

BANAT ER RIH: DAUGHTER OF THE WIND

By Kimberley Griffiths Little

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A soft whinny in his ear woke Sahloul. He sat up from where he'd been sleeping, curled against the old mare's belly. All was dark inside his father's tent. Even the lamp that usually glowed behind the curtains had been extinguished.

There it was again. The familiar noise that agitated the horse and disturbed Sahloul's dreams each night. Not a single sound, but a chorus of neighings on the edge of the ravine. Sahloul bade the mare lie still. "You remember, don't you?" he whispered. "Your day of glory when you became my father's Banat er Rih." Leaving his bed, Sahloul tiptoed to the door of his tent. Blackness enveloped the desert sands. Herds of camels stood like inky shadows under a crescent moon.

This spot was one of his favorites along the route to the oasis of Yathrib, where they traded camels. But he couldn't enjoy the peace tonight, for it was the last night of the horses' tribulation, and anticipation gripped his stomach. Sahloul slogged through the sand, nearing the corrals where the horses were penned above the narrow stream. Their cries rent the air. No water for four days had made them crazy with thirst, and they stamped and pawed the earth. It was painful to hear the usually quiet, patient mares and see their anguish. Stallions were the noisy ones, unpredictable and high-strung.

Sahloul leaned over the fence and called to his favorite, Tahirah. She came quickly and nuzzled his neck. He whispered to her as he had the last three nights. "Tahirah, you are beautiful and magnificent. I know you can be Banat er Rih. Your mother was a daughter of the wind before you. It is in your blood to be great."

Someday when his father, Sheik Abu Najjar, said he was ready, Sahloul hoped to ride this splendid white mare into battle. He longed to see the foal she would have next year, and he wanted to raise it and love it. He also knew that she might never be his, since he was the youngest child of his father's wives. Tahirah might be given to one of his older brothers, or even to his uncle Ragab.

The four-year-old mare gave a low cry deep in her throat, and Sahloul put his arms around her neck. "I pray the Lord of the Worlds will give you strength to obey when dawn breaks."

Behind him something rustled in the sand, and Sahloul whirled on his bare feet, but it was only his father stepping out of the darkness. "The night calls to you, my son?" Abu Najjar said gently.

"It is the mares' cries that awaken me," Sahloul told him.

"Tomorrow they will have their release," his father promised. "Would you like to know which mares will be Banat er Rih?"

Sahloul could sense his father's smile under his black beard. "How can anyone predict, Abu? Except perhaps God."

"A horseman of the desert knows his herd," his father replied.

"Then why do we starve and thirst them?" Sahloul asked. "Their anguish fills my dreams, and I cannot sleep."

"All animals," his father said slowly, "whether four-footed or two-footed, must pass the tests of life and prove their worth."

Sahloul stroked Tahirah's white forelock. "And this is the mare's test?" he asked.

"It must be so to keep the bloodline pure," said his father. "Worthy in battle and tireless on the trail to Mecca. The mare you receive someday will share your camel's milk and the rug on which you sleep. A good mare is never for sale. She is better than gold or silver in your purse. To desert men she is our wealth, our power, and most importantly, our freedom."

"Do you think my whispers to Tahirah will help prepare her for the future?"

"Are you trying to influence the will of God?" his father teased. "May Allah satisfy your soul, my son, and let your heart be at rest."

"Please tell me, Abu," Sahloul pleaded, "if you know which mares will heed your call. Is Tahirah going to be one of them?"

"We will know on the morrow," his father said. Then Sheik Najjar stepped forward and took the mare's head in his thick palms. "You have been learning your lessons well, my son, and your own hopes may prove correct. No one can deny that Tahirah is a fine horse. Her eyes are clear and wide, fiery as the sun when she runs. Her ears

alert and majestic. Tahirah will always be a fine horse, but will she mother to future generations of princes and princesses?”

His father’s words sent shivers down Sahloul’s neck. That was the question facing all one hundred mares tomorrow. The stars began to fade. “Dawn breaks,” his father said. “We must return to the tent for our prayers and ablutions.”

An orange sun burned in the sky later that day as Sheik Najjar led the families of the tribe to the ravine. Sahloul was anxious to see the penned horses, but he was last in line behind his brothers. His uncles and older cousins were all ahead of him, too.

Finally they came in sight of the frenzied mares, racing back and forth in their prison. Tahirah pawed the ground, shook her head, and raised her elegantly arched tail. Sahloul sighed at such beauty.

As the procession neared the corrals, the mares butted against each other at the gates, wanting to be first for the long-awaited water. Perspiration trickled down Sahloul’s neck as two of his married brothers prepared to unlock the gates. His mother Umm Salma and the other women stood on the fringes of the crowd, waiting with anticipation.

Sheik Najjar gave the signal, and Sahloul’s brothers swung the gates open wide. The mares charged down the slopes of the ravine toward the stream. Their galloping hoofs deafened the air. Chestnut, gold, and black swirled past in a blur. Sahloul watched Tahirah race toward the front of the pack, her sleek white coat shining in the sunlight. He saw his father raise his hand to signal the buglers. The men lifted the trumpets to their mouths, and the sound of the battle call blasted the air.

A few horses hesitated. They knew the call of their master, but in the next moment Sahloul heard the splash of water as the mares, one after another, rushed to satisfy their parched mouths. The bugle’s last notes vibrated in the air, and the dust began to clear. Sahloul held his breath. Had not a single horse heeded the master’s summons?

He surged forward with the crowd. Halfway down the hill, five horses halted on the path. Snorting, with eyes aflame, they returned to the top of the ravine. Impatiently they kicked up their legs, wanting to drink from the stream but torn between desire and obedience to their master.

Sahloul recognized one of the grays, two young chestnut mares, and the tall bay. Then his heart pounded harder, and he wanted to shout for joy. There with hoofs punching the sand, head tossing high, and mane flying in the wind, was Tahirah.

Sahloul wanted to race down the hill and throw his arms around her. He wanted to lead her to the best camel and milk a special bowl for her. But Tahirah was not his to honor. He gripped the corral, holding himself back. It was the hardest thing he ever had to do.

Sheik Najjar spoke to each horse, calming their spirits. He called to his older sons to help him lead the new Banat er Rih, daughters of the wind, to their place of nobility on the banks of the stream. Sahloul thought he would burst with pride, but it was heartbreaking to stay behind and watch.

The family crowded the hill, talking excitedly among themselves. Sahloul tried to not let his disappointment show. He fought the moisture stinging his eyes and attempted to smile and laugh with his cousins. Then Abu Najjar turned back once more. "Sahloul," he called. "What are you doing on top of the ravine? You must never leave your horse alone on its chosen day."

Sahloul's heart stopped. The crowd gasped, and Sahloul glanced over at his mother. Umm Salma lowered her head and motioned him to go. Beneath her silk veils he saw her smile. Sahloul raced down the steep slope while his father laughed and held out an arm to slow him down.

Then Sheik Najjar spoke the words that Sahloul had been dreaming of. "Tahirah needs her new master to walk beside her on the path of honor."