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Re-Mything Scheherazade

For most people, the name Scheherazade conjures up visions of oriental splendor and romance. According to many authors, it's a beautiful story of redemption through love. Indeed, it's been passed down from generation to generation as a great love story.

But what is this celebrated tale really about?

Scheherazade saves her life and that of countless other young women by telling a king 1001 tales so that he breaks his habit of having sex with a different virgin every night and killing her in the morning.

And what is the happy ending? The heroine gets to spend the rest of her life locked up in the harem of a serial sex killer!

Here is the plot of this "romantic" fairy tale, as told in the collection of Persian, Indian, and Arabic tales known as A Thousand and One Nights, so you can judge for yourself:

There once were two kings, King Shahriyar and King Shah-Zeman, who were brothers. One day King Shah-Zeman discovered his favorite wife in the arms of a male slave. Enraged, he killed them both and rode off to see his brother, King Shahriyar. A few days later, while his host was away hunting, King Shah-Zeman happened to look out a window in his brother's palace. In the garden below, he saw his brother's favorite wife along with her entourage of twenty women from his brother's harem, reveling naked with some of his brother's black slaves. As soon as King Shahriyar returned from his hunting expedition, his brother told him what he had witnessed. So the next day Shahriyar hid in the palace, and saw for himself that what he had been told was true.

"We must go forth into the world," Shahriyar exclaimed, "to see whether such a calamity as this has befallen any other person like unto us." Almost

immediately, they encountered a giant genie – and, to their amazement, found that not even he could prevent a woman from deceiving him, not even by tightly locking her up in a box he carried with him wherever he went. In fact, the woman herself reminded the two kings that a woman's evil contrivances caused Adam's ejection from Paradise. “Never trust in women nor rely upon their vows, “she advised them, “for perfidy lurks within their clothing.”

Upon hearing this, the two kings breathed a great sigh of relief. “If even a powerful genie's honor can be besmirched by the perfidy of woman,” they said, “this should console us.” They returned to the city, and King Shahriyar had his wife, the women in her entourage, and the black slaves killed.

But this carnage did not satisfy the king. He now made it his custom, every time he took a maiden to his bed, to kill her at the expiration of the night. These murders went on for three years. As a consequence, there came a time when no more young maidens could be found in the city.

It had been the job of one of the king's ministers to procure maidens for the king. This minister had a daughter called Scheherazade, a clever young girl who was said to have read a thousand books of histories relating to preceding generations and kings and works of the poets.

When her father came home one day, Scheherazade could see right away that he was greatly perturbed. “What is the cause of your vexation?” she inquired.

“Ah,” her father explained, “as is his custom, the king has ordered me to bring him another virgin for his bed. But although I have searched the entire city, alas, there is none any longer to be found.”

“You must give me in marriage to the king,” Scheherazade, who could see that her father feared for his life, told him, adding, “Either I shall die, and be a ransom for one of the daughters of the Muslims, or I shall live, and be the cause of their deliverance from him.”

Her father at first rejected the offer, but when Scheherazade persisted, he brought her to the palace. As soon as he left, Scheherazade persuaded the king to let her tell him a story.

So, on the first night of what became a thousand and one, Scheherazade commenced her tales – tales that she somehow managed to interrupt every night so that, wanting to hear the end, the king did not kill her.

In this way, three years passed. The king, we are told, learned to love the courageous young woman who knew so well how to please him, especially after she presented him with a son. And, so the story goes, Scheherazade and King Shahryar lived happily ever after.

That is the story. And the “happy ending”? It's that a villain who for years entertains himself by kidnapping young girls, having sex with them, and murdering them is not punished, but rather rewarded with a lovely young wife. And that the heroine – one of his intended victims – gets to spend the rest of her life locked up in his harem.

Clearly we need a new story of Sheherazade in a time when we no longer think that women are male property, that men are justified in killing women, and that the best women can do is placate men – even the most evil and bloodthirsty among them. So here it is.

Scheherazade

The New Story

Scheherazade pushed aside the blue and gold tapestries around her bed and sat bolt upright, her heart hammering. Every night, at the still time just before dawn, she was awakened by the same dream. Always, there were shadows ringing round her, circling, closing in. Though she could not see them, it seemed to her that they were the shades of young girls, hands stretched out, imploring help. And there was a man, moving with ghoulish slowness, moving toward her...

She rose, and made her way to the balcony. The dark, foul dream followed her, lingering in the still air.

In the distance, the flickering torches of the city shimmered like sparkling jewels as they began to go out. Slender minarets reached like white fingers into an ultramarine sky streaked with rose. A pale gold crescent moon was poised majestically above. In this hushed, spirit-filled time between day and night, all seemed to be held in a spell of everlasting peace.

