, still struggling to remove the dagger from his side. With only a single opponent left standing, Thakkor pressed his attack. His skills far outweighed those of the man facing him, and Thakkor opened the man's throat in a combination of two blows. Alicia snatched up the sword the first man to reach for her had dropped and stabbed the man she'd put down with her knee. Hearing the sound of chanting, she snapped her gaze toward where the men had appeared. She saw a well-dressed man holding back from the battle, and a man in the robes of a wizard. Realizing the danger, she dropped her appropriated sword and jerked her dagger free. With the wizard obviously building toward a crescendo, Alicia and Thakkor both took action. Alicia concentrated upon the magic stored in her dagger and released the dart spell. At the same time, Thakkor drew his own dagger, flipped it in the air, and caught the blade between his fingers and thumb. Alicia's streaking dart of magical energy burst against the wizard's robes, doing little more than stinging the man. It did, however, distract him enough to fumble his spell at the last second. The magic, which would have surely taken Thakkor out of the fight, never sprang into being. Thus, when Thakkor snapped back his arm and hurled his dagger, the spinning weapon lodged perfectly in the wizard's throat. The other man hissed a curse under his breath and jumped aside when the wizard sank to the ground. He slowly drew a finely crafted longsword and muttered, "Incompetent cretins." Holding the weapon with apparent skill, he stalked toward Thakkor and Alicia. "Well, my dear, you've certainly caused me no end of trouble, and now you will force me to sully my own hands." Alicia gasped, those words sparking a memory of hearing them before. "You used to trade with my father. I heard you say that very thing on the day he broke his ties with you, Armand." The man threw back his hood. "Indeed. The compensation for your ransom, while quite lucrative, is second in my mind to retribution for the slight you and your father delivered to me." "He serves a minor noble with an enormous debt, and shares the count's propensity for gambling. My father also refused to allow him to pay suit to me," Alicia explained to Thakkor with contempt. She then gasped again, the identity of the man who ordered her kidnaping suddenly clear. "Count Yeltsin – he was the masked man." A wide, disturbing grin spread across the opposing

swordsman's hawkish face as he continued to circle the couple. "Oh, how I hoped you would make all the connections, you bitch. With those words, I now have permission to kill you." "You are welcome to try," Alicia snapped back, her voice full of fire and confidence. The swordsman laughed, seemingly distracted, but then suddenly sprang into action. He darted toward Thakkor, his sword flashing in a vicious slash. Thakkor's sword intercepted the blow with a clang and a hiss, forcing the other swordsman's blow high. Alicia quickly realized that her dagger offered little protection or opportunity to strike against the man and his longer weapon. Even as Thakkor interposed his body between her and his opponent to parry another blow, Alicia took a step back, passed her dagger to her other hand, and knelt. As though summoned to her hand, she felt the hilt of the sword she'd appropriated earlier in a single blind grasp. Knowing nothing of fighting with two weapons, Alicia let her dagger fall to the ground. Her mind raced as she considered her training, trying to decide how best to aid Thakkor. As quickly as she formed the thought, Alicia moved to Thakkor's left side and faced the disgraced nobleman's servant. Thakkor blocked an overhead slash, and then used his superior strength to push Armand back, countering with a diagonal strike of his own. Off balance from the strength of Thakkor's shove, Armand had to dance backward to avoid the blow. Alicia noticed the man's eyes darting toward her just before he lashed out at her. Her body moving before her mind could catch up, Alicia turned sideways and swept Armand's sword up high. She felt a surge of elation when she saw the surprise in his eyes. That emotion rapidly turned to fear, however. Seeing Alicia in danger, Thakkor abandoned a position of balance in an attempt to intercept Armand's strike. Armand recovered from the surprise of Alicia defeating his attack to take advantage of Thakkor's miscalculation. He spun on his heel, his sword hissing through the air. Thakkor jumped back to avoid the blow, but nearly stumbled over the body of the man Alicia had stabbed. Despite the surge of fear for her handsome companion, Alicia's training surged to the forefront, and she did not abandon her footing when she lunged forward to launch a stab at Armand. Once again surprised by