

# Gold Dust

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# 1

WHEN UKHAYYAD RECEIVED THE CAMEL as a gift from the chief of the Ahaggar tribes, he was still a young colt. Back then, on moonlit nights, Ukhayyad liked to brag about the thoroughbred camel to the other young men of the tribe, taking pleasure in posing questions to himself and then answering them.

“Have any of you ever seen a piebald Mahri before?”

“Never!”

“Have you ever seen a thoroughbred so graceful, so light of foot and so well proportioned?”

“Not until now.”

“Have you ever seen a Mahri who could compete with him in pride, fierceness, and loyalty?”

“Not like this one.”

“Have you ever seen a gazelle who took on the form of a camel?”

“Of course not.”

“Did you ever see anything more beautiful or noble?”

“No, no, no! Admit it—you’ve never seen such a thing before and you never will again!” He would leap into the

open skipping like a dancing madman until, exhausted, he would collapse on his back on the sand. There, he would raise his voice, singing one of those bewitching songs, like charms against loneliness that riders take refuge in whenever they travel across waterless deserts. He would sing his sad ballad and close with well-known lines taken from the epic of Amud's war against the French invasion of the desert:

*How well did we receive Amud when he approached!*

*We gave him thoroughbreds dressed for war*

*And lent him riders who never miss their mark . . .*

Ukhayyad's passion for the piebald thoroughbred grew so intense that he finally sought out a famous poetess of the Kel Abada tribes. He asked her to compose a poem glorifying the Mahri's innate qualities and extolling his talents, likening him to warrior heroes.

All night long the young man sat enumerating the qualities of the piebald: "He's piebald. He's graceful and long legged. He's well bred. He's fierce and loyal."

"It's not wrong for a rider to laud the qualities of his mount or to sing about him like an angel," the experienced poetess abruptly interrupted. "But when you decide to commit praise to verse, you must follow convention. Poetry has its rules, after all! Your Mahri has never raised a battle cry nor made a name for himself at dancing festivals."

Confused, Ukhayyad tried to hide his embarrassment behind his veil. “But he’s piebald,” he blurted out. “It’s enough that he’s piebald. Did you ever see a piebald Mahri before?”

In the past, he had entrusted the vassals of the tribe with the job of breaking in the Mahri and getting him used to the bridle. But that had to change now—it would be wrong for him to rely on vassals to teach him to dance too. In the desert, only noblemen trained camels to dance in front of the womenfolk.



## 2

BEFORE ENTERING THE RING, UKHAYYAD wanted to fit out the camel in style. He borrowed most of the necessities, from the saddle and saddlecloth to the bridle, reins, bag, and even the whip. His old dressings were pale and dull-colored, bleached by the sun and unfit for adorning a Mahri that was preparing to dance in front of women, swaying back and forth to the rhythm and melody of music.

He spent an entire day fitting out his equipage. The saddle had been crafted by the cleverest of the Ghat smiths. The dressing was an embroidered kilim rug brought from Touat by merchants. The bridle had been braided by old women of the Ifoghas tribe in Ghadamès. The travel bag had been stitched by the fingers of Tamenrasset noblewomen. The whip was a rare piece, covered by strips of leather on which hands in Kano had once engraved magical charms. After the whip played its role in bringing about Ukhayyad's disgrace, some elders guessed that it had been supplied to him by the envious young men of the tribe.

He entered the clearing after noon. In the small valley, the women sat in a circle around their drums. The younger

women made a wider ring around them. The sheikhs took their place on the rise to the south, the men and boys stood across from them, their heads wrapped in lavish blue turbans. When they strode, they swaggered with the pride of peacocks. The Mahri thoroughbreds were hitched together in a long line on the two sides of the open space, one set to the west, another, facing it, fixed to the east.

Soon a wedding procession made its way into the valley. The celebration was for one of the tribe's vassals—a habitual divorcer and marrier who had decided this time to take a beautiful mulatta, choosing to savor the taste of Tuareg blood mixed with the heat of Africans.

