

TAMORA PIERCE

SONG OF THE LIONESSE



THE WOMAN
WHO RIDES LIKE A MAN

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About the Book

A knight at last, Alanna of Trebond heads out to seek adventure in the desert of Tortall. Captured by desert tribesmen, she is forced to prove herself in a magical duel to the death. But her real challenge doesn't come until after she wins. As the first female shaman, Alanna must fight to change the ancient traditions of the stubborn desert tribes - for their own sake and for the sake of all Tortall.

This third book in the *Song of the Lioness* quartet continues Alanna's saga as she strikes out alone and discovers herself anew . . .

Song of the Lioness

The Woman Who Rides Like a Man

Tamora Pierce

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THE WOMAN WHO RIDES LIKE A MAN

Alanna of Trebond, the sole woman knight in the realm of Tortall, splashed happily in the waters of an oasis, enjoying her first bath in three days. *Hard to believe that it's winter in the North*, she reflected. In the Southern Desert the temperatures were just right, although she objected to so much sand.

'Best hurry up,' Coram told her. Her burly man-at-arms stood guard on the other side of the bushes that concealed the pool. 'If this is a Bazhir waterin' place, we don't want to wait and find out if they swear for the king or against him.'

Alanna stepped out of the water, grabbing her clothes. She had no urge to meet any Bazhir tribesmen, particularly not renegades. She and Coram were bound for Tyra in the south, and coming to battle with the warlike desert men would cut their journey very short.

Drying off, the young knight pulled on a boy's blue shirt and breeches. Although her femininity was not the secret it had been when she trained in the royal palace, Alanna still preferred the freedom of men's clothing. It was odd to remember that the last time she bathed in an oasis, she had been a page and Prince Jonathan had just found out she was a girl. Those days - the days in which she bound her chest flat and never went swimming - were gone. She didn't miss them.

Faithful, her pet cat, was yowling a warning. 'Alanna!' Coram yelled, seconding the cat. 'We've got trouble!'

Grabbing her sword, Alanna raced for Coram and the horses. An approaching cloud of dust indicated tribesmen or robbers, and she grimaced as she threw herself into Moonlight's saddle. She trotted forward to meet Faithful, a small black streak racing toward her across the sand. The cat leaped, landing squarely in front of his mistress before climbing into the leather cup that was his position on her saddle. Alanna's gentle mare held steady, used to the cat's abrupt comings and goings.

'Let's try to reach the road!' Alanna told Coram.

They rode hard, Alanna crouched low over Moonlight's pale mane. She looked back to see Coram shaking his head. 'It's no good,' he was bellowing. 'They've spotted us! Ride on - I'll hold 'em!'

Alanna wheeled and stopped, Lightning glittering in her hand. 'What sort of friend d'you think I am? We'll wait for them here.'

Coram swore. 'If ye were my daughter, I'd tan yer hide! Go!'

Alanna shook her head stubbornly. She could see their pursuers now: they were hillmen, the worst of the desert raiders. Reaching behind her, she unbuckled her shield from its straps, slipping it over her left arm. Coram was following suit.

'Stubborn lass,' he grumbled. 'I'd druther tangle with ten Bazhir tribes than any hillmen.'

Alanna nodded. The Bazhir were deadly fighters, but they had a strict code of honor. Hillmen lived for killing and loot.

Renewing her grip on Lightning's hilt, she settled her shield more firmly on her arm. The hillmen closed rapidly, fanning out in a half circle that would close around Alanna and her companion. Grimly the knight clenched her jaw and ordered, 'Take them in a charge.'

'*What?*' yelled Coram.

Alanna charged directly at the hillmen. Coram gulped and followed her, letting out a war cry.

Moonlight reared as they reached the first raiders, striking out with hooves: she had been trained for battle years ago. Alanna slashed about her with Lightning, ignoring her enemies' yells of fury.

A one-eyed villain closed in, grabbing her sword arm. With an angry yowl Faithful leaped from his cup with his claws unsheathed. The one-eyed hillman screamed and released Alanna, trying to pull the hissing cat away from his face.

'Lass! Beware!' Coram bellowed, trying to fend off three at once. He yelled in pain as one of them opened a deep gash on his sword arm. He swore and attacked again, dropping his shield and switching his sword to his good left hand.

