

Shahrazade's Wedding

I

In olden times, when the Persian Empire stretched from India to the Aegean Sea, Shahryar, the emperor, avenged himself on an unfaithful first wife and, unsatisfied with her death agonies, continued his therapy by taking each day a virgin in marriage and slaying her the next day. The persecution of virtuous women continued for three decades, seeing the king from a young man full of passionate outrage to a middle aged one of comfortable habits.

One day, he took for his bride a young girl, Shahrazade who, in spite of her innocence, or, perhaps, because of or resulting in her innocence, was bookish and clever. On the night that was to be their first and her last, she told him a story so intriguing and exciting that the King was fascinated and his leg shook as he listened until dawn broke.

When the rooster announced the day Shahrazade said her recollection of the story suffered from her lack of sleep. She could go no further in the telling without rest. So the king spared her until the story was finished but on the next evening, the end of the story she told suggested another and the King demanded to know what would happen next. The rooster crowed again and once more Shahrazade demurred until she was rested.

That rhythm, in which one story suggested another and each was more exciting than the last, continued for almost three years when Sharyar relented and decided that Shahrazade would live out the rest of her days as his queen.

Shahrazade knew that by wit and education she had not only saved her own life but that of thousands of other women who would otherwise have followed her to doom. She had become the world's most important queen by virtue of older epics. Shahrazade felt the same sense of pride, good fortune and destiny that modern women participate in upon their engagements to, for instance, gum-chewing, shade-tree mechanics of doubtful morals.

“But I will need a proper royal wedding!” Shahrazade told the king. “There will be a legendary ceremony before you hear another legend from me.”

The King agreed, and the next day addressed the court with Shahrazade by his side, there would be a grand festival in a fortnight, a wedding party and a carnival to celebrate Shahrazade at last becoming Queen.

Shahrazade pulled at the king’s tunic and rasped “This will be the most important day of my life. It has to be perfect!”

The king had never before been interrupted and reconsidered the original plan with the beheading and the new virgin. Just then a beggar, who had been receiving alms in the corner of the courtyard, threw off cloak and turban and was revealed as Shahrazade’s mother.

“But wait!” the old woman yelled. “You must send for cousin Leili! You were in her wedding, after all!”

II

Sharyar thought it suitable that cousin should meet cousin and the road to Leili’s village was notorious for banditry, so the great king dispatched Ali, a general and son of Sharyar’s Aunt to retrieve Leili for the wedding. Ali brought with him five other soldiers and two men to drive the covered litter and oxen that would bring Leili back. After a day spent choosing the drapery for Leili’s cart, Ali and his men rode from the capitol to Susa. There was a short celebration in honor of Shahrazade and Leili until the latter was put in the litter for the journey to the palace.

That night, however, as the group camped, Ali heard sounds in the brush and knew the group had been surrounded by brigands. “Let the first among you come forward before we do battle!” Ali yelled into the darkness. When no one came forward he spoke again in a voice filled with a general’s authority. “I am sure you have us outnumbered but I am a general, we are soldiers in the Great King’s army. We will kill many of you and die ourselves before we are captured. Instead of bloodshed, let the smartest of you play me at chess. If you win, we will surrender to you without a fight, so long as the woman is

unmolested and you can ransom us for a great price. If I win, you must let us leave unharmed.”

The figure that approached the firelight was as big and robust as Ali himself. The two men set down before the chessboard and played, but they were so well matched in skill and focus that every game ended in a draw. As the sky started to lighten, Ali sought the advantage by distracting his opponent's thinking. “You seem to be a very intelligent man,” Ali posed, “how did you come to be a highwayman rather than seeking your fortune in service to Shahryar.”

The enemy answered “I was born to nobility but my birthright was betrayed and I was sold into slavery while still a boy. With every robbery and every kidnapping I build an army until the day I can reclaim my proper place.” The story was true, as it happened, but the Brigand hoped to get advantage of the General by stirring his sympathy. “To be truthful, I miss my family more than my rank.”

Another game ended in a draw and the brigand sought during the next game to distract the general by appealing to his pride. “I have kidnapped many noblemen and none were your equal at chess. How did you learn to play so well?”

“My father loved to play and taught his children well until one year a terrible famine fell on the land and the people were starving. A band of forty thieves fell upon the town to ravage it but were moved by our poverty. Their leader offered my father to feed the village until the rains came in exchange for whatever was most valuable of my father's possessions.” The story was true, but the General also hoped to gain advantage in the chess match by stimulating the bandit's populism so he added, “Already, the poorest of our neighbors were dying so my father made the bargain and the thieves sent grain until the famine ended in exchange for Kassim, my only brother. My father never played chess again and died soon after.”

In the light of the young day, the General could now see his opponent's eyes which were moist. In each other's faces they saw a likeness and stood for a long embrace after which Ali told his brother, “The woman we escort is cousin to the new Queen. We are obviously too few for her safety. Join us, and I'll see your position restored and your fellow thieves pardoned and made officers.”

Kassim answered, “I will join you and thanks be to Allah who is always wise and merciful. If anyone but my brother had come through today I would most likely one day have died

a criminal and if any robber but I had met your party, you might have been slaughtered and the princess taken.”

“It is right to thank Allah but also our father, who always thought three moves ahead.”

“They sit on the groom’s side.” Leili insisted.

When the enlarged party reached the palace there were warm reunions and Sharyar ordered a feast to celebrate the arrival of Leili and the redemption of Kassim. At the banquet, Leili asked Shahrazade and her mother, in a voice loud enough to be heard by the king and his cousins, “So, what kind of flowers are you planning for the wedding?”

III

Sharyar realized suddenly that a King on the eve of his wedding is at best a Prince and nearly a slave. “What of the flowers?” he asked his fiancée, her mother and her cousin.

“You are the pride of Persia,” Shahrazade explained “but the people must be reminded that you are both great and tender. That the flowers for our wedding will be beautiful, your generosity and greatness assure, but they should also be exotic so the people will know the breadth of your rule.”

“What do you have in mind?” Shahryar asked the three women who had, in two days time, become the most deeply rooted and dangerous conspiracy in the empire.

“There is a flower,” Leili answered, “that is said to grow only in the mountains between Bactria and Kashmir. It is said to bloom only once in a century and its petals are rumored to be as blue as the deepest ocean. Even dried, its aroma is said to be so sweet as to make prisoners rejoice and beasts repent.”

“Will it bloom in time for the wedding?” Shahryar asked.

Shahrazade’s mother spoke up next, “there is an old woman in the hills near Sidon named Roshan who knows the secret of making any flower bloom upon command. Send

Leili to get her for the trip to Bactria. We will need to delay the wedding a month, but it will be worth it for the reverence it brings you.”

So the wedding was postponed and Ali, Kassim and Leili were reunited and dispatched to Sidon to seek out the magical crone botanist.

Following clues and interrogating peasants, children and satraps, the men and Leili came at last to a path leading into a copse of trees. No sooner had they entered than they encountered two pillars, one on each side of the path made by living sunflowers whose stems twisted together supporting a boulder a child's height above the ground. Past the living columns was a twisted house surrounded by a patio of treeroots, bustling marigolds and ambitious tiger lilies swaying in the breeze. Dogwood blossoms rose from the frame and fell in piles around the base. Rosebushes the height of an elephant prospered vividly and the air was scented with their attar. Blocking the path, lay a lion.

The lion snarled and licked its lips at the strangers who approached it. Its eyes watched all three. Ali reached for his sword to attack the beast and Kassim for a stone to trick it. Leili stepped forward and knelt in front of the lion. “We are here to learn your secret, old woman,” Leili said.

“What secret?” the lion asked, to the amazement of the general, the bandit and their companies.

Leili put her hand up to silence the men, but Ali was accustomed to being in command and said, “tell us how you make flowers bloom out of season!”

“Too lustful,” answered the lion.

Kassim was used to ignoring instructions and demanded “tell us how an old woman can appear as a beast!”

“Too obvious,” the lion answered.

Leili finally found her turn to speak and did, “Share with us your memories, so that long after Allah, who is always merciful and kind, has taken the last of us, distant strangers will remember your story.”

The lion heaved to its feet and then reared onto its haunches and was transformed into an old woman bent with age. "Very well," she said. "Come in. I'll tell you all you wish to know and fix some jasmine tea."

IV

"I was born on the Steppes north of the Caucasus mountains. My father had a farm and kept a trading post for merchants on the great silk road who couldn't tell north from south, morning from dawn and who, therefore, were lost enough to come upon our place. My childhood was happy among the misplaced and perplexed." Roshan, the magic botanist crone, served delicious tea and lead her visitors down a meandering history. She described a quiet childhood, filled with discovery, freedom and doting relatives to come home to. She narrated juvenile affections that never violated or even inconvenienced her virtue. She spoke of strange men from strange lands, all fairly slow.

After countless stories and cups of tea, Ali and his brother ran outside to check for nearby enemies, bandits and children. Roshan and Leili were alone and Roshan changed stories. "Once, when I was a little girl, I was playing in my grandmother's flower garden and wondering about ecology. A tall merchant from Galatia rode up from the West to ask my father directions to Samarkand and my father sold him a night in our home and a meal. I went back to thinking about why violet blossoms never grew on rosebushes and why the crocus blooms before the jonquil every year when another merchant, this one a stout Mongolian seeking Thebes, rode in from the East and my father made an arrangement like that of the Galatian. Both of these men had all the peaks of the Caucasian range between themselves and any plausible route that the stars, good sense or a maddening fever would likely have led them down.