It is all so beautiful, she thought, looking out into the dawn. How could there be evil in this world?

As her gaze paused at King Shahriyar's palace, with its myriad roofs and strings of colonnades, a massive, mighty thing rearing up from the earth, the horror of her recurring dream prickled her skin.

The King's palace... what was there? What darkness?

Dread tales were told of the palace, frightful rumors she could scarcely believe. All that was known for certain was that, one day, returning unexpectedly from the hunt, the king caught his favorite wife in the arms of a slave, and slew them both on the spot. After that, virgin maids began disappearing without a trace, as if Allah took them bodily into heaven. No one ever learned their fate.

Scheherazade had once heard her old nurse whisper to the cook, not understanding perfectly what was meant: "Ah, yes, it is because the king has lost the power of his loins, because he cannot perform as a man. He fails with the young maids and then immures them in a dungeon, so they can tell no one of his humiliating affliction". But everyone had a different explanation. The darkest tale was that the maids taken to the king's bed every night were killed at dawn, prey to the king's lust for vengeance against all women.

Dawn, the time of her dream...

From the garden below her chamber's window, a gentle perfumed breeze wafted up, catching and lifting her unbound jet-black hair. Scheherazade drew her silken robe more tightly about her, feeling a draft of cold though the morning was balmy and warm.

* * *

At the fourth hour, Scheherazade went as usual to her lessons. Her parents, who cherished the girl's intelligence and nurtured her bold spirit, were having her instructed in mathematics, philosophy, literature, and law, as well as all the graceful arts. Scheherazade pursued learning with unusual vigor, and had collected a thousand books of stories and tales of past generations of poets, priestesses, and kings, as well as books on natural history and the writings of the sages. But today the dream intruded darkly, insistently, and she could not concentrate on her lessons.

It is only a dream, she reassured herself, no more real than the tales of genies and flying carpets my mother read me when I was small.

All at once, the sound of pounding on the door reverberated through the house. Scheherazade ran to the window. Below, she saw soldiers in the scarlet colors of the king gathered before her parents' house. Her body froze to stone.

It is true, then! Her nightmare burst though the veil of dream into the light of day.

In the next instant, strangely, she almost felt relief, as if she had known somehow that this was her destiny. She knelt before her mother's secret altar to the ancient Goddess Al-Lat, seeking wisdom from this deity worshiped in the time before time.

The bare form of a plan was beginning to take form in her mind.

She rose as her parents rushed in, intent upon hiding her.

"I cannot hide," she said to them. "I must go. Either I shall be a ransom for one of our people's daughters, or I shall be the cause of our deliverance."

Scheherazade's parents had always taught her to value freedom and justice. But this was too great a sacrifice. When the soldiers broke down the door, they tried to block their way. The guards beat them savagely, then put them in chains: a life in one of the king's dark dungeons would be their reward for this show of resistance.

Scheherazade's heart contracted in horror. Tears of rage blurred her eyes. But this outrage only strengthened her resolve.

She did not wait for the soldiers to drag her out. Halting them with a commanding look, her carriage proud and straight, she walked outside and stepped into the palanquin they had brought to carry her off.

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As soon as they arrived at the palace, Scheherazade learned that the worst tales were true. She had indeed been taken to the palace to serve the king's pleasure one night, and die.

Scheherazade shuddered under the touch of the slave women readying her for the bridal night, bathing her in narcissus water and anointing her with perfumed unguents. She thought of her dream, of all those who had been killed, and recoiled with dread at the thought of yielding her young body to satisfy the cruel appetites of a murderer.

"My poor child," the thin-haired crone who had charge of readying her cooed as she draped Scheherazade in seven embroidered veils and fastened the

ruby necklace that was the mark of the king's favor around her neck. "You must be brave. It is Allah's will. No one can prevent what must be."

Scheherazade, who was not given to rages, was seized by fury.

"It is the king's will," she retorted sharply. "And it does *not* have to be."

The old woman shrugged. "Perhaps you are right. But it comes to the same. There is nothing we can do. I will pray the end comes to you quickly, that you do not suffer long."

Scheherazade's eyes flashed wide with amazement. "Is that all you can say to me, that there is no hope?"

"Should I give you false hope? Should I lie? No, it is the will of Allah. You must accept your fate! You will wait here," she concluded, getting ready to leave, "until you are summoned."

When she was left alone in the heavily guarded chamber, Scheherazade struggled to steady herself. Slowly she managed to empty her mind, as her mother had taught her, and gazing into the small, still flame of an oil lamp, imagined her whole soul lived in that tranquil fire. Then, as she had learned to do when preparing to play a demanding game of chess, she went through every move and possible countermove of her plan again and again.