The entertainment now began with the secondary formations.

Two sleek riders from the western line went first, then two set off opposite them from the east. They met beside the dance arena and galloped off to a torrent of ululations.

Ukhayyad got ready. Beside him gleamed one of the vassal youths, crowned with a Tagolmost turban and girthed with a shiny leather belt. He sat on an elaborately decorated saddle that rested firmly on the back of an elegant gray Mahri camel. This youth would accompany him as he went across the field.

The two approaching men from the other side drew near. The youth sidled his camel up to the piebald Mahri. "It's my proud honor to escort you today." He smiled. "There's no purebred like your piebald throughout the whole

desert.” An eye winked behind thick blue fabric. The gesture unnerved Ukhayyad. He saw nothing sincere in the eyes of his companion.

They began to move.

They paced in unison, with firm, arrogant strides, pushing the other camel on, moving in harmony. In the short space that separated the emptiness stretching to the west from the singing circle in the middle, Ukhayyad experienced a lifetime of happiness.

The two thoroughbreds moved in unison, their approach slow and balanced. Ukhayyad felt that he was flying on wings in the air, his heart nearly bursting from the enchantment, anxiety, and hidden joy of the moment. Possessed by the music, he lived as hostage to the dance, its passion, and mysterious longing. He guessed that the magnificent piebald shared these same wrenching sensations as they went along to the circle, though he could not say how.

He awoke from the dream to find his partner had swaggered off to the east, toward the line of riders. For his part, the piebald had veered instead to the left, and turned back upon the dancing arena. The girls in the circle laughed among themselves. Mortified, Ukhayyad took the enchanted whip into hand, hoping to drive the camel back into formation. But as soon as the piebald felt the blow of the whip on his skin, he went mad. Instead of moving toward the right or rejoining his partner, he kicked at the circle of girls, then lost his mind altogether. Ukhayyad whipped his flanks again, but

the beast's madness only grew fiercer. He rushed directly into the women's circle, smashing a handsome drum covered with gazelle skin. The women scattered and the singing came to a halt. Then all was commotion. Ukhayyad pulled the reins until the neck of the mad thoroughbred arched backwards between his legs. But even reining him like that did not stop his frenzied motion across the dance arena. He continued to kick at everything in his path, frothing at the mouth and champing wildly at the bit.

Froth began to fly all over the women in gleaming sprays. Then a throng of strong men on foot hurried over and caught him in ropes. The piebald struggled against them too, so that they were forced to knock him down.

Together, Ukhayyad and the piebald were thrown to the ground on the dance arena.

### 3

THAT WAS NOT THE FIRST time.

The camel had entangled Ukhayyad in far worse humiliations many times before. In the past, he had been in the habit of embarking on late night romantic forays into the nearby encampments. He would saddle up the camel after sunset and depart for his lover's camp, to arrive only after midnight. He would tether the thoroughbred in the nearest valley and then steal through the shadows to the ladies' tents. There, he would flirt and chat all night, stealing kisses until the first light broke on the horizon of the desert. Then he would slip back to the valley, leap into saddle, and rush headlong home.

These forays kept up until he realized that his graceful camel had himself become smitten with a lovely she-camel owned by a tribe that spent each spring in the valley of Magharghar. Ukhayyad used to visit a beautiful daughter of that noble clan. He let the piebald graze in the valley floor with the herd while he dallied with the girl in her tents. The tender feelings of his Mahri had not gone unnoticed by him. In fact, from the first visit, he had recognized his steed's

passion for a white she-camel. He became more certain about it after he saw how the piebald flew to Magharghar, seeming to burn with longing for night travel. Ukhayyad gave him a hard time, asking, “Why hide it from me? Admit it—you’re not racing me toward my beloved, you’re flying to get to yours! Admit it—there’s no reason for you to rush there this time. There must be a female behind it. Women are always the reason!”

