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Opening Extract from...

One Thousand and One Arabian Nights

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CHAPTER ONE

The Marriage of Shahrazad

Stories are carried from the desert kingdoms of India and Persia and Arabia—but who can tell if they are true?—of the twin kingdoms of Sasan and Samarkand al-Ajam. Their rulers were brothers: the tall and glorious King Shahryar and his smaller brother King Shahzaman. The foundations of their cities and palaces were not moved by the shifting ocean of Arabian sand. Their domes and minarets on a horizon were as beautiful in the eyes of desert travellers as foaming water or banked rain clouds.

Just as his cities were wonderful to the eyes, so the young Shahryar was wonderful in the eyes of his people, for he ruled wisely and generously. The heart of Shahryar was lovely, for he took pleasure in the life that Allah gave him. Above all, Shahryar took pleasure in his wife—a lady as lovely as the moon reflected in lily pools. Only the queen of King Shahzaman, his brother, equalled her in beauty.

One morning King Shahryar took it into his heart to visit his brother in the kingdom of Samarkand al-Ajam

and called for camels to be mustered and loaded with presents. Bales of damask cloth, flasks of attar of roses, and panniers filled with oriental spices were heaped across the camels until their legs bent like an archer's bow. In the inner chamber of his palace, King Shahryar kissed his lovely wife goodbye and, of course, veiled her face so that no other man but the King should accidentally glimpse her beauty.

The streets of the royal city of Sasan were filled with fragrance as the caravan wound its way from the palace to the eastern gates. Just as they were leaving the city, King Shahryar remembered the small personal gift of red sulphur he had laid ready in his bedroom, intending to carry it to King Shahzaman. He hurried back to his palace alone and climbed the stairs, his calf-skin shoes making no sound on the stone staircase. As he opened the bedroom door, his heart jumped inside him like a startled hare. In one moment it leapt with delight at the sight of his wife's face, and in the next it leapt with anger that her veil was gone. A servant from the palace stables was sitting beside the queen. In one hand he held the crumpled veil and in the other he held the queen's hand.

When King Shahryar rejoined his caravan of camels, he wore his unhappiness like a black woollen cloak: he stooped under its weight. No word passed his lips until he reached the royal city of Samarkand al-Ajam, the home of King Shahzaman, his brother. The distant city walls trembled like a mirage, for his eyes were still full of tears.

An old man, richly dressed, came out of the gates towards them, making small and weary gestures of welcome—as though his strength was not equal to his message. But as they drew closer to one another, King Shahryar recognized his

own young brother, wearing his grief like old age. His body was like a tent smothered by a sandstorm as it bowed under the weight of his unhappiness.

'Put faith in no one but Allah,' said Shahzaman, pressing his forehead against his brother's shoulder. 'There is such wickedness in the world.'

They walked away from the whispering of camel drivers and grunting of the camels to share their secret in the shadow of the city wall.

'Who can I tell but you, brother?' whispered Shahzaman, looking around him for fear of being overheard. 'My wife has taken my love and emptied it into a pool of mud. She has uncovered her face in front of the palace cook and shined on him with her eyes and waited on him with her hands. Oh, Shahryar, you cannot know what good fortune you have in your lovely, loving wife.'

At the sound of his brother's words, King Shahryar, King of all Sasan (let it not be spoken twice) wept salt tears. 'Oh, Shahzaman! I wish I had married a camel on my wedding day! My wife has uncovered her face in front of a stable-boy and shined on him with her eyes and waited on him with her hands—and I killed them both this morning with my own sword.'

Shahzaman held his head and cried aloud. 'My wife and the palace cook were put to death this morning. What shall we do, brother? It is true what the poet says:

Women are worthless,

Women are liars:

They seem to be roses,

But grow into briars.

All women are fickle!

So night fell in the hearts of King Shahzaman of Samarkand al-Ajam and King Shahryar of Sasan. When Shahryar returned to his city, a pall of sadness settled over all the people of Sasan for three long years.