The appointed hour arrived. A procession of palace slaves led her to the king's bedchamber, a great room lit by hundreds of burning tapers that cast strange shadows on four giant archways carved with fantastic birds and animals caught in winding foliage. In the center stood a towering red and gold canopied bed supported by gilded lions. Next to it, on a high dais, unmoving as a statue, sat the king.

Scheherazade suppressed a gasp. Through her heavy veils it seemed to her that he was seated on a hundred bloody heads, the severed heads of the young maids he had murdered. But as she drew closer she saw it was only the profusion of crimson and pink embroidered cushions strewn about his dais.

"Uncover your face," Shahriyar commanded.

Scheherazade complied. When an oily smile spread over the king's countenance, she knew he approved of what he saw: jet-colored tresses rippling like water, a high brow, lustrous black eyes afire with keen intelligence.

As he studied her, she studied him. She saw a dark, wiry man, with a black, pointed beard that was small and almost lost on his long sallow face, sharp malevolent eyes, a round belly, and a dark stain – lamb fat from a recent feast? – on the front of his richly embroidered robes.

The touch of death is more welcome to me than the touch of this man, she thought.

He clapped his fleshy white hands for the music. A Moorish slave began to wail a sensuous, ululating song. Scheherazade had been told this was her signal; now she was to begin the dance of the seven veils.

But instead of whirling and peeling off veil after veil until she stood naked before the king, Scheherazade stood still until she caught the king's piercing black eyes with her own.

"If this virtuous king permit me," she said in her soft melodious voice, "rather than dance a dance he has seen countless times, I will offer him a far more amusing diversion."

The king was astounded by her boldness, but she could see that her proposal intrigued him. "I know glorious tales," she continued, "tales that have never yet been heard, stories of powerful genies and maids as beautiful as the moon, of rich distant lands and great and noble kings, of sights such as no mortal has ever seen, of all manner of fabulous things to enrapture, amuse, and amaze."

The king, who was bored with always the same song and dance, sulkily nodded his assent, motioning for her to sit on one of the crimson pillows at his feet.

When she was seated, Scheherazade began a tale such as had indeed never been heard, a tale of seven genies who would not get back into their bottles and all the mishaps, misadventures, and magical happenings that ensued. The king listened raptly and laughed uproariously hour after hour as Scheherazade

spun her tale, her musical voice swelling with emotion when the tension was high, dropping to a hush at dramatic moments.

But when, as she had planned, she halted and asked his leave to finish the next day, the king's brow creased darkly and his hand reached for the scimitar hanging from his side.

"You forget yourself," he hissed at her, his eyes flashing ominously. "Or perhaps you have already tired of life." He tightened his grip on the scimitar, as if to lift it over her head. "You forget," he growled, "that it is for me to interrupt your story when I have enough, not you."

Scheherazade had known this might happen. So again she summoned all her wit and all the skill in the art of storytelling her parents had taught her. Now she wove into her tale ever more intricate, more fantastic plots with suspenseful twists that so enthralled the king that he barely noticed the passing of time, not even when the dread hour of dawn came and went.

When she at last finished, Shahriyar yawned and smiled a sated smile. "You amuse me," he said rising, "more than I have been amused for a very long time. Tell me, have you more such tales?"

"Yes," Scheherazade retorted. "I have a thousand more."

"I may not want to hear them all," Shahriyar retorted with a malicious twist of his cruel mouth. "But I shall let you tell me another tonight."

"Now," he commanded, loosening his corded belt, "remove your veils."

Scheherazade had also known this moment would come. But now that it was upon her, her heart froze and her mind sank into an abyss of horror.

Unable to move, she tried to dissolve her soul into the image of a still, ever tranquil flame.

Shahriyar stepped down from his dais and grabbed her arm. For an instant, as she instinctively struggled to push him away, she thought he was going to reach for his corded belt and strangle her then and there.

But he only laughed as he ripped off her garments. "I like some resistance," he said, appraising her nude body as a predator appraises a prey.

"Too lean and muscular for my taste," he muttered, "but..." He did not bother to finish his sentence.

Twisting her arm behind her, he dragged her over to the canopied bed, gripping her waist so tightly that his fingers left red welts.

As he pressed his body deep into hers, Scheherazade thought she would suffocate under his loathsome flesh. She felt sickness rising up in her from the rank smell of his panting breath, as he clumsily butted against her until he found what he sought. A white hot pain flashed through her loins.

The only blessing was his quickness, for within moments he was spent, his wet weight sagging against her. Scheherazade shrank away, a silent prayer to the ancient goddess Al-Lat still on her lips. As he rolled off her, she could again breathe.

* * *

I must be strong, Scheherazade told herself as she was led through winding corridor after corridor.

By my mother's mothers, I must find a way to end this horror.

