

Nightflyer

The Magazine of the Oxford Roleplaying Society

Issue 38

Editorial

Welcome to another, much bigger edition of *Nightflyer* and my last before I hand on the reins to a seriously enthusiastic new editor.

Nightflyer can only be produced from the contributions of articles, stories and art from the society. We've had a fantastic response this time and, hopefully, Rosie will be receiving any more. Please, if you enjoy anything you read here, think about what you might contribute to the next edition.

When I originally asked for material for this edition, many many months ago with a deadline in Trinity, I asked for articles celebrating older society games. I'm pleased to be publishing a retrospective of the very first society game which gives a fascinating insight into how it all began. You'll also find inside stories touching on the last four years worth of society games, as well as White City.

I hope you'll enjoy what you read. If you do, then let the authors know!

— Ivan

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Articles

SOCIETY GAME ADVICE

A Year in the Life of a GM by Robert Clough

Well I guess I best start off saying how I in fact have told a lie in the title of this article. GMing has been for me more than a year, in fact it started halfway through my first term at Oxford with an email saying "YOU are killing the society game." It was an email saying how people should be thinking of game proposals for the next society game, me in my naivety came up with a proposal called Gemity. Just to set in context how crazy I was to be doing such a thing, before I came to Oxford the closest I had got to roleplaying was the Final Fantasy computer game series, then a matter of weeks after Fed had thrust a LARP sword in front of me saying, "you look like a roleplayer!" I was writing a system for a new game.

A few weeks after my first bout of insanity I decided I best start looking for other GMs to help me out, at the time two other games were being talked about with two other CAMPOS, Tony was proposing Broken Worlds, while Fabio was proposing Apotheosis, the initial proposal for which is still on the RPGSoc website under News. I can't speak for the others, but I at least was more interested in GMing than I was CAMPO, so even if my proposal wasn't the one chosen I would still be on the GM Team, so it came to pass the three of us would all be on each others GM Team.

Over Christmas I took a note pad around with me, and constantly jotted down ideas for the various races, magic's and bits of system I came up with. On the other side of the Holiday the AGM looked a lot closer, and approached even quicker, while I had most of my Proposal written, it was all on bits of paper. So in the few days before the AGM I spent a good few hours putting into word documents and sending it to the society. I guess this rapid typing up was my first taster of what was to come.

So the AGM came around, and while Fabio had stood down as potential CAMPO, me and Tony had to get up and put forward our proposals, after the questions came the vote and Tony's Broken Worlds came out top, I breathed a sigh of relief, and fell comfortably into my role as GM.

So we had our first GM Team, Tony, Cecily, James, Fabio, Rich and Me. When running a Society Game, I think what makes or breaks it is the chemistry of the GM Team. If the Team gets on and works well together then I think you'll have a better game as a result. If there was one thing I could say to a potential CAMPO, or indeed any GM, it's get your GM Team right, you want a good mix of system savvy GMs, others good at com-

ing in with cool idea's, as well as the GM's are just really organised, picking up the slack, and the odd jobs that come up. But fundamentally you want a group that gets on. Believe of the course of the game you will see a lot of these people, from session to GM meetings to discussions over email and MSN, so you want to like each other.



We were lucky, when we had our first GM meeting, I didn't feel I knew my fellow GMs particularly well, but over the time we spent building game 1, we started to gel as a cohesive unit. So how do you go about building a System? For us we each had our own area of expertise which we were responsible for, I think this is a good way of doing it, while it is important everyone know the basics of things, so you all pull in the same direction, having all the system covered between you so there is always at least one GM who is an expert in a particular area. For me I focused on bits of setting, I did a lot of work on the Alien races of the world before game 1, as well as things like religion. I guess this is because I like to write about cultures and history, where I can let my imagination run wild, and explore loads of crazy ideas, taking hooks from Tony's original premise, and following them to see what I can come up with.

With our character generation system published characters began to come in. The way we divvied up characters game 1 and game 2 was quite different. In game 1 we divided characters by their skill set, so Fabio took those characters with Spirit

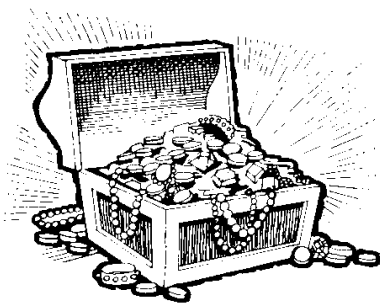
Magic. I went for those with no magic's at all, in hindsight, this wasn't a wise move. The Broken Worlds magic systems broadly had one thing in common, they were generally cheap to pick up at character generation, but expensive to level up in game. This meant while other GM's had nice easy research actions, all my characters had 8AP for the purposes of Role-playing.