Warned by her companion, Alanna whirled to face a giant hillman, a grinning mountain with red hair and long braided mustaches. He guided his shaggy pony with his knees, leaving his hands free to grip the hilt of a sword with an odd crystal blade. Alanna eyed its razor-sharp length and gulped, ducking beneath the redheaded man's first swing. He reversed it, and she blocked it with her shield just in time, yelping at the pain of impact. She struck back with Lightning, only to miss as her attacker darted away.

She refused to follow and fight on his terms. Instead she brought her lioness shield up and waited.

The giant returned, circling her carefully. His pony lunged forward, and Moonlight reared, warning it back with her flailing hooves. Alanna caught another blow from the crystal blade on her shield, feeling the shock through her entire body.

I hope my brother put plenty of magic on this shield, she thought grimly. Otherwise it won't last through its first battle!

She turned Moonlight as the giant circled her on his nimble pony. With a kick of her heels she urged the gold mare forward, slashing at her opponent. She was a knight of Tortall, and not to be toyed with!

She used every chance to break through his guard. He blocked her time after time, grinning infuriatingly.

Alanna drew back, breathing hard and fighting to keep her control. Now the giant returned the attack, and she blinked sweat from her eyes. She could not afford to make a mistake now! His tactics were different from those of the mounted knights she had fought before; she didn't know what to expect.

Suddenly the midday sun was directly in her eyes - he had maneuvered her just for this. Only at the last second did she glimpse his sword descending on her. She brought Lightning up hard, slamming her blade hilt-to-hilt with the giant's sword. There was a ring of clashing metal, and the downward sweep of the crystal edge was stopped.

Then Lightning broke, sheared off near the hilt.

Moonlight darted away, taking Alanna out of the hillman's range. Her mistress stared at the hilt she still gripped. Lightning had been her sword ever since she had been considered fit to carry one. How could she fight without it in her hand?

Coming out of her daze, Alanna fumbled for her axe. She was trembling with rage; it took all her selfcontrol to keep from losing her temper completely and making a fatal mistake. Axe in hand, she charged the hillman with a yell. She didn't hear the warning cries of the other hillmen, or Coram's gleeful whoop; she heard only the wheezing of the giant's pony and her own choked breath. She swung, swearing as the hillman ducked and pulled out of her range. She was closing with him again when he yelled, seeing something behind her. To her fury, he whirled his pony and fled, calling to the few men he had left. Alanna spurred after him.

‘Come back, coward!’ she cried.

The giant turned to laugh and shake his sword at her. His voice was choked off as a black arrow sprouted in his chest. More arrows struck down the hillmen; only two escaped. They rode for all they were worth, pursued by five white-robed tribesmen.

A Bazhir, his white burnoose tied with a scarlet cord, rode toward Alanna as she dismounted. She was staring at the body of the hillman who had wielded the crystal sword. The blade lay beside him, gleaming against the sand. It glimmered and suddenly flashed, blinding her for a short moment. Alanna stared: against the yellow-orange fire that filled her sight was a picture.

A dark finger - or was it a pole? - pointed at a crystal-blue sky. Before it stood a man wearing tattered gray; his eyes were mad. She could smell wood smoke.

Her eyes cleared, and the vision was gone.

Reaching under her shirt, Alanna drew forth the token given to her by the Great Mother Goddess three years before. It had once been a coal in her campfire; now it was covered in clear stone, its fires still flickering under its surface. Alanna knew that if she held it when magic was present, she could see power as a glowing force in the air. She saw magic now as orange light flickered around the sword, and she scowled. Recently she had dealt with magic of this particular shade, and the memory was not pleasant.

The Bazhir who had followed her kicked sand over the sword. ‘It is evil,’ he said, his quiet voice slightly raspy. ‘Let the desert have it.’

Distracted from the magic, Alanna discovered she was crying. It was as if she had lost a companion, not a weapon.

A glint of metal caught her eye and she stopped to pick up Lightning’s sheared-off blade. Sliding the length of metal into its sheath, she strapped the now useless hilt in place. Unless she tried to draw the blade, no one would know it was not whole.

Mounting her horse, she settled Faithful before her as Coram brought his gelding to her side. 'I'm sorry, lass,' he told her quietly, putting a hand on her arm. 'I know what the sword meant to ye. But ye can't be thinking of that now. These men may be friends or may not be; who knows why they saved our skins. Ye'd best be puttin' yer mind to talk with 'em.'