Sadness crept like a spy into the rib-cage of young King Shahryar. It snuffed out all his candles of joy and left his heart to blunder about in utter darkness. Unhappiness crept to the back-door of his heart and unlocked it, letting in the enemies of Allah: doubt and harshness and . . . fear. Yes, let it not be spoken twice—the tall, valiant, and courteous King of all Sasan was afraid. At night, when his courtiers were in bed and his maidservants were sleeping, the candles in his chamber trembled with loneliness, and the black tent of night flapped around his heart. The creases of the empty pillow beside his head made faces at him, and the faces reminded him of his wife. Then, hitting the pillow with his fist, he vowed to hide the pillow's creases under a new head.

'Wazir!' he shouted. 'Fetch my Wazir!'

The King's Wazir, his sole adviser, ran to King Shahryar's chamber bleary with sleep, and kissed the hem of the bedspread.

'I will not spend another night alone in this bed,' shouted the King.

The Wazir clapped his hands with joy. 'Oh, you wish to marry again, most courteous and mighty king! All Sasan will delight in the news.'

'How can I marry again,' Shahryar stormed, 'when all women are faithless, and none of them will love a man for more than a day?'

'No one could love the magnificence of your lordship for less than a thousand years,' said the Wazir, shaking with fright.

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'I know that women are fickle. If anyone dares to dispute it, I'll have him fed to the palace dogs in pieces for a week—and then put him to death myself!'

'All women are fickle,' said the Wazir, who had a certain store of wisdom.

'It is perfectly obvious what I must do,' said King Shahryar, recovering his just and even temper, renowned throughout Sasan. 'Fetch me a pretty, talented girl at once and I will marry her this morning.'

'I will, sir, with all my heart, sir . . . ' said the Wazir, anxious only to be gone. But with one word the glorious young King stopped his Wazir at the door.

'Worthy old man,' he said. 'Invite the executioner to the wedding and furnish a room for him inside the palace. I shall behead my new bride tomorrow morning before she can stop loving me. Fetch another young woman to me after the execution, and I shall marry again. While the executioner's sword is sharp, I need never be alone at night. Have I not more wisdom than my own Wazir in solving this problem?'

'With such wisdom what need have you of me, your miserable Wazir?' agreed the Wazir, and he crept backwards out of the King's presence. In the corridor outside he was obliged to stop and lean his head against the wall: his heart had turned into a lead anchor which stopped all movement but for the seasick rocking of his soul.

And so for three years, the golden ruler of all Sasan married every day: a thousand brides, a thousand executions, a thousand spaces in the crowded streets of the bazaar, two thousand empty sandals, a hundred thousand pricks of conscience in the heart of the King's Wazir.

So the stories say—but who can tell if they are true?

The stories also say that the Wazir had two daughters,

Dunyazad and Shahrazad, and that during those three dark years in the history of Sasan, Shahrazad, daughter of the King's Wazir, crossed the river that separates childhood from womanhood.

One morning at breakfast, the King's Wazir took his beard in both hands and wept salt tears into his pewter dishes.

'Dearest father, why are you crying?' his daughters asked. The Wazir looked at Dunyazad and her elder sister, Shahrazad—and he covered his face with his hands.

'Tell us, father,' said Shahrazad. 'Is the dear King ill? Nothing else could make you so unhappy.'

He shook his head. 'I cannot truthfully say that the dear King is ill . . . O sweet Shahrazad, you know that there is no king more glorious in all the realms of India and Persia and Arabia than King Shahryar. And there is no man more fortunate than I am to be his Wazir and to advise him. But there is a matter about which he will not take my advice. My words fall like blown sand on a sleeping traveller: he rises the next morning and brushes my advice away with a wave of his hand.'

And the Wazir recounted the sorrows of the last three years. 'The dear King has taken the notion into his heart that no woman can be trusted. A woman, he says, will love a man one day and hate him the next. She will marry a man one day and fall in love with his servant the next morning. I cannot convince him that there were many good women among his brides.'

'Many? Brides? Has the King married many times?'

'He marries every day, Shahrazad. His bride keeps him company during the hours of darkness . . . (Let it not be spoken twice, but the valiant King is a little afraid of being alone at night.) But the morning after his

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wedding, the dear, good King has his new wife's head cut off so that she cannot fall in love with anyone else. And it is my task to find him another bride . . . and another . . . and another . . .'

'Poor father,' said Shahrazad. 'Now I understand why the halls and corridors of the palace are so empty. I understand why I see no noblewomen in the market place and so few silken sandals outside the marble mosques. Now I understand why you are weeping.'

