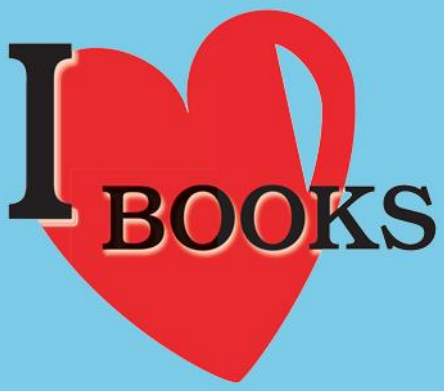


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Opening extract from

The Arabian Nights

Written by

Robert Leeson

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Christina Balit

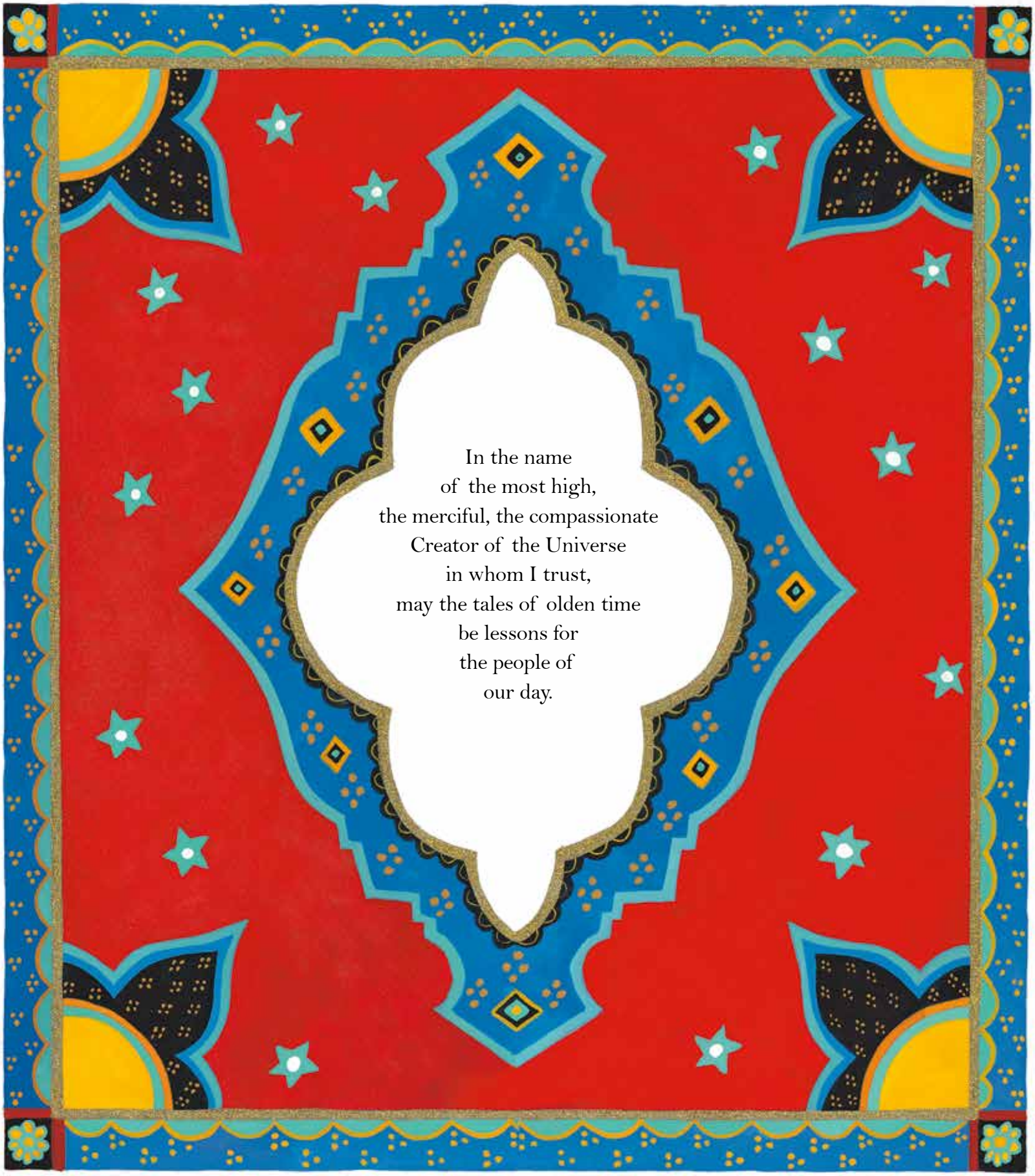