"When we all sat down for our meal, the Galatian and the Mongolian vied to tell remembered stories of how their people had won glory in battle with the other's or been tricked. Although both men struggled to remember names and years and places, I was fascinated by their stories because I could see the tribes of mankind as unruly flowers, seeking the garden's order outside its border, each trying to be the first animal.

"After supper, the two merchants competed with one another in the sport of fraud. The Galatian sold the mongol a golden statue made of lead. The Mongol offered in

exchange a decanter filled with holy ointment he'd flanked beneath a ram. The exchanges escalated as the Mongol offered a mating pair of infant swans that quacked when pulled from his cart for a turtle so ancient its back was covered in moss and so wealthy that it never needed to leave its shell. When the next dawn broke, the men completed their deals and left, the Mongol heading north and the Galatian to the west, both riding high in prosperity.

"It was then that I began to understand the secret lives of plants that, by root, pollen and perfume persuade their neighbor where to grow and when to bloom, securing for themselves the finest seasons and best ground. And every blossom transforms in communion into a new dream and a tolerable neighbor.

"I know what you have come here to learn. I will give you my art if you answer this riddle.

Before the pollen flecks the tree
With promises where fruit will be
The sap finds riches in the loam
To adorn the busy, wooden home
And you, so pretty and so fair,
Are she who put those riches there
So tell me now, and then run free
By what name shall I call thee?"

"I am..." Leili began as she considered the riddle, rearranging the order of the verses and considering the rhymes. Then she thought of Roshan's last story and the answer came to her. "Fertilizer!"

The crone sipped her tea and smiled proudly, did not speak but stood. She pressed her bony hand on Leili's forehead until Leili felt science magically fill her skull. In gratitude, she left a jeweled comb on the old woman's table which had been a gift from her husband during their courtship. The princess then burst outside, filled with a botanist's certainty

to gather the men for the long trip to the mountains of Bactria where they could now find the rare oceanflower and bring it in blossom to her cousin's wedding.

As they travelled east that Spring, all along her path, flowers bloomed majestically until the party reached the Hindu Kush.

V

The floral detachment arrived in Bactria, where Ali thought to announce themselves to the local Satrap and ask about the oceanflowers.

"Needless!" Leili said. "Why ask for directions when you brought with you an expert botanist?"

"Do you know where the oceanflower grows, Princess Leili?" Ali asked her. "Or what it looks like?"

"It looks like the Oceanflower, *Mandragora Oceanus*, and grows in the Upper Bactrian Alpine Stratum of the Hindu Kush, I believe. I bet we'll find it just above the tree line."

"The Oceanflower is a mandrake?" Cassim asked. His once lost brother, Ali, slid his eyes toward Cassim. Leili stared back at the man who'd questioned her, wide eyes frozen above pursed lips.

"Yes," she stated certainly.

So the party climbed the mountains for a day and camped among the last trees. Cassim was awakened by the sound of leaves rustling. "Don't wake them, they'll only ask questions," a voice creaked. Cassim opened one thief's eye and looked around until his sight settled on an oak and linden which grew together, their trunks entwined. Cassim moved stealthily away from the camp and when the other side of the trees were revealed, he saw no one there.

"Who's there?" Cassim whispered, sword drawn.

"Told you," groaned the oak, unexpectedly.

“What brings you and your friends here?” the linden breathed in a trembling, feminine voice.

“My brother, the botanist Princess and our men have come seeking the oceanflower that grows here,” Cassim answered with some tremble in his own brigand throat.

“Isn’t this still a mountain?” the Linden asked the Oak, with a mild rebuke couched in her rustle. The oak groaned again and Cassim pitied it, for Cassim himself had once been married, and he fraternally preempted the answer.

“The Princess is the botanist, but I understand the oceanflower gets its name from its flowers, which are the deepest blue. I also understand its scent is sweet enough to reform a lion, that it only blossoms rarely and it grows,” and here he added stress, “in these mountains. I believe it may also be a mandrake.”

“There is no such flower except in the fictions of liars, drunkards and fools,” the oak creaked with revived authority. “But if you can do for us a certain chore within the hour, we will create one for you to take.”

“I never doubted you,” the Linden whispered loyally to her mate.

Cassim knelt and promised to do his best if they would but name his task.

The linden breathed “To do the chore, you must name it yourself by answering this riddle...”

“OK. I get it. Fertilizer. What kind?”

“Just over yonder hill,” the old oak intoned, “there lives a yak with horns of gold and bristles so sharp they cut stone. He never leaves the little lea in which he lives and gores any anyone who intrudes. Bring me a sackful of his manure.”

“Blood of an eagle for me, thanks” added the Linden.

In less than hour, Cassim had returned with the blood, the dung and an acorn.

“Well, aren’t you resourceful?” the Linden patronized. “How did you manage?”

Cassim answered “I found a squirrel’s nest inside a tree at the edge of the meadow. When an eagle flew overhead, I stood opposite the nest and spoke as if I were the tree,

which startled the squirrel, who fled the tree. When the eagle caught the squirrel, it was on the yak's ground and I caught the dung the yak sprayed as he charged the eagle whose blood I now present to you." He then placed the acorn at the foot of the oak, "The squirrel had this among his affairs. I thought it might belong to you."

The linden stiffened and the oak bent perceptibly away. "That's not my acorn." he groaned. "Tell me, why would a talking tree startle a squirrel?"

Cassim answered "I spoke in the voice of a stone."

When the rest of the party awoke, at the edge of camp was the oceanflower, early in bud and potted in bark.

"Did I not tell you we'd find one here?" asked the botanist.

When the party returned, all Persia rejoiced and Shahryar asked his future mother-in-law if he could, once again, schedule the ceremony.

"What shall we serve our guests?" asked Shahrazade's mother, "that is worthy of such an important event?"

VI

"I thought, maybe, chicken," Shahryar offered, helpfully.

Shahrazade's mother began to lecture, "Young man..." before the Queen-to-be intervened.

"O King of kings, the metaphor will not be lost on the people. You are the nourishment of Persia and its provinces. Although you have no rival among the other nations, the people must see their good fortune in their era as well as their land. The feast should celebrate your reign, may it be long, within this great dynasty. Our wedding banquet must be both rich and unique.

"In Aksum, there is a wizard-chef named Frumentius of whom it is said that when he cooks, the aromas leads Sheban traders to wreck their ships against the Eritrean coast, so hungry they become that they forget to disembark when they reach land. So

appetizing is his food, they say, that snakes in his kitchen, upon taking a mouse, immediately seek the next until they are as thick and tender as pigs.”

The King sagged a little, then summoned the royal chef who sent a Dacian slave in his place. The slave was a small and wiry boy named Rufus who had proven exceptionally resourceful and clever. For example, once, when a royal cousin had failed at love, Rufus had devised a method for stewing doves alive under a thin layer of oil so the diner could see at once his own reflection and the terror of the paragons of romance. It was determined that Rufus would be sent to Aksum in search of Frumentius and his recipe for snake souvlaki.

On foot, Rufus left the palace with a sackful of dense, sugared biscuits he had prepared himself for the long journey. He was crossing the Sinai desert, eating his crumbly cookies, when he came over a dune and saw a poor tent. There were no animals outside the tent and from the inside he could hear coughing.

Just then the sunlight dimmed and the sand echoed the sound of countless beating wings. Frightened of an avenging flock of doves, Rufus ran for the tent. Inside he found a bearded man and a pregnant woman, both were shaking with fever and silent from starvation. Rufus placed one of his biscuits in the mouth of each and began looking through their few items of property for a weapon he could use against the furious flock. A biscuit crumb lodged in the throat of the bearded man who began to choke. A handful of the Dacian's water into the man's throat not only removed the blockage but aroused the man who blinked once at the slave who had saved him and immediately tended to the woman. Soon the couple were swaying but upright, weakly trying to introduce themselves to Rufus in a language he didn't speak. The man stretched and went to the entrance of the tent to look outside.

Rufus yelled for the man to stop, but the man didn't understand. He opened the tent and sunlight streamed in as Rufus hid in the shadow of a rolled blanket in the back. When he dared look, the open flap revealed not the terrible flock of murderous doves Rufus had feared, but a lazy collection of pigeons pecking the crumbs Rufus had left behind him. By then, the bearded foreigner was staggering back to the tent with his slingshot in his right hand and three slain pigeons in his left.

The woman cooked the birds and all ate. In the morning, the strength of the couple had returned. Rufus and they exchanged indecipherable farewells as Rufus left behind a

small plate of baked goods for food or bird bait. In her own language, the pregnant woman had declared his cookies “blessed among biscuits,” as Rufus continued toward the legendary ovens of Frumentius.

VII

Rufus followed the Nile river on his way to Aksum. As he left Lower Egypt he spotted a toll collector smoking a pipe. Rufus crept off into the brush and, with his sense of herbs and spices, concocted from the local brush an assortment of leaves that smelled like the best pipeweed. He offered this to the toll-collector in lieu of a toll, the bargain was struck and by nightfall Rufus was well away while the toll-man began to smoke, became ambitious and added a surcharge to those passing.