But her legs barely held up under her as she walked through the arched doorway into the seraglio where the king's concubines were housed. Languid smoke drifted from a massive stone incense altar and the air was thick and rich with the sweet pungent smells of frankincense. A tall woman with soft brown eyes caught her as she was about to fall.

More women pressed behind her, staring at Scheherazade as if seeing a ghost.

"Allah be praised," one of them whispered. "Perhaps we will all be saved."

"You have wrought a miracle," the tall woman whose name was Nasreem said, helping Scheherazade to a silk-cushioned bench. "We heard news of what

happened earlier, how you beguiled the king with your tales, how you lived to see the dawn.”

She handed Scheherazade a silver cup containing a warm red wine, and when the girl stared at it unseeingly, she held it to her quivering lips.

“You must bathe and cleanse yourself quickly,” she said in an urgent voice. “Come, we have a special potion. It is our women’s secret. It will help wash out the king’s seed.”

She led her to an alcove where two young women helped Scheherazade disrobe and use the potion, all the while offering her wordless support. Then she was led toward the vast bathing pool with its gently steaming waters.

The women in the vast room crowded around her, waiting to hear what had happened from her own lips, murmuring in wonderment as she spoke, offering her sympathy and comfort.

But as Scheherazade submerged herself into the pool, the lilac scented waters caressing her body, she was again engulfed by cold despair.

No amount of scrubbing will cleanse me, she thought, I will never again feel clean.

Suddenly the pain she had held in swept over her. She began to weep, her tears spilling noiselessly into the perfumed waters.

As if reading her thoughts, a young woman sitting on the edge of the pool reached an ebony brown hand down to her. Scheherazade looked up and saw that she was black and more beautiful than anyone she had ever seen, with wide brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a full red mouth. She heard one of the other women call her Nuhva, and when she heard her voice she knew from her exotic accent that she came from distant lands far to the south.

“It is a terrible thing,” Nuhva said simply, “I know.”

“Come,” she continued, gently pulling Scheherazade by the hand, “you have been in the water long enough. Let me help you dry yourself so you may rest.”

Scheherazade let Nuhva wrap her in one of the soft drying cloths. She nearly wept again when she felt her tender touch, so different from the brutish pawing of the king. Slowly she allowed her body to let go of some of its tension.

For the first time, she looked around her opulent surroundings. Tall columns of serpentine marble encircled the baths and between them were low tables laden with ornate boxes, richly embroidered silks, and all manner of musical instruments. Brightly hued niches were set into the walls where women plucked drowsily at the strings of tamburs, or reclined on red and gold silk cushions. Looking more closely, Scheherazade saw they were of all ages, from little girls who could not have been older than ten to full – bodied young women, even a half – dozen grey – haired women who, Nuhva later explained, Shahriyar had inherited from his father.

Again, as if reading her mind, Nuhva spoke. “We are never permitted to leave this place. It is a prison. A luxurious prison, but a prison all the same.”

Nuhva related how she had been purchased for the king's household as part of a lot of five from an Arab slave trader who specialized in girls from the southern part of the African continent. They had been intended to work as scrubwomen, but they caught the king's eye, and he consigned all five to the harem. Nuhva alone lived on; her four sister – slaves had long since been bedded, then killed.

Languorously, to the rhythm of a red tambourine, a woman began to dance. A few others joined her.

“Scheherazade, this is your gift, “Nasreem exclaimed. “No one has danced here for a long time. But tonight you have again given us hope.”

They lifted their cups, and gently Nuhva put the pungent wine to Scheherazade's lips. “Drink,” she said. “It will help you sleep. Tomorrow, you will again need all your wits.”

A sweet-voiced woman began to sing a meandering tune, as Scheherazade tried to swallow the wine. It was a song she knew from her mother, and again her eyes brimmed with tears. Nuhva put her arm around her, softly

stroking her hair. Finally, the wine began to do its work and Scheherazade sank into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

Scheherazade felt a hand shaking her with gentle insistence. She awakened with an unpleasant start.

For a moment she could not understand where she was.

"It is almost evening," someone was saying. She recognized Nuhva's voice.

Then it had not been a dream.

She recoiled into the alcove where she had been sleeping.

Nuhva opened the plush curtains that draped the bed. "You have slept a long time, a healing sleep, I hope."

Behind Nuhva Scheherazade saw what seemed to her the shadows of the maids she had so often seen in her dreams. Then she saw Nasreem.

"He will send for you soon," Nasreem said, reaching out her hand to help Scheherazade rise. "You must eat something, so you can recover your strength."

Scheherazade felt a wave of revulsion sweep through her. *I cannot go*, she thought.

But she followed Nasreem to the table where dishes of lamb, fruit, and rice had been set out for her.

"Tell me," she asked Nasreem, "has this monster ever loved anyone?"