'The city is as empty of young women as the sea is empty of drinking water,' said the Wazir. 'The dear King has cut off all their heads. But that is not why I was weeping. I must send both of you away today—at once. If the dear King should find out that I have a beautiful daughter of marriageable age, you would have to become his latest wife. And he would not leave you your life the morning after the wedding.'

Dunyazad began to cry. But Shahrazad covered her face with her veil so that her expression could not be seen.

'But that is not why I was weeping, either, my beloved daughters. There are no more noblewomen in the city, and I will not empty the kingdom of Sasan of all its young women. When I cannot or will not carry out the orders of the dear King, he will certainly, in his graciousness and wisdom, see fit to put me to death.'

Dunyazad cried all the more, but Shahrazad's face was hidden by her veil and she was silent. Finally she said: 'Dearest father. If you believe that we shall never meet again after today, you cannot refuse me one favour.'

'I would not refuse you a favour even if you were not going away,' said the Wazir. 'You have never asked me for anything. What would I refuse you?'

'Then marry me to the dear King Shahryar. In this way I will die as a queen, and one less daughter of Sasan will die because of me.'

'O Shahrazad. You are the oasis in the desert of my dry old soul. Do not empty yourself into the King's hands. He will only spill you.'

'Father! Do not let your sorrow make you speak without respect for our glorious King. Mention to him that you have a daughter. Please, I beg you. If Allah wills it, our dear King will marry me.'

King Shahryar, ruler of all Sasan, was delighted with Shahrazad.

'Her face behind her veil is like the moon behind a cloud,' he said to the Wazir. 'Why did you not bring me this one before?'

'She is my daughter, noble king, my beloved daughter . . . ' And seeing that the King's heart was already set on a marriage, the Wazir covered his face with his arm and left the royal chamber, not staying for the wedding feast which began in the self-same hour.

During the festivities, Shahrazad took her little sister to one side and whispered to her:

'You know that the dear King, in his graciousness and wisdom, will not cut off my head until the morning. I would like to see a friendly face when I wake. Come to my royal husband's bedroom in the morning.'

'I will come,' said Dunyazad.

'And if you come, perhaps Allah will put it into your heart to say this . . . ' and she lifted her sister's dark hair and spoke a few words into her ear.

The sound of the King's Headsman sharpening his sword

in the courtyard woke Shahrazad where she lay in the royal bed. King Shahryar was already awake.

'Are you ready, wife?'

'If it is time, my gracious husband. My little sister Dunyazad is knocking on the door. Let me say goodbye to her, and then you may take what joy you can from cutting off my little head.'

Dunyazad stood on the threshold, her face uncovered, and King Shahryar captured her face in the cage of his memory, thinking to marry her, too, when she came of age.

'If you have come to ask for your sister's life to be spared,' said the King, 'I must tell you that it is impossible. A woman's love is as long as the stroke of a pen that has seen no ink. Do not waste your tears.'

'Gracious King,' said Dunyazad, bowing to the ground. 'In your graciousness and wisdom, you know what is for the best. But let me say goodbye to my sister, for the swordsman is waiting in the courtyard and I shall never see her again.' The King stood aside: Dunyazad and Shahrazad kissed one another.

'Dearest sister,' said Dunyazad. 'How we shall miss you, father and I. How we shall miss your voice singing in the garden, your flute playing on the terraces, and the aroma of your cooking. But I know when we shall miss you most of all. The nights will be so long without your wonderful stories. No one in all Arabia can tell stories as you do. The nights will be as empty as the sea is empty of birds. Do you remember how father laughed when you told the story of the Everlasting Slippers? Do you remember how we all cried when you told the story of the Keys of Destiny—and how the maidservant almost choked on her dinner when you amazed us with the secret

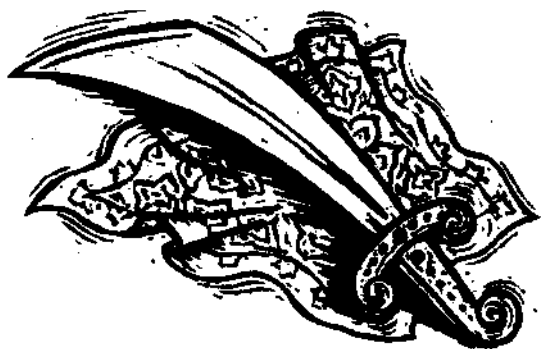
language of the animals? I would give up my place among the ladies of this palace just to hear one more story. Won't you tell me one last story, Shahrazad?