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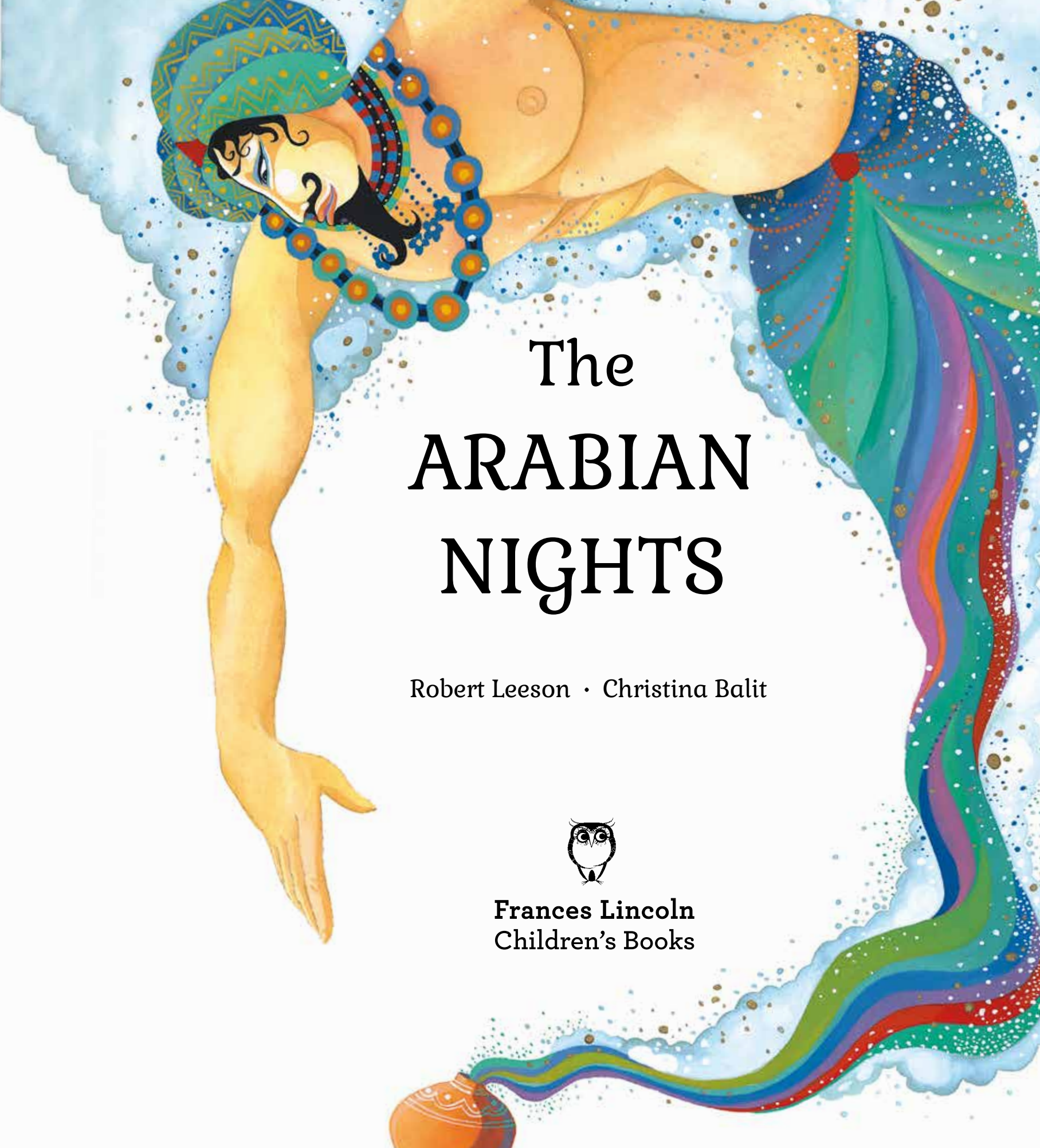
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In the name
of the most high,
the merciful, the compassionate
Creator of the Universe
in whom I trust,
may the tales of olden time
be lessons for
the people of
our day.