Nasreem shrugged. "It is said that he loved Fatima, and that this is why he killed her when he found her with another man."

"But what kind of love is that?" Nuhva cut in.

"It was a matter of honor," one of the other woman retorted. "She should not have betrayed him."

"You have the soul of a slave!" Nuhva's eyes were alight with wrath and her voice shook with anger. "I suppose you blame her for all the evil that he has done."

"It was her fault," the woman replied in a calm, self-assured tone. "Was it not her act that started it all?"

"So a man becomes a murderer," Scheherazade said incredulously, "and you blame not the man, but his first victim?"

"Women have the right to choose for themselves whom to love," Nuhva added spiritedly. "That is how it is with my people. Here, women are slaves."

"Your people," the woman retorted in the same calm tone of certainty, "are nothing but heathen savages."

Nuhva lunged for the woman, but Nasreem quickly came between them.

"There is no sense in our fighting one another!" she said. "We have troubles enough!" She turned to Scheherazade, who had not touched her food. "You must eat and fortify yourself. They will come for you soon."

Seeing the look on Scheherazade's face, she added, "For every night you amuse him you save a life." She paused. "And despite all we have suffered, we would still rather live than die."

They all depend on me, Scheherazade told herself. I must be strong.

After a moment of quiet, she turned again to Nasreem. "Fatima... what kind of woman was she?"

"She was very beautiful," Nasreem replied. "She was, as you know, the favorite wife, and she had special quarters. So we saw little of her. We did see her sometimes at great banquets, and she was always laughing, heartily and freely like you rarely see women laugh, as if she were really enjoying herself. It was said that she had an enormous hunger for all the pleasures of the flesh."

"He certainly could not satisfy that," one of the women laughed. "Poor Fatima. The king could not satisfy even a small hunger. If she searched for pleasure elsewhere, it is because he is such a miserable lover."

"Are you mad?" another woman reproved her, looking anxiously about at all the curtained alcoves. "Just because the eunuchs are gone, that does not mean it is safe."

"Ah," the first woman retorted, "we have nothing left to lose. When he tires of Scheherazade, as he certainly will, sooner or later, he will kill us all. Does it really matter if it is a little sooner?"

There were only twenty nine left now, Scheherazade learned, from what had once been a harem of over two hundred concubines. Every night one of them had been summoned, never to return.

"After he killed Fatima, he killed all his wives, one by one," Nasreem, who seemed to be a storehouse of all the palace secrets, told her. "He even had all the eunuchs killed because one of them had been bribed to carry love letters for Fatima. Then he turned on us. When he'd slaughtered more than half of us, he grew bored with this sport and began to range farther afield, dragging in girls from the city."

"His blood lust knows no law, either of god or of man," she went on. "Now he even brings in girls who are betrothed, like the beautiful child he snatched in the city a fortnight ago, who had been promised to the captain of the palace guard."

"But how do you know all this?" Scheherazade asked. "I thought you were never allowed to leave this place."

"In this palace," Nasreem replied, "one can buy almost anything... from opium to news of everything that goes on beyond these walls."

"Anything," Nuhva added, "but the thing one desires most: one's dignity and freedom."

A messenger from the king's chamberlain interrupted them. Scheherazade was to be prepared for the royal bedchamber. Again Scheherazade's body was subjected to the ritual bathing and anointing. But when the wardrobe women began to dress her, Nuhva waved them away.

"Let me dress her," she commanded in her firm, gentle way, reaching for the gossamer veils and the golden girdle with the tinkling gold and silver coins they had laid out.

As Nuhva draped Scheherazade with the seven embroidered veils, fastening the slinky chained belt around her hips, Scheherazade felt a strange shiver course through her body.

It was a shiver unlike any she had ever felt before: deep, mysterious, powerful. It seemed her loins melted into honey. She wondered what this delicious feeling could be.

But she had no time to reflect on that now. She had to turn her mind to the dread night looming before her. Reminding herself that she alone stood between the king and the death of numberless women and children, she let herself be led to Shahriyar's bedchamber.

* * *

That night Scheherazade told the king the story of Ali Baba and the forty thieves. But it was a version he had never heard. To the forty thieves who pillaged Bagdad she gave the names of the king's enemies, which, as she anticipated, immensely amused and pleased him. She gave the story many other new twists and turns, and by the time Ali Baba followed the thieves up the mountain and was desperately seeking the magic words that would move the stone and uncover the stolen treasure, shouting "Open cucumber!", "Open pomegranate", and "Open apple!", until he finally discovered it was "Open sesame!", the king was doubled over with laughter.

And so again the king forgot time, lost in the magic of Scheherazade's tale. Scheherazade too lost herself in the enchantment of her imagination, escaping for a while from the terror of the world ruled by Shahriyar into a world to which her parents had first taken her with their wondrous stories when she was small. Her parents, whose faces, contorted with pain under the soldiers' cruel blows, constantly appeared to her in her mind's eye.

