

DAUGHTER OF WOLVES



LIA PATTERSON

Published by Lia Patterson

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ONE

I won him in a game of dice. I never owned him, though. He owned himself and always would, but I didn't discover that until much later.

It was the mare that caught my attention. Clean limbed, deep-chested, with a delicate head and wide nostrils that longed to eat the wind, she stood tied to a post in the courtyard of the caravanserai, flicking her tail in boredom. Compared to the shaggy pack horses tethered next to her, she looked as out of place as an opal amongst pebbles.

I urged Shar over and slid from the saddle. The mare pricked her ears forward, touched muzzles with Shar and gave a low whinny. When I stroked her neck, admiring her lustrous white coat, she shook her mane, obviously very much aware of her charms, then deigned to breathe into my hand. Not only a beauty, but also delightful manners. Quite unlike my own irascible gelding, who now snaked his head round, showing yellow teeth, when somebody approached from behind.

The man jumped back hastily. “My apologies, lady, I did not want to startle you.”

I snorted. “You didn’t.” As if I’d let anybody creep up on me.

Short and stocky, the man was dressed in a red tunic and loose trousers of the style often seen in these borderlands. At his waist he wore a broad sash embroidered with peonies for luck and fastened with a jade buckle in the shape of intertwined carp.

He let his eyes slide over me, from my dusty boots up my faded trousers to my blouse sewn with beads of turquoise. There they lingered a moment too long; the day had been hot and I had undone the laces.

“Ah, you’re Khotai,” he said. “The famous horse people.”

I shrugged. Though I suppose it was better than what we were usually called, the wolves of the steppe. Not without reason either.

The merchant sidled over to the mare, who ignored him in favour of rubbing noses with Shar. “I see my horse has caught your fancy. She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

I knew better than to praise a horse that I might be interested in buying. “I’ve seen finer.” Briefly, I extended my mage senses, establishing that besides the knife carried openly at his belt, the man had another one concealed in his boot and one in a sheath along his upper arm. Not that this worried me overmuch, but it always paid to be prepared.

“Look at those legs, slim as a dancing girl’s,” the merchant said. “Her carriage is like that of a maiden in the first flush of youth and the lustre of her eyes would put a courtesan to shame.” Belatedly it seemed to dawn on him that comparing the horse to a ravishing woman might not have the same effect on me as on his male customers. His voice petered out.

“Hmm.” I slid a hand along one of the mare’s legs.

“She’s fast too,” he added. “And just look at her coat: glowing like a pearl. You will not find another like her in these parts.”

That at least was true. A quick glance at the horses clustering round the water trough, all that the little caravanseraï sheltered, had already shown me that none of them was worth bargaining for. And I needed another horse. The faster the better.

“Hmm,” I said again, not giving the man anything. “I suppose she’s quite a pretty colour.” I took Shar’s bridle and began to lead him away. “Now I need to see about my evening meal though.”

“My sweet lady, won’t you stay?” he exclaimed and took my arm. “You’ve hardly had a proper look at her yet.”

I gave him an icy stare, put my hand on the hilt of the curved dagger at my belt and pointedly looked down at his fingers on my arm. Hastily he let go. “No offence intended, lady.”

“None taken,” I replied, but with no warmth in my voice.

The man took a step back. Sometimes the Khotai’s reputation as ruthless killers was rather useful. It had kept a number of would-be human predators like this one at bay over the course of my journey, though at times I could not help feeling like a toothless dog masquerading as a fierce wolf. Hopefully they would never discover how little I shared my people’s relish for bloodshed.

The merchant licked his lips. “My profoundest apologies. Lady, I am Behzad tal Hassar, at your service. Allow me to make amends by offering you some tea and perhaps a small repast.”

I hesitated. While I did not like the manner of his invitation one bit, I did want an opportunity to start bargaining for the mare. “You are most kind,” I finally answered. “I just need to see to my horse first.”

