Opening extract from

A Thousand Nights

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We do not know why we came from the sea to this hard and dusty earth, but we know that we are better than it.

The creatures that live here crawl beneath a crippling sun, eking what living they can from the sand before they are returned to it, as food for the sand-crows or worse. We are not troubled by the sun, and sand is but a source of momentary discomfort to us. We are stronger, hardier, and better suited to life. Yet we struggled here, when first we came.

The humans were many, and we were few. We did not understand them, nor they us, and they feared us for it. They came at us with crude weapons, heavy stone and bright fire, and we found that our blood could stain the sand as easily as theirs could, until we learned

to build bodies that did not bleed. We retreated to the desert, away from the oases, to sun-baked places where they could not follow. From there, we watched. And we bided our time.

They died, and we did not. As our lives measured on, we learned more about them. We watched them tame the auroch and then the horse. We watched them learn to shear the sheep and card the wool. When they spun, we felt the pull of each spindle's twist, and when they wove, we felt a stirring in our bones.

We coveted the things they made, for though we had nothing but time, we had little inclination to master handiwork ourselves. Always, it was easier to take. And so we took. Weavers we kidnapped and brought to our desert homes. We fed them sand and they thought it a feast, and before they died, they made marvels for us. Coppersmiths we pulled from their beds, and set them to fires so hot they blistered their skin. They crafted baubles and blades before they paid with their lives, and we decorated ourselves with their wares.

When they worked, we found ourselves enlivened; and before long, those youngest of us ventured forth to prey upon other artisans. They returned with strength and power, and necklaces made from the finger bones of those whose hands they used to achieve it.

It was never enough for me.

I craved more.

And one day in the desert, I met a hunter who had strayed beyond the reach of his guard.

And I took.

I took.

one

LO-MELKHIIN KILLED three hundred girls before he came to my village looking for a wife.

She that he chose of us would be a hero. She would give the others life. Lo-Melkhiin would not return to the same village until he had married a girl from every camp, from every town, and from each district inside city walls—for that was the law, struck in desperation though it was. She that he chose would give hope of a future, of love, to those of us who stayed behind.

She would be a smallgod for her own people, certainly, in the time after her leaving. She would go out from us, but we would hold on to a piece of her spirit, and nurture it with

the power of our memories. Her name would be whispered with reverent hush around new-built shrines to her honor. The other girls would sing hymns of thanksgiving, light voices carried by the desert winds and scattered over the fine-ground sand. Their parents would bring sweet-water flowers, even in the height of the desert wilt, and pickled gage-root to leave as offerings. She that he chose of us would never be forgotten.

She would still be dead.

Every time, the story began the same way: Lo-Melkhiin picked one girl and took her back to his qasr to be his wife. Some in his keeping lasted one night, some as many as thirty, but in the end all were food for the sand-crows. He went to every corner of the land, into every village and city. Each tribe, every family was at risk. He consumed them the way a careful child eats dates: one at a time, ever searching for the sweetest. In turn, he found none of them to suit.

When he came to my village, I was not afraid for myself. I had been long ago resigned to a life in the shadow of my sister, my elder by ten moons and my year-twin. She was the beauty. I was the spare. Before Lo-Melkhiin's law, before the terror of his marriage bed reached across the sand like a parched gage-tree reaches for water, I had known that I would marry after my sister, likely to a brother or cousin of her betrothed. She was a prize, but she was also loath to separate herself from me, and it was well known in our

village that we came as a pair. I would not be a lesser wife in her household—our father was too powerful for that—but I would wed a lesser man.

"You are not unlovely," she said to me when we saw the desert burn with the sun of our fourteenth summer, and I knew that it was true.

Our mothers were both beautiful, and our father likewise handsome. From what I could see of my own self, my sister and I were very much alike. We had skin of burnt bronze, a deeper brown than sand, and duskier where it was exposed to the wind and sky. Our hair was long enough to sit upon, and dark: the color around the stars, when night was at its fullest. I had decided the difference must be in our faces, in the shape of our eyes or the slant of our mouths. I knew my sister's face could take my breath away. I had not ever seen my own. We had little bronze or copper, and the only water was at the bottom of our well.

"I am not you," I said to her. I was not bitter. She had never made me feel the lesser, and she had only scorn for those who did.

"That is true," she said. "And men will lack the imagination to see us as separate beings. For that I am sorry."