The ARABIAN NIGHTS

Robert Leeson · Christina Balit

Frances Lincoln
Children's Books

For Christine – R.L.

For a special friend, Tessa – C.B.



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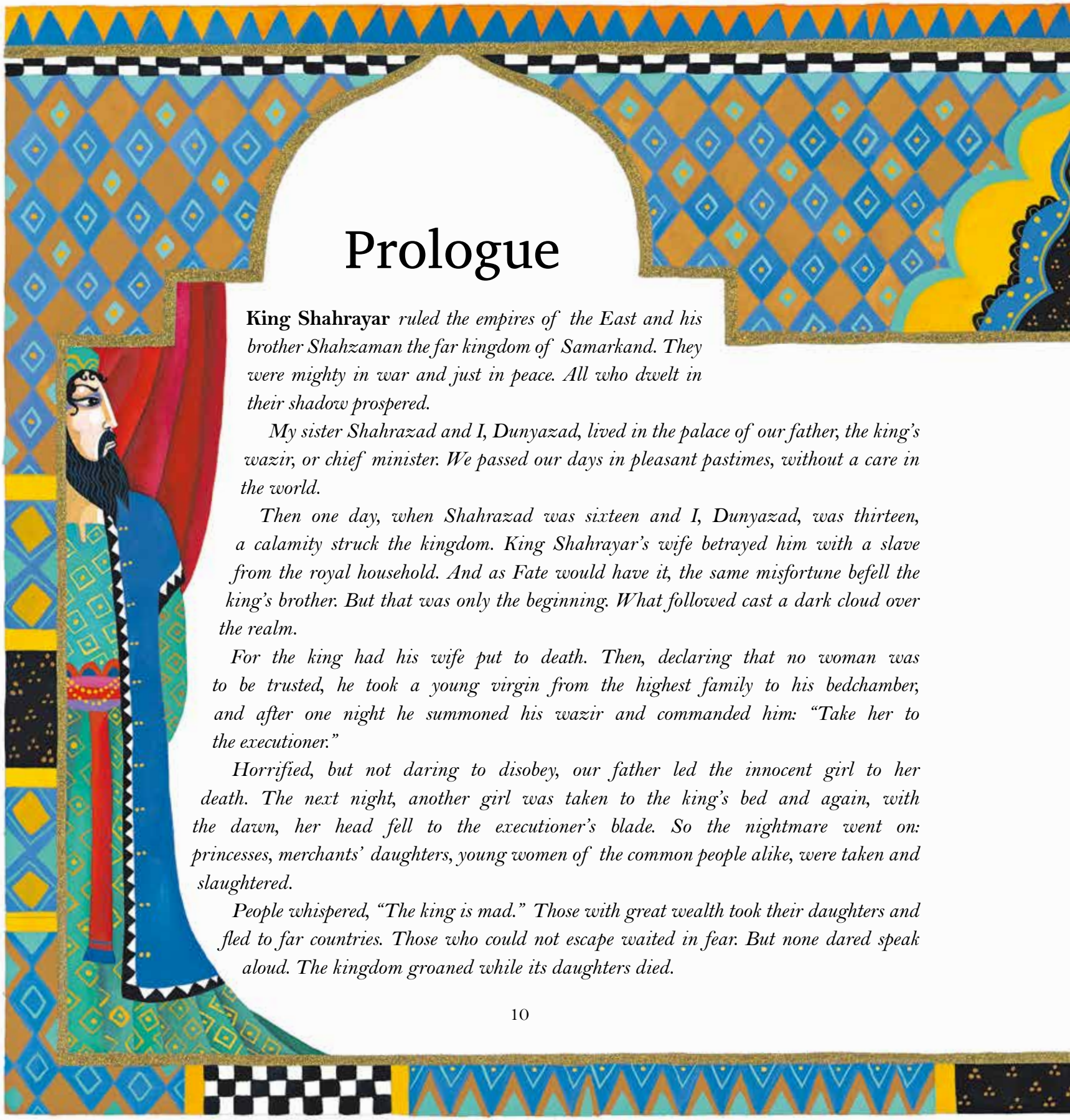
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Prologue

King Shahrayar *ruled the empires of the East and his brother Shahzaman the far kingdom of Samarkand. They were mighty in war and just in peace. All who dwelt in their shadow prospered.*

My sister Shahrazad and I, Dunyazad, lived in the palace of our father, the king's wazir, or chief minister. We passed our days in pleasant pastimes, without a care in the world.