“Oh, please, let my slave do that.” Without waiting for an answer, he clapped his hands. “Kiarash, you lazy dog! Come here at once.”

From beyond the other horses a man came shuffling over. The merchant aimed a kick his way, which he avoided with surprising nimbleness. “Master?” he asked.

“Water and feed this lady’s horse, then groom it. And mind you take proper care of it, or I’ll tan your hide.”

The man ducked his head. “Yes, master. Nice horse. Pretty horse.”

I looked at him dubiously, for his long black hair hung in lanky strands over his face, and his trousers and shirt were threadbare and stained. On his approach a pungent combination of horse manure and unwashed man wafted over. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to give Shar into his care.

Behzad seemed to guess my reservations. “Kiarash takes care of all our horses. He’s touched in the head, but he knows how to brush a coat until it gleams.” He patted the mare’s rump. “Just look at my beauty here.”

It was the mare’s behaviour that decided me: ignoring the merchant, she turned to Kiarash and gently blew against his chest. The slave stood hunched over and had his head lowered submissively, but I saw him reach out a quick hand and stroke her.

“Very well,” I said and removed my saddlebags, my bow and quiver of arrows. “Thank you.”

Turning to Shar, I told him to behave. I had spoken in Sikhandi to the merchant, as it was the recognised trade speech in these lands, but with the gelding I used my own language. I grinned to myself. Shar could take care of himself anyway, at least he had never stood any nonsense from me.

Whereas I had merely paid a small fee to the master of the caravanserai to spread my blankets beneath one of the arches set

into the wall, Behzad had rented a couple of rooms facing the central courtyard.

But when he asked me inside, I shook my head. “It’s been a hot day, I would much rather sit out here and enjoy the evening air.”

“Of course,” Behzad answered with an ingratiating smile.

Poor Kiarash got called away from grooming Shar to spread a carpet just outside the door and fetch cushions, so we could sit and watch the going-ons of the caravanserai. I settled down with my back to the wall. While the merchant did not have a Khotai warrior’s trained strength, nevertheless he was burly and thickset, and I had no desire to court trouble. I had plenty of that already! As long as we sat in the courtyard, the guards would enforce the trading peace – what happened inside the rooms was a different matter altogether.

A huge tash tree spread its broad leaves over the courtyard, and with the coming of the night a swarm of ganda finches settled amongst its branches, chirping sleepily. The open plains of the steppe were parched by the summer sun at this time of the year, the grass yellow and sere, but I had noticed how the vegetation had grown more plentiful over the last few days. Located as it was at the foot of the mountains, the caravanserai had its well fed by underground streams, allowing the cultivation of grapes.

Behzad offered me some of these, together with a cup of green tea, which I accepted gratefully: it had been a long, dusty ride. I observed the merchant out of the corner of my eye. He seemed prosperous enough, but while his clothes were of good make, they had seen plenty of wear.

I wondered where he had picked up a horse of the quality of the mare, but knew better than to ask. Here in the borderlands, there was often little difference between bandit and merchant. As long as no irate former owner turned up, I didn’t really care.

By and by, more men joined us, Behzad's trading partners who had formed a caravan with him. They eyed me with open curiosity, but politely enough. Several of them had knives hidden about their person, but that was hardly unusual in a place like this.

"You honour us greatly with your company, Lady..."

Behzad said, letting his voice trail off suggestively.

"Javaneh," I supplied. The rules of hospitality demanded that I give him my real name, but I did not think it would matter.

He raised an eyebrow. "Javaneh? That's a Sikhandi name."

"Yes." If he wanted an explanation of how I had been given a name in the language of the Khotai's hereditary enemies, he would not get it from me.

He must have realised as much. "A name as beautiful as the lady who owns it," he declared. "And what brings you here?"

"Business."

"Ah. Are you travelling west?"

