

ELEPHANT THIEF



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Published by Lia Patterson

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

*For those of you who have read my novel **Bride to the Sun**, this story is set in the same universe, but some three hundred years before Shay and Medyr's time. One of Medyr's ancestors will play a small role in the narrative though.*



In the presence of the mighty, keep your mouth shut, my father had once told me in one of his more sober moments. Excellent advice that might have saved me a lot of trouble, but of course I didn't heed it.

Although the audience had started none too badly really, with Prince Bahram offering polite words of condolence on my father's death. When I bowed and murmured my thanks, he motioned to one of his concubines to pour me a cup of tea. The thick canvas of his tent muted the constant noise of the army camp around us, and silken draperies on the wall created the illusion of a secluded space sheltering us from the world outside.

Prince Bahram leant back on his cushions and took a draft from the water pipe resting beside him, making it gurgle loudly. "A good man, Lord Ardavan. I will miss our weekly Shah matches."

Involuntarily I wondered if he knew that my father had

deliberately let him win every now and again. Probably not – Father had been good at that sort of thing. “You’re very kind,” I answered, bowing again. My black hair that I had cut short as a sign of mourning fell in my eyes, and I brushed it back impatiently.

Shrewd, dark eyes regarded me. “You asked to see me, Lady Arisha?”

I hesitated. By all accounts Prince Bahram was more honourable than most of the previous commanders of the Victorious Fifth. We might even have won, if we’d had him from the beginning instead of his predecessor, that butcher Maziar. An Earth mage and true imperial prince, Bahram had somehow fallen out of favour with his brother the emperor and been sent north to this graveyard of men’s reputations. Yet he had not done too badly, had even instituted the unprecedented policy of actually paying the Aneiry villagers for what the army took from them. Sadly, it was too little too late and Prince Bahram was no match for his adversary.

To gain time I sipped my tea, inhaling the delicate scent of jasmine rising from the steaming liquid. Hopefully I would not drop the tiny cup of costly porcelain. “My lord, I feel that lacking a father’s protection, I ought to return to my family in Sikhand,” I said. Surely an innocuous enough response to his question.

He nodded, stroking the mighty paunch gained from imperial banquets. “Very proper. Whereabouts does your family live?”

“My grandfather is the abbot of Mohsen monastery. I thought to go there first.”

That caught his attention and he leant forward. “Your grandfather is Mohsen’s abbot? I seem to recollect he’s from an old lineage of Wood mages. A Fourth Circle family, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Prince Bahram drummed fingers encrusted with rings of

precious stones against the mouthpiece of his water pipe and took another deep draft. “I see. The connection is on your mother’s side, I suppose?”

“Yes, my lord.” Poor Mother had been disowned by her family for marrying below her, but I saw no need to enlighten Prince Bahram about that fact. If he thought me well-connected, I might just have a chance to pull this scheme off. And once we were across the border, there was no need to go begging to my mother’s haughty relatives.

One of the prince’s slaves, probably captured in an army raid, knelt by my side and offered me a plate of sugared dates. Even after a year of living north of the mountains, her flaxen hair and freckled complexion still seemed strange to eyes used to black hair and ivory skin. How different these people were from us – why had that madman Prince Maziar ever thought we could conquer them! But I turned my attention back to Bahram, who was contemplating a plate of candied rose petals with a look of abstraction.

“With your permission, my lord,” I said, trying to sound casual, “I thought that Hami and I could join one of the patrols escorting your couriers south.” I held my breath.

Prince Bahram looked up abruptly. “Ah, I’m afraid there might be a small problem.” He snapped his fingers. “Ask Lord Sattar to attend upon me,” he commanded. One of the slaves went scurrying off.

My heart fell. So my ruse hadn’t worked – Sattar must have talked to the prince beforehand. I sat up straighter. This fight wasn’t over yet!

Silence descended while we waited for the slave to run her errand. Outside, one of the elephants rumbled loudly, the noise even penetrating the thick canvas. Old Makan – I identified him by extending my senses – wanting his dinner. A moment later two

others answered him. Probably the elephant boys were dawdling over their tasks as usual. However, that was no longer my responsibility.

The entrance of the tent swished open and Sattar entered. After a profuse bow to the prince, the Fire mage raked his eyes over me, his gaze sharpening when he noticed my unusual apparel. I had dug out an extravagant triple layer court robe my father had bought me when serving the governor of Roshni province, and the smooth green silk pooled around me.

“Lady Arisha, you look lovelier than ever,” he said, a suave smile on his face.

Under the cover of the wide sleeves I balled my hands into fists, trying hard not to show my dislike of the man. Most women would probably consider his regular features and glossy black hair attractive, but I’d seen him carousing with Father too often to have any illusions about the kind of man he was. Even so, being one of the few mages to serve in the army, he had considerable influence with the prince, who had named him the new Master of Elephants.

I inclined my head. “Lord Sattar.”

He took that as an invitation to settle on the cushions too close to me, his scarlet robe overlapping my green. A subtle reminder that Fire burned Wood?

“Lady Arisha has asked for an escort to return to Sikhand,” Prince Bahram informed him.

“That would be a grievous loss to us,” Sattar said.

“You are too kind,” I pressed out, disliking the man more than ever. “However, I feel I cannot stay in the camp without my father’s protection.” Very proper sentiments for a gently-bred lady and difficult for them to gainsay.

Prince Bahram popped a candied rose petal in his mouth. “There is the question of what to do with her father’s elephant.”

“My mother’s,” I put in. Although Hami had truly been

mine from the moment of my birth. And I his.

The prince waved my objection away. “Whatever.”

“Hami is a prime male,” Sattar threw in. “One of our strongest tuskers. I fear we cannot do without him.”

Well, they would have to! I wouldn’t stand by and see him butchered in a senseless war. But before I could frame a polite objection, the prince leant forward again.

“Lady Arisha, your father was devoted to our campaign. Surely he wouldn’t have wanted to weaken the Victorious Fifth in any way.”

I suppressed a bitter snort. Lately Father had only been devoted to his next wine skin. “My lord, Hami is all I have left. Please, we have served you well...” I let my voice peter out: an appeal to his honour.

Only honour was in short supply this side of the mountains.

Visibly torn, the prince hesitated. “I would of course offer you suitable compensation.”

Blood money! I opened my mouth to protest, when Sattar forestalled me.

“Perhaps there is a solution.” He paused a moment to make sure he had our attention. “As you know, I have always considered Lord Ardavan a dear friend. In fact the last time I saw him, he commended his daughter to my protection.”

Only with difficulty did I hold back a sharp rejoinder. If anything Sattar had seemed to enjoy watching my father making a fool of himself in his cups.

“A solution?” Prince Bahram prompted.

Sattar stroked his moustache. “As Lady Arisha very properly pointed out, our camp is no fitting place for an orphaned gentlewoman on her own. However, I am willing to offer her the shelter and protection of my name...as my wife.”