A few days later, Rufus reached another toll-collector with nervous eyes. This man Rufus challenged to a coin-toss, promising to pay double if the toll-collector guessed the side the coin would land on. The man, suspecting a trap, insisted his own coin be the instrument of the wager, and so it was, as well as the currency of settlement when the nervous man guessed wisely.

A few days after his bad bet, Rufus neared Luxor, the ancient city of Pharaohs. By the time Rufus spotted the third toll collector, a fearsome, large and well-armed man nursing a bad mouth of teeth, the slave realized he had been surrounded by a host of men no more delicate than the first and all with commerce in mind.

The group had no coherence. When Rufus would convince two of the guards to check the bottoms of their sandals, a third would cuff him on the ear for pleasure. When he convinced another that there was a creature half-lion half-water buffalo standing right behind him, three others would refuse to turn preferring to bop little Rufus on the pate. The leader let it be known that toll collectors travel on their stomachs and that if Rufus could not buy them supper, he might be their breakfast. It was then that the poor slave saw the crocodile cavalry from the corner of his eye.

“What are those?” he yelled, pointing downriver, but no one turned and he was smacked for speaking. The stream of crocodiles continued towards the men. “Take up arms!” Rufus suggested emphatically, receiving a clout in answer which knocked him

down.” Soon a great amphibian army, each crocodile ridden by a small grey and black bird fell upon the band of men. Amid gnashing teeth and ballistic bone, Rufus stayed safely on the ground as his antagonists were devoured.

“Once upon a time,” explained the largest bird, atop the first crocodile, to Rufus who lay shaking, “there were two brothers, creampuff and Smokie. Smokie fell in love with a pure white pigeon and asked his brother, already the father of several hatchlings for advice on how to woo her. Creampuff recommended that Smokie court the pigeon with a gift so dangerous to obtain that she could not fail to understand both the magnitude of his affection and his heroism. Smokie gathered grubs and parasites from the backs of crocodiles and carrion from between their teeth.

“Smokie barely escaped death several times but with his craw filled with exotic foods gathered at great expense, he at last took wing home to his little loved pigeon. When he arrived however, he found her already satisfied with a sweet pear and soft seeds she had received from the treacherous creampuff. Creampuff, himself, took startled flight from a nest filled with sweets and two white eggs at the sight of his brother whose death he had expected. From those two eggs descend all doves, children of treason. Smokie bitterly returned to the place he had been sent to die and fathered the line of crocodile birds while praying in vain for revenge.

“When we heard from a crow of your dove stew, we knew that finally, after thousands of generations, our grandfather’s prayer was answered in you. We could not let you be persecuted in our land for, unlike our cousins the doves, we are loyal, honest and true.”

After saying his thanks, Rufus was again on his way upriver carrying a cloth filled with grubs from the backs of crocodiles and splinters from between their teeth. In his other hand he held the wallet which contained the money he had been given by Sharyar’s chef to pay tolls with, for to the free, to live is to profit but to the slave, profit is life.

A week later, the gates of Aksum rose before the Dacian.

VIII

No sooner had Rufus passed the gates of Aksum when an aroma reached him bearing the message that all men were equals to a slave. Had he been a coward, such a smell would have made him remember he was a born a hero. If Rufus had been vegetarian, the

vapor would have reminded him he was once a man. Had he capsized on the Red Sea and washed ashore near Ethiopia, his nose would now have called him lucky.

Rufus forgot his mission and followed the breeze of virtue and vice. Before long he stood outside Frumentios' kitchen. A door opened and out walked Frumentios, a man with skin the color of green olives and a body like a green olive stuffed inside a hippopotamus. "Please come in," the great man said. "You're standing on my pepper plant." The Dacian wafted in, hypnotized. Even the bread on Frumentios' table seemed serene.

Fortunately, as every pleasure, the exquisite appetite stoked by the scent of Frumentios' cooking soon abated and Rufus regained his senses and identified himself as an royal emissary from Persia seeking a recipe.

"I have no interest in royalty or politics. The king of kings himself eats pilaf!"

"Perhaps I should explain further," Rufus answered. "I am an emissary from the royal kitchen. The chef himself dispatched me because he knew you were the greatest of gourmets."

"So you work in the kitchen. Very well. I'm hungry. Make me an omelet and I will give you a recipe to take home."

"An omelet?" the Dacian queried.

"Yes," Frumentios answered. "The Rukh is a bird that lives in the mountains to the west. It is so large that once a single feather fell from its wing and the whole army of Candace, Queen of Sudan, used it for a shield during an invasion. When it is hungry, it carries off elephants, cows and hogs in an assortment. If two Rukhs hunted this kingdom I would have to become a baker.

"Just last week, merchants from Mali who had crossed the mountains reported seeing an egg in the Rukh's nest. Make me an omelet of the Rukh egg and I will give you a recipe to take home."

So, Rufus left for the mountains and as he neared the jagged crests of the tallest, the sky darkened and the Dacian looked up to find the sun hidden behind a bird more expansive in the sky than a storm. Its beak was so long and sharp, Rufus reckoned the Rukh could catch an earthworm at the bottom of a volcano. The talons looked like oak

trees tied around boulders to remind a mountain it needed something from the store. The feathers were not ruffled by the breeze but scolded the wind. The fearsome raptor had flown beyond the horizon before the sun came back out.

Rufus climbed the mountain from behind which the Rukh had flown and looking down at a nest the size of a palace saw the egg the Malians had reported. The egg itself was the size of an ox-cart. Rufus saw no way to move an egg that size, nor any chance for carrying it away undetected. Looking down from the peak he saw a rounded boulder just above the nest. He looked around and found a small tree that had fallen centuries before and carried over to the ovoid boulder and was still prying when he heard a caw so terrible that snakes on the mountaintop foreswore temptation.

“Thank heavens, you’ve returned!” Rufus yelled back. “I found a man trying to steal this egg and replace it with,” he continued, pointing at the egg, “yonder boulder!”

The outraged big bird kicked the egg, a false impostor, so hard it cleared the next mountains, then took wing herself to find the culprit. When Rufus reached Aksum again, he found that the egg had crashed through the city wall and come to rest outside Frumentios’ kitchen, crushing the pepper plants. As Rufus sauteed onions for his omelet, in the far mountains, the Rukh swallowed the only man large enough to have replaced her egg with a boulder, Frumentios the chef. The boulder that Rufus had been found trying to move now sat in the nest where it was pierced from the inside by a beak the size of a calf’s head.

Two weeks later, Rufus returned to the palace carrying Frumentios’ entire cookbook and found the royal family arguing about music for the reception.

IX

“What’s wrong with the Immortals’ marching band?” Shahryar demanded as his cousin Ali nodded vigorously. “They have accompanied my best soldiers and I through victories throughout Asia!”

“They’re a military band, sweetheart,” answered his bride and queen-to-be. “I was hoping for something more ethereal.”

Shahryar looked with something that seemed like hope at the scimitars of his personal guards and then, grimly, asked “And where will we find such ambient beauty?”

“My king, in the jungles of Malagasy, there is said to be a beetle with perfect pitch. A choir of them would be perfect for our perfect day.”

“Very well, though the oceans are stormy this time of year and the journey will be dangerous and costly, I myself will seek a sailor to take me to Malagasy, a royal errand for the love of bugs.”

“Make sure you get at least four,” Shahrazade instructed. “And one should play percussion.”

Kassim and his men, brigands recently, were judged the best bodyguards for Basrah, a seafaring city religion had never penetrated. Leili suggested she go along as entomology was often applied to botany and she reckoned she might know a thing or two about it.

Ali, the King’s cousin, general and advisor approached Shahryar and whispered two concerns. First, that a woman would not be safe on a boat, were it known she were a woman and second that if it were known the King of Kings was at sea, the far provinces of Persia might go restless.

“These are good points,” Shahryar answered. “And I would like to see how much love the people have for their King when he is not about. I will disguise myself as a valet for this trip and Leili, in false beard and noble vestments can pretend to be a provincial warlord.”

And so the group left the capitol and arrived in Basra with the Shah in disguise and Leili in drag.

“I am Sinbad!” they heard as they approached the docks. Kassim turned and saw a man in jeweled robes addressing the shorebirds. “Sinbad, the Sailor, scourge of the seas!”

His audience honked and flapped. The King admired Sinbad’s pride and approached Sinbad who greeted Shahryar. “I am the captain of captains!”

“And I, the...” Shahryar remembered himself as the troop caught up, “porter of porters. We need a ship to take us to Malagar on an important mission for, um, Baron Guadaloo.”

He pointed at Leili who did indeed look aristocratic in her false beard, gold chain and flowered silk vestments.

“Well, that Baron can ride in my cabin. Let’s go to the tavern and discuss terms.”

Sinbad, the sailor and Shahryar’s troop discussed the conditions for the mission over drinks which Kassim and his men found invigorating but Shahryar and Leili wouldn’t touch.

“Here’s the thing,” Sinbad explained. “There are too many missionaries at sea. Except you renounce your religion, I will not take you.”

Kassim and his men turned red and explained that they could not renounce Allah but were thieves, not missionaries.

“Ah, you passed the test!” Sinbad roared and clouted Kassim on the shoulder. “There are no atheists at sea but too many apostates. Sailors and thieves rely on God like missionaries depend on money. But I must be sure you can help provision us. There is a widow next door who makes the most delicious pies for her grandson, an orphan. Steal one from her sill and you can sail with me.”