"Yes, I am." This was no secret, as I had already asked the caravanserai's master about the onward road. There would be no more certain shelter for several days, not until I reached the fort on the Zhubin Pass, the gateway into the Empire of Sikhand. One more reason I needed a second horse.

"We're heading south ourselves, but I've been that way many times before." Behzad proceeded to advise me on what route to take. I stored away the information, though I did not trust him much. However, he seemed determined to be friendly and chatted away about what wares he traded, boasting of his success.

As the swift southern dusk fell, he offered me rice wine, but I declined, for I wanted a clear mind. Behzad and his friends showed no such restraint, and after the first few cups their eyes traced my neckline rather too often.

It was obvious I was travelling alone, and unattached women were rare in these lands, young ones even more so.

However, I had learnt how to deal with that. When I took out my knife, its blade long and deadly sharp, and cleaned it with a soft cloth, they hastily looked away. You did not trifle with Khotai women – not even half-bloods.

Seeing that the slave had finished with the horses, Behzad called him over to build a fire, then sent him off to fetch a selection of dishes from the vendors who had set up their stalls in the courtyard.

Despite my polite protests, he insisted on treating me to the meal. “Please, Lady Javaneh, you’d honour us greatly by breaking your fast with us.”

I did have some coin in my saddlebags, could in fact sense the metal calling to me through the canvas that held it, but I had no idea how long the money would have to last, so I accepted gracefully. If he thought to lure me into his bed this way, he would find out otherwise.

Kiarash came back carrying two large bowls of spicy lentil stew, dumplings and rice, then was sent back for more. The food smelt delicious and I thought I saw him swipe some small pasties and hide them away amongst his clothes. The men paid him no attention, only cuffing him every now and again over some clumsiness.

“You have finished grooming the lady’s horse?” Behzad asked him. “I’m warning you, I want a proper job, no rushing.”

The slave ducked his head. “Proper job, master,” he mumbled. “Kiarash promise.” The slave collar on his neck had chafed him raw.

Behzad waved him away. “In that case make yourself useful shaking out my bedding and see to it that my privy is clean. Don’t just stand around!” As the slave ran to do his bidding, Behzad turned to me. “A complete dimwit. I swear there’s nothing

in his head except how to shirk work. I don't know why I bother to feed that ungrateful wretch."

Because otherwise he'd have to clean his privy himself? But I just murmured an agreement.

"Still, the Elements reward those who look after the simple in mind," Behzad went on in a self-satisfied voice. "That's why I took him on."

"Took him on?"

One of the other men guffawed. "He sold himself to Behzad for a bowl of rice a day."

"Saw the mare and said he liked horses," another added.

They all laughed at how they had taken advantage of the poor man's simplicity. What kind of life had he led that he would trade his freedom for a full stomach? It was difficult to tell under all the grime covering him, but Kiarash seemed little older than myself. However, while I felt sorry for him, there was nothing I could do to help. I had more than enough worries of my own.

Behzad leant back on his cushions and played with the jade ornament that fastened his sash. "Of course it's not surprising he liked my mare. She's a beauty, isn't she?"

"Quite pretty," I agreed in a bored voice. "Though I'm not sure about her stamina."

He chuckled. "Admit it, Lady Javaneh, she has caught your eye."

I shrugged. "Perhaps." Were we finally settling down to some serious bargaining?

"Ah! Now with anybody else I would have said that I could not possibly part with my beloved horse, not even for all the riches of the Emperor of Sikhand."

"Indeed?" I lifted an eyebrow.

“But I’ve taken a fancy to you,” he added. Something unsavoury glittered in his eyes. “And who wouldn’t, faced with your charming company.”

The man was full of empty compliments. I said nothing, just kept a polite expression of enquiry on my face.

Behzad spread his hands. “So I’ll give you the chance to win her.”

“What?”

He smiled. “A beauty for a beauty: flowing white mane and a coat lustrous as a pearl against raven hair and soft ivory skin...”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the other men exchange grins. “What do you mean?” I asked, mystified.

