

The Jackal's Courtyard, Messemprar

An excerpt from *The Alabaster Staff*

The officer stepped forward, heedless that an audience had gathered. "You're a gambler, aren't you?" he asked in a gravelly voice.

"No, I—I don't have any coin," said Kehrsyn haplessly. "Not even a wedge."

"A likely story."

"It's true," protested Kehrsyn. Then she turned to the sparse crowd around. "But if one of you wants to loan me a coin," she said loudly, "I'll pay you back double." Immediately a half dozen coppers presented themselves, but she picked the lone silver egora offered by a merchant's hand and favored the worthy with a wink and a bright, wide smile.

"All right," she said to the sergeant. "You see this egora, right? This side is crowns, and this side is verses. Crowns, verses. I'll bet you this egora against one of your own. Done?"

The sergeant nodded assent.

Kehrsyn suppressed a smile. "Are you ready? Watch closely." She held out her right hand and placed the coin on it. "There, it's showing crowns, right? Crown side up, got it? Now watch closely." Then she held her left hand out next to her right, palm down. With a flick as fast as an arrow, she flipped her right hand down on top of her left, concealing the coin against the back of her left hand. "Now, sergeant," she said, "tell me which side is up: crowns or verses."

The sergeant snorted. "Verses, of course."

Kehrsyn faked a heavy sigh and lifted her hand. "Sergeant," she said, "you weren't paying attention." The crowd gasped; the coin showed crowns. The sergeant blinked a few times and did nothing until the elbowing of his troops prompted him to give Kehrsyn a silver egora.

"All right, let's try it again, shall we?" said Kehrsyn. The sergeant nodded automatically. "Look," she said, "we'll try it a different way. I'll put verses side up this time. Got it? Verses up. Remember that. Ready? Verses up." Again she flipped her hand over with the speed of a falcon. "For a silver, sergeant, which side is up?"

"It was verses up," mumbled the sergeant to himself, ensuring he had been paying full attention and remembering the chain of events properly, "and you flipped your hand over, so now it has to be crowns. Crowns up," he said firmly.

“Sergeant, I’m trying to help. I gave you the answer, you know. I said, ‘Verses up.’ Three times I did.” And when she lifted her hand, the coin indeed showed verses. The crowd cheered, most especially the soldiers. The sergeant mutely handed over another egora.

Urged by those around, the sergeant agreed to a third guess. Kehrsyn placed crowns up once more and flipped her hand, but, before the sergeant could say anything, another soldier stepped up. “I’ll make the guess this time, wench,” he said, “and I’ll wager three egorae against all three of yours!”

Kehrsyn paused and glanced about, her face paling. “Uh... but the sergeant...” she stammered.

“I’m onto your trick,” the soldier proclaimed. He clamped his hands on hers, ensuring that she couldn’t manipulate the coin. “The guess is mine; don’t back out!”

Kehrsyn recovered some of her composure and said, “You—you don’t have three silvers on you to wager, so I decline.”

Ordering one of his fellows to keep a tight hold on Kehrsyn’s hand, he quickly emptied his purse and indeed found he had only one egora’s worth of copper on him. So, while carefully watching to ensure she held her hands perfectly still, he quickly borrowed two others from his peers. “There you are,” he proclaimed at last. “Three silvers, even if two are in copper. Now show the coin!”

“Your guess?” asked Kehrsyn.

“Crowns!” barked the soldier.

“You’re sure you won’t change your mind?”

“Quit trying to flummox me and show the coin!”

Kehrsyn lifted her hand. The egora very plainly showed verses. The audience erupted in laughter and applause. In the midst of the noise, the soldier stared at her in shock and anger. “The trick,” she told him earnestly, “is knowing when to stop.” But before she could scoop the coins from his hand, Noseminer clenched his fist and stormed off, followed by the jeers of the gathered crowd. The rest of the soldiers ambled off as well, chuckling to themselves.

Despite having been shortchanged, Kehrsyn still had a profit to show for her efforts. She paid the merchant back two silvers as she had promised, and received an ovation for her honesty.

But, in the end, applause was all that the crowd was willing to part with.