Shahryar turned red but Kassim and his men again refused. “What is a brigand but an orphan with a taste for pie? We will not steal from our brother.”

“A second test passed!,” Sinbad declared. “If you would steal from a widow and an orphan you would surely steal from a sailor! But there is one thing I would ask in sincerity. These are dangerous times on the seas and a sailor must know his crew will follow his orders without reservation. Will you renounce the empire and King Sharyar, the old cuckold?”

Shahryar, the porter, turned a dark crimson but Kassim and his men happily agreed as they toasted one another and Sinbad, the sailor. All laughed but the horrified princess Baron and the furious King of Kings.

“There is no law at sea which is all mystery and without secrets,” Sinbad told Shahryar, “but I will stay loyal to your highness even there. But no boat can float laden with piety and no sail fills without laughter. Does the Baron dance?” This time, Shahryar joined the laughter and lifted his glass.

Soon, Sinbad's ship set sail for Madagascar with the King of Kings and his entourage on board and all went well until, on the night of the new moon and far from land, a tentacle wrapped itself around the prow.

X

Leili was in Sinbad's cabin. Kassim and his men were seeing to the functions of the small ship's crew while Sinbad and Shahryar stood on the deck before the cabin exchanging tales of conquest and daring at sea and on land when the boat surged forward. The tentacle around the prow was spotted at once by the sailor and the King of kings.

"The princess!" Shahryar barked at Kassim who ran for her cabin. The King himself drew his scimitar and Sinbad the sailor drew a dagger as both men ran forward to challenge the sea monster. Before they could reach the briny arm, the boat tipped forward and plunged beneath the surface. The rush of water washed Kassim's crew instantly from the deck, but Sinbad committed to his vessel's destiny by wedging himself between the deck and the port-side rail. On the starboard side, Shahryar committed to courage by doing the same.

Both men crept forward, hoping to release the ship by steel and both men approached the watery limb with their weapons drawn when the tentacle disappeared and the boat, which was well-built and held air, reversed course and rushed backwards toward the surface. The two men held tight and the boat emerged with a pop, leaping by buoyancy and inertia into the sky. As the boat flew through the air, and fell back to sea, both men were shaken loose and fell to the water fortunate for now not to have drowned.

Kassim's men, meanwhile had spotted an atoll and were swimming for it. They called to Shahryar and Sinbad to follow but the two men swam for the unguided ship. The great tentacle reappeared on the prow and once again the ship was pulled under this time leaving the aristocrat and the pirate behind. The two men swam after Kassim's crew and were making progress toward the atoll when the ship emerged a second time and flew once again. Farther this time, the boat made an arc through the sky and landed with a splash in the lagoon of the island which sneezed.

All the men between where the ship had first sunk and the indignant island where it floated now tread water in bafflement. They watched as, in the direction from which the flying ship had come, the sea monster broke the surface and rose into the air. The monster's head was the shape of a nomad's tent and the size of a roadside temple. Two giant eyes were on either side of the head and the mouth was a mass of undulating lobes and gnashing teeth. The men treading water drew their futile weapons. As the monster rose higher, two long tentacles appeared, dangling beneath the mouth and one, even larger was coiled around the whole body.

Beneath their feet the Persians and the Arab felt a stream rush underneath the ocean until another giant tentacle, the equal of the one coiled around the sea monster's body emerged near the key, and lifted and tossed the boat. On the third flight of Sinbad's ship, she flew South and disappeared beyond the horizon.

The sea monster continued to rise and move closer to the atoll which had once sneezed and now seemed to growl or curse. It became obvious that the monster was airborne not under its own strength but on the strength of the coiled great arm which matched the one had launched the boat and came from what the men had once thought an island but now realized was another, much larger monster.

The terrible eyes of their attacker grew even wider and filled with remorse. The lobes about its mouth turned inward to suck on one of the now free-hanging tentacles. The sea monster mewled and received a slap. The monster fell back to the sea and under as the island sank entirely from view. A big splash and a churning eddy were all that remained of the mother monster and her kitten.

The soaked party was pulled to the center of the maelstrom which finally calmed and they found themselves amid the hulls and keels and barrels of other vessels, detritus from age-old disasters that had reposed upon the mighty island monster, Oahu, or been toys for her daughter, Tali.

"Parenting is the same at sea as on land," Sinbad observed. Over a long afternoon the men cobbled together a raft and discussed what to do next.

"We need to find Sinbad's boat," Shahryar declared.

"That is gracious, my King, but I can build another boat," Sinbad answered.

“Not such a boat as has carried the King of Kings,” Sharyar replied. “Nor one that still carries Kassim and Leili.”

XI

“What do you think you’re doing?” Sharyar bellowed at the reclining Sinbad on the newly arranged raft.

“Trusting in Allah, of course. Allah, who is always merciful and kind will provide us a way to regain my ship.”

“Allah helps those who help themselves, and I execute the useless.”

“Allah is greater than even the King of kings. I will wait and trust. Let the winds and currents do God’s will.”

“We’ll make a sail,” Sharyar instructed the other men, “and prosper on the sea.”

The men took off their tunics and Sharyar assisted them in tying each to the other. With some salvaged loose boards, their swords and scimitars and some string with which the cloth had been sewn, Sharyar, the emperor, and the reformed thieves had put together a sail, jib and mast. Stood upright, the cloth did not reach the center from the sides so the King took off his own tunic and joined its fine silk to the rough canvas the brigands had worn. The sail, ornate and whole, soon filled.

“To the sailor who speaks a prayer, Allah gives his own breath.” Sinbad prophesied.

“To the emperor who commands wisely, Allah sends followers.” Sharyar answered.

Soon the men on the raft had caught the monsoonal current and were making way to the South and West. As Sinbad sat, holding the mast between his folded legs and with one arm, Sharyar asked for his dagger.

“What for?” Sinbad asked.

“To make some oars from these loose boards so we can row to land.”

“Why row?” Sinbad asked. “Allah brought Noah to land when there was only one dry place on Earth. Surely he can find us Africa. Let the wind and currents do God’s will”

“Africa is outside my dominion, but I won’t show up there with idle men. We’ll lift our oars proudly in a harbor.”

Sharyar and the men made six oars and the men took turns rowing. There were only eleven of Kassim’s ennobled reprobates so Sharyar himself took an oar in the second shift. After a few days of wind and work, the Somali coast could be seen.

“For every boat at sea, Allah chooses the sailor or the timber to bring to shore,” Sinbad observed piously.

“To those who will make their own legs, Allah brings a continent,” Sharyar replied.

It was dark when the little raft reached the mouth of the Jubba river and Sharyar suggested waiting offshore overnight and seeking commerce in the morning, when an Emperor’s credit is at its best. “We can trade the gold I’m wearing for food and water and maybe a boat to find your ship and my cousins.”

“Allah provides for those who depend on him, whether for a fresh meal or an old ship.” Sinbad declared.

“Conquest makes an empire wide but commerce makes it great,” Sharyar responded.

The men all went to sleep but were awakened just before dawn by vaulting and the sound of breaking timber. Soon the men were splashing around in the mouth of the river and the wreckage of the raft, soggy sails sinking still sewn to swords. All thirteen shocked men suspected pirates or villagers until they saw the cause of the calamity- an unmoored ferry still dragging its tie-rope had crashed into their own improvised craft. As they climbed on board they found it carried a large cask of water and a cow.

“Beef!” Sinbad proclaimed.

“Milk!” Sharyar celebrated.

“When I was a lad, I ‘ad one for a pet,” declared Nikos, a young Corinthian from Kassim’s band.

Níkos rescued the sail, swords and four of the oars and by morning the men were once more at sea, well provided for and hopeful. They had made much progress before the ocean-going river ferry was spotted by the pirates.

XII

The pirates hailed the river ferry on the bounding main. The cargo was obvious: one cow, one barrel of water, an improvised sail, twelve bare-chested men and one man in a fine sailor's tunic. If the men were hiding something more valuable, it was probably sea weed seeds. What the pirates sought from the raft was a laugh.

The second shift was at the oars and Sínbad had the sail. The men standing drew their swords and prepared for the mockery.

"Aí," yelled the pirate captain, "Is the cow for meat, milk or shelter?"

"Be humble. You confront the the emperor of Persia, pirate dog!" Níkos threatened. Sharyar glared at Níkos and drew his finger across his throat.

The pirates chuckled as the captain added "Wouldn't the King of kings have brought a horse to guide the herd from? Or does he find the water barrel a fleet enough mount for the challenge?"

Sharyar understood the situation. He had chosen to disguise himself. He had sacrificed his royal shirt for the sail. He had been at sea for weeks. The King of Kings was not insulted, a poor seaman on an odd craft was. And yet, philosophizing indignity had not been part of Sharyar's education.

"I like your sail," a pirate yelled, pointing at the woven plain rough shirts and the silken tunic. "It looks like you found a dozen farmers crushed by avalanche in a harlot's tent." The pirates let out more laughter and Sharyar's fingers tightened about his scimitar.

"Have you ever seen men stand so stiff?" a pirate asked his mate, who answered "Never, now you see why their boat is flat, they used up all their lumber on the crew." The pirate ship and the river ferry were now nearly touching and if battler were to come, it was coming soon.

“An empty bookshelf shouldn’t parody a full table.”