My mouth dropped open. “You must be joking!”

Sattar stiffened and his eyes narrowed dangerously. “Arisha, I’m warning you—”

“Please!” the prince intervened.

Hastily gathering my wits about me, I bowed to him. “My apologies, my lord. This very...flattering...offer took me by surprise. However, I could not possibly accept it without consulting my grandfather first.” I did my best to look like a helpless female unable to decide anything without the assistance of her menfolk.

Prince Bahram appeared mollified by this explanation, but Sattar knew me better than that and still regarded me through narrowed eyes. “Think well before you refuse me,” he said, the threat in his voice clear. But when Prince Bahram frowned at his words, he suddenly changed tack. “Lady Arisha, please forgive a suitor’s understandable ardour.” The suave smile was back. “I only ask you to consider the mutual benefits that would accrue from such a match.”

That I would get to keep Hami? And Sattar would acquire a competent manager for the elephant camp, for he knew who had really run it, though my father might have had nominal charge of it. Not to forget a body to warm his bed at night? Well, he could wait a long time for that!

“I’d rather take my chances with the Eagle’s men than marry you!” I snapped.

The prince choked on his water pipe. I appealed directly to him. “My lord, what difference does a single elephant make?” They were only staving off the inevitable and everybody knew it.

“The elephant corps is a highly trained fighting force,” Sattar protested. “To remove one of the animals—”

“Oh nonsense! You’ve gathered a motley collection of elephants from logging camps and call that a fighting force?”

His face red with anger, Sattar started to rise. “You dare!”

To my surprise, Prince Bahram waved him to sit down again. “She has a point.” He turned to me. “But what would you have us do?”

“Retreat to Sikhand.” The words were out of my mouth before I could truly consider them. I swallowed hard at the sudden silence that followed. “Forgive me, my lord,” I added, “but as Rastam tal Nasar said: only the general who knows when not to fight will emerge victorious.” He had also written something to the point that you had to know *where* to fight, but I thought better of pointing out that we had no business invading a country that owed us no allegiance.

Prince Bahram raised an eyebrow. He probably had not had many women quote from *On Warfare* at him, yet seemed to take it in his stride. “Retreat is not victory,” he pointed out gently.

I had to admit the truth of that, but at least we would all still be alive. “Could you offer the Aneiry a treaty?”

“Oh, really!” Sattar burst out. “What does a girl know of matters of state?”

The prince sighed. “Yes, unfortunately things aren’t that simple,” he said, not unkindly. “You have to leave these matters to those who have more experience.” He rose from his cushions, indicating that the audience was over. “Lady Arisha, I will speak to you again tomorrow. Why don’t you use the time to consider all your options?”

“Yes, my lord.”

I bowed to him, reminded of another saying: to a prince, losing face is worse than losing ten thousand men.



I slipped out of the tent while Sattar was still taking a wordy farewell from the prince and hurried down one of the lanes

dividing the camp into regular quarters, a plan based on the far away capital of Arrashar that most of us had never seen.

Where to now? By habit I turned towards the healing tents, but stopped. There was nothing there for me anymore. Father had finally found his peace after three weeks of fever, agonising coughing and slow deterioration. I wiped sudden moisture from my eyes. In truth he had left me long ago, that day in the pouring summer rains twelve years ago when my mother had died. I hoped that they would be reunited on the Wheel; he had waited long enough.

More slowly I took the path along the horse pickets that would lead me to our tent – or rather Sattar’s now, for it went with the position of Master of Elephants. Some of the horses whickered a greeting when I went by, so I stopped to pat necks and stroke noses. They looked scruffy with their winter coat shedding in irregular patches and ribs sticking out from lack of proper fodder.

“Poor things,” I murmured. At least the fresh spring grass was already pushing through, yet how many would survive the conflict ahead?

The tent stood empty and forlorn when I reached it. I had freed my father’s two slaves upon his death and they had decided to return to their native village somewhere up in the mountains. Already the tent had that stuffy, uninhabited smell.

I did not pause long, for I had no wish to meet Sattar again. He was not a man who took a refusal gracefully! So I only nipped inside quickly to pick up my mother’s lute in its felt travelling case and my two bags of belongings. Not that I had a lot. Most of the space in the bags was taken up by my father’s books. On top I had placed his prize possession, a folding Shah board with the figures carved from the tusks of one of his former elephants. Before I shouldered them, I looked down at my few possessions: all that I owned fitted into two bags. Well, apart from a few score

hundredweights of elephant! Which I would never give up, I vowed again.

With little regret I left my old home behind. It had never much felt like one anyway, for I had always known that sooner or later Father would decide he wasn't appreciated enough, quarrel with the prince and move on. From childhood, I had learnt not to get attached to places, since we never stayed any length of time. The longest had been four years spent working for the governor of Roshni. We'd had a nice house, and I had enjoyed going to temple school, but of course it hadn't lasted. Still, Hami hadn't liked getting all decked out in tinsel and paint to carry the governor round and preferred the logging camps in the forest.

I turned a corner, and up ahead the picketing line of the elephants came into view. By long habit I checked the spacing, though I would have heard had anything been amiss. But only the low rumbles and contented grumbling of elephants having their evening meal filled the air. The familiar scent of hay wafted over, overlaying the more pungent smell of elephant dung. Some of the boys were busy carting it away, just as with a loud plopping sound one of the elephants produced more.

Emad, the smallest of the boys, groaned loudly. "We've only just cleared Makan's pen! I swear he's doing it deliberately."

I grinned. "Shovelling elephant dung is good for you, it builds up muscle." I knew that Emad's secret ambition was to become a soldier one day. Though I hoped not for a long time yet.

I stroked old Makan's trunk, afterwards passing on to the next animal, checking for dull eyes or cracked skin. But all were well and greeted me with pleasure after my absence spent looking after Father. My heart grew heavy at the thought of having to leave them and the boys in Sattar's charge. Yet what choice did I have?

Suddenly loud trumpeting rent the air. Hami! He flapped his ears excitedly, his trunk snaking out to me. I rushed over.

Warm, moist breath whistled over me and I dropped my bags to hug whatever bits of him I could grab. As I touched his leathery skin, I extended all my senses, reaching out for his firm protection, the sheer reassuring solidity of him. Gently he touched me on the head with his trunk, huffing a question.

Suddenly the tears I had held back so long overflowed my eyes. “Oh, Hami,” I whispered, “Father is dead.”

He stood patiently while I buried my head against his trunk and sobbed out my grief and desolation. When I finally wiped my face on my sleeve and looked up at him, his beautiful amber eyes regarded me gravely. How much did he understand, I wondered. He had certainly grieved at his own mother’s death.

“Now it’s just you and me,” I told him.

That moment somebody cleared their throat behind me, and when I turned round I found Yasaman, the wife of the Master of Archers, standing there. Not much older than myself, she’d always been kind to me.