Not that I minded, turnsheets are one of the brilliant things about being a GM, some people give you a work of literary genius every single week, sometimes a turnsheet will make you laugh all the way through, other times you will be shocked and appalled by the level of evil the characters will stoop to, to achieve their plans, sometimes both. Tom Keyton's wonderful actions as the King of Winter in training his minions to actually aim at the enemy, how to wear helmets which showed your face, and name badges so they weren't unnamed mooks are excellent examples.

In game 2 we split the players by backstory and factions. While this had the advantage of needed less flicking between turnsheets of other GM's to get the full picture, and made writing group briefs easier, it meant I had to work out how the magic systems worked. This had been something I had carefully managed to avoid in game 1, except for my single player; Guerra, with passion magic. In Game 2 between my players they had all the magic covered, storm, mist, spirit and rune, the only one I was missing was passion. Bloody Typical. It also introduced the rest of the GM Team to my methods of interpreting the metaphysic, which consisted of player (normally Joe) giving me a well articulated argument of what they wanted to do and why it should work, and me going "Well that sounds plausible, but I best go check." I subsequently went to another GM who pointed out the obvious problem imposed by the metaphysic,

put in place to stop people destroying the world with cunning application of spirit magic and a small amounts of AP. My response being "But it was going to be cool."

I guess this brings me onto session, which consists of 2 parts, GM calls, where you are asked a question, then have to try and remember which GM will have an answer, and my favourite part of the whole job, NPCs. NPCs are the best thing ever, find there's a bit of the game you think is cool and awesome, more often than not you can come up with an NPC to get involved in it. You've got to be careful with the Pet NPC, that NPC who you just love to play, and would do all session if your not being careful. At the start of session Tony could never understand why my NPCs got such big cheers at the start of session, until we point out to him, it because they give the players stuff.



I guess this is probably my biggest flaw as a GM, I like to give the players "snackies." The chief job of the NPC is to develop and move plots along, either by giving a player someone to use diplomacy on, or to give someone that important piece of information, so they no what to do next, or finally to generate conflict. My NPCs helped moving plots along by putting big crosses on a map, and being the go to guy. My problem is I'm a sucker for a good plan. The conversation always went "Hey Caul, we want to do this, do you think you cold help out." I would go yeah, that sounds cool, then I would tweak the plan to make it fit with (my interpretation of) the Metaphysic, and ask them to do something in return. The thing was my NPCs' motive were often exactly the same as that of the players, so I'd end up for rewarding them for something they were going to do anyway.

If I was giving advice to a new GM about NPCs, I'd say to make sure they have a motive, for every NPC that turns up, make sure you know what they want to achieve and who they need to talk to. This was a problem I had in game 1, in Game 1 I had about 6 NPCs every session, I'd walk in talk to a few people and not

be sure what to do next, so go onto the next one. Then I'd have gone through all my NPCs and still have an hour to go. In comparison in game 2, I had only 2 or 3 NPCs and run out of time.

While motives are important to give your NPCs' direction, it's not the be all and end all, as a GM feel free to take a bit of time to just roleplay a bit, I had a lot of fun getting one of my NPCs to roleplay with Bezeth, which ended in a pub crawl around the colonies after serenading Comrade Ivan, although as a rule roleplaying with Frances is always going to prove interesting. But it shows my NPC generating a nice plot, which led to his kidnapping by Segue Tyr, without going in with a motive to do so.

The power level of NPCs is an important thing to discuss when you are building a society game, on the one hand you can have NPCs being figureheads, and when they come into contact with NPCs they fold. On the other you have the argument of this NPC is powerful, with resources at their disposal, and that you can break the suspension of disbelief if NPCs are too easy to deal with. This links into the question of PvE, how easy do you want a player to beat the environment. The problem arises from the fact nobody in PvE looses if the PC wins, so if you go for winning = fun, then it seems to make sense for the environment being easier to beat. But of course losing is also fun, if done in the right way. It's certainly a hard job to balance to two sides, but no one ever said GMing was an easy job, and sometimes you've just got to make a decision, and the challenge of the environment is one of them, I don't think there is a right answer (although I'm sure there are plenty of wrong ones.)