Alicia's skill, Armand barely had time to continue his spin, almost accidentally intercepting Alicia's appropriated sword on the hilt of his own weapon. He jumped back, now wary that he faced not just one trained swordsman and a spoiled girl, but two capable swords. Thakkor planted his feet, his look of surprise mixed with one of distinct admiration. He faced Armand, his sword at the ready, seeing Alicia doing the same in his peripheral vision. "Put down your sword," he growled ominously, sliding his foot forward. Armand loosed a scream of rage and frustration, and lunged toward Alicia. His sword cut down for her left shoulder, but Alicia intercepted the blow. Her muscles strained against his far greater strength as she held him back. Just as she thought that she must surely break, the pressure vanished. Thakkor let out a grunt as he attacked, aiming for Armand's sword arm. Armand whipped his sword into position, blocking the blow, and slashed at Thakkor's midsection. Already in the process of stepping back, Thakkor easily avoided his opponent's sword. He then pressed his attack, his sword crossing with Armand's overhead. Knowing that Thakkor possessed the greater strength, Armand disengaged just in time to feign a blow toward Alicia. Alicia broke off her attack and brought her sword up to defend against the attack that never came. Once again, Armand took advantage of Thakkor's overprotective instincts, opening a wide cut on the warrior's upper left arm. Thakkor had just enough time to notice that Alicia

hadn't needed his help. He focused his willpower toward ignoring his automatic reaction when seeing her in danger, and concentrated on his opponent, praying Alicia would continue to exhibit such astounding skill and luck. Unused to anything resembling a fair fight, Armand panted for breath as his sword flashed, defending against a flurry of blows from both Thakkor and Alicia. As she had in the courtyard against Trell, Alicia fell into the rhythm of the battle, striking and countering without conscious thought. Her hair whipping into her face and sweat threatened her vision, but she pressed on. Perpendicular to her, Thakkor took Alicia's lead, his strikes and parries perfectly complementing hers. Armand fell back, looking for any opportunity to escape the punishing assault. A fleeting second of unbalance provided him a chance. Thakkor stepped into a gopher hole hidden in the tall grass, stealing the strength and accuracy of a powerful overhand blow. Armand took advantage of the minor stumble, forcing Thakkor's sword wide with his parry. When Alicia's sword stabbed toward him in the next heartbeat, Armand grabbed her leading wrist and jerked her in front of him. Alicia yelped. She stumbled as she felt her fingers going numb from the strength of Armand's grip, his fingers digging between the bones in her wrist. Tears of pain joined the sweat blurring her vision. He pulled her arm up high, further stealing her balance. Barely maintaining her grip on her sword, Alicia snapped out her free hand and grabbed her numb fingers, allowing her weight to pull Armand's hand down. Standing on her tiptoes, Alicia turned to a weapon that Trell had stressed early and often in his training. Armand screamed in pain as Alicia's teeth sank into his knuckles. He released her arm and simultaneously whipped a half-closed fist into her face. Her vision nothing but red surrounded by encroaching darkness, Alicia fell. As she hit the ground hard, she had just enough presence of mind to snap a kick up at her opponent, praying to ward off the killing blow she knew must surely be coming, even if she couldn't see it. As Alicia fell, Thakkor attacked. Armand was no novice, and knew that his second opponent would strike as soon as the obstruction of Alicia's body was out of the way. He brought his sword into position, ignoring the downed woman for the moment. It proved his undoing. Alicia's foot connected with uncanny accuracy, straight into the V of his legs. The jolt of mind-numbing pain from his crushed testicles caused Armand to falter, his sword out of position by little more than a few fingers width. That tiny space provided Thakkor with all the opportunity he needed. His sword slipped past Armand's guard and into the man's chest. Blood instantly darkened Armand's shirt as his sword fell from his nerveless fingers. Thakkor withdrew his sword, and Armand stumbled back. He stood for a few seconds on wobbling legs, and then fell to his knees. With blood trickling from the corner of his mouth, Armand fell face first onto the earth, vanishing into the sea of grass. "Alicia, are you okay?" Thakkor asked, kneeling down next to the groaning woman. He noted with admiration that Alicia still maintained a grip on her sword. Alicia blinked the tears out of her eyes and groggily asked, "Thakkor?" "It's okay, he's down. Can you get up? Let me help you." Alicia accepted Thakkor's hand and let him help her into a seated position. She could see Armand lying face down in the grass in front of her, obviously dead. She released her sword, letting it fall to the bloodstained grass, and leaned against Thakkor's muscular chest, her head still swimming from Armand's blow to her nose. After a few seconds, Alicia nearly forgot about the pain and the battle. The feeling of her cheek resting against Thakkor's chest and his arm around her back erased all her