The pirates’ brows furrowed and Sinbad continued, “We may lack keel and cabin but not spine nor skull. Were I in your place and you in mine I wouldn’t mock your poor possessions but edify them with a superior master. You make fun of our cow from fear of her milk. Such cowards and fools should never have left their mothers’ breasts as I just have!”

“Sinbad?” the pirate captain asked. “Mateys, it’s Sinbad the sailor! Sinbad, tie on. We’ll take you wherever you were headed. Where’s your ship? And what are you doing with this sorry lot?”

It was one insult too many. Turning and charging, the cow crossed the ferry and tore the side of the pirate’s ship with her horns at the water line. Water began to seep in and the ship started to list as Shahryar declared the cow a baroness of the Persian Empire.

XIII

There upon the deep and bounding main, the river ferry appropriated by the royal party was tied onto a pirate ship and the pirate ship threatened to founder. The corsair captain, the King of Kings and their men, with Sinbad the Sailor strove to patch the hole in the ship’s side that had been opened by Baroness Bossy of Istakhr, a found cow, in reply to an insult. In those days, official navies sometimes pillaged and stole while pirates often took up arms in pious causes, the difference between crafts of either category was largely a matter of the quality of construction and the availability of spare parts.

So, the royal bodyguard and the pirate crew took boards from places that seemed less critical to patch the hole at the waterline, using nails and spikes pried from less needful joints. As Sinbad, the Pirate Captain and Sharyar conferred and gave orders, an occasional avalanche of wood could be heard when estimated comparisons of structural importance proved inaccurate. It became unclear to the management

committee whether the endeavor remained a heroic repair at sea or if it had become a dismantling operation in far too wide a port.

On what remained of the ship's deck, Shahryar declared that "a good emperor sheds blood when his servants make war and likewise takes splinters when they build. If you gentlemen," he told the pirate and the sailor, "will excuse me." He crept into the hold and joined in the carpentry and the ducking.

The captain turned to Sinbad and remarked, "I am in distress. I don't know if your companion is this world's humblest King or greatest fool."

"He may be both," answered Sinbad. "His royalty is above my rank to question, but the last thing I'd royally bequeath those men is assistance drowning us all."

"Forgive my impudence," the pirate continued above the cracking of wood and the splashing of dropped tools, "I have little experience with imperial sorts other than oiling my neck for their nooses, but a man with no shirt holding an improvised oar, propelling a river boat in the open sea disappoints my expectations. Despite your reputation, I would laugh at your claim were he not in the company of so grave a cow that she risks us all to defend against levity. Are you sure he isn't a merchant?"

"He met me in a poor disguise, but our voyage together improved his camouflage." Below the feet of the two men, a pirate or perhaps an imperial guard mistook a driftwood joist supporting the deck for an ornamental trophy and his success removing it was the failure of the deck. Under the weight of not much cargo and two mythical characters, the last dry platform on the ship crashed into the wood-lined swamp below. The anarchy was complete and everyone joined as peers in desperately baling, except for Sinbad who leaned against a rib of the hull awaiting Allah's assistance or mercy.

As the water rose, the structure sank and it seemed the cow and barrel of water still on board the ferry would survive alone to tell the story. Sinbad shouted at the sight of his own vessel. With Kassim, the reformed thief, steering and Leili, the anointed botanist, working the sails, Sinbad's ship crept up from the horizon and sailed over to the drowning disaster of a pirate's livelihood. Neither captain nor pilot were experienced at sea and the ship plowed into the wreckage, completing the calamity a resentful cow and twenty-odd amateur carpenters had begun. Nikos and Sharyar retied the ferry to Sinbad's boat as the rest swam to their rescue.

When the salvage of the ship was complete and all aboard, the two who had been lost celebrated the salvation of their rescuers, bowing to Shahryar. From inside Sinbad's cabin, a quartet of Malagar scarabs sang together in instinctive harmony a wedding hymn.

"I taught them that song," Leili announced proudly.

Admiring the Princess and the hearty vessel, the pirate turned again to Sinbad. "Maybe Shahryar is Emperor after all, but he still seems common to me."

"Commonness is a rare virtue among the noble," Sinbad agreed. "But if he is who I say he is, your choices now are reformation or the wrath of Persia. If he is not, this is still my vessel. No thieving and keep your hands off the Princess."

When Sinbad's ship once more reached Basrah, Shahryar offered the pirates clemency and officialdom or hanging and the pirate crew consoled themselves that civility might be more tolerable than they'd thought. The captain palmed one of Sinbad's cups and pinched the Princess as a hedge in case reformation didn't suit him.

When the large party at last reached the palace, an impromptu parade was held and there was great rejoicing.

Leili and Shahrazade embraced tearfully. “Have you picked out your dress yet?” Leili asked.

XIV

“The dress!” the tired and sunburnt Emperor thought privately. “Of course it will need to be of Javanese silk, designed by an undoubtedly Malvinian mystic with a bow found in the hair of seven-headed serpent from the canopy of the Congo.”

“My dress should be simple,” Shahrazade answered her cousin. “To demonstrate my humility before the honor of sitting at my husband’s side while he rules Persia.” Shahryar turned aside where a single tear rolled down his cheek into his beard.

“My dear cousin,” Leili praised, “that is both wise and poetic. You will be a perfect queen. But shouldn’t the bride’s cousin be more elaborately dressed?”

“And her mother?” Shahrazade’s mother asked, urgently.

“Your clothes,” Shahrazade answered, “should be many-colored and exotic, to demonstrate that the family of Persia unites the world.

In the corner where he stood against the wall, Shahryar pressed his dagger against his leg until he was relieved of it by a palace guard. “There may be less vital matters of state to attend to,” Shahryar told the women. “I trust you will have no trouble commanding whatever needs direction.”

As Shahryar confined himself to the affairs of his office, the three women planning the wedding devised foreign policy. The two most powerful neighbors of Persia, Rome to the West and China to the Northeast would be represented in the clothes of the wedding

party. On the surface, this warm acceptance into the royal family of the empire would seem a grace. Below the surface, however, the threat would not be lost. In those days, the annexation of China or Rome by force of arms was uncreditable but who, from East to West, would doubt the ruthless grasp of the wedding party?

Leili and Shahrazade's mother considered which should go where. "Leili," said the matriarch, "you are young and botanical. You should go to Rome. Listen to me, a lonely widowhood faces wives who won't travel."

"Of course I'll travel, but to China. Auntie, the trail to China is long, the road in places high and your bones old and brittle. I would have you travel in comfort to Tyre for a warm dress of Roman purple."

"Silk! You are tempted by silk to betray me, the mother of your cousin. Rome, the home of treason is where you belong!"

"Old woman! Silk flatters the figure. If you don't like Roman felt, take Bossy to Germany and try on some cowhide!"

"My cousin," Shahrazade soothed, "Dear mother, the marriage is to Shahryar so why should we fight?"

Chastened, the members of the wedding party sat and thought.

"A thousand on one apologies," Leili offered Shahrazade's mother. "Perhaps rather than argue we can find a fairer way."

"Divination?" the matriarch asked.

"I thought dice." Leili answered.

So the three women discussed how to assign destinations and dresses when the baroness, Bossy of Istakhr, recently a domesticated cow on a stray ferry, walked past the ogee leading to the courtyard. She was followed by a flock of royal hens.

Shahrazade knew a wise suggestion when she heard it and went to the kitchen for a bag of wheat and a bag of barley. The three women went out to meet the cow and hens and opened the barley at the feet of her cousin, the wheat at the feet of her mother. The hens fretted and pecked one another and flapped back and forth considering wheat and barley. Amid the feathers and the flapping and the feces, the wheat was finished first and Leili congratulated her opponent graciously.

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” the matriarch cooed. “If you want to wear the silk, you go to China and I’ll go to Rome. No, no. It’s ok. I remember a patrician Senator who once called me pretty.”

“Ew, Mom!” Shahrazade answered.

So the next day the two women set out, Shahrazade’s mother with an entourage went West and Leili, Bossy and Kassim’s soldiers left to the East.

XV

Shahrazade’s mother, Ramak, left to the West with two handmaidens, three burly guards, two horses who pulled her litter and a treasurer. Until Shahryar had relented to her daughter, Ramak had disguised herself as a beggar. On the day she left as the sun set orange among faint clouds, her face was set in cruel dignity. Along the road, none of the party spoke except to command strangers out of their way. The long journey to

Rome to buy a dress was a grave mission of state and Ramak would not have levity impeach the importance of the proceedings.

For several days, the party traveled stopping only at night. The campfires were formal affairs, which the guards knelt, rather than hunched to ignite. They chopping kindling in syncopated unison and bowing each time they stuck their flints together. The handmaidens did not only wash before cooking the night's meal, but sang sullen hymns to the glory of the royal family, Persia and the sacrament of marriage in preparation for the soup-making. On the third night they reached the Euphrates. On the sixth they neared Baghdad.

Before the commercial legature reached Baghdad, however, an old man with a hunched back, stumbled in the road before the party. Solemnly, the lead guard growled a warning not to interfere with the sartorial process of the Great King's mother-in-law-to-be. The old man looked back and smiled, a harelip parting above a toothless mouth. His left eye was covered in a milky white cataract and his right was missing.

"A thousand pardons," the old man broke the silence. "Do you want to hear a joke? I used to be a barber."

The lead guard pointed ferociously to the side of the road.

"It's a really good joke."