'No, little sister. It is time now. My dear husband the King has many things to do today; I must not keep him waiting. It is a pity, for tonight I would have told you the story of . . . No matter.'

King Shahryar overheard their words. He remembered in his heart how the black tent of night flapped around him when he was alone in the dark.

But he said: 'You have some of the wisdom of your father, Shahrazad. My days are busy. My courtiers are waiting. No worthless wife must delay court business, and surely every second that passes makes it likely that your life will outlast your love for me. Woman's love is as long as the hairs on a chicken's egg. You can do only one more thing to please me: give up your head. I can see the swordsman from this window. Hurry down to him, and I will watch from here.'

In the courtyard, the stones underfoot were already hot. Shahrazad bowed to the ground before the King's window and then she coiled up her hair and bowed low before the King's swordsman.



CHAPTER TWO

The Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor

IN his heart, King Shahryar pictured the nights of his childhood when his mother told him tales from beyond the furthestmost borders of Araby.

'One word, Shahrazad,' he called from his window. 'What story were you going to tell to Duniyazad tonight?'

'The story of Sinbad the Sailor, dear husband,' said Shahrazad as the swordsman placed his foot on her back. 'An adventure drawn up from the liquid mountains of the sea where there are as many wonderful beasts and fabulous islands as there are trees in a forest.'

'Shahrazad, I have it in my heart to hear the story. But I have affairs of state to attend to. You will tell it to me tonight. Swordsman, come back tomorrow at the very same time.'

Just as the tent of night began to flap around King Shahryar's heart and set the candles in his eyes trembling

with fear, Shahrazad came to his bed and lay down beside him. Leaning on one elbow, she began:

A story is carried from Baghdad—though who can tell if it is true?—of a young man called Sinbad the Porter. Sinbad was known at all the local inns for his beautiful singing voice, and he would often sing in return for a coin or a bite to eat. He was summoned one day to a great house built of white and wine-coloured marble on the skirts of the city. An old man was sitting on the vine-covered terrace, and asked him to sing—which he willingly did:

*Oh I have carried golden treasure
Half across Arabia's sands,
And I have seen the cost of pleasure
Pouring out of rich men's hands.
But do not think of me as rich, sir,
Because I carry treasure chests,
For I count myself much richer
When I lay them down and rest.
I am just a poor young porter—
All my meat is caught from rivers,
All the wines I drink are water—
All I carry, I deliver.*

The song pleased the old man, and he took a great liking to the porter.

'The pleasure a good song gives can't be paid for with money alone,' said the old man. 'Let me give you something of mine. I shall give you the story of my life, which is moderately interesting. My name is Sinbad too. But I am Sinbad the Sailor.'

The Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor

I was born the son of a rich father who died and left me a lot of money. Being a particularly clever boy, I made the sensible decision to invest the money. I invested it in drink and expensive food and stylish clothes and in buying myself a lot of friends at the local inn. Before long I found that my investment had left me with hardly a penny. To tell you the truth, I did not want to be poor in my old age.

So I sold everything I owned and bought instead a silk-sailed ship and cargo. I employed a captain, and we set sail for the rest of the world, turning a furrow through the sea as straight and certain as an arrow through a blue sky. I was confident of making my fortune as a merchant.

One day a solitary island came into view from the mast top—two or three trees and a smooth, grey beach the colour of the atolls in the great Western Ocean.

Some of the sailors were tired of the blood swilling in their veins with the motion of the ship, and we took it into our heads to draw alongside the island and walk about on dry land. The captain was sleeping below decks. We did not trouble to wake him: a friendly fire, a baked fish, a short walk, and we would be ready to set off again. Two of the men even brought a laundry barrel from the ship to do their washing in.

Ali lit a fire, and I made a tour of the island, but there was not a lot to recommend it. We were just deciding that no one could live there, without fresh water, when suddenly Abdul caught sight of a fountain—a geyser, rather—at a great distance from us. Its water gushed higher and higher, seemingly to the height of a castle tower, then dropped out of sight.