cares. "So are you okay?" Thakkor asked again, his hand caressing the small of her back. "I'm fine," Alicia answered, though wonderful was the word that actually sprang to mind as she relaxed in his arms. "There's a stream near the clearing in the woods. You could clean up a little while I... Well, take care of things." Unfortunately, that reminded Alicia that she was sitting in the midst of a field full of dead bodies, which certainly soured the mood. "C'mon, I'll come in with you." Alicia nodded and tried to avoid looking at the carnage until it was behind her. Thakkor showed her the stream and started a fire. Once the flames danced cheerily, he nodded back toward the edge of the wood and said, "I'll be back in a few minutes." Alicia washed as best she could, but she knew that she could never completely remove the blood spatters on her blouse and skirt. She then sat down by the fire, her eyes heavy now that the excitement had ended. Thakkor returned just as Alicia thought that she would need to find more wood for the fire. A few pouches dangled from his arm, and he carried a sword in his hand. "I found your dagger, and I thought it would probably be a good idea for you to hang on to this sword. I grabbed a scabbard and belt for you, too. They had a couple of canteens, but not much else." He held up a tooled leather bag and said, "The wizard had this, but I can't open it." Alicia recognized a few arcane symbols on the bag. "It must be magical. Only the owner can open most of those bags." Thakkor shrugged. "We need a tent more than bat poop and dried rose petals anyway." He then handed Alicia the sword, scabbard, belt, and her dagger. "I'll show you how to put on the belt." An idea occurred to Alicia, and she asked, "May I see the wizard's pouch?" "Sure," Thakkor answered, and handed it over. "You might want to stand back. I can't be sure what might happen when I try this." Thakkor's eyes widened. "Uhm, then maybe you shouldn't try it at all – whatever you're thinking about." Holding her dagger near the pouch, Alicia opened her senses to the weapon. "I don't think it will be dangerous. I might be able to open this, since my dagger does strange things to magic." "I still don't know if it's such a great idea," Thakkor countered. The more she felt the magical energy flowing between the dagger and the pouch, the more convinced Alicia was that she could safely open the wizard's bag. "Trust me?" She asked with a sweet smile. Thakkor looked as though he was about to protest again, but the expression melted off his face in light of her smile. "Okay, but be careful." Alicia gingerly touched her dagger to the buckle on the wizard's pouch, unleashing a shower of red sparks. Both she and Thakkor jumped from the display, but when the sparks faded away, Alicia saw that the buckle was open. Her smile growing wider, Alicia opened the flap and knew instantly that there was far more space inside the bag than should have been possible. Thakkor stared incredulously as Alicia removed silk bags, books, wands, and even a staff several feet long from the small pouch. She then discovered a curious sculpture and took it out. The sculpture looked much like the command tent she'd seen Gwen's soldiers set up in the courtyard to air it out after a long period of storage. Alicia turned the sculpture over in her hand and noticed a word carved into the bottom. As soon as she silently pronounced the magical word, she felt a jolt pass up her arm. In a fraction of a second, she knew what the object was. "You okay?" Thakkor asked, moving closer and reaching out to her when he saw her jump. "I'm fine, and I think I may just have the solution to our accommodations for the evening." Thakkor stared at the carving, recognizing it as a tent as well. "Little small, don't you think?" Alicia erupted in a silvery laugh and stood up. She walked a short