Where are they? Will I ever see them again?

For an instant she lost the thread of her story. But she quickly recovered and resumed her tale, until the king's laughter again rang out so loudly it reminded her of a donkey's bray.

Once again the tale kept him entranced far into the night. And once again when she had finished he ordered her to unveil.

All levity fled when he pounced upon her. He attacked mercilessly as a lion, but mercifully, was quick as a rabbit.

Two nights became seven. A fortnight passed, then two. And still the king sent for her, and still her stories kept her alive.

"That tale you told me yesterday," he asked her one evening as she was brought to him, "about a time when women were free, and gave their favors like harlots to whomever they wished... Do you really believe there ever was such a time?"

Scheherazade tensed, sensing she must pick her way through a field set with traps. Last night she had told him one of her mother's stories, handed down from the time before time.

"No, of course not," she lied.

"A goddess named Al-Lat! I would worship a god in the form of an ass before I would worship a god in a woman's shape. And a time when priestesses spoke the law. What heathen devilry!"

"It was a fanciful story, no more than that." Scheherazade kept her eyes downcast, but within, she seethed like a pot ready to boil over.

"Women," Shahriyar continued, as if she had not spoken, "cannot rule any more than slaves can. If they were meant to rule, they would have been born free men!" He gave a hearty laugh, at what he evidently thought a fine joke.

"Women," he went on, pleased with himself, "must never forget who their masters are, or the whole social order will collapse."

That is true, Scheherazade thought to herself. *When women are no longer men's slaves, there will no longer be despots like you.* She knew that from what her mother had told her of that earlier time. But she held her tongue.

"Where did you learn all your stories?" Shahriyar demanded on another evening.

The question surprised her because he had never shown the slightest curiosity about her life, barely deigning to speak to her. As with all his servants, she was but a tool for his use, and one does not converse with a cup, a spoon, or a plate.

"From the books I read. And from my mother and father. Mostly, from my mother." The word mother caught in her throat.

"And where did they learn them?"

"I do not know," Scheherazade answered in as level a voice as she could, trying to hold back the tears that always came when she thought of her parents.

She dreamed of them almost every day, as she often dreamed of her home, her books, the garden outside her chamber window where they had so often strolled, the country streams where they had sometimes waded smelling the wildflowers growing along the shore. Though she had twice sent letters to her parents through Nasreem, who secretly communicated with others in the king's dungeons, she had only heard back from them once. And now she did not even know with certainty if they were still alive.

A thought came to her. "I do not know," she repeated. "But when they are released from prison, they will readily answer that question."

But the king only gave her a knowing look. "Clever girl. But be careful. Do not overstep your bounds."

* * *

When Scheherazade returned to the seraglio, she found some of the women, robed brightly as parrots, taking turns doing a lively whirling dance. Others composed songs which they sang to the tunes of ouds. Now that the threat of

death was no longer so imminent, the women of the harem had begun to return to their old ways.

Scheherazade sat down as she often did next to Nuhva. When Nuhva welcomed her with her soft brown eyes and reached up her hand to pull her close, she shivered like the plucked string of an oud.

Scheherazade had always known the harem women had learned to survive by finding pleasure where they could -- whiling away the long languid hours of the day in dance, in food, in wine, in their bright, gay adornments, in the baths. And from the first she had seen that how these women touched one another, how Nuhva touched her, was different from how other women she had been with touched. They touched as if touching were an art, an expression of the whole soul. Gradually she began to understand why the very air in this place was laden with sensuality.

They make love, she thought. They really make love. Not like what the king does with me, but the way it is meant to be, with tenderness and caring.

This love of women for women had seemed strange to her at first. And it seemed even stranger that when she looked at Nuhva, or when their hands touched or they brushed against each other's bodies in the bathing pool, her whole being pulsed with excitement.

It was an excitement she had never known before. And it was an excitement she now carried with her even into the king's bed at night. It helped her somehow endure his touch.

"I am not sure how long I can sustain this," she told Nuhva one morning when she returned from his bedchamber. "The only way," she turned and looked away, "the only way I can bear it at all is by thinking of you."

That day they became lovers.

When Nuhva followed her into the alcove, Scheherazade suddenly turned round, lips parted, and opened to her embrace. As they eased back onto the cushions, their bodies melting together, Scheherazade felt her whole body

hummed; a bolt of pleasure passed through her that dissolved time, that made her feel more alive than she had ever felt before.

Shahriyar noticed that there was something different about her. It was not just that her stories were even more amusing now; there was, as well, a new confidence in the way she moved, a joyous glint in her eye.

He mistook it to be something having to do with him.