Now she shifted uncomfortably, her heart-shaped face sad. “Arisha, we heard about your father. I’m so sorry.”

I blew my nose on my much abused sleeve. “Thank you.” How I hated receiving condolences! Each one only seemed to confirm Father’s death all over.

Giving Hami a nervous glance, she placed a hand on my shoulder. “What are you going to do now?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.” Feeling foolish for losing control in front of her, I made a show of inspecting Hami’s pen, checking that the bedding was fresh, his pail of water filled and the restraining ropes not too confining. He didn’t really need them, but the army got nervous at the idea of elephants ambling around freely.

Curious as always, Hami wanted to see what I was doing, and Yasaman jumped back at the massive head turning round. “I

heard Lord Sattar has been named the new Master of Elephants,” she said. “What about you, where will you stay?”

News travelled swiftly in the camp. “I don’t know,” I said. It was the least of my worries, at the worst I could always share Hami’s pen. It wouldn’t be the first time I slept next to him. There was no safer place.

Thoughtfully she smoothed out the gauzy scarf she’d wound round her hair. “I could ask Navid if he minds you staying with us for a few days.”

I didn’t doubt that her husband would agree, for he doted on his pretty wife, but I shook my head. “I’m fine.” At the moment I only wanted Hami’s company.

She regarded me with big eyes. “But what will become of you now, with no family left?”

I bit my lip. There was no need to make me feel even more alone than I did already! “I’ll manage,” I snapped, but felt contrite at once. Yasaman was only trying to help.

“Lord Sattar was looking for you earlier on,” she said in a sudden change of topic.

I bent to slip off Hami’s shackles. He gave an excited rumble, recognising the time for his evening bath. Straightening up, I found Yasaman regarding me closely, which made me wonder how much of my conversation with the prince had been disseminated already. As the saying went: a secret is better shouted out in a forest than whispered in an army camp.

I pulled a face. “He offered to marry me.”

She exhaled her breath in a rush. “So it’s true! I had wondered...”

“I refused him.”

“Arisha!”

“I’d rather marry a toad.” Although toads had lovely eyes and charming personalities once you learnt to see past their ugly

outsides. “Or a slug,” I amended my statement.

“But he’s a lord of the Seventh Circle! And so handsome.” She sounded wistful.

I thought of Yasaman’s husband, grey haired and with a face tanned a leathery dark brown from the weather. But a kind man. “I don’t trust Sattar, there’s something about him that’s not right.” I shuddered at the thought of him taking me to his bed, laying his hands on me. “And Hami doesn’t like him either!”

Hearing his name, the elephant rumbled a query, but Yasaman shook her head. “Really, what does it matter what *he* thinks! Just consider, as Lord Sattar’s wife you would have a fitting position again. And he would keep you safe!”

“Not from himself,” I pointed out.

Yasaman pressed her lips together in exasperation. I touched her on the arm. “I know you’re only trying to help, but it wouldn’t work out. Can you imagine me as a proper lady of the Seventh Circle?” For that was what Sattar no doubt wanted to turn me into.

With a reluctant smile Yasaman shook her head. “I suppose not.”

I clicked my tongue to Hami, who obediently lowered his head and at a sign lifted the leg next to me. Lightly holding on to his big, leathery ear for balance, I stepped on the leg and let him boost me onto his back. A quick twist and I was firmly seated behind his ears, my green robe billowing around me. “Good boy!” I rubbed him on the head, just as he liked it. At another soft command he picked up my bags and handed them up to me with his trunk. “He needs his bath now.”

Craning her head to look up at me, Yasaman sighed. “Very well. But consider my offer; you’re always welcome in our tent.”

Touched, I smiled down at her. “Thank you.”

“Would rather marry a toad,” she murmured, shaking her

head.

I grinned and nudged Hami to move forward. “A nice, juicy one that locks me up on the top of an enchanted mountain, like the girl in the tale. And with no manners.”

Her laughter followed us while with his ponderous, rocking walk Hami ambled past the other elephants, some of whom rumbled a greeting to us. The Victorious Fifth’s elephant corps comprised of twenty-four animals, but they were a mixed bunch with none of them having proper training for war. Prince Bahram had assembled this force from the logging camps on the other side of the mountains, and we had bought him a year’s breathing space by throwing the enemy into confusion, but I wondered how my charges would fare in a real battle. There were several ways to cripple an elephant, all of them bloody and brutal. No doubt the Eagle had found out about them by now. He might be a ruthless killer, but he was no fool.

“He won’t do it to you!” I vowed, stroking Hami’s head. Brave words, yet inside I knew that our position was precarious. With a single stroke of a pen, Prince Bahram could confiscate my elephant, making Hami imperial property. For all I knew, he’d done so already.

Soon we reached the southern gate, where I called a friendly greeting to the guards. “Permission to leave the camp?”

The captain stepped forward, the copper medallions on his topknot that denoted his rank jingling. “Permission granted. But listen, Arisha, please do not take too long, the sun is sinking.”

I nodded obediently, though only an idiot would attack me with Hami around. However, the prince wanted the entire army inside his mage-built walls at night. A bit like a porcupine rolling into a prickly ball, I thought privately.

“I won’t be long,” I promised.

The camp lay in the bend of a river, guarding the ford of the

main trade road leading south. Already the mountains cast their long shadows over the foothills, reaching out for us, while overhead rooks cawed on their way to roosting in the woods. Once, there had been a village surrounded by fields on the opposite side, but that had been abandoned long ago.

Hami splashed through the shallow river to an island in the middle, dotted with a few stunted alders, and the gravel crunched under his weight. On the side facing away from the camp was a narrow beach, sheltered by willow trees green with the fresh leaves of spring, that offered a little privacy.

With Hami's help I slid down from his back and dropped my bags at the foot of one of the willows. I didn't want to get my things wet and Hami liked nothing better than to squirt water at me – he liked to hear me squeal. Quickly I shed my court robe and changed into my customary long tunic worn over loose trousers, stuffing the green silk into my bags with the rest of my clothes.

Hami had already started to splash water all over himself, so I rolled up my trouser legs and with a shudder at the cold melt water joined him. This had been a lot more enjoyable in the summer! Hami didn't mind though, for he had been born in the mountains and knew nothing else. At least with my hair cut short, it would be quicker to dry.

I picked up one of the brushes left lying on the beach for common usage and began to scrub Hami's thick skin. The ungrateful beast promptly drenched me with a spray of icy water!

“Hami!” A good thing I always had spare clothing along.

Suddenly his massive head swung round in the direction of the camp. A moment later I heard it too: hooves striking the ground, coming our way.



Scattering gravel around him, Sattar rounded the corner at a canter, then drew his horse to a halt in front of us. I winced in sympathy at the poor beast having its mouth mauled.