Alanna nodded, trying to collect her thoughts. Their rescuers formed a loose circle around her and Coram as the man who had covered the crystal sword with sand joined them, guiding a large chestnut stallion with ease. The others gave way to him, letting him approach Alanna and Coram. For a while he said nothing, only stared.

Finally he nodded. 'I am Halef Seif, headman of the Bloody Hawk tribe, of the people called the Bazhir,' he said formally. 'Those who are dead were trespassers on our sands, riding without leave. You also come here unbidden. Why should we not serve you as we did these others, Woman Who Rides Like a Man?'

Alanna rubbed her head tiredly. She felt too tired and dazed for the dance of manners that passed for conversation among the Bazhir. Dealing with these desert warriors was bound to be tricky; luckily she had learned their ways from an expert.

Faithful climbed onto her shoulder, setting up a murmur among the watching tribesmen. Alanna glared up at the cat, knowing he knew he was making the Bazhir nervous. *They don't see black cats with purple eyes often*, she thought. 'You're getting too big to sit up there,' she whispered to her pet.

Never mind that, Faithful told her. His meowing had always made as much sense to Alanna as human speech. *Talk to them now.*

Suddenly she felt more confident and alert. 'I hope you will deal with us fairly, Halef Seif of the Bloody Hawk,' she replied. 'We took nothing. We harmed nothing, my friend

and I. We are simply riding south. Would you harm a warrior of the king?’

Her gamble failed as Halef Seif shrugged. ‘We know no king.’

Alanna could hear Coram shifting nervously in his saddle. It might have been easier to deal with men who acknowledged King Roald of Tortall. Renegades would not take kindly to the presence of Roald’s most unusual young knight.

‘You know no king, but others of the Bazhir do. If they knew you held a Knight of the Realm and her companion, they might counsel you to take care,’ Alanna warned.

This produced some amusement among the riders. Only their leader remained grim. ‘Is your king so weak he uses women for warriors? We cannot think well of such a king. We cannot think well of a woman so immodest that she puts on the clothes of a man and rides with her face bare.’

Alanna pointed to the bodies of the hillmen she and Coram had slain. ‘*They* did not think I was a worthy opponent either. Can you say that my friend and I would be dead at the hillmen’s swords if you had not come? They took my sword from me.’ She swallowed hard and said recklessly, ‘What is a sword? I have my axe, and my dagger, and my spear. I have Coram Smythesson to watch my back, as I watch his.’

‘Big words from a small woman,’ Halef Seif remarked. There was no way for Alanna to read his expression.

One of the riders, a head and shoulders taller than most of his companions, brought his horse forward, peering at Alanna’s face intently. Suddenly he nodded with satisfaction. ‘She is the one!’ he exclaimed. ‘Halef, she is the Burning-Brightly One!’

‘Speak on, Gammal,’ Halef ordered.

The huge warrior was bowing as low to Alanna as his saddle would permit. ‘Would you remember me?’ he asked hopefully. ‘I was at the smallest west gate in the stone

village that northerners call Persopolis. It was six rainy seasons ago. Your master, the Blue-Eyed One, bought my silence with a gold coin.'

Remembering, Alanna grinned. 'Of course! And you spat on the coin and bit it.'

The big man looked at his chief. 'She is the one! She came with the Blue-Eyed Prince, the Night One, and they freed us from the Black City!' He made the Sign against Evil close to his chest. 'I let them through the gate that morning!'

Halef frowned as he watched Alanna. 'Is this so?'

Alanna shrugged. 'Prince Jonathan and I went to the Black City, yes,' she admitted. 'And we fought with the Ysandir - the Nameless Ones,' she said hurriedly as the men muttered uneasily. 'And we beat them. It wasn't easy.'

A skinny man wearing the green robes of a Bazhir shaman, or petty wizard, threw back his hood. His scraggly beard thrust forward on a sallow chin. 'She lies!' he cried, putting his horse between Alanna and the tribesmen. 'The Burning-Brightly One and the Night. One rode into the sky in a chariot of fire when the Nameless Ones perished. This all men know!'

'They rode back to the stone village, on horses,' Gammal replied stubbornly. 'And the mare ridden by the Burning-Brightly One was even as this one now - the color of sand, with a mane and tail like the clouds.'

While the Bazhir argued among themselves, Coram drew near his mistress. 'Now what've ye gone an' done?' he asked softly.