Behzad took out a leather bag from his sleeve and opened it. “Let’s have a little game,” he said, spreading a handful of dice on the carpet in front of me. “You win, you get the mare for free.”

My mind was still catching up with his extraordinary proposition. “And if I lose?”

“Then you’re mine.”



I recoiled. “What? Certainly not.”

Behzad’s smile widened. He leant forward. “Why not? Think about it, Lady Javaneh. A few throws of the dice, no more, and you might own two horses instead of one. And what a horse. I would not part with her to anybody but you.”

He made it sound as if I were sure to win. But I wasn’t stupid. “No, thank you,” I answered. “I might just possibly be interested in buying her, but I will not gamble my liberty away.”

Behzad took a sip of rice wine. “The mare is not for sale.”

So that was how the wind blew. I hesitated, for I wanted another horse for speed. However, my need wasn’t desperate enough to make me take that kind of chance. Shar and I would manage.

I was just about to refuse the bet, when I noticed something: my bag of coins and the knives hidden about Behzad were not the only metal I perceived near me. Could it be?

Everywhere about the caravanserai there were bits of metal, and so far I'd kept my mage senses furled up on themselves to avoid the confusion of too many impressions. But now I carefully extended a tendril of awareness. The familiar rich taste of my silver coins, bright and playful copper mixed amongst them, keen iron from the knives, calling out to shape it. And very faintly...the dull, heavy throb of lead.

Pretending that I was still considering Behzad's offer, I picked up the dice. And sure enough: inside them I felt small pips of metal.

They were loaded.

I opened my mouth to make an accusation, but realised to do so would be to give myself away. But suddenly another idea hit me. I looked up at Behzad who was watching me as a glutton might watch a tasty morsel. "You're willing to have your bet witnessed by the master of the caravanserai?"

He exhaled his breath softly. "Certainly, Lady Javaneh."

Playing for time, I weighed the dice in my hand, concentrating on locating the small pieces of lead. It was cleverly done, for every dice was loaded in favour of a different side. I considered my options. Having the master of the caravanserai witnessing the bet would assure that Behzad could not easily go back on the terms, at least not for tonight. And the next day I would be gone.

Sudden movement behind Behzad caught my attention. Kiarash stood in the door to the merchant's room and to my astonishment was shaking his head violently. Had he listened to our conversation and was trying to warn me? Noticing my distraction, Behzad started to turn round, but the slave had already ducked back into the room.

"Still, the stakes are hardly fair," I said impulsively. Perhaps there was a way I could help that poor wretch after all.

“What do you mean?” Behzad asked.

“If I win, I get a horse,” I pointed out. “If you win, you get not only me, but also all my belongings, including my horse.” Slaves owned no property. They *were* property.

Caught off guard, he hesitated. “My mare is not just any horse.”

“As you said yourself: a beauty for a beauty,” I answered. “But I have a proposition for you. I’m willing to wager my person and my belongings against the mare and that slave of yours.”

“Kiarash? That useless—” He swallowed his surprise. “Well, I suppose it’s only fair. He’s very good with animals, a hard working lad, straight limbs, good teeth.” He made the man sound like a horse!

Behzad did not seem to notice at all, instead he took a deep draught of his rice wine. “So, Lady Javaneh, shall we have a little game?”

For one last moment I hesitated, then I looked him straight in the eye. “Yes.”

A predatory grin spread across his face. “Very good. I like a spirited woman.”

In his bed, no doubt. But I said nothing as he sent for the master of the caravanserai and we set out the terms of our bet in writing. Already Behzad regarded me with a possessive gleam in his eyes, as if he could not wait to get his hands on me. The idea made me shudder with distaste and I began to regret my impulsive decision. But it was too late to back out now.

The news of the bet had spread and many of the other merchants congregated to watch the game. Nothing like a bit of free entertainment! There was a circle of curious faces around us, not unfriendly exactly, but certainly none of them would lift as much as a little finger to help me if I lost.