“There you are!” he exclaimed as he swung down. “I’ve been looking for you all over the camp.”

“Well, you’ve found me.” Not bothering to hide my lack of enthusiasm at his presence, I folded my arms on my chest. “What do you want?” Beside me, Hami had gone still, only his ears flapping nervously.

Sattar’s mouth thinned, but he visibly reined in his temper. “I’ve come to ask you to reconsider my offer.”

“There is nothing to reconsider.”

“The position of my wife is an honourable one! The prince himself has named me Master of Elephants.”

A reminder that Hami’s fate still hung in the balance? When he saw my hesitation, he pressed his point. “I’m sure I could

convince the prince to let you keep your elephant.”

“To have him butchered in battle? No thanks!”

His hands bunched into fists. “You coddle that beast too much anyway! But that will end now that I’m in charge.” He took a step forward and raked me over with hard eyes from my bare feet to my soaked tunic. “Any other maiden would dream of such a proposal! Do you think many noblemen will line up to offer their hand to the daughter of a lowly Ninth Circle lord who spent half his life in his cups?”

I clenched the brush so hard my fingers hurt. “Leave my father out of this!” Sensing my mood, Hami grumbled a low warning, but Sattar ignored him.

“Not a copper to your name and still you’re looking down your nose at me,” he snarled. “Remember: Fire burns Wood.”

Really, what did the circles of dominion that ruled the balance between the five magical elements have to do with this? “Is that what you want in a wife?” I threw at him. “Somebody to threaten and dominate? Well, I’m not interested in the position!”

His handsome face twisting into an ugly grimace, he stepped closer still. “Always so high and mighty, the Lady Arisha, making me look a fool in front of the prince! But that will change.” He seized my shoulders and brought his mouth down on mine.

Taken by complete surprise, for a moment I didn’t know how to react. He must be mad! When I started to struggle against his grip, Sattar gave a breathless laugh and grasped me closer, mauling me with his lips. I gagged at his foul taste and tried to wriggle free, but he caught my arm and twisted it round my back, trapping me against his chest. Had he done this before?

Hami trumpeted loudly, making Sattar curse. “Stupid beast!”

Fire flared in a circle around us and Hami squealed in alarm. No! Finding unexpected strength, I wrenched my arm free

and pushed the wet brush into Sattar's face, making him stumble. How dare he frighten my elephant! I kicked him in the shin. Sattar hissed with anger and raised his hand to strike me.

But the blow never connected: a black shadow loomed over him and suddenly he found himself lifted high in the air. Sattar shouted in surprise, but before I could react, Hami sent him flying into the river. He landed with a splash in the shallows and did not move again.

I gasped for breath, then ran over to him, Hami following me anxiously. Sattar lay with his face in the water and I had to turn him over to check his pulse. His hair had come undone and slid like wet snakes across my hands. Had Hami killed him? Clammy skin met my searching fingers, but there at his throat... I released my breath in relief when I felt a feeble pulse. Alive!

"Fire burns Wood," I muttered savagely, "but elephant quenches Fire, you fool!"

Shouts sounded from the direction of the camp. Hami's trumpeting must have alerted them and help should arrive soon. Suddenly I went cold inside. What would happen to Hami now? He had attacked a human, and not just anyone, but the Master of Elephants himself. It didn't matter that he had only wanted to protect me, they would keep him chained up constantly and away from the others. And what else would Sattar do to him in revenge? Could I go and talk to Prince Bahram again? But even if he believed me, he needed Sattar and wouldn't interfere with him. In an instant I saw it all in my mind's eye. Given the choice between marrying Sattar and keeping Hami or being sent across the mountains without him, what would I do?

The shouts were getting louder! "Hami, come here," I ordered. They would not punish my elephant. I would not let them!

Though reluctant to touch the man, Hami helped me carry Sattar to the beach where we unceremoniously dumped him. I ran

to pick up my things and had Hami boost me onto his back again. “Quick!”

We splashed into the water and were halfway across the ford by the time a troop of guards came into view. Their captain called out to me, but I just waved and pointed at Sattar. “Get him to a healer!”

Once we reached the other shore, I urged Hami into a run. The road plunged into the woods and as the trees flashed by, I hung on grimly to my precarious perch on Hami’s neck.

Overhead, the rooks flapped into the air, protesting loudly.



Before long, Hami had to slow down, but he had bought me some time: time to think. Had I just done something very foolish? Anyway, there was no going back. I swallowed hard when the enormity of my situation began to sink in. I was alone and on the run in hostile territory.

While I owed no direct allegiance to Prince Bahram, taking one of the elephants could be construed as sabotage. And Sattar was certain to put the worst possible interpretation on my acts! Of course I could accuse him of assaulting me, but would the prince believe me – or even care? Imperial law was not known for its leniency, so what would they do to us if they caught us? In my dismay, I reached out for Hami’s familiar strength. Sensing the turmoil of my mind, the elephant trumpeted anxiously. That steadied me. Hami depended on me to keep my head and look after him.

What should I do? My first impulse had simply been to put as much distance as possible between me and those who would take Hami away from me. But I could not stay in a country at war, I had to find a refuge somewhere. In Sikhand with my grandfather?

A man I had never met, but my closest blood relative and an influential mage by all accounts. Would he shelter us? What if Prince Bahram claimed that I had stolen Hami, would my grandfather send me straight back?

I decided to tackle that problem when faced with it. The sun had sunk behind the mountains and shadows pooled in the woods. Would that help or hinder me? The tall oaks with their gnarled roots seemed to watch me. I told myself that the stories of Aneiry rebels hiding in the forest, ready to cut any unwary traveller's throat, were grossly exaggerated. Rumour even had it that Sikhandi deserters running for the border found their way completely unmolested, a clever move by the Eagle that had greatly increased Prince Bahram's problems with discipline. And surely I had an impressive protector?

"First we have to get away from our own people anyway," I muttered to Hami. Would they pursue us despite the gathering darkness? I thought so. Well, I could do something about that.

I signalled Hami to stop and slid down to the ground. To my annoyance, my knees buckled for a moment. "Pull yourself together!" I admonished myself.

While the elephant began to denude some hazelnut bushes of their greenery, I crouched down and extended my senses to that level beyond hearing or sight. Drawing small amounts of energy from all the growing things around me, layer by layer I built up a barrier.

"You do not want to go beyond this point," I whispered. "Turn back."

With nature waking up for spring, there was plenty of energy available to a Wood mage like me. I wove it into the barrier until to my inner eyes a glowing net extended across the road and into the woods either side. No horse, hound or elephant pursuing us would cross that line, not without great effort.

Even so we would have to get off the road as soon as possible. The prince had established garrisons at regular intervals along it and I doubted that they would fail to notice an elephant sneaking past them. While we continued at a more moderate pace, I kept looking for a good place to enter the woods, finally settling on following one of the small brooks that crossed our path. Hami left no traces in the shallow stream bed and moved silently through the darkening forest.