'I think it's more a question of what Jon and I did,' Alanna whispered back. 'I told you about going to the Black City, didn't I? We fought demons there, and Jon found out I was really a girl. It was six years ago.'

'If I'd known I'd be ridin' with a legend, I'd've thought twice about comin' along,' Coram grumbled.

‘Silence!’ Halef ordered them all. He looked at Alanna. ‘For the moment, let us accept that you are a warrior of the Northern king, Woman Who Rides Like a Man. Your shield is proof of that. As headman of the Bloody Hawk, I invite you to share our fire this night.’

Alanna eyed the tall Bazhir, wondering, *Do I have a choice?* Finally she bowed. ‘We are honored by your invitation. Certainly we could not think of refusing.’

The tent she and Coram were given to share was large and airy, well stocked with comfortable pillows and rugs. Alanna flopped down, thinking of what she had seen of the village itself. A rough count of the tents indicated the Bloody Hawk encompassed at least twenty families. Some of the bachelors would live apart from their parents in a single large tent. The shaman, the man wearing the burnoose tied with a green cord, had vanished into the largest tent in the village; from what her teacher Sir Myles had taught her, his dwelling would double as the tribe’s temple.

Her reverie was interrupted by three young members of the tribe. Two wore the face veil all Bazhir women put on when they began their women’s cycles of monthly bleeding. The taller girl balanced a tray of food and wine. Carefully she placed it on the ground between Coram and Alanna as the other girl and a tall, handsome boy stared at the guests.

‘We have never seen a woman with light eyes,’ the boy said abruptly. ‘Did the water that falls from the sky in the North wash all the color away?’

‘Of course it didn’t, Ishak,’ the smaller girl retorted. ‘How would her eyes be purple, then?’

‘Ishak! Kourrem! Hush!’ the girl who had carried the tray snapped. She bowed very low to Alanna and Coram. ‘Forgive my friends. They forget that they have been made adults of the tribe.’ She glared at her friends. ‘I let you

come with me because you promised not to say anything. You broke your word!’

‘I didn’t swear it by my ancestors,’ the boy called Ishak said virtuously.

‘Will your cat let me pet him?’ Kourrem, the smaller girl, asked Alanna. ‘His eyes are purple too. He is very handsome. Is he your brother, who was turned into a cat by great sorcery?’

Faithful, looking smug over the praise, sauntered over to the visitors, letting them pet and admire him. Alanna smiled at their guess that she and Faithful were related somehow. Many others had wondered about the fact that she and the cat had the same eye color.

‘No,’ she replied, pouring wine for Coram and herself. ‘Faithful is just a cat. My brother is a sorcerer, but he is still shaped as a human – or he was when I saw him last.’

‘I am Kara,’ the tall girl announced. ‘I am to serve you until your fate is decided by the tribe. And now we should go,’ she admitted reluctantly. ‘We weren’t supposed to stay long. Akhnan Ibn Nazzir says you will corrupt us if we are not careful.’

Alanna and Coram exchanged worried glances. ‘Who is this—’ Coram made a face at his inability to remember the harsh Bazhir name. ‘The one who says we’ll corrupt ye?’

‘Akhnan Ibn Nazzir,’ Ishak said from the doorway. ‘The shaman. He says you are demons who have come to try our faith.’

Kourrem crossed her eyes. ‘Ibn Nazzir is an old stick with a beard like weeds.’

Shocked, Kara ushered Kourrem and Ishak from the tent. Couram shook his head worriedly. ‘I don’t like the smell of this,’ he admitted. ‘D’ye think there’s anything we can do?’

Alanna was rolling herself up in an embroidered throw. ‘I plan to take a nap.’ She yawned. ‘Until the tribe decides what to do with us, we can’t do a thing.’ Within moments she was fast asleep, Faithful curled up beside her nose.

Coram was working on his third cup of date wine when Halaf Seif looked into the tent. 'She looks softer when she sleeps,' he commented quietly. 'When she awakes, tell her the tribe will decide your fate before the evening meal, at the campfire. I will send for you.'

Coram nodded and finished his wine. Alanna was right; there was little they could do now. Making himself comfortable, he took a nap of his own.