So that is PvE but how do you deal with PvP conflict. This is probably the hardest part of GMing, sometimes it's easier, when two groups are going for the same temple, you can work it so the "winning" side gets the big prize, but the losers still get something out. Other times it is impossible to strike this kind of balance, the gain of one side is a loss for the other, this is the case in wars, anything that is a win for one side, the destruction of a warship, capturing a PC is a loss for another. It's tough to do and find a resolution the entire GM team is happy with, even before you throw players into the mix, but it's just one of those hard decisions you have to make as a GM. For me the important thing was to find a resolution where I

could say to a player, I'm sorry but we this was the fairest outcome.



This goes onto Player Death another touchy subject, and I'm afraid even after a year, one that has no easy answers. The problem is everyone has different views on it, some people understandably grow attached to a character, while others don't think they are doing it right unless someone is trying to kill them. Some games have introduced quirks as an OOC agreement that you don't want your character killed, we decided this limits you to much on what is doable, as they always have the clause "You cannot deliberately put your character at high risk of death. You must also not attempt to kill any other character." Where do we draw this line, in most cases people will try to kill you because you've done something to provoke them (I say most of the time.) It's a hard line to draw, as playing someone even slightly dodgy is going to cause people to try render you unplayable, at the same time playing the commander of the watch is going to cause you problems if you can't make people unplayable, which lets face it is fair enough you can't kill if you can't be killed. Talking to the illustrious Crusade GM Team that is set to follow me, they however have come up with what I deem to be an excellent Quirk which we missed out on, I am writing this before the Crusade character generation system is out, so I may have the details wrong, but as I understand it the "Hit me Harder Heathen," will by an OC agreement that its OK by you to be killed by the GM's if you do something stupid, to me this seems like an excellent idea for those of us who like to be hit in the face by our actions when we do something stupid.

I realize that I have now spent a lot of time writing about the tough decisions GM's have to make, an indeed gone on for much longer than I was expecting. GMing despite having the hard decisions is an amazing experience and something that I

would recommend to anyone who plans to stick with the society game for a number of years, while there are tough decisions, it is far outweighed by the number of times it causes you to smile. That conversation you overhear in session with a blatant lie to the face, I'm thinking of Gareth when people asked him about the destruction of the Earthborne Stack. The wild conspiracy theories people come up with, I'm thinking of General Deep-

cut's paranoia that Ms Minver was actually a Confederate spy. The needlessly complicated plans people have, I'm thinking of Segue Tyr's triple bluff for getting the adventuring party into Stormwatch. And the grand reveals that people do over email, I'm thinking of Bezeth revealing to Catequill half way through the second term of game 2 after they have been courting for a few turns that she has been a passion mage like him all along. These

are just a few examples, but they happen all the time and really makes your effort worth while.

So if I had chance to go back, would I do Broken Worlds again? Yes, most definitely. Will I be doing it again in the future? Possibly, it depends how long I'm with the society for, and if I do a PhD in Oxford.¹ Unless you're my girlfriend; Grace in which case the answer is "No dear."

SOCIETY HISTORY

Grand Conclave - A Retrospective by Dom Camus

This is the story of Grand Conclave, the first ever Society Game of the Oxford University Roleplaying Games Society. In order to tell the story properly I must first provide a bit of context. In the autumn of 1991 I arrived in Oxford as a young, innocent Fresher. At least, innocent in fields other than gaming, in which context I already considered myself a grizzled veteran (pro tip: if you can't manage cute, go for grizzled). Inevitably I found my way to the exalted halls of OURPGSoc, signed up for life membership, then left.

Well OK, I didn't actually *leave* as such. But I attended very few events and ran my own roleplaying games quietly in a corner. The reason? At the time, RPG-Soc as a society wasn't actually very good. Shocking, right? But honestly, there were better games running at my sixth form. It was all very disappointing.

That might have been the end of my relationship with the society were it not for a gentleman named Mike Oswald. By Michaelmas of the following year he was Treasurer of the society. Like every committee before and since, the great and the good of the society were having some trouble finding a suitable venue for the Christmas party. Was it possible, Mike wondered, that in my capacity as a member of Corpus Christi I could book the New Music Room? I could. Whilst he was there, he asked out of curiosity if I had any recommendations for improvements to the society. As soon as he was again able to get a word in edgeways, he asked me to write it down and the following week I found myself in a meeting with the President, Chris Tomkins.