When it got so dark that even Hami began to stumble, we stopped in a clearing halfway up a hill. Later the waxing moon might light our way, but first we needed a rest. Shivering in my damp clothes, I changed into dry ones and for good measure piled on all my spare clothing. My stomach grumbled, reminding me that I'd had nothing since breakfast beyond a couple of sugared dates in Prince Bahram's tent, hardly a filling meal. I envied Hami who browsed contentedly on the fresh grass.

Leaning back against a boulder, I stretched my legs before me and looked up at the sky strewn with stars. They glittered like a wealth of diamonds carelessly scattered by a child across the heavens. Somewhere in the woods an eagle owl gave its characteristic hoot and a fox yipped as if in answer. I had nothing to fear from anything on four legs I reminded myself, but even so was grateful for Hami and the familiar sound of his contented munching. How strange not to hear the busy noises of the camp around me, men talking, horses neighing, the low rumble of the elephants calling to each other. I realised that for the first time in my life I was completely alone.

On the plains below, a few pinpricks of light hinted at human habitation, the small farms typical of this corner of the world. Or the camps of my pursuers? Too tired to care, I closed my eyes. It would only be for a moment, until the moon rose.



I woke to the grey, pearly light of dawn. Tendrils of fog covered the clearing and for a moment I panicked, until I spotted Hami's big, dark shape nearby. My body hurt all over from sleeping on the hard ground, I was stiff from the cold and an insistent ache filled my stomach. I sat up and sneezed, startling a jay that flew away scolding loudly.

So it hadn't all been a bad dream. A wave of dismay swept through me and I buried my face in my hands. Had I really run away with Hami on a moment's impulse? I must have been mad! What would my friends at the camp think of me?

A soft touch on my head, and Hami's trunk settled on my shoulders, offering comfort. I struggled to my feet and leant against him, shivering in the predawn cold. The gauzy silk shawl I'd wrapped around myself, a relic from my time spent at the court of Roshni's governor, did nothing to keep me warm. I would gladly have exchanged all its rich silver embroidery for a cup of hot tea and my usual breakfast of stewed lentils and vegetables wrapped in a piece of flat bread! My stomach contracted at the thought while I considered my options: return to the camp or continue. Briefly the vision of a hot meal and a proper bath tempted me, but not if it meant losing Hami and possibly even my own freedom to Sattar.

No, the only way was onward. First I had to reach the border and then I could decide whether to contact my grandfather. However, the main pass over the mountains had a garrison guarding the approach, which would surely be alerted by the prince to look out for me. My heart sank until I recalled that on our way over from Sikhand a year ago, we had taken one of the lesser known passes farther east. I would just have to find it again.

“We have to go,” I told Hami and gathered my belongings.

The clearing showed abundant traces betraying our presence, trampled down grass and a pile of elephant dung, making me worry about pursuit. We entered the woods again, following a game trail that would lead us along the shoulder of the hill, and I stopped at regular intervals and set spells of confusion and distraction behind us. More subtle than the barrier I had woven across the road the evening before, they would simply lead any pursuit down the hill and away from us.

Soon the rising sun shafted between the trees, turning the swathes of mist to gold. Hami moved silently, his steps cushioned by the thick leaf mould on the forest floor, and around us the trunks of the trees rose like the pillars of a giant’s hall. There was little undergrowth, but elephants were able to move through woods with an ease that belied their size anyway. In the branches above us birds greeted the morning. My heart rose. I would even have enjoyed our ride if it hadn’t been for my empty stomach. “Next time we run away, I’ll plunder the kitchen tent first,” I declared. Hami grumbled an answer.

Midmorning we stopped at a small stream for a drink and a wash. If only I had brought a pot along, I could have made myself nettle soup, but our precipitous departure meant I didn’t even have the means to start a fire. Foraging along the bank, I collected wood sorrel and dog violet leaves. Fresh ramsons rounded off these culinary delights, making me think that if any rebel tried to jump me now, I could simply frighten him off with my garlic breath.

If anything, my stomach felt more empty after that meagre meal, but at least Hami seemed happy enough, so we continued after a brief rest. All day we saw no sign of pursuit or indeed of any human habitation and I began to relax. Then, when the afternoon drew to a close and long shadows slanted across the land, we came to a break in the trees and looked down on a small farm cupped in a

meadow. Smoke rose from the chimney, so I quickly backed Hami into the cover of the trees again. Yet I hesitated to move on, for I had spotted something: on a windowsill at the back of the farmhouse two loaves of bread cooled! My stomach grumbled loudly and though I couldn't possibly have smelt them, they made my mouth water.

With provisions like that I could make it to the border easily! I chewed my lip, considering what to do. If I simply walked up to the farm and asked to trade for food, my black hair and Sikhandi accent would garner me little welcome. And what if Prince Bahram had offered a reward for information on my whereabouts? Which left the alternative of stealing the bread...from poor farmers who probably had little to spare. The farmhouse looked patched up and anyway, nobody made a good living in this contended land. No, I had to leave them some kind of payment, but how?

Searching through my bags, I came upon my small store of valuables. The few pieces of jewellery inherited from my mother I would not part with, but I also had some coins, what little of his pay my father had not managed to spend on drink. All minted in Sikhand, of course, with the mark of Emperor Firooz on them. I bit my lip. Would that set the hounds on my trail? Yet I had nothing else!

Coming to a decision, I led Hami farther back into the forest and told him to wait there for me. He wasn't happy at the idea, but he knew to obey my command.

"First a fugitive, now a thief," I told him, patting his trunk in comfort. "What will be next, a rebel?" And all within the space of days!

Leaving Hami grumbling unhappily to himself, I returned to the forest's edge to survey the scene once more. A man was digging up the soil in the kitchen garden, but luckily it lay on the

side facing away from me. While I watched, the farmer's wife appeared at the door, a toddler clutching her skirts, and exchanged a few words with him before going back inside.

By now the shadows of dusk filled the small valley and I crept downhill, careful to keep to the cover of a few apple trees. I had nearly reached my goal and was just congratulating myself on the ease of it, when a couple of geese rounded the corner of the house and spotted me.

When they opened their beaks to start honking, I flung wide my senses, reaching out for their animal consciousness: an impression of grass under my feet, a strangely wide field of vision.

"Harmless," I whispered, "I'm completely harmless." I held my breath.

The geese regarded me out of beady eyes and crowded round me. "Harmless," I said again, hoping the poor things wouldn't end up in the cooking pot for not alerting their masters.

After a last careful look around, I sneaked up to the house and crouched down, the geese following me faithfully as if I were the leader of their flock. When I reached the open window, I listened hard. No sound from inside, but I heard a door close in the distance and voices from the courtyard. My chance!