"So you have finally come to understand," he said to her, "how privileged you are that it is my desire to be with you. I knew that, with time, you would, that in time you would come to love me."

Then he turned on her, his eyes flaring with that malevolence she had grown to dread. "You know that your loyalty to me must be absolute. Absolute. You understand what will happen if you ever let anyone else touch you."

* * *

Now that Scheherazade and Nuhva had to hide their love lest they be betrayed to the king, life for Scheherazade became unbearable. There was another thing, a new virgin, a young girl by the name of Raz, had been brought to the seraglio, and it was rumored that the king had ordered her for when he tired of Sheherazade.

"We must escape!" Sheherazade said to Nuhva.

"Impossible. I know the palace well. There is no way out where we would not be seen. And what of the guards? The captain of the guards has them stationed fourfold in every passage. They bar every doorway."

As Scheherazade listened to Nuhva, all at once, she thought of something she had learned on her first day.

"The captain of the guard," she said, half to herself, "he must hate the king for what he did, for taking and murdering his betrothed."

They both jumped up, as the same thought leapt into their minds.

"Yes!" Nuhva whispered.

"He is our best hope," Scheherazade whispered back. "But we must proceed very carefully."

She looked quickly about to make certain no one else was near. "Who else can be completely trusted?"

"Nasreem. There are others. But Nasreem knows every secret in this palace, even in this city."

Scheherazade's mind churned with ideas. Finally, she spoke.

"Nuhva, here is what we must do..." She spoke excitedly, sketching out the details of a plot that amazed Nuhva, pausing occasionally to ask quick questions about the times of guard changes, the exact location of the guard captain's post, the trustworthiness of the old herb woman who sometimes came into the harem to heal the women with her draughts.

It was an intricate, yet tidy, plan and every bit as inventive as her stories. It also meant a terrible risk. But it was a risk that must be taken if they were to gain their freedom.

* * *

Scheherazade had chosen Nasreem to approach the captain of the guard, because Nasreem knew him from when they were children together in the same impoverished quarter of the city. He was a huge man by the name of Sarabin, a mercenary who had risen quickly in the ranks.

Sarabin was surprised to have news of the plot delivered to him through a woman. As Scheherazade had suspected, he nursed great hatred for the king. But since he was a man used to taking orders rather than giving them on matters of any moment, he had only dreamt of getting back at the king.

"It is a sound plot," he remarked to Nasreem during their first secret meeting. "Whoever is behind this is a very clever man. I will think about it. It may work."

Nasreem let him think the mastermind was an old man whose granddaughter had been murdered by the king. This was easy for Sarabin to believe, for there were many such men in the city who burned with a need for

vengeance. Indeed, it seemed that the whole of the populace was ripe for revolt. It needed only a person of courage and vision to take the lead.

The plot soon also gained fervent adherents among a small group of palace guards, including Hassim, a new guard who had caught a glimpse of Raz as she was being dragged into the palace, and had instantly fallen in love with her. It became his job to make contact with the prisoners in the king's dungeons, including Raz's father, an influential man, who like Sheherazade's parents, had put up a brave fight in a futile attempt to save his young daughter.

Messages were smuggled in and out of the palace and the dungeon, and it came to Scheherazade's parents, who had the confidence of many of the other prisoners and their families in the city, to send the secret messages that helped bring together the desires of the people with the discontent of the palace guard.

Still, Sarabin was not completely convinced that he had the needed support. Besides, although he hated the king, he was used to obeying only those above him, and there was always a twinge of fear when he thought of actually carrying out a plot against his ruler.

It was only because of Hassim that he finally came around. Hassim, Sherherazade soon found out, was a very unusual young man. He had wanted to pursue a career as a poet until he was persuaded to instead join the palace guard by a recurrent dream he had. It had been a dream somewhat like Sheherazade's, where a woman's voice called on him night after night to go to the king's palace and join a heroic enterprise to save the people from their cruel fate. Being a Sufi, Hassim believed in mystical visions, and he had of course also heard stories about terrible happening behind the palace walls. But it was not until he was able to join the palace guard through an influential uncle that he learned the shocking truth.

"You must act, " he told Sarabin. "It is your sacred duty as a Muslim and a man to protect the daughters of Islam. You will be a hero, a great hero, if you act."

But Sarabin was still not convinced. And so the days went by, until one fateful night, when Raz, with whom Hassim was now secretly meeting through

Sheherazade's good offices, carried out a ruse he and Sheherazade had devised. While Sarabin was sleeping, a heavily veiled Raz appeared in his bedchamber dressed in robes that had belonged to his murdered betrothed. She left almost instantly after the sleeping man woke, but she stayed long enough to tell him he must swear to avenge her untimely death or she would come back every night of his life and haunt him.