distance from the fire and sat the carving down on the ground. She then returned to Thakkor's side and said the command word. "Fuck me!" Thakkor shouted, jumping back a step as the huge tent blossomed from the tiny sculpture. He then looked over at Alicia and apologized, "Sorry. Startled me a bit." Alicia laughed again and opened the door to the tent. Thakkor followed her inside, staring in wide eyed wonder. "Is that a tub?" "And a real bed," Alicia beamed. "It's cool – comfortable," Thakkor observed. "Sure as hell beats carting around a roll of canvas on your back." "It will warn us of intruders and dangerous animals approaching, and the walls are impossibly strong." Thakkor poked the tent walls experimentally and remarked, "So we can actually get some sleep." "And I can have a proper bath," Alicia gratefully sighed. Seeing the wistful smile on Alicia's face, Thakkor nodded and said, "I'll go gather up plenty of wood for the fire. We may not really need it, but I'll feel better with a fire burning. Just let me know when you're done. I could probably use a bath, too." "I didn't want to say anything," Alicia said in over-the-top innocent tones. She then touched a glass globe hanging from the ceiling, bathing the interior of the tent in soft, white light. Thakkor shook his head at the incredulity of the sequence of events he'd experienced since hearing Alicia's scream in the night. With a little chuckle, he stepped out of the tent to gather wood. As soon as the tent flap closed behind him, Alicia touched the runes on the tub to fill it with warm water, her clothes falling to the floor a second later. \*\*\*\* Thakkor returned with a final armload of wood and grunted in approval, believing he had more than enough to last through the night. He looked over at the tent and the wood fell from his arms, one of the logs bouncing painfully off his foot. He winced and picked up his foot to shake it, but his eyes remained locked on the silhouette outlined by the light inside the tent. Alicia stood next to the tub, the shadow of her on the tent wall so clear that he could see her nipples and the curls adorning her mound as she dried her hair. Her breasts jiggled in a manner that made it impossible for him to ignore, and when she stretched with her arms overhead after dropping her towel, the image nearly took his breath away. Thakkor stood transfixed until Alicia pulled on her skirt, and then finally realized what he was doing. He rubbed his throbbing toe against his leg and turned away with some mental effort, lamenting his rotten luck. To find a woman as beautiful as Alicia who was good in a fight was the dream of any sellsword. Unfortunately, Alicia was a member of the upper class – a merchant princess. He knew he didn't stand a chance against the barons and other rich, powerful men that certainly vied for her hand. He couldn't resist a final glance as Alicia pulled on her blouse, once again hiding the most perfect breasts he'd ever beheld, even in silhouette. \*\*\*\* Alicia stared at the bed as she strapped back on her dagger, feeling far better with the magical weapon within easy reach. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest as she considered what the single bed suggested, causing her to think about the enchantments stored within her dagger. She must have thought about those spells in a little more detail than she'd intended, because one of the spells activated. White motes of light danced on Alicia's palm, and she hesitantly brought her hand to her tummy. The light emerging from beneath her hand changed from white to blue, signifying that she couldn't become pregnant right now. Despite her best efforts to suppress the urges, Alicia felt the chilly tingle of wetness flooding her sex and her nipples hardening in arousal. She turned away from the bed so fast that her hair whipped around to cover her face, but it did little to dull the intense emotions surging within her. Alicia pulled back the

flap of the tent and stepped out into the night air, which was still warmer than the inside of the magical tent. "You can have the tub, now." "I won't take too long. I'm sure you're exhausted," Thakkor said as he walked toward her. Alicia's heart pounded in her chest, and the hot ache in her loins surged. Without realizing it, she stared into Thakkor's eyes. "So, I'll be out in a few minutes." Alicia realized she was staring, and felt heat swelling in her cheeks. She nodded and turned toward the fire to sit on one of the logs a previous traveler had obviously selected for exactly that reason. She heard the tent flap open as she turned to sit down. Thakkor spoke to her every desire – both physical and emotional – and she found it harder to resist her growing arousal by the second. When she discovered the effect of the light from inside the tent, as Thakkor had before her, Alicia stifled a gasp with her hand. The sight of him pulling off his shirt to reveal his muscled chest forced her to squeeze her legs together to tame the need she felt. A second later, her eyes and mouth both opened wide when he dropped his pants. His manhood stood out