Then one day, when Shahrazad was sixteen and I, Dunyazad, was thirteen, a calamity struck the kingdom. King Shahrayar's wife betrayed him with a slave from the royal household. And as Fate would have it, the same misfortune befell the king's brother. But that was only the beginning. What followed cast a dark cloud over the realm.

For the king had his wife put to death. Then, declaring that no woman was to be trusted, he took a young virgin from the highest family to his bedchamber, and after one night he summoned his wazir and commanded him: "Take her to the executioner."

Horrified, but not daring to disobey, our father led the innocent girl to her death. The next night, another girl was taken to the king's bed and again, with the dawn, her head fell to the executioner's blade. So the nightmare went on: princesses, merchants' daughters, young women of the common people alike, were taken and slaughtered.

People whispered, "The king is mad." Those with great wealth took their daughters and fled to far countries. Those who could not escape waited in fear. But none dared speak aloud. The kingdom groaned while its daughters died.

At last my sister Shahrazad went to our father the wazir and said, "Take me to the king. It may be that I can be a ransom for others, whether I live or die."

Aghast at this recklessness, our father reasoned with her, argued with her, threatened to beat her. He would not let her go, because he believed that as long as he did what the king demanded, his own daughters at least might be spared.

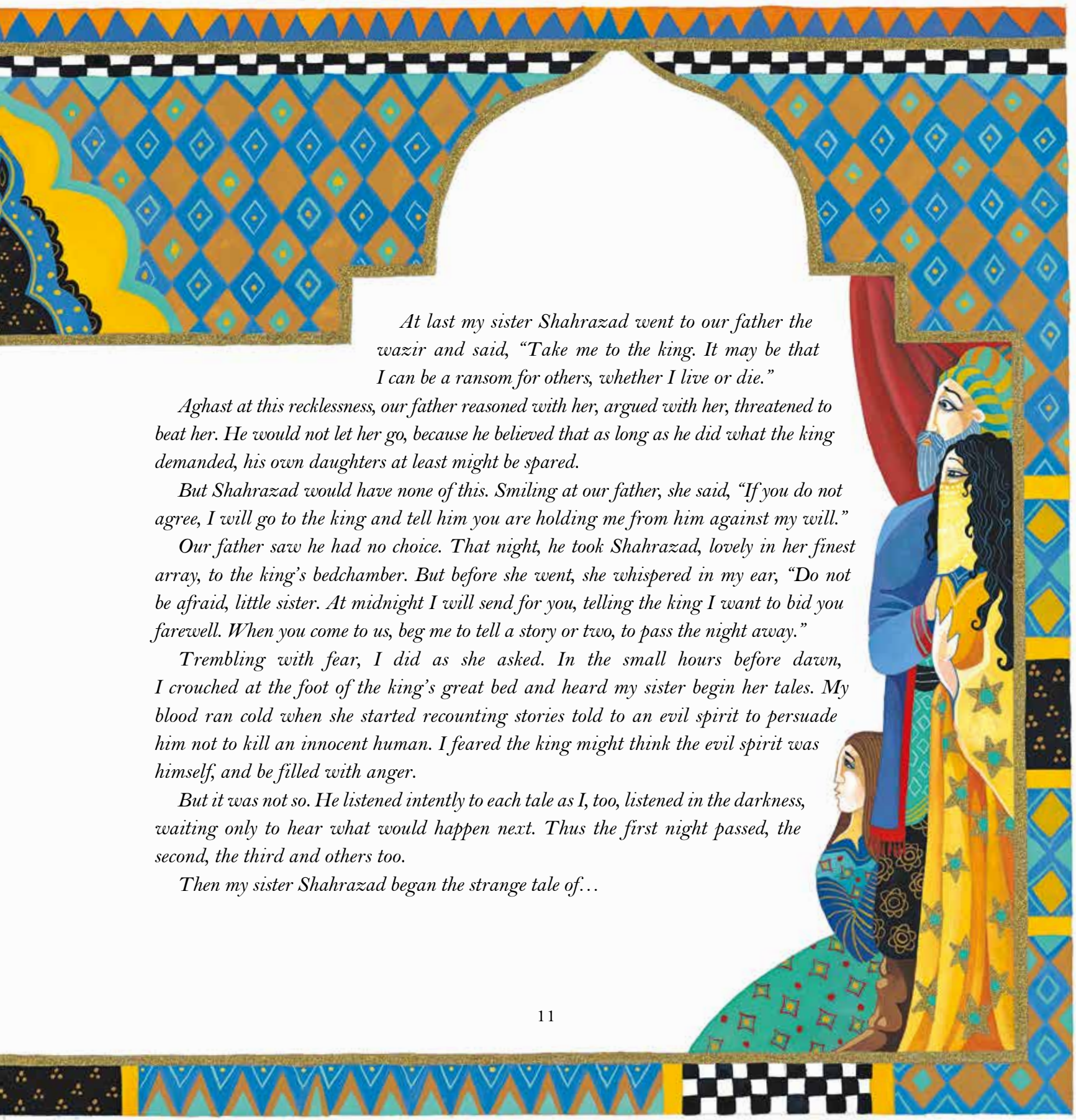
But Shahrazad would have none of this. Smiling at our father, she said, "If you do not agree, I will go to the king and tell him you are holding me from him against my will."