"I am not," I told her, and I was not, "for I love you more than I love the rain."

"How remarkable," she said, and laughed, "for you see my face every day and do not tire of it." And we ran together,

sure-footed, across the shifting sand.

We were strong together, carrying the water jar between us to share the weight. Its thick ceramic sides made it heavy, even without the weight of the water, but there were four handles, and we had four hands. We learned the trick when we were small, and were rewarded with candied figs for spilling so little water as we walked. Even when we were old enough to carry a jug each, we did the chore together, and more besides. In most things, from weaving to cooking to spearing the poisonous snakes that came to our well, we were equal. My voice was better at the songs and stories our traditions gave us, but my sister could find her own words to say, and did not rely on the deeds of others to make her point. Maybe that fire was what made her beautiful; maybe that was what set my sister's face apart from mine. Maybe that was why I did not tire of it.

I feared that Lo-Melkhiin would think my sister's face was something, something at last, that he too would not tire of. He had married only beautiful girls at first, the daughters of our highest lords and wealthiest merchants. But when his wives began to die, the powerful men of the desert did not like it, and began to look elsewhere for Lo-Melkhiin's brides. They began to scour the villages for women that would suit, and for a time no one paid mind to the host of poorer daughters that went to their deaths. Soon, though, the smaller villages tallied their dead and ceased trade

with the cities. From thence, the law was struck: one girl from each village and one from every district inside city walls, and then the cycle would begin again. So many girls had been lost, and I did not wish to lose my sister to him. The stories were very clear about two things: Lo-Melkhiin always took one girl, and she always, always died.

When the dust rose over the desert, we knew that he was coming. He would know our numbers, and he would know who had daughters that must be presented to him. The census was part of the law, the way that men were able to tell themselves that it was fair.

"But it isn't fair," whispered my sister as we lay underneath the sky and watched the stars rise on our seventeenth summer. "They do not marry and die."

"No," I said to her. "They do not."

So we stood in the shadow of our father's tent, and we waited. Around us the air was full of cries and moans; mothers held their daughters; fathers paced, unable to intervene, unwilling to circumvent the law. Our father was not here. He had gone to trade. We had not known that Lo-Melkhiin would come. Our father would return to find his fairest flower gone, and only the weed left for him to use as he saw fit.

My hair was unbound under my veil, and both blew wildly around my face. My sister had tied back her braid and stood with straight shoulders, her veil pulled back and

her black hair gleaming in the sun. She was looking out at the coming storm, but there was a storm brewing in her eyes that only made her more beautiful. I could not lose her, and surely once Lo-Melkhiin saw her, she would be lost.

I thought of all the stories I had heard, those whispered at my mother's hearth and those told in the booming voice of our father when the village elders met in his tent for council. I knew them all: where we had come from, who our ancestors had been, what heroes were in my lineage, which smallgods my family had made and loved. I tried to think if there was any one thing in the stories that I could use, but there was not. The world had never seen another like Lo-Melkhiin, and it had no stories to combat him.

Not whole stories, but maybe there was something smaller. A thread in the story of a warrior who laid siege to a walled city. A fragment in the story of a father who had two daughters, and was forced to choose which of them to send into the desert at night. An intrigue in the story of two lovers who wed against the wishes of their fathers. A path in the story of an old woman whose sons were taken, unlawfully, to fight a war they were not part of. There were stories, and then there were stories.

No single tale that I could draw from would save my sister from a short and cruel marriage, but I had pieces aplenty. I held them in my hands like so many grains of sand, and they slipped away from me, running through my fingers,

even as I tried to gather more. But I knew sand. I had been born to it and learned to walk on it. It had blown in my face and I had picked it from my food. I knew that I had only to hold it for long enough, to find the right fire, and the sand would harden into glass—into something I could use.

My sister watched the dust cloud for Lo-Melkhiin, but I watched it for the sand. I took strength from her bravery in the face of that storm, and she took my hand and smiled, even though she did not know what I was trying to do. She had accepted that she would be the one to save us, the one to be made a smallgod and sung to after her time of leaving. The one who died. But I would not allow it.

By the time the village elders could see flashes of bronze armor in the dust cloud, and hear the footfalls of horses that rode, too hard, under the sun—by the time the wind pulled at my sister's braid and worked a few strands loose to play with, as though it, too, feared to lose her—by then, I had a plan.