Quickly I straightened up and grabbed one of the loaves, leaving a piece of silver in its place. For a moment my hand hovered over the second loaf, the coin being more than generous payment, but I thought of the child I'd seen earlier on. If I took all the bread, it would go hungry that night.

With a sigh I resisted temptation and instead wrapped the stolen loaf in my tunic. Followed by my faithful avian entourage, I retraced my steps. At the orchard's edge I stopped and bent down to their level. "Go back, you don't belong in the forest." They gazed at me reproachfully for abandoning them and a few mournful honks followed me, but luckily they stayed behind when

I disappeared into the woods.

Hami in his turn was pleased to see me, trumpeting a greeting. I just hoped the noise wouldn't carry down to the farm. Quickly I mounted him and we continued along our trail. And finally I broke off a piece of bread and stuffed it in my mouth. It tasted absolutely heavenly, though it was the strange leavened bread they baked here and not our familiar flat bread. However, at that moment I couldn't have cared less. Food at last! Even so I paced myself and only ate a little bit, since it would have to last me for the next few days. Turning into a thief had been unnerving and I didn't particularly fancy having to repeat the experience.

We continued on our journey until full darkness had fallen before stopping for a rest. Only this time I didn't fall asleep, and once the waxing moon had risen high enough, we set off again. I wanted to put as much distance as possible between us and the farm, just in case they decided to pursue the thief. That night we slept in another clearing high up on the shoulder of a hill.

We had reached a wide valley formed by a meandering stream, which had a road running along it. It looked familiar and I thought that if we followed the valley south, we would find the pass across the mountains that we had traversed the previous year. Only we couldn't use the road, but had to keep to the wooded sides of the hills, which meant slow going. I eked out my bread carefully, supplementing it with whatever greenery I could forage, but got heartily tired of the taste of wild garlic.

At least we saw no sign of pursuit, neither that day nor the next, and the weather stayed fair, though the nights were bitterly cold. On the fifth day of our flight we stopped early out of sheer fatigue. Hami might be able to live off grass and leaves, but he needed time to browse. We had found a meadow strewn with big boulders from a long ago rockfall, where in summer the farmers probably pastured their sheep and cattle, but which lay empty at

the moment.

I chewed down a meagre meal of a chunk of bread accompanied by some mint sprigs and looked up at the mountains peaks, which seemed to loom much closer now. How much farther to go? And would my supplies last long enough? We had passed a few solitary farms on our travel, but always stayed well away from them, yet if we continued at our current slow pace I might need to steal more food.

The setting sun lit up the mountains in a dramatic display of stony crags throwing long shadows across orange and pink snowfields, a glorious sight. Yet all I could think of was a warm meal, a hot bath and a soft bed. What wouldn't I give for just one of them! My whole body ached from sleeping on the ground and I hadn't found any time to wash my clothes, let alone give myself more than a quick dip in a mountain stream. Clearly I wasn't cut out to be a fugitive.

Yet surely it would be over soon. Prince Bahram seemed to have given up pursuit and no Aneiry had spotted me so far. Perhaps the tales of rebels lurking everywhere in the hills were exaggerated.

Too tired to move, I sat on one of the boulders and watched the evening shadows deepen until Hami seemed no more than another rock littering the meadow. He had been browsing busily, pulling up big bushels of grass and dusting off the dry soil before stuffing them in his mouth, but now he suddenly slewed round his head.

I straightened up and took a step forward. "Hami? What is—"

From behind me, a hand clamped down on my mouth.

THREE

I began to struggle when a cold blade touched my throat. “Stop that.” A man’s voice, low and assured. I stilled.

Hami had rushed towards me, but now he slowed uncertainly, his trunk raised in agitation.

The iron grip on my mouth eased very slightly. “Tell the elephant to stay calm,” the man whispered in my ear, pressing the dagger against my skin as a reminder that he held me at his mercy. “Come on, I’ve seen you people do it.”

My throat dry, I swallowed. “Peace, Hami,” I called, the words coming out in a squeak. Who was this man?

Hami trumpeted unhappily, but stopped a few paces away.

“Good,” the man said, “now get him to back up. He’s making my men nervous.”

His men? Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of dark clad figures. Was that the curve of a bow? “Back, Hami,” I

said, suddenly afraid of what they might do to him. "It's all right." I tried to infuse my words with confidence and reached out with all my senses to calm the elephant.

The first shock over, my mind raced to catch up with events. How many of them were there? And who were they? Not Sikhandi, that was for sure. The man holding me barked a command in Aneiry, confirming my guess. Bandits? Or...? The alternative made my blood run cold. I needed to break the man's grip and escape!

Reluctantly Hami took a few steps back. My captor forced me to follow him, his blade still against my throat. With his other hand he gripped my arm and twisted it behind my back. "Well done, lad," he said. "If you cooperate, we might let you live."

He thought me a lad? Perhaps my short hair had fooled him. Well, I would do nothing to disabuse him of the notion. "What do you want?" I asked, struggling not to cry out at his cruel hold.

He ignored my question. "Torches," he called in Aneiry.

After a moment, lights blossomed from behind, making Hami rumble threateningly. Another man stepped up beside us, holding a torch. "By the Lord of Light, you've done it!" he exclaimed in triumph. I understood him well enough, for I had picked up a fair command of Aneiry from my father's slaves and these men spoke with a pure accent. Another indication they might not be straightforward brigands?

"But how are you going to control the animal?" the new man asked. "I don't think our ropes will hold it."

My captor chuckled. "We don't have to control the elephant, we only have to control *him*." He gave me another shove forward. "That's the beauty of the plan."

The other man lifted his torch and peered in my face. His eyes widened. "Rhys, it's a girl!"

“What?”

For an instant the blade slipped from my throat and the grip on my arm loosened. At once I drove my elbow into my captor’s chest and twisted away. He grunted in surprise and lunged after me, but I managed to evade him.

“Hami!” I shouted and ran to him. The elephant trumpeted in response.

Something heavy hit me from behind, bearing me to the ground. I gasped at the impact, but managed to roll around. The bandit again! He had got hold of my leg, so I tried to kick him in the head. Quick as a snake he grabbed my other leg and pinioned it to the ground. “Got you,” he grunted.

The earth shook and he looked up with an expression of surprise on his face. The next moment Hami had seized him round the waist and lifted him high in the air. Shouts of alarm rose around us.

As easily as he might hoist a log, Hami held the man with his trunk, preparing to dash him against one of the boulders. He would kill him! “Stop!” I shouted and Hami halted.

Hanging upside down, the bandit called to his men: “Shoot the beast in the eyes!”

I scrambled to my feet and ran to interpose myself. “No!”

“Hold!” he commanded.

My hand on Hami’s trunk, we regarded each other for a moment.

“Surrender,” he told me. “I have archers on all sides.”

How dare he set the terms when he was so clearly at a disadvantage! “Tell your men to pull back and let me go,” I demanded. “Now!”

“No.”