That morning, when Hassim again told Sarabin he must act, the captain of the guard finally agreed. As Shererazade had surmised, his fear of ghosts was even greater than his fear of the king.

"There is one final, very important matter," Nasreem said to Sarabin after she again instructed him on the last details. "If we rid ourselves of this king simply to install another, there is no guarantee that this will not happen again. The only way is to make some real changes."

But Sarabin was not willing to even contemplate such a thing. "You fail to understand," he replied, "that traditions established by time-honored custom must not be touched. No, one of the king's little sons by Fatima will be the new king. And since I will avenge his mother's death, I will be his regent until he is grown."

Nasreem realized that Sarabin's mind was set. "Very well," she said, as Scheherazade had counseled her to do. "But you must promise me that when you overthrow the king and take him to the dungeons, you will free all the men and women he has imprisoned unjustly over the years, return to them their stolen lands, and let them sit in judgment of the king and decide his fate."

Sarabin promised.

* * *

On the night set for the king's overthrow, there was a great storm. The king seemed uneasy, and Scheherazade wondered if he sensed something was amiss. But it turned out to be the storm that troubled him.

"Ever since I was a little boy," he said to her in a voice she had never heard, "I have hated storms. They are bad omens."

For a moment Scheherazade felt a pang of pity for him. But almost instantly he was once again his menacing self.

One of the king's boy attendants entered, as usual bearing a golden tray laden with the king's favorite sweetmeats. He served the king first, then brought the tray to Scheherazade, who selected from the back of the tray an almost hidden sweetmeat specially marked with sesame seeds – the one sweetmeat not laced with the old herb woman's potent sleeping powders.

The king savored his sweet. Then he turned sharply to Scheherazade.

"Why are you lazily lying about? Commence your tale at once!"

As Scheherazade began her tale, the evening guard change was called out. According to her plan, those guards who were party to the plot now came on duty.

But as she wove her tale, the king was still wakeful. A cold fear began to seize her heart.

Was the dose in the sweetmeats not potent enough? Or had there been no sleeping powder in them at all? Had he uncovered their plot? Was he only toying with her before they all suffered horrible deaths?

She saw he was looking at her in a strange way, one hand on his scimitar.

"You are dull tonight," he said. "You know, you may not live long enough to tell all your thousand and one tales." A cruel smile twisted his mouth as he began to rise.

But suddenly he sank back, sagging into his pillowed dais.

Scheherazade's heart leaped from terror to joy. The sleeping powder was at last taking effect!

She jumped up and pulled hard on the silken bellrope hanging over the lion-flanked bed where so many maidens had been condemned to spend their last tormented hours in pain and terror. As she tugged, it almost seemed to her as though she could hear their muffled voices, their shades murmuring gratitude.

It was the signal for Sarabin and Hassim that all was proceeding according to Scheherazade's plan, and they burst into the room.

As they took the king away to one of the dungeons where he had so long imprisoned innocent women and men, he offered no resistance. He merely snored loudly, one of his white puffy hands still clutching his scimitar until they dragged him off.

* * *

That same night, the freed prisoners came together to judge the king. At first they clamored for his death that very dawn. But with the aid of her father and mother, who were reputed for their wisdom, Scheherazade prevailed on them to instead condemn him to live out his days in one of his dank, dark dungeons.

Sarabin was not pleased. If the king was not killed, his son could not become king, and he could not become regent. But he had little choice. Scheherazade had stolen the king's sacred seal ring, without which no one could rule, and it now belonged to her mother and father, who were chosen the new regents.

The city broke into wild celebration. The people danced in the streets, tablet drums and stringed instruments echoing boldly into every alley, proclaiming the happy news. Scheherazade, Nuhva, Nasreem, Raz, Hassim, and Sarabin were raised up in the king's silver and gold sequined palanquins and carried in serpentine procession through the city's winding streets. The people poured out of their houses, shouting their thanks and blessings. Even when the sun rose again, the festivities continued, once again lasting long into the night.

No longer did a pall of fear hang over the city. No longer did rumors run riot of nightmarish crimes. Instead, glorious tales of noble deeds traveled the width and breadth of the land. Scheherazade and Nuhva were called the saviors of the city. Many songs were sung of them. And every dawn votive candles were lighted, commemorating the courage of these heroic women who had launched the plan to deliver the peoples' daughters from their cruel king.

And so it was that Scheherazade and Nuhva were greatly honored and loved by the people, whom they loved in return. So also were Nassreem and Sarabin, who went their separate ways, and Raz and Hassim, who were wed and had three children, a boy and two girls, who grew up to be poets like their father, gleefully telling stories without any thought that they might have to weave tales to save their very lives.

And they all lived happily until they were very old in a joyful land where women were free, and despots no longer ruled.

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