Our father saw he had no choice. That night, he took Shahrazad, lovely in her finest array, to the king's bedchamber. But before she went, she whispered in my ear, "Do not be afraid, little sister. At midnight I will send for you, telling the king I want to bid you farewell. When you come to us, beg me to tell a story or two, to pass the night away."

Trembling with fear, I did as she asked. In the small hours before dawn, I crouched at the foot of the king's great bed and heard my sister begin her tales. My blood ran cold when she started recounting stories told to an evil spirit to persuade him not to kill an innocent human. I feared the king might think the evil spirit was himself, and be filled with anger.

But it was not so. He listened intently to each tale as I, too, listened in the darkness, waiting only to hear what would happen next. Thus the first night passed, the second, the third and others too.

Then my sister Shahrazad began the strange tale of…



The Fisherman and the Jinni

Know, O King, that there was once a poor fisherman who had a wife and three daughters. They all lived on what he could harvest from the sea. Every morning, while the moon still hung in the sky, he rose and went down to the shore. He cast his nets into the water four times, waiting to see what his catch might be.

On this day, of all days, he waded into the water to his knees and spun his nets through the air until they sank beneath the waves. When he tugged on the lines, how heavy they felt! Overjoyed at the thought of a rich haul of fish, he rushed forward until he was up to his waist in sea water, and dragged his nets to land.

Imagine how his heart sank when he saw that a dead donkey was trapped in the meshes! Yet he did not curse, but only raised his eyes to heaven, said a silent prayer, and cast again. Once more his hopes were dashed, for he had caught nothing but an old cooking pot.

A third time his nets vanished into the depths. This time they rose loaded with stones and rubbish.

Raising his head in despair, he prayed once more, for this was his last chance. He never tried more than four times, for fear of bad fortune. This time, so heavy was the burden of his nets, he was forced to plunge beneath the waves. It took all his strength to bring his catch to shore.

There in the nets lay a great jar made of copper, green with age. Its mouth was sealed and the seal inscribed with ancient writing which he could not read.

"Copper!" he cried. "If I can carry this to market and sell it, we shall live well for a month. But first I must empty out what is inside." So saying, he cut open the seal.

At once a thick cloud of smoke rushed from the neck of the jar and spread out until it filled the skies. There it formed into a monstrous jinni, or spirit, high as a mountain, with legs as tall as ships' masts, a mouth like a cavern, teeth like tombstones and eyes like blazing lamps.

As the fisherman cowered on the sand, the monster cried in a voice like thunder, "O great Solomon, forgive me! I will never disobey you again."

Forgetting his fear, the astonished fisherman cried out, "Why do you call on Solomon? He has been dead these two thousand years."