Leaning forward, spitting, and chewing at his bridle in his joyous rush, the thoroughbred would respond, “Aw-a-a-a-a-a-a.” And Ukhayyad would laugh and slap him.

Then came the day the broom trees burst into bloom with their sad white flowers. He tethered the camel in the valley and left him to graze next to the fragrant broom, not realizing that broom blossoms were a sign that spring had come to the desert valleys. And when spring arrives, it brings with it the mating season—and madness seizes the beasts and sends them into a frenzy. That is what happened on that day.

Ukhayyad had only been murmuring in the girl’s ear a short while when he heard the roar of the rutting beast. At first, he thought it was distant thunder, and he went on stroking her face and flirting. The roar repeated itself even more furiously. He leaped from the tent and rushed to the valley. There, the piebald was crashing into a ferocious gray camel in a terrible battle. Their fight, of course, was over a she-camel. As the dawn split the horizon, the Mahri’s wounds appeared in the feeble light. His opponent’s teeth

had shredded his neck and lower jaw and had seriously wounded his left thigh. But the horrible gray adversary had also been wounded, and was bleeding profusely. His entire body was covered in blood.

The commotion awoke the whole tribe. Shepherds rushed into the valley armed with sticks. It was only after a long struggle that they managed to separate the two opponents. The sun burst forth and Ukhayyad realized he had been caught, completely exposed. When the tribe's young men arrived at the scene, he could sense their scorn. Their eyes told him that they knew everything. Then they led him to the sheikh of the tribe, a tall, lean, old man who held an elegant cane made of lote wood crowned by leather straps embossed with delicate patterns.

Deep wrinkles laced his cheeks, though his glance radiated lively health and an enigmatic sense of mischief. He ordered tea to be prepared and indicated that Ukhayyad should sit down on the kilim inside the tent. He then turned the lote wood cane over in his hands before finally speaking. "There's no shame in a noble man being in love, or embarking on journeys to clandestine meetings. But what's wrong with abiding by Muslim law and entering houses by their front doors?"

He smiled and added, "It delights us to receive the son of the sheikh of Amanghasatin in our parts. He earned the honor of having stopped the foreign attackers and halting their intrusion into the desert."

Ukhayyad understood that the clever sheikh intended to smooth things over and calm the young men with his talk about romantic adventures, and his gesture to the role Ukhayyad's father had played in repelling foreign invaders from the Sahara. Tribal sheikhs never utter a single word they do not mean—and they express themselves through allusion rather than plain speech.

One of his men brought out the piebald, now exhausted from his injuries. He was covered in blood and spit and sweat and dust.

The astute sheikh took in the mark and build of the camel, then called to his men, “My God! What is this?! Why didn't you tell me that our noble guest possessed a thoroughbred of such perfection? He's a piebald Mahri as graceful as a gazelle. This line became extinct throughout the desert a hundred years ago. By God, where did you come by him?”

Glad for the chance to cover himself, Ukhayyad said, “From the chieftain of the Ahaggar. He gave it to me when I reached manhood.”

“Ahh. The chief of the Ahaggar. Ibrahim Bakda. This is a kind of animal that befits a hero like him. No one but he could give such a gift. Those old tribes—they've always got surprises and secrets.

“We always say that the Mahri is the mirror of his rider. If you want to stare into the rider and see what lies hidden within, look to his mount, his thoroughbred. Now that I look at you more closely, I can see you're a young man who's got

everything. Whoever owns a Mahri like this piebald will never complain for want of noble values. You've honored our homes, O noble youth descended from noble men!

“But I'm sorry to say, you have little chance of inheriting your father's position in the tribe. From what I know, your father has three nephews, each of whom is more ready to take over than you. . . . But who knows? Maybe a miracle will happen. The door to miracles is always open.”

A gigantic youth with grim cheeks and rough hands began to serve the first round of green tea.

The sheikh blew on the head of foam on the tea. He placed his cup on the ground and said, “Our noble guest should also allow us to treat his Mahri with generosity. Riders often grumble about having to enter our homes through the front door. But there's no harm in his thoroughbred doing that.”

