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LION'S BRIDE

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Iris
Johansen



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LION'S BRIDE
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To L.H.–
thanks for the memories.

Lion's Bride

Prologue

December 3, 1188

Gates of Constantinople

"I have it!"

Thea whirled to see Selene running through the city gates toward her. The child's red hair had come loose from her braid and was flowing wildly down her back, and her narrow chest was lifting and falling as she tried to catch her breath. She must have run all the way from the House of Nicholas.

Selene thrust the large straw basket at Thea. "I told you they wouldn't see me do it." She glanced at the long line of camels and wagons that had already begun moving down the road. "I couldn't get away earlier. I think Maya was watching me."

"You shouldn't have taken the risk." Thea set the basket on the ground and knelt to hug Selene. "I would have found a way to do without it."

"But it will be easier now." Selene's thin arms tightened around Thea's neck. "You're taking so many risks. I had to do something."

Thea's throat was tight with emotion. "You must get

back. Go through the garden. Selim doesn't tour back there every hour."

Selene nodded and stepped back. Her green eyes were glittering, but Thea knew she wouldn't cry. Selene never cried as other children did. But, then, Selene had never been permitted to be a child.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "You know I'll be safe."

"I know." If she hadn't thought Selene would be safe, she would never have embarked on this wild venture. Though Selene had value, she was only ten; it would be years before she faced the same danger as Thea. "But you must take care of yourself. You must eat well and walk and jump and run in the garden as I taught you."

Selene nodded. "I have to go." She started to turn away and then whirled around. She said gruffly, "I want you to know—it's all right if you can't come back for me. I don't need you. I know you'll try, but if you can't—I'll understand."

"Well, I won't understand." Thea tried to steady her shaking voice. "We'll be together, I promise. As soon as it's safe, I'll come for you. Nothing will stop me." She smiled tremulously. "Just as nothing stopped you when you brought me the basket."

Selene stared at her a moment longer and then ran toward the city gates.

Thea had a wild impulse to go after her, to gather her up and take her safely away. Selene might believe she could care for herself, but so many things could happen to children. What if she became ill?

But her chances of becoming ill were far greater on the caravan. Thea's food supplies were scant, and the journey to Damascus dangerous. Caravans were often attacked by Saracen bandits or renegade knights who had come to the Holy Land only to plunder. Once she reached

Damascus, the situation might be even more hazardous. After years of sporadic battles Jerusalem was once more at risk, and the great Turkish sultan Saladin had sworn to reclaim all that had been lost to his people in the previous Crusades. That Damascus was war ravaged would make it easier for Thea to lose herself in it, but Selene was safer here until she could provide a safe haven.

Selene turned at the gate and waved at her.

Thea lifted her hand in farewell. "I'll be back," she whispered. "I promise you. I'll come back for you, Selene."

Selene had disappeared through the gates, and only God knew how long it would be before Thea would see her again.

She must not rely on God. God seldom helped those who sat and waited for His aid. She would work hard. She would never surrender. She would be clever and find a way for herself and Selene.

She bent down, lifted the basket, and slung the attached straps over her shoulders. She hesitated as she looked at the caravan slowly moving away from everything familiar to her. The caravan itself was like a strange serpent, hissing and creaking. Only the soft jingle of the camel bells seemed without threat.

And then there was this terrible dust. She was accustomed to surroundings of absolute cleanliness, and the stinging waves of dust striking her face were terribly distasteful.

Well, there was no turning back. She would become accustomed to all of it, she told herself. She would learn and adapt to every trial.

She adjusted the basket straps on her back and started down the road in the hot, dusty wake of the caravan.



April 21, 1189

Syrian Desert

The moonlit silver sands shimmered hazily before her eyes.

The mountains on the horizon seemed an eternity away.

Thea staggered, fell to her knees, then struggled again to her feet.

She must keep going. . . .

She must not waste the night. The darkness was less cruel than the burning light of day. Barely.

She tried to swallow.

Panic seared through her. Dear God, her throat was too dry; she would strangle.

She drew a deep breath, trying to calm the wild pounding of her heart. Fear was as much her enemy as this burning desert. She would not be frightened into taking the last few swallows from her water bag.

Tomorrow she might reach an oasis.

Or even Damascus.

She had been traveling so long, surely Damascus was a possibility.

She would not give up. She had not escaped those savages just to succumb to the desert.

She stopped and concentrated. See, she could still swallow. She had not reached the point of total desperation. She started jerkily forward again.

Think of coolness, smoothness, glowing threads of gold on fine brocade. Think of beauty. . . . The world was not this desert.

Yet it seemed to be the world. She could not remember anything but glaring sand by day and shifting sinister shadows by night.

But tonight the shadows seemed more alive, less evanescent and more purposeful. Coming toward her.

Pounding toward her.

Not shadows. Horsemen. Dozens of horsemen. Armor gleaming in the moonlight.

The savages again.

Hide.