While waiting for the master of the caravanserai, we had agreed on the rules of the game and now Behzad motioned for me to choose the six dice we would play with. This was supposed to ensure a fair contest, but of course Behzad had no such thing in mind.

I pretended to examine the dice for regular sides, but in reality I picked the ones that had the largest nuggets of lead in them, making them the easiest to manipulate. Behzad observed my choice closely, no doubt already calculating his strategy.

It was his turn to start. When I handed him the dice, he let his fingers linger on mine. "I should have warned you, lady, that the Elements favour me greatly in this game," he said with a suggestive leer.

I didn't doubt it. "We'll see," I answered. Kiarash had squeezed into a corner behind Behzad, I noticed, watching us intently.

Being the challenger, Behzad got to throw first. In the traditional Sikhandi manner, the dice had the five elements Fire, Earth, Wood, Metal and Water engraved on the sides, while the sixth side was left blank. With a practised flick of the wrist, the merchant rolled the dice the first time, made his pick which ones to keep, repeated the process with the remaining dice, then threw the third and final time.

Three pairs, called the Tower: a good result. Even so I thought it could be beaten. We had agreed to play for a total of five rounds and this was only the first, but I wanted to develop a solid lead.

Yet when I held the dice in my hands, I found that it was more difficult than I had anticipated to shift the weight to where it would favour me. After all I couldn't very well hold every single dice in front of my eyes and concentrate on it. In the end I changed the weights rather haphazardly by feel.

I paid for it: the Gate, two pairs only.

We each had a bowl for the winning points by our side. Now the master of the caravanserai tossed a copper coin in Behzad's. It tinkled merrily, mocking me. My mouth suddenly dry, I swallowed. Had I overreached myself? Behzad certainly seemed to think so, for he wore a self-satisfied grin. One of his friends elbowed him in the ribs and murmured something in his ear, which made the merchant chuckle.

"The night is still young," he answered. The other man laughed in reply and cast a look of envy at him.

Behzad threw for the second time. It was obvious that he had a lot of practise at this game, for he made his choices quickly, without hesitation. Fire, Wood, Earth: three pairs again. I pushed my misgivings aside and concentrated on the dice. This time it went better and I too scored three pairs. An encouraging result, but I needed to make up my loss of the first round. The winning point still lay in Behzad's bowl.

"Well done, lady," he said condescendingly. "There's nothing more pleasant than whiling away the time with a lovely woman...playing games."

It was perfectly obvious what kind of games he had in mind. Many of the men watching us acknowledged this sally with unconcealed laughter. I began to wonder whether I would be able to kill him when alone with him, but in my heart I knew that it wouldn't be easy. Khotai women had a fierce reputation, so he would take no chances.

And always at the edge of my mind there hovered the familiar fear. Behzad might find that he would only enjoy me for a very brief time – unfortunately that wasn't a reassuring thought at all. Taking a firm grip on myself, I squashed my forebodings. The game was far from over yet.

Behzad picked up the dice. “Elements, favour me,” he called the traditional appeal and rolled them.

And they did. Water twice and three times Metal: the Elephant.

My own element was betraying me. With a sense of injustice I collected the dice. Suddenly I frowned: they felt different somehow. I realised that Behzad must have exchanged some of them without me noticing. The cheat! Yet I could prove nothing.

However, these new dice were loaded too. Perhaps I could use that against him. Gently probing for the metal, this time I did not try to change the weights, but instead made a guess which way they were most likely to fall. And almost as if making up for betraying me, three Metal came at the first throw and the next one wielded three Earth.

“The Palace,” the crowd muttered.

I smiled in satisfaction when the master of the caravanserai threw a coin in my bowl. We were even.

At the back somebody laughed. “Hey, Behzad,” the man called, “the Khotai wench is beating you. How does that feel?”