The guard pointed twice more to the side of the road.

"Surely, travelers of such magnificent importance with such splendid beards can use some laughter to carry them on their way!" At this Ramak glowered darkly and all three guards pulled out their scimitars and raised them to end the old man's life.

Ramak broke her silence resentfully. "I am of the royal family, mother to the Emperess of Persia and you will not kill this poor old man while I am watching over you!"

"Thank you, your majesty!" the old man pled. "For your mercy, you will be richly blessed. It's a really good joke."

But the guards understood their command and while the lead guard stayed to protect the royal mother-in-law, the other two lifted the old man and carried him off a ways into the brush until the trio were out of the old woman's sight.

Back on the road, Ramak became impatient. "My son-in-law despises me, giving me such inept guards that a broken, blind old man has bested two thirds of the complement in combat." Turning to the remaining guardian she continued, "Should we leave them for dead and continue or are you afraid you'll step on a frog who'll take your sword?"

Just then, a hearty laughter was heard in the distance and Shahrazade's mother snarled. Soon three imperial guards appeared on the horizon. The first was burly and missing his red cumberbund. The second was a similar size and missing the brass cup that had protected his elbow. The third was tiny, wearing a red tunic, and a brass helmet covered his hair that looked and smelled like artemesia leaves. The weapon by his side was a small leather awl, still bloody from the execution.

"The old reprobate has been dispatched!" the tiny guard announced solemnly and toothlessly. "Rabbit stew for supper?"

Ramak barked, "I sent two guards to kill one man old man and three return. Do you think the King of Kings would marry the daughter of a fool?"

"Your majesty," the gnarled guard responded, calmly through his hare lip, "You sent three guards."

“I left the palace with three guards. One remained here. I have no time to teach bodyguards arithmetic, but you’ll have to trust me that this allows only two guards to execute one impudent old beggar.”

“Barber!” the smallest guard complained. “The Emperor was so concerned for your safety lest we be set upon by brigands that he hid me in the big one’s pants to gain the element of surprise. The big one is a eunuch, you see!” The larger of the two guards and the fairest of the handmaidens both blushed.

Ramak scowled but said no more. Later that night, the largest guard whispered to the lead guard, “get this...when I say ‘knock knock’ you ask ‘who’s there?’”

XVI

“Moo!” the baroness clarified as she led the fashion embassy from Persia east along the great road toward China. Behind her walked Leili, the royal botanist, who, in turn, was followed by Kassim, the bandit turned bodyguard, and, finally, his men.

“You know,” Leili told the cow’s tail, “I sure do favor a nice silk dress for my cousin’s wedding but a slow trip to China is kind of a drag. Besides, I’ve already been to Bactria. I picked up a nice shrub there.” The great road was a long and divided path of wide silences perforated occasionally by the clamor of bustling caravans kicking up dust in pursuit of commerce and the soft footfalls of lurking thieves in pursuit of caravans. Kassim and his men were armored in officialdom and steeped in thievish ways. The shopping expedition was safe from the criminals on the great road if not the merchants.

Along with Leili, the Princess’ cousin and the noble cow, Kassim guarded enough gold to insure that the dress Leili would buy would be suitably glorious for the wedding of the

Persian Emperor. That burden had lightened since the expedition began its advance, the portion lost replaced on the journey by various adornments, exotic pets and fine lanterns that it had been the merchants great honor to exchange with the noble and learned botanist. These wares now hung from the armor of Kassim's men whose elevation from leather-clad brigands to shining soldiers stretched now to the very image of bachelor courtiers. The sound of the embassy passing included clanging, clucking and the sassy song of ribbons whipping in the breeze. Although the men carried the extra burden lightly, the scout, who, for practical reasons dangled no jewelry, carried no creatures and wore nothing bright, was a position the men competed for vigorously, often by wrestling.

By the time the embassy, or, from Bossy's perspective, the herd, reached the southern shore of the Aral sea, they stopped at an Inn. They were able to buy fresh lamb, clean rice and a liquor with a strange and potent aroma. They made camp and cooked. They ate and drank. Leili's tent was set up and she went in to rest. No sooner was she out of sight than the men began to gamble, sing songs, tell dirty jokes and drink.

So, with Leili drowsing and the men carousing, Bossy wandered off browsing. She grazed a little grass, ate some flowers and then caught the scent of a strange bush. Off she wandered up a nearby hill and down into a shallow draw. There, by a rippling creek, she found a shrub with soft, moist leaves and an aroma that blended the best of alfalfa's musk with the tang of wild buckwheat. All over the brush, the Baroness' probing nose found supple seeds hanging in pods.

She took a second to enjoy the moment and the promise of this delicious foliage and, when the anticipation was enough to make her stomachs quiver she bit the bush. The bush pulled itself back, and the branches closed around the middle like a milk maid pulling closed her frock against the chill. This surprised the Kenyan cow.

Bossy bit another branch, pulling off some delicious leaves and seeds. A second time, though, the bush pulled itself closed. Bossy, curious, pawed the ground around the bush, leaving tracks.

“Is that Hebrew?” came a voice from inside the brush.

“Moo,” Bossy answered.

“Please let me be,” the voice begged.

Bossy stuck her nose up under the bush and licked the stem. She found no sign of anything but brush but the branches pulled upward away from her cold nose.

“If you write the name of Allah in Hebrew around this bush, I will be bound to you. I will have to use my power at your command. You don’t understand the burden a Djinni can be! Please, for both of our sake, leave me be! You aren’t remembering the lore!”

But Bossy would not be turned away from the juicy, exquisite smelling shrub and she bit the stalk, tugging it away from the ground. When finally, the earth let go its treasure, tangled in the golden roots was an ancient metal vessel. Bossy gave it a sniff and a lick and returned to eating what must have been the best tasting plant in all the world. But her breath on the lamp was enough and the Djinni, Bossy’s newest subject, jumped and up and hid in her hair.

The men were still singing and sharing raw humor when the cow and her magic companion returned for the night.

XVII

As Ramak and her party continued westward there were signs of the Persian empire fading and the rise of Rome. The long and intricate beards on the merchants they passed were soon replaced by the clean and perfumed cheeks of bureaucrats. Robes that suited the desert became less common and the tunics of the forest people of Europe became more frequent while the graceful arches of the Earth's center disappeared in favor of the furrowed columns of the peripheral city-states confederated with Rome.

Although Ramak's expression remained haughty and her stare pious and cruel, the air around the embassy had changed as well. Since the old, blind and hare-lipped guard had emerged from the pants of another protector, there was a frivolous tinge to the rest of the party. At night, as she reposed on the couch placed inside her tent she could hear laughter among her servants. Even during the day's travel, although the guards remained alert most of the time, occasionally, two guards would catch each other's eyes or look down on the blind old man they led and snicker. Ramak's sense of peril grew and as it did so, so magnified her piety.

"It is noon," she enlightened. "We should all stop what we're doing and pray."

"Yes! Yes!" the old guard affirmed, "That the afternoon should find us without delay!"

The embassy came to a halt and ablutions were done, followed by prayer and incantations while the old man tried to dance liturgically but tripped over a rock and fell down. "Oh great spirit!" the man exclaimed. "Give me direction and show me the way. Up is a good one."

Ramak was unfamiliar with satire so she suspected it everywhere. "He mocks our religion," she hissed. "Shouldn't he be put to death?"

"I am sorry, your magnanimity," the Lead Guard answered. "But whoever slays a member of the royal guard must himself be slain under the Emperor's law and soon you would be without without bodyguards. When we return to the palace and your son-in-law, you can doom him under the law."

"This is Rome!" the pious old woman pointed out. "Murder is sanctioned."

“And so is folly, your majesty.”

And so the band continued on, the old guard led by rope alongside Ramak’s litter. The embassy arrived at a stone bridge that spanned a deep chasm. As the first guard tested its security, a deep voice echoed from below.

“This bridge belongs to Mifil, Troll lord, The river below’s too fast to ford. The canyon’s too long to go around, I’ll have your names or your bones ground.”

The guards drew their swords and Ramak rolled her eyes. “I am Ramak!” she answered defiantly. “I am mother-in-law to the emperor of Persia and will not be detained,” she commanded as a giant, hairy arm clad in lion’s hide appeared beside the bridge and plucked the treasurer where he was nervously counting bricks in the span. From below, there was the sound of a scream and the treasurer returned, flying in a spiral arc to land beside the litter, a new knot on his head and his index finger broken.

“That counting was annoying me too,” whispered the lead guard to his second.

“Humans are for food or entertainment, I offer all just one arrangement. Answer my riddle and cross this span, answer it not and I’ll dine on man.”

From below the bridge came a second voice. This one familiar to the party above. It was the nasal voice of the old blind man with the hare lip who had been by their side moments before.

“Greetings, friend Mifil! It’s me, Dorgborg from Arbela, Queen of All Troll’s office of inspection and etiquette. Just a formality, I assure you. I am here to make sure your skins fit snugly. Let me check your legs. Sorry, I have to yank them. I’m blind. Yes, yes. Wait, your cuffs are uneven. There you go. I’ll put in a good word for you to the Queen. Carry on, enjoy your meal.”

When the dress code was noted met, Mifil continued his challenge.

“Before the dawn, there was mud.

At day break came grass.

Next came creatures with blood,

The Troll’s noontide repast.

In the afternoon, they gathered their brothers

And sisters to bake in hottest sun.