Where? No shrubs in this barren place.

Run.

No strength.

There was always strength. Call on it.

She was running. The water skin and the basket on her back weighed her down, slowing her.

She could not drop either one. The water skin was life. The basket was freedom.

The pounding of hooves was closer. A shout . . .

A sharp stitch in her side. Ignore it. Keep running.

Her breath was coming in painful gasps.

The horses were streaming around her, in front of her, surrounding her. . . .

"Stop!"

Arabic. Saracens. Savages like those others.

She darted blindly forward, seeking a way through the ring of horses.

She ran into a wall of iron.

No, not a wall. A broad chest garbed in iron mail. Huge gauntlet-clad hands grabbed her shoulders.

She struggled wildly, her fists pounding at the mail.

Stupid. Hit flesh, not armor. She struck his cheek with all her strength.

He flinched and muttered a curse, his hands tightening with bruising force on her shoulders.

She cried out as pain shot through her.

"Be still." His light eyes blazed down at her from beneath the steel visor. "I won't hurt you, if you don't fight me."

Lies.

She had seen the blood and rapine and the killing. . . .

She struck his cheek again. And again.

Her shoulders went numb as his grip tightened again.

Her body arched with agony. She slowly lifted her fist to strike him again.

"Christ!" He released her shoulders, and his hand swept out and connected with her chin.

Darkness.

"Very good, Ware. You vanquished a helpless woman with one blow." Kadar nudged his horse forward to look down at the figure on the ground. "Perhaps soon you will progress to brutalizing children."

"Be quiet and give me your water skin," Ware growled. "I had no choice. It was either break her shoulders or this. She wouldn't do as I told her."

"A sin, to be sure." Kadar got down from his horse and handed Ware his water skin. "You didn't consider patience and turning the other cheek?"

"I did not." He pushed back the cloth covering the woman's head. "I leave courtesy and gallantry to you. I believe in expedience."

"She appears very young, no more than ten and five. And with fair hair . . ." Kadar paused musingly. "Frank?"

"Possibly. Or Greek." He lifted the woman's head and poured a few drops of water into her mouth, waited until she swallowed before giving her a few drops more. "Whatever she is, she's thirsty."

"You think she may have escaped the caravan from Constantinople that Hassan ibn Narif attacked last week?"

"It seems reasonable. One doesn't find women wandering the desert alone." He called over his shoulder, "Bring the torch closer, Abdul."

Abdul rode forward and Kadar gazed down at the woman with interest. "She's comely."

"How can you tell? She's burned and dry as an over-ripe date." Ware wrinkled his nose. "And she smells."

"I can tell beauty when I see it."

Ware supposed the woman's features were pleasing enough; wide-set eyes, a small nose, well-shaped mouth. Though the line of her jaw and chin were a bit too firm.

"Once she's clean, she'll be very comely," Kadar said. "I have an instinct about these things."

"You have an instinct about everything," Ware said dryly. "It serves to take the place of thinking."

"Cruel." As he continued to look down at the woman, he added absently, "But I forgive you because I know of your fondness for me."

Ware forced another few drops of water between the woman's lips. "Then you know more than I do."

Kadar beamed. "Oh, yes, infinitely more. How kind of you to admit it."

Ware frowned. "I didn't hit her that hard. She should be awake."

"You underestimate your strength. You have a fist like a mace."

"I never underestimate myself. It was only a tap." Yet she was lying too still. He bent forward and saw the faint movement of her chest. "She must be in a faint."

"Concern?"

"An observation," Ware said flatly. "I feel neither guilt nor pity toward this woman. Why should I? I didn't attack the caravan and leave her in the desert to die. She means nothing to me one way or the other." Though, as Kadar knew, he did admire strength and determination, and the woman had displayed an abundance of both. "I merely wish to determine whether to bury her or take her to the nearest village to heal."

"Burying her would be a little premature, don't you think?" Kadar bent forward. "She's clearly suffering from heat and thirst, but I see no wounds. Though I doubt if Hassan let her escape unscathed. He likes pale women."

"She's not pale now." It was a wonder she had survived ten days in the desert after Hassan had finished with her. He felt a surge of rage that surprised him. He had thought he had grown so hard that he had lost the ability to feel pity or rage for the innocent.

"Well, since you're not going to bury her, shall we take her with us to Dundragon? The nearest village is over forty miles north, and she needs care."

Ware frowned with impatience. "You know we take no one to Dundragon."

"I fear we must make an exception. Unless you intend to leave her here to die." Kadar shook his head. "And that would not be appropriate. It would defy a law of nature. After all, you've saved her life. Now she belongs to you."

Ware grunted scornfully.

Kadar shook his head and sighed. "I've tried to explain this to you before. You don't understand. It's a law of—"

"Nature," Ware finished. "I think it's more Kadar's law."

"Well, it's true I'm often far wiser than nature, and also more interesting, but I can't claim to be as all-powerful." He added, "Yet. But I'm only ten and nine. There's still time."