He smiled and most of those present smiled along with him. Ukhayyad did not understand the signal. He could not grasp what the sheikh was alluding to. The sheikh continued aloud, “A rider might escape the women of the tribe, but a rare thoroughbred shouldn't be allowed to escape its she-camels. I see how our she-camels want to claim him as their own. Having piebald Mahris among our herds will be the envy of all the tribes. It's our duty to resuscitate the piebald line and preserve it from extinction. What does our guest think?”

The sheikh did not wait for his guest's opinion. He ordered that she-camels be brought before the Mahri. That day, Ukhayyad witnessed for the first time how males impregnate

females. They led in a white she-camel and forced her to her knees on the open ground. They hobbled her fore and hind legs. Then they led the rutting piebald to her and gathered around them. The camel kneeled down on top of her until it seemed to Ukhayyad that the poor she-camel's ribs would break. She frothed and squealed and vomited frothing spit. When her tail blocked him from entering, one of the men wrenched it out of the way. The wailing rattled the houses, causing the women and children to come out and gape. In front of the houses, they lined up in deep rows. Every now and then the old man would chuckle and point his cane into the air, repeating, "The rider might fly, but this piebald shall not."

The whole operation was awful. Whenever Ukhayyad remembered it, he was filled with fury and embarrassment.

## 4

THE CAMEL CONTINUED HIS ADVENTURES in desert pastures where she-camels roamed loose. But eventually his blind virility cost him. One day he returned, the spark of mischief extinguished from his large eyes, his bottom lip drooping. He stood on the open desert, still and silent, casting a sad gaze across a horizon that danced and flickered with tongues of a celestial mirage.

Ukhayyad noticed the camel's sullenness, but for some days did not discover the reason. He was inspecting the camel's lustrous coat, checking for ticks and pulling out a lote thorn from his speckled skin. There, on his hide, beneath the pelt, a disease and inflammation had taken hold. He scratched at it with his fingers and the Mahri winced and bellowed in pain. He brought out the shears and chose a place to cut away the thick hair. Underneath, the beast's skin had turned black and the flesh had been eaten away.

In the coming days, he saw that the mange was spreading and devouring new spots on the piebald's body. He went to the wise men of the tribe, the doctors, asking for advice. They

agreed that there was little hope for a cure: “When mange takes hold of a camel, expect the worst.” But Ukhayyad did not lose faith. He could not allow himself to believe that there was a power capable of stealing his piebald from him. One blind man, an expert of animal diseases, shook his head and answered him skeptically: “Son—after laughter come tears. Just as sorrow follows happiness, so too does death intrude into the foolishness of life.”

But the young man would not be reconciled. The piebald was not a mortal creation. Ukhayyad recalled how he cared for his steed and how he had raised the camel after receiving him, still a colt, from the great chieftain. During famine, he would sneak barley from the tent, placing it in the palms of his hands to offer it to the camel. His secret was soon discovered and the black servant woman complained about it to his mother. This was all before his mother had died. His mother told his father, who scolded him, saying, “At a time when not everybody has grain to eat, you go and give it to the livestock!” That day he answered his father: “The piebald is not livestock. The piebald is the piebald.” His father, who hardly ever smiled, chuckled and shook his finger at the boy, perhaps pleased by the cleverness of the boy’s answer.