And you are the daughter of incestuous mothers.

Tell me your your name, now, and run!"

The blind old man whispered into Ramak's ear and she shouted "I am a brick!"

The troll muttered. "Fine. Pass." and when the group was safely across and out of a long arm's reach from the chasm, the lead guard asked the old man how he had solved the riddle.

"It was as I suspected. He had the answer carved into his sleeve."

XVIII

The Persian Fashion Embassy, Oriental, approached Samarkand with ribbons and jewelry, cages keeping exotic birds and strange animals, lamps and vases all dangling from the armor of the bodyguards and a Djinni tucked away in Baroness Bossy's hair. Leili, mostly unadorned, was cheered by the clamor of the great city. Pilgrims, soldiers, merchants and slaves wandered in and out of the great gates. Kassim and his men became fairly self-conscious about their own appearance.

"There's no theme here," said one of Kassim's men looking down at the red bolt of silk draped over his shoulders and the teal duck he carried in a cage. "They're all going to think we look funny at the soldiers' inn. This doesn't represent the might of Persia well."

"There's no theme anywhere!" Leili cried, fairly skipping with her excitement. She was right. Even the slaves had bangles on their shackles. The hive of immigrants and emigrants were of every race and religion, from feathered Ethiopians to hooded Christians, Mongolians on horses and Arabs on camels. All had bows in their hair or jewels on their chests and flashes of colored cloth, carefully imperfectly hidden. The band had not entered a city since Susa and Leili thrilled at the chaotic urbanity promised by the gleaming arches of temples, the long minarets of the many mosques and the dour domed church.

“Moo,” Bossy declared as her captive Djinni rustled nervously through the hair of Bossy’s left ear.

As they reached the gates, a tariff collector, wearing silken robes and backed by well-armed soldiers asked them to stop. “Are you carrying any agricultural products?” he asked, directing his question at Kassim, who grasped his scimitar.

“Just pets, and one Baronness,” Leili interrupted.

“And are you carrying any dangerous items?” the tariff collector continued, still addressing Kassim. “You are allowed one sword or scimitar per person for personal use, a single hidden dagger and no more than two vials of poison per troop. Adders, pikes, explosives and Djinnis must be left with the Tariff officer, that’s me, for safe keeping until you depart. You’ll be given a receipt for your wares. Do you have anything to declare?”

“Moo,” confessed Bossy but Leili insisted they were a peaceful party en route to China for the purpose of purchasing a maid-of-honor’s dress for the royal wedding of their excellencies, Sharyar and Shahrazade of Persia. The tariff officer rolled his eyes but welcomed them to Samarkand and turned his attention to the next party, a Hindu Rajput on holiday with a Satrap’s wife.

“Sri Singh, welcome back to Samarkand. Your beautiful bride never ages.” was the last thing the Persians heard the officer say before the bustle and flow of international commerce pulled the troop along toward the marketplace where silk, spices and clowns competed for the attention of the traders’ senses. Kassim beckoned everyone into a slightly less hectic alleyway to regroup and plan the safety of the Princess, Baroness and treasury.

The alleyway was quieter but still filled with fire-eaters, belly-dancers, fortune-tellers and philosophers plying their trades. In fact, the alley was so filled with motion, color and noise no-one had noticed the class of imperial Chinese schoolchildren on a field trip being eaten by a dragon. “Roar!” said the dragon, as fire licked its nose.

Kassim and his men grabbed their weapons and shields and arrayed themselves between the dragon and Leili and the cow.

“I hear you have to stab them in the heart,” whispered Kassim to his men. “Man, I wish we’d brought an archer.”

“Is it even legal to slay dragons in Samarkand?” asked Nikos, the Corinthian companion to Kassim.

Kassim considered. “Maybe if we back away slowly.”

In fact, no sooner than Leili began to retreat, the dragon leapt into the air, wings beating majestically, and let out a torrent of fire, landing at the entrance to the alley and blocking the party’s escape. The men redeployed, again between the dragon and the female nobility. Again, the various entrepreneurs continued their transactions without noticing their peril.

“This might be a good time to involve me,” the nervous Djinni whispered into the cow’s ear. “I can move the whole party to anywhere on Earth, if you ask me to.”

“Mer,” murmured Bossy.

“I’m sorry?” inquired the Djinni as the dragon lashed out against the men who huddled behind their shields and pricked the dragon’s nose with their weapons.

“Listen,” the Djinni explained frantically to her mistress, “I can help but you have to ask me to. A djinni in bondage still needs communication. A little support wouldn’t kill you either.”

“Moo!” came the answer, as a column of flame engulfed the soldiers and the Djinni moved out of the soft fur in the cow’s ear, wondering if she was missing something. Her motion tickled and bossy turned her head to press the inhabited ear against her flank, which the Djinni took for consent.

When Kassim bravely raised his head above the shields, he was surprised to find the heat blasting his face was not dragonfire but the hot winds of the Maghreb. Gone were Samarkand, the dragon and the entrepreneurs.

“Huh,” Kassim said to his companions.

XIX

When the Persian Fashion Embassy, Occidental arrived on the outskirts of Rome, Ramak announced that their search for a Roman tunic worthy of the royal mother-in-law would begin at the home of the Patrician Senator, Hadrian Flavian Trajan. When she gave her command, although her face remained stern, her handmaidens noticed a light in her eyes.

Once upon a time, when Ramak was younger and her husband still lived, Ramak and Hadrian had met at a grand ball in the Susan palace where he served as the ambassador from Rome. Ramak's husband had been Grand Vizier to Shahryar's father and the single dance Ramak and Hadrian shared had scandalized the hierarchies of both the world's great civilizations, leading to exile for the Grand Vizier of Persia and repatriation of the Roman.

The troop arrived at a large villa surrounded by a stout guard of Roman legionnaires.

"He must be some clothier," the little blind Baghdadí barber observed. "His fancy clientele protect their fine garments under brass armor."

At the gate, the troop announced themselves and Ramak emphasized both her name and that they were an official delegation of the Persian king. Soon, the guard returned and saw the little company in. Past fountains filled with lilies and ponds rich with fish, past a stable of impressive horses and beyond grand, marbled arches they were led. In through the door of the villa, under the watchful eyes of a score of guards, the group finally reached a richly furnished receiving room where a strong and handsome man with particularly lustrous white hair sat, his lower body comforted under a Persian blanket. With great nobility, he waved for the troop to seat themselves on the satin-covered couches and silky pillows arrayed around the room.

“Wonderful to see you again, Ramak. How is your holy husband?”

“The Grand Vizier is now in heaven, lecturing Zoroaster. Have you married?”

“More than once, but none danced like you. There were other disappointments.”

The barber noted to the guard beside him, “Disappointing a Roman Senator is easier than listening to him, I imagine.”

“Disappointments are so easy to come by,” Ramak answered. “Your blanket reminds me of home.”

“Yes, this a Persian weaving I bought here in the marketplace to remind me of you. I warm my lower body with it and never take it off.”

“Can I feel it?” the barber asked.

“Certainly not, slave! It is too good for an old, blind hare-lipped beggar!”

“It certainly is,” Ramak agreed.

“Barber,” the barber explained without hope of clarification. “Oh, just let me test it. My sister-in-law is a weaver and I can probably tell you by touch where it was woven and the name of the lamb.”

The Senator’s face was red and his tone was fierce. “Don’t touch the blanket!” Against the wall, a legionnaire chuckled. This, the barber took as a sign and walked toward the sound of the Senator’s protestations. “I’ll have you skinned for shoes!”

The barber tripped then and fell forward, he reached out to stop his fall and grabbed the blanket at the Senator’s knee, gathering the blanket underneath him. The Senator

called him fool and Ramak and her handmaidens gasped but all the soldiers, Persian Immortals and Roman Legionnaires, broke out in laughter.

“Elegant anklet,” the lead bodyguard observed. “I suppose your chair is nailed to the floor.” The loss of the blanket had revealed a bronze cuff, with which the Senator was locked to his chair. A bedpan, clean and polished lay on the ground beneath him. It became obvious to all what the barber had suspected, the throng of Legionnaires were not a rich complement of bodyguards but a secure force of prison guards.

“What could I do?” the Senator explained. “When I was still in my youth, I married a conquered Gaul who betrayed me. As was then the custom with Gauls, I poisoned her. Soon thereafter I married the daughter of a Berber chieftan who was entirely disagreeable. So my mother had her piked. On and on I took new wives but each was in her own way unpleasant. Then I met you, and you danced so gracefully. After my exile, I married the Queen of the Tuareg tribe but she was as wild as a doe and thoughts of her clouded my mind even during senatorial orations. My career was in jeopardy. But it will be different with you. You’re professional! Marry me! Take me to Persia!”

It wasn’t stupidity that had made Ramak grouchy but wisdom. Nonetheless, she was dumbstruck. When she finally spoke, it was with a voice filled with doubt. “This can’t be.”

“Show her,” the Senator instructed the legionnaire closest to him, who went and opened a nearby wardrobe. The open door revealed a collection of hundreds of dresses, each elegant and regal and in the fashion of all the provinces of Rome, every conquered people and all those tribes with whom Rome maintained cultural or diplomatic relations. “Do you see?” Hadrian asked, “that with you I can be honest!”