erect from his body, longer and thicker than anything she'd ever imagined. She almost felt afraid of the huge phallus, wondering how it could possibly fit down there. She only snapped out of her trance when he sank into the tub, and she realized that her right hand was between her legs, pressed tight against her throbbing bud. Stop it, Alicia. This is all wrong. It cannot be. Her attempt to think rationally proved futile, however. Her arousal surged, and the shadow image on the tent wall transformed in her mind's eye. She could see him standing before her – naked, hard, and wearing an expression of both admiration and desire. She could feel him touching her, his hands so gentle, yet so strong at the same time. Unconsciously, she rolled her bud beneath her finger, deepening the intensity of her fantasy. She nearly stood up and walked directly into the tent when he emerged from the bath, his shadow revealing that he was still hard. Her brain a fog of sexual need, Alicia wondered how she could possibly resist. The shame such thoughts of surrendering her virginity felt tiny and insignificant in the face of her need. She barely had the presence of mind to pull her hand from between her legs when Thakkor walked to the entrance of the tent. A chilly kiss of night air told her that her panties were wet. "Looks like there are enough blankets for me to make a pallet on the floor in there. Now, if we only had something to eat, this could be a pleasant little outing." Hungry for something else, Alicia hadn't even thought about one of the other magics of the tent. She smiled and stood, praying to whatever god would listen that he wouldn't notice her walking funny because her panties were caught in the cleft of her nether lips for the first couple of steps. "If what the sculpture told me is correct, there should be some simple fare in one of the boxes." "Simple is fine with me, I'm a simple man." Simply gorgeous, Alicia thought as she crossed the canvas floor to the box. As her impression of the magical tent's powers had informed her, she found bread and dried meat within the box. She brought it over to the simple table and declared, "Dinner is served." Thakkor laughed. "After midnight snack is more like it, but I'm famished." Alicia couldn't keep her eyes off of him as they shared the plain meal. He smiled at her, his expression a little embarrassed and boyish despite his mustache and beard. As she finished her bread and took a sip of water, Alicia tried to distract herself in conversation. "What is it like – to be able to come and go as you please?" Thakkor shrugged his shoulders and responded. "It's a good life, but a hard one. You don't always know where your next meal is coming from, or where the next attack is coming from."

Once you're outside of Freeland, the critters rule the land more than man does. Not all of them are friendly – or scared of people." "Is it..." Alicia paused and ran her fingers through her golden tresses. "Is it lonely?" Thakkor leaned back in his chair. "Can be at times. Even when there's other people around, you're alone, sometimes. You don't always hook up with men who enjoy comradery." He sighed and added, "Wasn't all that lonely with Fantil. His bunch always has a story to tell. I'm gonna miss that." "Perhaps he'll take you back, if I explain what happened." "Maybe, if he's even around." Alicia yawned, unable to hold it back in her weariness. "We should probably get some rest. We still have a few days walk ahead of us." Alicia nodded, the thought of bed once again sending her sexual desire to a new peak. She couldn't believe her own words when Thakkor reached for some of the blankets to make a pallet on the floor. "The bed is more than large enough to share." Thakkor shook his head. "I wouldn't want to make you uncomfortable." "Nor I, you. I cannot bear the thought of forcing you to sleep on the ground, after all you've done for me." Thakkor paused, looking into her eyes for a moment before he said, "I don't want you to feel guilty, either. You have my word that I'll stay on my side of the bed." What if I don't want you to? Alicia thought, and wondered for a moment if she'd uttered the words out loud, considering that her tongue was acting long before she'd given it any direction. She simply nodded and touched the glass globe to dim it, unable to find any words to answer him. Alicia turned down the coverings on her side of the bed and slipped in. Her heart skipped a beat as Thakkor did the same. She could feel the heat of him beneath the covers, and she found her fingers tracing the edge of the depression in the mattress from the weight of his muscled form. Only her state of exhaustion kept her from giving in to her desire – at least in the waking world. Her dreams were another matter entirely.