“I’ll order my elephant to kill you!”

Incredibly, he chuckled at my threat. “I think I’ll take my

chances.”

Caught out, I hesitated. Perhaps it was squeamish of me, but I didn't want blood on my hands, not even this annoying bandit's.

Of course he saw my hesitation. “Surrender,” he told me again, “or I tell my men to shoot your elephant.”

“No!”

He raised his voice. “Men! On the count of ten, shoot the beast in the eyes.”

“But Lord Rhys—” one of his followers called.

“Do it!” he barked. “On my count: one... two...”

“No, stop!” I cried.

“Three...four...”

“Hami will kill you!”

“Five...six...”

How could he be the complete master of the situation when he was hanging upside down in the air?

“Seven...eight...nine...”

“I surrender!” I shouted.

He stopped counting. “Tell the elephant to put me down.”

Grudgingly I gave the command, and Hami obeyed, though none too happy. He must have sensed that the man meant us no good.

The bandit leader picked up his knife that he had lost in the struggle and straightened his tunic, completely ignoring the elephant that was still looming over him threateningly. I got my first proper look at him: despite his air of authority he was a young man, probably not much older than myself, rangy and tough. He had braided small beads and a feather into his light blond hair, which gave him a barbaric air.

He looked me over in his turn, from my scuffed boots to my tangled hair, and contemptuously flicked a piece of dirt from

my cheek. “Let this be a lesson to you: never threaten something that you’re not willing to carry through.”

I gritted my teeth. Next time I wouldn’t stop Hami from bashing his brains in!



A quick succession of orders followed, allocating each man his place, then he pushed me before him down a barely perceptible path back into the woods. One of his men led the way, holding a torch, and Hami perforce followed behind. Three more bandits shadowed us either side, bows at the ready.

“Remember,” he said, “if you try to make a run, they have orders to shoot the elephant. These are my best archers, they won’t miss.”

He didn’t even bind my hands or threaten me in any other way and I fumed inside how quickly he had found my weakness. Yet after I had stumbled down the trail for a while, my situation began to sink in. I had been captured by Aneiry bandits or rebels – there wasn’t much of a difference between that anyway – so what would happen to me now? And where were they taking me?

That last question at least was answered fairly quickly when we reached what had to be their campsite. A large cave gaped in the hill, lit up by a fire, and the smell of food wafted my way, involuntarily making my mouth water. Over to one side, a group of horses were picketed, neighing nervously. When Hami ambled into full view, they reared and panicked, as untrained horses will do in the presence of elephants. My captor cursed and sent some men to lead them away upwind of Hami. I suppressed the impulse to help with calming the animals. Let him realise what a bag of troubles he had netted!

At the leader’s instruction some of the men fetched a thick

rope, which he himself wound around one of Hami's back legs and tied to a tree. I watched impassively, but secretly I felt some relief. The rope looked strong and well-made, but they had no idea of an elephant bull's strength. At need Hami could snap that rope in an instant or even push the whole tree over, so if the worst came to pass, we would simply try to make a run for it. Poor Hami hated being tied up, but at a word from me held still. I stroked his trunk in reassurance, gaining comfort from the contact myself.

The bandit leader stepped back and surveyed his work. Riled by his self-satisfied expression, I crossed my arms on my chest. "My elephant is hungry. If you won't let him forage for himself, you need to provide something. He starts fretting when not properly fed."

Some of the bandits looked alarmed at my words, but the man just raised an eyebrow. "What does he eat?"

"Grass, hay and any fruits or vegetables you may have." And lots, as he would find out soon enough. It had been a challenge for the army to keep all its elephants fed.

However, the bandit leader only nodded and sent some of his men off. Soon Hami had a pile of freshly cut grass mixed with an odd assortment of carrots, turnips and cabbages before him.

"That should do." The bandit leader took me by the elbow and steered me towards the fire lighting the cavern. "And now you will explain what brings you here."

I shook off his grip, but sat down on one of the logs placed round the fire that he indicated. A quick glance round the cave showed piles of saddlebags lying around and some freshly cut wood stacked against the far wall. Not a particularly impressive bandit's lair.

Farther back a pot of stew bubbled over another fire, attended by a short, grey haired man. When he saw us sit down, he brought over a couple of mugs of tea. I wrapped my hands around

the battered wooden cup, my mind involuntarily going back to the last time I'd been offered tea. This strong, black beverage, generously sweetened with honey, couldn't be more different from the delicate jasmine tea Prince Bahram served, but somehow I found the very ordinariness of the situation reassuring. It seemed to me that if they just wanted to rape me or slit my throat, surely they wouldn't bother to offer me a drink first. But of course I didn't exactly have a wide experience of being captured.

Another man sat down across the fire from me and I recognised the bandit leader's friend from earlier on. He had black hair, unusual for his people, and dark, deep-set eyes. With a nod to me he passed over my bags to the bandit leader. "Here are her things."

I grabbed my mug hard as the man methodically went through my belongings. However, he showed no interest in rich clothes or even my small stash of jewellery. Those he stuffed back after a cursory glance, but he lingered over my father's Shah set, admiring the intricately carved figures. Finally he looked through all the books, separating them into two piles.

"Here," he said and handed me the bags with everything except the books. "We're not thieves."

No? Well, he gave a pretty good impression. I didn't want to antagonise him though, so didn't say anything. He flicked back the feather braided into his hair, and I suddenly remembered one of the elephant boys mentioning that fashion as being popular amongst the Aneiry rebels. Not exactly a reassuring thought.

He regarded me with the cool, pale gaze of a bird of prey. "So who are you?"

I decided to tell the truth, or at least part of it. "I am Lady Arisha tal Ardavan, Ninth Circle." Let them think me a valuable prisoner.

"One of their nobles?" the dark haired man exclaimed in

surprise.

Unimpressed, his friend shrugged. “So it seems. We are of course greatly honoured.” I noticed that he spoke Sikhhandi with hardly any accent, a rare thing this side of the mountains.

“And who might you be?” I snapped.

The dark haired man gave me small, formal bow. “Lord Taren of Meirchtraeth, at your service.” The courtesy made me blink with surprise. He too had a feather braided into hair, but it was jet black, not the mottled brown of the bandit leader’s.

“And you?” I asked the other man.

“You may call me Lord Rhys,” he answered curtly and with none of his friend’s courtesy. “And now that we have the introductions over, perhaps you would care to explain what you are doing in these mountains?”

I hesitated, but perhaps they would let me go if I told them that I was on my way out of their country. “My father used to serve with the army,” I answered, “but he died a few days ago, so I decided to head home to Sikhhand.”

Lord Taren made a sympathetic noise, but Lord Rhys only nodded. “So that’s why you cut your hair. I thought you had the foolish notion of passing for a boy that way.”