In those days the young Mahri would wander with Ukhayyad from tent to tent, following on his heels like a dog. He would trot after him, even when he went to stay out at all-night gatherings in barren regions, and he would not sleep until Ukhayyad had lain down first. He even escorted

the young man when he wandered into the desert to relieve himself. These things made Ukhayyad's cohort laugh at him, but he did not care. He submitted to the caresses and tendernesses of the camel and retorted: "Sheikh Musa says that animals are superior to humans and make the best friends. I heard him say that." Sheikh Musa was a man who read books and recited the Qur'an and led the people in prayer. He was all alone in the world, without wife, children, or relatives, and wandered around with the tribe even though he was not of the tribe. It was said he came from the western ends of the desert, from Fez, the land of teachers and scholars of Islamic law. Sheikh Musa was the one who whispered to him the secret that saved his piebald: "This must stay between us, but only silphium can cure your camel. Don't be an idiot, listen to what I say. Go to the desolate fields of Maimoun next spring. Since the fall of Rome, silphium grows nowhere but there. Secure the Mahri well so he cannot escape and let him graze one or two days. You'll see." Then he repeated enigmatically, "But don't forget to secure him well."

Among the tribe, silphium was another name for the fury of jinn and madness itself. Whoever tasted it, whether beast or man, lost their senses and went mad. Dread of this legendary plant was passed down from generation to generation. As soon as a child became mature enough to herd goats, he was told, "Don't graze the goats in the fields of Maimoun. There's silphium there. There may be a thousand

cures in that weed, but each one passes by the door of jinn. If silphium takes to you, it will cure you of any ailment. But what is the use of restoring health if you then lose your wits? He who loses his reason has lost his soul!” His mother had recited this very warning when he had grown old enough to herd the goats in the valleys.

Sheikh Musa’s injunction frightened him. Would the piebald really become possessed? Would he lose his wits? And how exactly does an animal lose his reason? Do his eyes bulge and turn bloodshot? Does froth drool from his lips? Does he beat his head against stones like men who have become slaves to passion during late-night revelries, or like dervishes who join the Sufi brotherhoods and rove through the encampments and deserts, beating tambourines and wandering all night, every night?

This would be a fate more wretched than mange. Rather than submitting to the sage’s advice, Ukhayyad roamed the encampments searching for others knowledgeable in animal diseases. He could not bear seeing his steed suffer the cruelty of the other shepherds. They had separated him from the camel herd, fearing the contagion, and left him to graze, isolated and alone in the pastures. Ukhayyad preferred to accompany him in his tribulation, setting out with him in the pastures from dawn, not returning until night. Sometimes, Ukhayyad himself was harsh with the Mahri and scolded him, “This is all the result of your recklessness. What have you gained now from your adventures? Didn’t you listen to

what Sheikh Musa said, ‘Females are the most dangerous trap males can fall into.’ Adam was led astray by his woman and God condemned him to be expelled from the Garden. If it were not for that damn woman, us men would have remained there, blessed with an easy life, left to wander freely about paradise.

“There are serpents and scorpions lurking in every hole, ready to sting any idiot who sticks a limb in. What did your sweet she-camel do to you? It turns out she was also a serpent. She’s lovely, but she bites. And the germ you carry is the price of it. You must bear your situation and be patient for the time being.”

The beast lowered his eyelids and answered in shame, “Aw-a-a-a-a-a.”

“Oh, *now* you regret it,” Ukhyayyad smiled bitterly. “Regret won’t do you any good. What will we do with your disease? Don’t you understand how serious this is? Mange is more contagious than smallpox or the plague. God save us from it. Don’t you know, life contains nothing but pitfalls and traps. If you don’t pay attention to where you put your foot, you’ll step right into one. Good God—it was I who raised you to become so heedless! Your mother didn’t get to enjoy seeing you as an adult when the great chief brought you to me. But tell me, by God, how am I supposed to enlighten your mind if I myself, no less than you, need someone to enlighten me? Living blindfolded is our lot, and only traps can teach us wisdom. How reckless we are!”

The Mahri drew near and nuzzled Ukhayyad with his shoulder. Ukhayyad regretted his tirade and changed his tone: “It does not matter. Don’t worry. Thoughtless she-camels may have infected you, but pay them no mind. We’ll find a way out. We have to find a way. Just be patient. You must be very patient if you want to get out of this mess. Life consists of nothing but patience, as old men say.”

He held the Mahri’s head in his embrace and stood there, consoling and consoling him in the pasture.

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