"We don't take her to Dundragon," Ware said flatly.

"Then I suppose I'll have to stay here and protect her." He sat down beside the woman and crossed his legs. "Go on. I ask only that you leave a skin of water and a few grains of food."

Ware glared at him.

"Of course, Hassan may come upon us. I'll be outnumbered, and you know I have no skill with weapons. There's also the possibility that Guy de Lusanne may pass this way on his glorious journey to Jerusalem. It's rumored his troops are no more godly than Hassan's." Kadar smiled guilelessly. "But you must not worry about me. Forget that I saved your life in that den of assassins."

"I will." Ware stood up and mounted his horse. "I didn't ask for your help then nor your company now." He wheeled, lifted his hand, and motioned the riders forward.

Someone was holding her, gently rocking back and forth.

Mother?

Yes, it must be her mother. She was back in the House of Nicholas, and soon she would open her eyes and see that sad, gentle face. Her mother was always gentle, and her meekness filled Thea with wild frustration.

Not for me. I'll not let them break me. Not you, either. Let

me help you and together we can leave this place. You're afraid? Then let me be strong enough for both of us.

But Thea hadn't been strong enough, and her mother would be even more unhappy when she learned how Thea had failed her.

A sharp pang of regret surged through her.

I tried to keep my promise to save Selene. I won't give up. Soon I'll be stronger and try again. Forgive me, Mother. You'll see that Selene—

But her mother would see nothing ever again, she remembered suddenly. She had died long ago. . . .

But if this was not her mother, who was holding her with such tenderness?

She slowly opened her lids.

"Ah, you're awake. Good."

She was being held by a handsome young man with great dark eyes, a sweet smile—A turban!

Savage.

She started to struggle.

"No. No." He held her immobile with surprising strength for one so slim. "I mean you no harm. I'm Kadar ben Arnaud."

Her eyes blazed up at him. "Saracen."

"Armenian, but my father was a Frank. In truth, my mother's people have proved more civilized than my father's." He gazed soberly down at her. "And I'm not of the band who attacked you. You were with the caravan from Constantinople?"

"Let me go."

He released her at once.

She rolled away from him and scrambled to her knees.

"You see, I don't hold you captive. I wish only the best for you."

She could not trust him.

Yet there was nothing but gentleness in his expression.

But there had been that other man who was neither gentle nor merciful.

She glanced around but saw no one else in sight, only a single horse a dozen yards away.

"They've gone away." He set the water skin before her. "More water? I don't think Ware gave you enough."

She looked at the container as if it were a scorpion about to sting her.

"It's not poisoned." He smiled. "You drank for Ware, now drink for me."

His smile was the most irresistible she had ever seen, and his tone was like dark velvet. She felt a little of her fear subside. "I don't know this . . . Ware."

"Lord Ware of Dundragon. You struck him several times. I'd think some memory would linger."

Cold blue eyes, gleaming mail and helmet, bruising pain in her shoulders. "He hurt me."

"He meant no harm."

Hard, ruthless face, eyes without mercy. "He meant to hurt me."

"He has a great anger in him and he's not a gentle man. I admit he often takes the most direct path to reach his destination. Unfortunately, it's sometimes also the roughest. What is your name?"

She hesitated.

He smiled and pushed the water skin toward her. "Drink."

She picked up the water skin and drank deep. The water was warm but flowed like mead down her parched throat.

"Not too much," Kadar warned. "It may have to last us awhile. Ware and I had a small disagreement regarding your disposition, and he can be very stubborn."

She lowered the water skin. "I . . . thank you." She searched her memory for his name. "Kadar."

"It was my pleasure. . . ." He looked at her inquiringly.

"Thea. I am Thea of Dimas." Panic rushed through her as she suddenly realized her basket was no longer on her back. "You took my basket," she accused fiercely. "Where is it?"

"On the ground in back of you. I don't steal from women, Thea of Dimas."

The relief flowing through her was immediately followed by shame when she met his reproachful gaze. How foolish to feel shame for doubting a stranger.

He tossed another leather pouch to her. "Dates and a little mutton. How long have you been without food?"

"I ran out yesterday." But she had limited herself to only a few bites a day since she had escaped the attack. She opened the pouch and tried not to snatch at a piece of meat. It was dried and tough, but she chewed blissfully. "You don't wear armor. The others wore armor."

"Because I'm not a soldier. I regard those who battle with lance and sword as barbaric. I prefer my wits."

"You call this Lord Ware barbaric?"

"On occasion. But he has known nothing but battle since he was a child, so he must be forgiven."

She had no intention of forgiving him when her jaw still ached from his blow. Those light-blue eyes and aura of power were imprinted on her memory as vividly as the bruise he'd inflicted.

"He's a Frankish knight?"

He shook his head. "Ware is a Scot."

"Scot?" She had never heard that term. "From where?"

"Scotland is a country far more barbarous than this one. It's north of England."