Behzad frowned. “Enough fooling around,” he snapped. “I’ll show her who’s master.” He grabbed the dice and threw them. But the Elements had turned against him, all he had at the end were two pairs. He spat a curse.

My chance. I couldn’t help grinning in triumph as I reached for the dice and rolled them. The first throw came up all different elements, except for two Earth. I hesitated. Should I keep the single pair and build on that, or try to exchange one of the duplicate Earths for the blank that would make a Wheel of Heaven and give me victory?

The Elements were with me and I had two more throws. So I went for the second option. But the next go only yielded Water,

useless to me. Opposite me Behzad leant forward, his smile intact again. Biting my lip, I concentrated on the dice, but it only had a tiny nugget of lead inside it. I rolled it for the third time.

Water again.

Behzad slapped his thigh. “You’ll be mine yet,” he chuckled.

Another copper coin tinkled in his bowl. I cursed myself for relying on my luck. Now I had to win the next round just to stay in the game. If I lost...

Behzad had been observing me closely. He turned round to Kiarash and whispered something to the slave that sent him wriggling through the crowd towards the merchant’s room. Next he collected the dice and leisurely rolled them round in his hand. He had thick, powerful fingers, I noticed, calloused from handling animals, the fingernails rimmed with dirt.

A flick of the wrist and the dice fell on the carpet. Too fast to follow, he picked up his choice and threw again. And again.

The men around us exclaimed with surprise. There it was: The Wheel of Heaven that had eluded me just now. I swore. He must have cheated somehow.

Behzad swept up the dice and showed them to the crowd. “See how a true master plays the game.” His friends slapped him on the back in congratulation, thinking he had as good as won.

Which he had – only a Full Temple, six times the same element, topped a Wheel of Heaven. Could I prove that he had manipulated the dice? If broken open, surely the bits of lead would show. Yet would anybody listen to me? The crowd was by no means sober anymore and seemed to consider it good sport to watch a woman, one of the feared Khotai as well, brought low. Several of his friends were already offering to buy me off Behzad when he tired of me!

I reached for the dice, which Behzad had thrown negligently on the carpet, just as Kiarash came back from his errand. Bowing submissively, he handed his master a small bag, before crouching down in his place in the merchant's shadow. For a moment our eyes met. I thought I saw pity in his, but he quickly looked down.

Behzad opened the bag, making sure he had my attention, took out the contents and spread them on his lap. The men around him craned their necks to see what it was. They sniggered.

An iron slave collar, gleaming dully. Leather straps. A whip, the handle worn smooth.

“Well, Javaneh,” Behzad said. “Your turn, I believe.” He was obviously enjoying himself.

Anger ignited in my belly. So he liked to have women in his power? I regarded him with narrowed eyes. The leather straps might be tricky, but just let him put that collar on me and I would show him a thing or two. He thought to intimidate me, but I had faced worse things than slavery of the body. I bared my teeth in a smile at him, and his self-satisfied expression faltered.

Slowly, I rolled the dice round in my hand. There was not the smallest fragment of lead in them. I felt no surprise. Obviously Behzad had played this particular trick many times before and was skilled at exchanging the dice by sleight of hand. He would not leave himself open to an accusation of cheating.

My first roll. A mix of elements: two Wood, one Fire, one Metal, the rest blank. I regarded my result and pondered the possibilities. Two dice exchanged for Earth and Water would bring me The Wheel of Heaven. But that wasn't enough, Behzad would still win by one point. Try a Full Temple with Wood? Go for Metal, my own element? Or...

I picked up Fire, Metal, Wood, leaving only the two blank dice. A murmur went through the crowd when they realised what I was doing.

Second roll. Two Water, one Metal. Only one more blank. Behzad had regained his confidence and sat there, gently fondling the slave collar.