The last streaks of sunlight were fading in the west when Alanna woke from her nap. Coram was still asleep, snoring lightly, and Faithful had vanished. Yawning and stretching, she stepped outside to find the village oddly still, as if it had been deserted. She would have gone to explore when Ishak - who was crouched beside the doorway of her tent - caught at her pant leg. Covering his lips with a warning finger, he led her back into the tent.

'It is the Moment of the Voice,' he explained when they were inside. Coram was smoothing his sleep-ruffled hair. 'All adults in the tribe must be present, but I was told to attend you.' He looked up as voices sounded outside. 'It is over, and soon they will call you. I will take you to them.'

'Aren't ye afraid we'll corrupt ye?' Coram asked kindly.

The boy shook his head. 'Halaf Seif says only the man who wishes to be corrupted will fall into evil ways. Halaf Seif is wise in the ways of men.'

'Wiser than your shaman?' Alanna asked.

'Akhnan Ibn Nazzir is an old desert hen,' the boy said scornfully. 'His magic hurts more than it helps.' He looked eagerly at Alanna. 'Ibn Nazzir says you are a sorceress from the North. Will you teach me your sorcery? Look! Already I know a little!' Reaching out, he concentrated on the ball of reddish fire growing at his fingertips.

Alanna knocked his hand away, breaking Ishak's concentration. 'I know nothing of magic,' she said harshly.

‘And I want to know nothing of magic. The Gift only leads to pain and death.’

Kara peered in the doorway and bowed. ‘Ishak, help our guests to get ready,’ she commanded. She swallowed hard, looking at Alanna. ‘Will you need help, Woman Who Rides Like a Man?’

Alanna smiled. ‘Thank you, Kara, I can manage for myself.’

The girl bowed again. ‘Ishak will bring you to the central fire when you are ready,’ she said before letting the tent flap fall.

Coram was already breaking open one of Alanna’s saddlebags, bringing out her mail shirt and leggings. Ishak gasped in admiration, touching the goldwashed armor with reverent fingers. Alanna had been given the mail by her friends on her eighteenth birthday. Although she had plain steel mail to wear, this was specially made for her and particularly light. She fastened the amethyst-trimmed belt at her waist, removing the sheaths for sword and dagger. It would not be polite to go armed, and it still hurt to look at Lightning. She hooked gauntlets decorated with her lioness rampant design into her belt and nodded to Coram. ‘I’ll wait for you two outside,’ she said casually. ‘I need to think.’

She was actually responding to Faithful’s soft hiss just outside the tent. She went to stand beside her pet, scanning the rapidly falling darkness. ‘What do you want?’ she whispered. ‘We have these people to—’

Shadows moved against the night, and she froze. Akhnan Ibn Nazzir was leading a horse into the darkness. ‘Now, what do you suppose he’s up to?’ Alanna asked Faithful. ‘D’you think he means trouble for us?’

Yes, the cat replied. *He was asking the young ones who came into your tent what you had of value. I don’t think he asked because he means well.*

Alanna sighed and followed Ishak and Coram to the campfire. Wasn't life difficult enough without earning the enmity of a Bazhir shaman?

She was given the place on Halef Seif's right, with Coram beside her and Faithful settling down in front of her crossed legs. As the men of the tribe settled into the great circle formed by the firelight, Alanna took a closer look at Halef Seif. With his burnoose off his head, the headman looked to be in his late thirties. He was hook-nosed and lean; sharp lines were drawn from his nostrils to the corners of his thin mouth. *A man who's seen a lot of life*, Alanna decided.

The women of the tribe watched from behind the men, their eyes glittering over their face veils. Alanna tried to keep her nervousness hidden; she wanted to make friends of these people, and she had no way of knowing if they wanted to make a friend of her. A flicker of green caught her attention, and she turned with the others to watch the shaman take his place opposite Halef Seif. He looked pleased with himself. Something told Alanna he had been up to mischief.

Halef raised his voice so everyone could hear. "There are two voices in our tribe. One speaks for the acceptance of the intruders, saying they are a sacred one and the servant of a sacred one, deserving honor at our hands. One calls for their deaths, saying they are the servants of the king in the North, and that women must not act as men. By our custom, the strangers must hear each voice and answer. So it has always been. Before others speak, I will say what I must say. I am headman of the Bloody Hawk: this is my right.

I do not know that this woman is the Burning-Brightly One who came with the Night One to free us from the Black City. She claims to serve the king in the North, and he is our enemy. Yet she came here in peace until the hillmen