Well, it had fooled him anyway! At least at first. And where had he learnt about Sikhhandi mourning customs? “I’m on my way to my grandfather at Mohsen monastery,” I continued my tale. “He’s the abbot there, an important man.” Involuntarily I wondered if I was going to find out whether my grandfather would be willing to pay ransom for me.

However, my important kinsman didn’t seem to impress Lord Rhys. “Where did you get the elephant?” he asked.

“He’s mine.”

Those pale eyes regarded me unblinkingly. “Is that so?” He leant forward. “You have stirred up a hornets’ nest of trouble;

there are Sikhhandi soldiers looking for a stolen elephant all over the countryside.”

“Hami belongs to me!” I protested. Then I took a deep breath. “Admittedly I had a...slight difference of opinion with the Master of Elephants.” No need to tell them how that had ended. “Look,” I said, “all I want is free passage over the mountains. I’m sure my grandfather would reward you for your help.”

“A slight difference of opinion?” His tone mocked me. “Your Master of Elephants doesn’t seem to see it that way.” He leant back and stretched, making his joints pop. “Ah well, we already knew we were chasing a thief.”

“I told you, Hami is mine,” I snapped.

He took something from a pocket and threw it in my lap. “I didn’t mean the elephant.” When I stared down at the small silver coin, bearing Emperor Firooz’s mark, he added, “I meant the bread.”

“Where did you get that?” I stuttered.

“Where do you think?” he asked back.

When we stared at each other, neither one willing to answer the other’s question, Lord Taren cleared his throat. “A farmer living two days down the road sought us out and showed it to us. That’s how we picked up your trail.”

I bit my lip, thinking I would have done better being dishonest and just taking the bread.

Lord Rhys seemed to be able to read my mind. “Be grateful. This coin is the reason why we didn’t just kill you out of hand.” His lips curled contemptuously. “A Sikhhandi paying for something he takes is such a novelty that we decided to go and look for him.”

He was the right one to talk! Another thought hit me. “Did you just take the coin?” I demanded to know. “The poor farmer was supposed to buy food with it!”

That earned me an icy glare. “I gave him two silver crowns for it, money he can actually use.” He paused for a moment. “And promised him we’d catch his thief.”

How dare this rebel, bandit or whatever, sit in judgement on me! “Well, I’d rather be guilty of stealing bread than of killing innocents,” I threw at him.

A breathless silence fell. Slowly he leant forward. “Lady, I only kill the guilty.” His voice stayed mild, but his eyes bored into mine. “But that I enjoy.”

My breath seemed to be caught painfully in my chest, but I refused to lower my gaze. He had a long scar near his hairline, faded and half covered by a strand of blond hair, and I wondered who had dealt it to him. Had he enjoyed that fight too?

“Stew?”

The question caught us both by surprise and we recoiled simultaneously. The grey haired man who had handed me my tea stood there with a couple of bowls of steaming liquid.

Grateful for the interruption I accepted one, but then noticed a chunk of meat floating in the stew. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I exclaimed, “but I can’t eat this.”

His brows drew down. “Why not? Don’t you like my cooking?”

“Sikhandi nobles don’t eat meat,” Lord Rhys threw in to my surprise. Quite calmly he reached over with his spoon, fished out the offending piece and popped it in his mouth. “There, problem solved. Now eat.”

Really, the man had no manners! But the stew smelled most tempting, so I squashed my scruples about any remaining meat juices mixed in with the vegetables. Living with an army had taught me that you had to be pragmatic and eat whenever the opportunity presented itself. The food was rather bland, but it felt wonderful to have something warm to eat, so for a few minutes I

concentrated on nothing but filling my belly. The elderly man even brought me a second helping and a slice of bread to go with it – a strange kindness in this bandits’ camp.

Lord Taren regarded me curiously as I wiped up the last remaining juice with the bread. “Why don’t you eat any meat, my lady?”

I wondered how to explain the Eternal Wheel, the Balance of Magic, the Sacredness of Life and half a dozen other philosophical concepts to this bunch of killers, but never got the chance anyway.

“Sikhandi nobles have no stomach for killing,” Lord Rhys threw in, “except by poison of course.”

Words meant to provoke me, and all the more annoying for the truth in them. That butcher, the late, unlamented Prince Maziar had a lot to answer for! I took a deep breath and tried to sound conciliatory. “My lord, believe me, I have no quarrel with you. Just let me go and you need never concern yourself with me again.”

“Anything that happens in my lands concerns me,” he replied.

His lands? Lord Taren had claimed to come from one of the coastal provinces. Did Lord Rhys in his turn consider this particular stretch of northern wilderness his property? Ever since Prince Maziar had slaughtered the majority of the Aneiry nobility that night at Glynhir Castle, the government of the lands not in the immediate proximity of a Sikhandi garrison had become uncertain and contended.

Lord Rhys put his bowl down and seemed to come to some kind of decision. “Very well,” he said, “you may leave.”

“What?”

He nodded. “You may go right now. I don’t care, one Sikhandi less in my lands is all for the better.” He looked me up

and down dismissively. “You seem to be harmless.” It was not a compliment.

“Now just a moment,” I began.

“Rhys!” Lord Taren exclaimed. “You can’t leave a woman all on her own without any protection.”

We both ignored him. “I can really go?” I asked.

“Yes.”

Gathering my bags, I got up uncertainly and turned towards Hami.

“The elephant stays,” Lord Rhys added.

“What! I’m not going anywhere without my elephant.”

“He’s not yours anymore,” Lord Rhys pointed out in an even voice, “he’s mine.”

And he had accused me of stealing! “Hami is mine and always will be,” I pressed out through clenched teeth.

“Spoils of war, my lady,” he said, his eyes glittering with some unfathomable emotion.

The threat was clear. “You’ll never be able to control him,” I shot back.

I had his full attention now. “And why not?”

“Hami’s not used to any other handler. If I’m not there to calm him, he will run wild. So you see, he’s absolutely no use to you,” I concluded triumphantly.

“Is that so?”

“I’m the only one he obeys.”

Lord Rhys tapped his chin in thought. “I believe you. However, you’re wrong. He’s only of no use to me if I don’t keep you.” A decisive nod. “Very well, you stay. Teach us how to handle the elephant and afterwards I’ll let you go.”

I shut my mouth with a snap. What had my father told me more than once: the wise man considers well before arguing with a tiger. I could have kicked myself for my ill-considered words, but

really, the man was unbearable in his arrogance!

“Sit down,” he told me.

Lord Taren looked pained at this ungallant treatment, but I noticed he didn’t disagree with his friend. “Please, my lady,” he said.

Grudgingly I obeyed, there being no point in making a scene. At least there seemed no immediate danger of having my throat slit, a small mercy. Perhaps I could lull their suspicions and wait for a better opportunity to make my escape, when I wasn’t surrounded by a camp full of bandits.

The only thing I had to decide first was whether to give in to temptation and have Hami trample Lord Rhys before I left.

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