I could write an entire article on the many aspects of gaming we discussed and on what became of our many plans. Maybe another time. One of the ideas Chris had which I liked the sound of was to run a small game combining many different forms of gaming into an integrated world. It was to be a live action game with play-by-mail turnsheets,

a duelling system, a large game world with political and wargaming elements, an experience-based ongoing campaign and various other things besides. This game was seen as a playful experiment, most likely to be played by between half a dozen and a dozen gamers for no more than a couple of hours a week. Chris liked the idea of GMing, so he took on the project, electing to set it in TSR's "World of Greyhawk" fantasy world (released originally as a source pack for Dungeons and Dragons).

The game's plot was somewhat inspired by Feist's classic "Magician". The first session began with the greatest mages in the world each receiving a summons to attend the Grand Conclave of Mages. But no sooner has they arrived than they found the Conclave to be in the grip of a crisis. The three person executive had been fragmented. The Inquisitor had turned traitor and fled. The Castellan was dead. Only the Grand Master stood before us. He declared to us that he had remained this long only in order that the Conclave could be handed over to us in person. Remained? Yes, indeed. Since having addressed us he then performed a ritual before our very eyes in which he left the physical plane forever. We later discovered he had ascended to the ranks of the mythical Mage Drakes who, despite their near limitless might, concern themselves only seldom with mortal affairs.

Grand Conclave's character system

was extremely simple (and may be familiar to some of you since it returned to use many years later). Each character had ten stats and had to distribute the numbers one to ten amongst them. These stats varied wildly in terms of their applications, with duellists, researchers, monarchs and heroes all well represented amongst the player characters. From these primary stats, various other things were derived. Not least amongst them was Prestige. Chris was keen to stress the importance of this to such an extent that a table of Prestige scores was drawn up each week and the mere act of speaking in Conclave required due respect to the social order it defined. This is the kind of mechanic that can fall flat on its face if either the players do not respect it or if too many of them have generated characters who defy it. Here it worked brilliantly and the early game was rich in atmosphere as characters with key roles in the wider world radiated terrible power in the chamber. It helped that the game was set in Lincoln College's excellent Oakeshott Room, thick with old books and dark, polished wood.

Pretty soon duels were being fought, reputations won and lost, alliances formed and plots plotted. Remember that at that time almost nobody carried a mobile phone and almost nobody had access to email. Despite this, the game's reputation spread like lightning and player numbers began to grow. But something

¹ Editor's Note: This article was written before Djemity was chosen as one of next year's Society Games.

more important than that happened too. Players of the game began to meet up outside sessions to plot and roleplay for the game. Within five weeks of the game's start there were people effectively playing the game twenty hours a week, if not more. And these people became good friends in many cases, all but discarding their college social lives for this immersive new game. Eventually, overwhelmed by the workload, Chris took on Leon Sucharov - one of the players - as assistant GM.

Before telling more of the game itself I need to make an apology to the other players. Grand Conclave was a game with many deep plots and interwoven storylines. I have no hope of even summarising most of what was going on, so I will restrict myself to the story as it seemed from the perspective of my own character, Badger Sorengrim. Similarly I won't namecheck any of the other players since, honestly, there are far too many who were genuinely noteworthy. My own character concept was of a master of thieves and assassins. Not so much an open godfather-like figure as the invisible hand behind a vast network that spanned Greyhawk. I imagined the character had worked his way up from the lowest of the low thanks to his magical skill, so I gave him the stats of a duellist then shifted them all down one and set Followers at ten. In the meetings, I played the part of a duellist, working to advance my position in small ways whilst keeping my true nature concealed. In turnsheets, my many allies scurried around the map making mischief.

The culture of the mages was such that duelling was considered a reasonable way to resolve disputes. Of course, it was quite acceptable to call upon allies and so my life as a duelling mage was a very political one. So it was that a little more than halfway through the game I found myself sitting on the executive of the Conclave as Inquisitor. At that time there was a strong group of mages with interests opposed to my own who called themselves the Azure Alliance. Amongst them, none was more dangerous to me than Bezique, a duellist himself, he was aggressive and outspoken in meetings, bowing to nobody and frustratingly hard to manipulate. Abusing my position as Inquisitor I had him convicted and thrown into the Conclave's dungeons. Then the following term of office I was elected to the role of Castellan and had him killed in the dungeon I'd thrown him into myself, making it look like suicide.