“I would never marry a despicable killer of women,” Ramak declared. “Even a Senator of Rome. I have come to purchase a dress to wear at my daughter’s wedding and the price of disappointing me will be far cheaper than the one you exacted. I’ll have my choice of your unfortunate wives’ fine gowns. She selected a shining wedding dress with a lion depicted on the back that had belonged to his departed Tuareg bride.

“Please don’t tell mommy!” the Senator shouted as the band departed from him. “She thinks I’m writing a memoir.” In a few weeks they were reunited with Sharyar and Shahrazade. Warm greetings were exchanged as the palace awaited the return of Leili and Kassim of whom no news had been received in a month’s time.

“Do you like my dress?” Ramak asked her daughter. “This will be such a beautiful wedding!”

XX

“There has to be a reasonable explanation for this,” stated plainly one of the younger men who had transitioned with Kassim from bandit to Persian officer and from Samarkand to the Maghreb.

“How’d I do mistress?” whispered the tiny djinni hiding in the ear of the Baroness of Istakhr, recently an unmoored milk cow.

“Moo,” Bossy allowed.

“There is always,” Kassim answered his young comrade, “a reasonable explanation if you are mad enough to imagine it. I believe we are in Cyrenaica. I was here once before when a Greek ship I had taken was attacked by pirates and I was enslaved with my captives.”

Nikos, who had been the cabin boy on that ship and had preferred banditry under Kassim, agreed.

"I still need my dress of Chinese silk," insisted Leili "Is China still to our East?"

"Yes," Kassim answered. "But now so is Susa. If you like we can return to the capitol and then continue to China."

"I will not return to Susa until I have my dress," Leili stated.

"If you would consider it, I prefer my men leave your new pets, silks and wares here. The Berber brigands live in the hills to our South and the Barbary pirates on the coast to our North. We are still carrying your gold and I'd prefer to keep carrying it until you buy your dress."

"I like those things. Would the Berbers dare rob a princess of Persia?"

"The berbers would dare snatch the undergarment of an Emperor of Rome."

Leili consented and the humiliating draperies the men had cussed were buried under a rock while the pets were set free. The troop marched East with each of Kassim's men feeling newly colorless, quiet and wistful.

Nonetheless, two days later the thunder of hooves was heard and a column of dust was seen heading toward the group from the South. "Berbers!" Kassim announced. The Persians headed for a steep Wadi where the two royal females and the gold were hidden in a cave as the men took up positions to meet the challenge.

"Did you have another brother?" Leili asked Kassim before he left her to ready for battle. When the hoard arrived, they were equal in number to the Persians. The Berbers were well-armed and mounted while the Persians knew the ways of brigands as well as of soldiers. The battle was joined and bravely fought by both sides. Steel struck wood and bronze pierced bone. Men on horseback were brought down from their mounts and men on foot grabbed and dragged. By heroism or malice, no one fell and when the sun went down the berbers retreated to positions blocking escape and the Persians fell back to protect the cave. The berber horses who had been liberated by the Persians returned to their riders while Bossy licked the soldier's wounds.

The next morning, Kassim went forward alone as his brother, Ali, had once approached him, for parley. The Berber chieftan came forward to meet him.

"I think Persian soldiers would not be here unless they protected something I'd like." The Berber noted. "Gift us as generously with your treasure as you have with your blood and we'll let you all hobble back to your empire. Are there women? Royal women?"

"Mainly a cow," Kassim answered in Berber. "But your eyes will only glimpse what we protect from between my fingers. Besides, captives are a heavy burden on swift thieves."

"Captives are no trouble for us at all. Behold!" A Berber second brought out a sad-eyed Hebrew with a long, unruly beard. "My best warrior has been arranging with this man's family his ransom. The negotiation has gone on so long I now receive reports from my man in Hebrew, Greek and Latin."

"My daughter doesn't like the man I married her to or the house I gave them," the Hebrew explained sadly in fluent Berber. "My name is Moishe," he added before his guard pulled him away.

"Perhaps we can ransom him," Leili said, stepping forward.

Leili was the loveliest woman the Berbers had ever seen and a vision with not even a chain around her ankles, the fashion among the beautiful women of the Berber tribes. Kassim smacked his forehead, imagining the unavoidable bloodbath to come and nostalgic for the dragon of Samarkand whose breath had been fiery but logical.

"Well, your majesty, I presume. It seems to me if we kill your men we have him, you and whatever you offer for purchase. I'm curious what you'd offer that isn't already in our custody."

"I offer you what you already have but without a fight," she answered and winked at him. The Berber chieftan had never been winked at before. He could smell her perfume. Terms were arranged and the Hebrew, Holstein and Persians were given three Berber horses and permitted to leave in exchange for Leili's gold and a wink at each of his men.

As they departed the Wadi and the dazed Berbers, Kassim complimented Leili, "Brilliantly done, trading what he already had for what we never would have obtained on our own. I had no idea a woman could be such a skilled thief."

"Poor thing," Leili replied. "You mustn't have known many. It's well that you are still learning for now we'll have to steal my dress for my cousin's wedding."

“I was a tailor before I was kidnapped,” Moïshe explained. “Now I am merely grateful and yet still a tailor.”

Three soldiers were dispatched on horseback to retrieve the colored cloths, ducks, et cetera and after an awkward reunion with Moïshe’s family, two weeks were spent making and remaking a dress for Leïli and having diverse adventures over trivial matters. When the band left for Susa, Leïli was giddy over the splendid Hebrew dress she’d wear to Shahrazade’s wedding.

XXI

The wedding party was reunited. Ramak could think of nothing impressive to add. Leïli was tanned from her trip. Shahrazade could think of no absent symbols. Her alphabet complete, she whispered in her husband’s ear, “Well, that about does it.”

“Are you sure?” Sharyar asked his betrothed wife. “What will you ride into the ceremony?”

“Ride into the ceremony? Why would I ride into the ceremony?”

“Uh, well. It seems to me that you were married to your doom with me. A good mount will demonstrate how far you’ve come and demonstrate that the road is open before you. I should honor you with an exotic animal. I hear there’s an animal in the middle of Africa with an elephant’s size, a zebra’s stripes and the face of a macaque. I’ll send Ali and Kassim and that kid from the royal kitchen.”

“My king, there’s no need for me to ride. After the wedding we walk together. That’s the idea.”

“Are your shoes comfortable? Maybe a pair of wooden shoes from Jutland or some slippers made of glass from Albion?” Sharyar interrogated her in the fast words of a convict faced with doom.

“My king, are you stalling?” Around them, a hush fell. Kassim and Ali stopped playing their game of chess and Ramak ceased scolding her handmaidens. Sinbad silenced the tale of a cyclone he had been entertaining Shahrazade’s chambermaid with. Rufus, the

Dacian sous-chef had been bringing a plate of snake kabobs and paused in front of a tapestry depicting The Fall, hoping to blend in. Even the Baroness of Istakhr lifted her head from her hay, unbalancing the Djinni in her ear.

“I thought it was something we could do together,” was Sharyar’s nervous answer. He was surprised by Shahrazade’s reply.

“Very well. I don’t need a grand royal wedding. I am yours and you are mine but there’s another wedding still awaiting me.” Sharyar blinked and considered a return to earlier habits.

“Have you betrayed me?” Shahryar asked Shahrazade. Ali grabbed his sword in preparation for Shahryar’s next order. Kassim grabbed his for Shahrazade’s defense.

“No,” answered Shahrazade to the relief of an entire palace. “But when I first became your wife it meant death. Instead I found life and love through the adventures of others and have been given safety through their perils. This palace is now filled with exotic gifts for our weddings, obtained from the distant monsters our families and servants have met. I do love you...” and with this confession the rest of the palace returned to scolding, serving and slight of hand in a flurry of normal activity.

“... and no other man will touch me. But it was adventure that kept my heart beating until you trusted me and that romance, unlike ours, remains unconsummated. The wedding I want is to adventure, the puzzles and ambushes that wait for me in a world of monsters and danger.”

“So,” Sharyar asked, “you want to go on Safari?”

“Yes. That’s all I need for a wedding. Can I take the cow?”

“I’ll go, too!” Leili piped. “You’ll want a narrator.”

“And a fool to rescue!” said Kassim, seeing the excitement in Leili’s eyes. “I’ll go with them as a guard.”

“But will that leave us without enough fools for the palace?” the blind barber from Baghdad inquired generally.

“Very well,” Shahryar answered. “Go have your wedding but remember your husband. He is, after all, the Emperor! And stay off of ships.”

Sinbad relaxed and returned to talking up the chambermaid, soon to be idle.

Shahryar and Shahrazade shared a long embrace and then she departed with Leili by her side and Kassim by Leili's. Behind them trotted the noble cow with her hidden djinni.

Ramak mouthed the words “but the wedding” and swooned. She fell on a pillow, sitting up and inventoried in her mind all the beautiful things that been brought to Susa for a royal ceremony that now would never be. She thought of her own, beautiful, Tuareg wedding dress. “We need a wedding. I've waited all my life for the wedding.” She felt despondently without intrigue until her eyes fell on the tiny, blind, hare-lipped barber who by his wits had saved his own life, hers and, she had to admit, a healthy sum of money she'd have spent on a useless Roman wedding dress.

Although he was blind, the barber from Baghdad felt the shadow of Ramak's gaze fall upon him. Because he was blind, he knew he could live in that shadow.

To Be Continued...also, The End.