'I have been aboard ship for too long—the ground still seems to be moving,' I said, embarrassed by losing my

balance and falling over. Then the captain's voice drifted to us on the wind.

'Aboard! Aboard! Or you are all dead men!'

'The island is sinking!' someone cried.

'The island is moving!' shouted another.

A deep roaring beneath us was followed by a second eruption of water from the geyser. It spouted so high that the spray reached us on the wind and soaked us to the skin in a second.

Amidst the spray, I could just see the captain giving orders for the ship to pull away. The space of water opened between our landing-party and the vessel. Some men ran to the water and leapt in. Others shouted at the captain, calling him names or begging him to pull ashore again. Only one or two of his words reached us across the opening gap.

'Whale! . . . Fire has woken the whale . . .'

Well may you hold your head in wonder, friend. We had indeed moored alongside a giant whale, and the fire we had lit on its back had disturbed it out of a sleep centuries long. The sandy silt of the ocean had washed over the whale, and the winds had brought seeds and spores and planted its sparse vegetation. But as it rolled in pain, our fire beginning to burn through its hide (and making an awful stench), the shallow-rooted trees were washed away like toothpicks, and the sand swirled round our knees as we stumbled to and fro. The whale dived.

One sailor was thrown high out of the water by the massive tail—believe me, friend, those tail-flukes were larger than galleon sails—and the tail fell on us like the greatest tree in all the gum forests of Arabia.

To the end of my days I shall weary Allah with my thanks. The barrel full of my fellow sailors' washing rolled

towards me across the water. I pulled myself across it and floated away, while my sailor friends swam down with the whale to the kingdom where only the fish can breathe. Friend, friend, it makes me sweat salt-water only to think about it.

The ship had long since gone. I was alone on the ocean with the smell of scorched whale in my nostrils. I began to paddle with my feet, and my lonely voyage, as you can imagine, was so long and tiring that I do not remember reaching land.

I woke up beside my barrel on a white beach to find, to my great surprise, that I was alive. I also found that the fish had eaten many holes in my feet, and only with pain and difficulty did I climb the beach and explore.

I saw no one, friend, and nothing. Under the trees the undergrowth was thick—a perfect home for wild animals. Why else did I climb that tree? But from the topmost branches I could see a long, long way.

I saw no one, friend, and nothing. In another direction, however, I glimpsed a shining white dome. Surely it was a fine mosque at the heart of a splendid city. Its white curve seemed so massive that I was almost afraid to approach.

When I finally reached it, I walked around it five times before I gave up hope of finding a door. Its whiteness was dazzling in the sun. I tried to climb up it, but the white surface was so polished and smooth that I slithered down to the ground again every time. I exhausted myself in the mid-day heat, and that is why I was sitting on the ground in the shade of the white dome when the sun went dark.

I have seen tropical suns set like a single clap of hands. I have seen the moon forget its rightful place and push in front of the sun. But this was no eclipse or sunset.

Looking up, I saw that the sun had been blotted out by the shape of a gigantic bird. Its claws were as large as the tusks of elephants, one toe the thickness of a tree-trunk. Its wings were as huge as my terror, and its feathers as black as my miserable fate. For now I realized that the white dome I was sitting under was nothing other than the bird's unhatched egg. And as slowly and certainly as a ship on a whirlpool is sucked circling down, the huge bird was wheeling down towards me.

'Why have you stopped?' said King Shahryar.

'Oh, my dear husband,' Shahrazad replied, 'I am surely the most worthless of wives, for I have wearied you all night with my story-telling, and already it is dawn. Your swordsman is waiting for me in the courtyard. I can hear him sharpening his sword.'

'But what became of Sinbad the Sailor?' Shahryar demanded. 'How did he escape being eaten by the bird?'

'Ah, dear husband, the things that happened to Sinbad are so strange and so many that I could spend another night in telling you his story . . .'

So King Shahryar rose and went to the window and leaned out.

'Come back tomorrow, swordsman, at the very same time. And you, Shahrazad,' he said, turning to his wife, 'you must return this evening to finish the story.'

'To hear you is to obey,' Shahrazad replied.