I tell this story not to make myself seem awesome - after all, experienced roleplayers recognise such play as barely the right side of abusive - but rather to capture something of the character of the game. None of us had the slightest idea how games like this *ought* to play out and so there was a lawless, anything-goes atmosphere. In general terms that's not a good thing, since too much of that can break a game. Conclave got away with it, if only barely, with the result that it had outstanding dramatic tension. The safety nets we became used to years later were simply not there.

Another feature of this charming inexperience we all shared was that many of the boundaries of the game didn't get pushed all that hard. During the debrief, Leon remarked to me that my turnsheets invariably amazed him since I'd used every time slot available to make some huge game-changing play whilst many of the other mages were pottering around quietly in their labs. Again, this isn't a good feature of my play as such since as we discovered in later society games if everyone behaves this way it can be a nightmare to GM and doesn't lead to good gameplay. (In my defence I should perhaps point out that once I knew better I played some far more balanced characters in later games.)

The Conclave eventually dealt with the rogue Inquisitor Tren Vordex. War engulfed the world as the demigod Iuz rallied his huge armies and swept Southwards. Mages fought on the field of battle. Kingdoms fell. And yet in contrast to later games, the mages of the Conclave were not united against the threat! An evil alliance rose up from amongst the ranks of the Conclave. The Dark Triumvirate, as they called themselves, massed a vast army to march upon the Conclave itself. And they'd planned it pretty well. I hon-

estly think that the GMs would have let them succeed. Their army was more than strong enough. Their magical strength was considerable. Nystagmus, one of their number, was the most accomplished researcher in the Conclave.

But in fact the Triumvirate were defeated at the eleventh hour. Remember the disappearance of the Grand Master at the start? Throughout the game, some of the mages of the Conclave had been obsessed with learning the secret of the Mage Drakes for themselves. After making deals with both Vordex and Iuz, stealing a magical tome from under the noses of the other mages and sharing research notes with several who thought I was their ally, I finally learned the secret at the start of the final session. "What can I do?" I asked Chris. He shrugged and replied, "Anything!"

Have you ever gone back to a board game you loved as a child and noticed huge holes in the rules that leave it broken and unplayable? That is how Conclave looks to me now. Everyone says nothing compares to your first good game, but Conclave was even more than that: it was *everyone's* first time. That's something you can only do once. The following year I was on the GM team for *Psigen*, which Leon ran. The year after that I was elected to the office of Campaign Organiser to run the first Society Game that was split between one and two term games, *Thieves' Guild*. Both of those games made one thing very clear to me: no matter how much we perfected our skills there could never be another Conclave. It was good, but that's not why. It will remain unrepeatable because it came first.

At the time of writing I am almost exactly twice the age of a first year undergraduate. I am pleased to say I am still an active gamer. Indeed, a great many of my friends are people I once played alongside at RPGSoc. As such, I owe a considerable debt to Chris Tomkins' vision. What's he doing now? Designing incredibly dull things for Unilever! I mention this not as some kind of oblique criticism, but to provide some perspective on the importance of RPGSoc. Anyone who wants to can turn up as an undergraduate and spend a few years creating amazing adventures before heading off to whatever they decide to do with their lives.

And as I understand it from friends still in Oxford, RPGSoc's gaming remains strong to this day. Long may it continue!

PHYSREP

5 Easy Steps to a Black Eye Without the Pain

by Ellie Williams

OR What to do when the GM team decides to ~~pick on~~ take a special interest in your character.

Equipment:

- 1 makeup sponge (although any type of sponge will do)
- 1 small paintbrush or makeup brush.
- 1 Pot of light red face-paint (I use the water based stuff you can get from the party shop on Turl street – about £3.50 a pot but lasts forever!)
- 1 Pot of dark red face-paint
- 1 Pot of black face-paint
- Green eye-shadow



Step 1: Find ~~victim~~ willing volunteer.