At these words, the jinni laughed a gigantic laugh and cried, "I am free!" Then he bent down his hideous face and said, "Mortal, it is you who have released me. I shall grant you a wish." But, before the fisherman could find his voice, his insides turned to water, for the jinni went on, "Tell me how you wish to die."

"To d-die?" stammered the fisherman. "Why should you take my life when I have just freed you, O unjust spirit?"

"O insect," roared the jinni. "Why ask foolish questions? I could kill you now, but as a reward I grant you this wish: choose how you would die."

Out of his wits with terror, the fisherman remained silent. So the jinni spoke again:

"Know, O worm, that I was one of the jinni that rebelled against the great Lord Solomon. When we were defeated, he punished me by making this copper jar my prison. As the ages passed, I longed for deliverance. I promised that he who set me free would be rich for life. But no deliverer came, though countless years went by.

"Then I promised that whoever freed me should be rewarded with all the treasures of the earth. A hundred, two hundred, three hundred years went by, but still no one came. Then I swore that my liberator should be king and I would serve him day and night. But my dungeon door stayed shut.

"At last my mood darkened with impatience. I grew angry in my dank cell. And I swore a great oath: that whoever opened this door should die, in revenge for my ordeal.

"So now," said the jinni, "choose how I shall kill you."

Desperate to gain a little more time to live, the fisherman began to tell the jinni stories of mercy and of treachery. He told how a king, led astray by bad advice, condemned to death the doctor who had cured him of a terrible illness. But even as the doctor died, he succeeded in poisoning the king. "Injustice is surely punished by death," cried the fisherman.



But the jinni only laughed until the sky shook.

"Don't waste my time, O miserable one. Choose the manner of your death, and choose quickly."

Staring death in the face, the fisherman said to himself, "The spirits are all-powerful. Yet we mortals still have our wits."

So he spoke out boldly: "O, most potent lord, if I ask you one last question before you end my unworthy life, will you answer it truly?"

"What, more questions?" bellowed the giant. "Well – one question, then."

"Tell me, O mighty one," said the fisherman humbly, "if your head touches the clouds, and your breadth is like a mountain, how did you spend two thousand years in that small jar? It is not to be believed."

The jinni ground his teeth like clashing rocks. "I tell you, I did – may you die slowly and in torment."

"Then how did you get inside, O potent one?"

"Like this!"

And with a roar of impatience like ten thousand lions, the jinni turned himself into a cloud of smoke, which dwindled until it vanished inside the copper jar.

With trembling fingers, the fisherman took the seal with the name of the great Solomon inscribed on it and clapped it into the neck of the jar. From inside came a hollow howl of fury, as the jinni realised he had been tricked.

All at once his voice became soft and pleading.

"Most noble sir," he begged, "free me once more, and I will make you rich."

But the fisherman laughed harshly. "O enemy to truth and trust, you shall stay prisoner beneath these waves until the end of time. I shall warn all fishermen on this shore whose nets may drag you up again by chance, and they will cast you back."

"I beseech you," whimpered the jinni. "I am wicked, but you are a good man. Let us go by your rules, not mine. Forgive me, and you will have cause to be thankful."

The fisherman thought for a while, then said, "Do you swear by the name of One on High not to harm me?"

The jinni swallowed his pride. "I do, I do," he murmured.

At this, the fisherman knocked away the magic seal and, with the sound of a thousand rushing whirlwinds, the smoke poured out. Once more the jinni towered over the sea and shore. With a laugh of fiendish glee the monster kicked the jar into the sea. Then he turned a face full of malevolence upon the one who had freed him not once, but twice. The fisherman grovelled on the ground, wetting himself with terror.

"I call on you in the most Sacred Name," he begged. "Remember your oath!"

The jinni roared with laughter. "Fear not, worm, but follow me," he said. Still shaking, the fisherman followed.

They marched into the mountains and there, by the side of a deep dark lake, the jinni halted, saying, "Look!" The fisherman stared at the water, which swarmed with miraculous fish, white, red, blue and yellow.

The jinni spoke. "Cast your net," he said. "Take your catch to the sultan and he will reward you greatly. Only one warning: do not fish here more than once a day, or the fish will disappear. Now, cunning mortal, farewell!"

With that, the jinni stamped his foot and was swallowed up by the earth, leaving the fisherman astonished, but happy beyond belief.