I told myself that I had chosen my path. To falter now would only mean certain defeat. I picked up Water and Metal, leaving three blanks lying on the carpet. Briefly I held the dice to my forehead and closed my eyes. Was this my last moment of freedom?

“Elements help me,” I whispered. It seemed appropriate to appeal to my mother’s gods, though they had always seemed distant and impersonal, compared to the spirits that inhabited the Khotai’s lands.

I threw the dice.

They rolled and spun for what seemed like a small eternity, coming to rest one after the other.

Blank.

Another blank.

The last one settled.

Blank.

“Release from the Wheel,” a man in the crowd whispered.

I exhaled my breath slowly. The one throw that ended any game, but that most players didn’t attempt, out of superstition. Those favoured by the Elements so highly usually did not lead quiet or peaceful lives.

The master of the caravanserai upended Behzad’s bowl. “Lady Javaneh has won,” he announced.

Our audience slowly dispersed amongst murmurs of speculation. Several of the men made the sign of the Wheel. I faced Behzad. The merchant looked as if he had bitten into a

lemon, and his hands curled into fists. But he knew when he was beaten.

“The mare is yours, lady,” he said. “And so is this useless whelp here.” He got up and aimed a kick at Kiarash, but the slave quickly twisted aside.

“Leave him be,” I snapped. “He’s mine now.”

Behzad sneered. “I suppose you wanted a fresh body between your blankets. Is that why you wagered for him?” A deadly insult to any Sikhandi lady’s virtue.

Slowly I rose to my feet, one hand on my knife. Behzad began to look uneasy. But I was no Sikhandi lady. What did I care what he thought of me.

I laughed in Behzad’s face. “Any day, I’d take this miserable wretch, simple of mind and stinking of manure, in my bed – rather than you.”

The leather straps and slave collar had fallen to the floor. I kicked them away. “Let’s go,” I said to Kiarash and motioned for him to pick up my saddlebags, while I took the bow and quiver of arrows.

“Yes, mistress,” he mumbled.

Poor simpleton. What should I do with him? I had included him in the bet only by impulse and had no intention of taking him with me. Vaguely I had planned to set him free, yet if I left him here, he would surely just fall victim to Behzad and his friends again. I didn’t doubt that the merchant would enslave him once more, given the chance.

Well, I would consider my options later. It had been a long, tiring day, crowned by an even more exhausting evening. What kind of night I might have had, I didn’t even want to think about. I shuddered. It had been foolish to make that bet and I had escaped only by the grace of the Elements. How often had my brothers

chided me for giving in to mad impulses. I pushed that thought away.

The small arch that I had rented only offered shelter for one person, but it was a dry night, so it would just have to do. Kiarash fetched the horses, and from a neighbouring merchant I managed to acquire a cheap saddle. It was threadbare, the leather cracked in places, but it fit the mare and would make changing horses much easier.

I was still hungry, so I sent Kiarash off to buy some steamed buns. When I shared some with him, he gobbled them down as if it was the first food he'd had for days. I sighed and gave him a coin to buy himself more. Had Behzad not fed him at all?

Finally we could bed down for the night. This presented the next problem: I would not have minded Kiarash absconding during the night – one less matter to worry about – but not with my belongings. Luckily Shar was trained to guard his rider's sleep. So I tied the horses' reins loosely together and used my bags as a pillow.

"You sleep over there," I told the slave, pointing to a place hopefully downwind of me. "And stay away from my horse. He's vicious when defending me."

"Yes, mistress." He slunk away and curled into a ball against the wall.

I had never realised what a burden on the conscience a slave could be. With a muttered curse I dug out my spare blanket and tossed it to him. I would just have to wash it before using it again.

When I settled down to sleep, Shar lowered his head and blew softly in my hair. I reached up and scratched him under the forelock. "You'll watch over me, won't you, my sweet," I whispered.

He gave a low nicker. My faithful friend for many years, ever since my father had given him to me. At need he would have died for me.

Unfortunately there were some things he could not protect me from.

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