Step 2: Put some of the light red face-paint onto the damp sponge. Don't overload the sponge – you only need a little paint. Then dapple around the area you want bruised. Dappling will avoid unnatural- looking block colours and blend in better with your skin. A slightly off-centre black eye also seems to work well. This one is going to be quite a large and fresh black eye.



Step 3: Put some of the dark red face-paint onto the sponge – again take care not to overload it. Then dapple with the dark red within the area defined by the light red but keep closer to the middle of the bruise and leave some of the light red visible at the edges.



Step 4: Put a miniscule bit of black face-paint onto the sponge. Black can overpower everything really really easily so go carefully with it. I found it best to use the very corner of the sponge only for fine control. Again, dapple with the black in the centre of the bruise, leaving the edges showing the light and dark red. I also found that since all the makeup was still fairly wet at this point I could use the other end of the sponge to blend in any bits that looked a bit too blocky by dabbing the area lightly. This helped to mix the black into the red and make it look a bit more purple.



Step 5: Use the green eye-shadow to add very light discolouration to the edge of the bruise. You can do this either with a paintbrush or the handy little things that come with most eye-shadows .

***Disclaimer: No Ellies were hurt in the production of this article.
Also anyone reading this in black and white may want to take a look at the Netflyer
edition of this article in all its Technicolour glory!***

Fiction

LEGACY

Skyspiders by Mark Jenkins

with contributions from *Tony Porteous* and *Frances*

The inspiration, a pre-game rumour:

Apparently the ichor of an Onloxian Skyspider has amazing medicinal properties.

The protagonists:

- Peter Ordos Vinka (Stuart) — An explorer; guardian of the old, drunken hero Oskar and ward to the socially inept but deadly Maibecque.
- Oskar Per Vinka (NPC) — Oskar made his name as a pilot for House Vinka long ago. However, after his wife was killed during a reconnaissance mission he turned to the drink and to his hunt for the great white Space Monster that killed his beloved.
- Bethina Per Vinka (NPC) — Bethina, daughter of aged hero Oskar, was a young but skilled pilot. She was the captain of the Salvation, a Cruiser in House Vinka's fleet.
- Maibecque Vinka (Frances) — Maibecque was the newest and youngest Junior Advocate (professional lawyer and duellist) for House Vinka. Since her introduction to Court, she took to diplomacy like an elephant to badminton.
- Commander Niels Jakob Vinka (NPC) — A Commander with House Vinka's elite Marines. His troops are thought to be some of the best in the House and his best men are known as "Jakob's Troubleshooters".
- Winnifred Vehl Truniss (Ann) — Explorer and pilot, Fred also had the distinction of hearing the voice of her ancestor Sarrelon in her head. Someone exploiting this began to leave orders on notes signed Sarrelon which she followed unquestioningly.
- Zen Diego Karpeer (Tony) — Having dropped out of Prime College and started as a livestock trader, Zen rose to become a junior Noble, owner of Globofoods and a media mogul. Zen dressed in a flamboyant, yet businesslike manner, and was never without his business card or smile.

* * *

Zen contacts some explorers during the first session and following a series of emails, he reaches out to those who have agreed to go:

*To my intrepid explorers,
Let me first say how thrilled I am at the zeal with which you're undertaking this mission! I assure you that if these rumours pan out, you will be repaid for your efforts tenfold.*

Now, to business, and as you are well aware, I am a businessman at heart. This means that a sustainable business venture is what I desire most. To

that extent, a single spider is only the beginning, and as you uncover more information, the project could take some unexpected turns. I have compiled a "shopping list" for you!

- A quantity of skyspider ichor
- A complete specimen for analysis
- A mating pair (as long as the legs are all you chop off, that could be ok)
- Accurate accounts of the creature's nature, including diet, movements, attack patterns... anything that could help Globofoods farm them effectively.
- The Location of a large sustainable population for farming.
- Suitable safe location as a potential site for a Globofoods outpost.

Some of my finest Globofoods personnel will accompany you. They will be able to best determine the culinary and medicinal value of the spiders before you've invested too much effort. I'd be a poor manager if I micromanaged the experts however, so I've told them they are entirely at your command.

Also, much to my pleasure, a film crew have requested to accompany you on your endeavours. I had initially commissioned a small advertising project from a fellow Karpeer noble, but we got talking about this brave expedition you are undertaking on my behalf. The gentleman was truly enthralled with the idea, and insisted on producing a small film about your exploits.

Remember. While Globofoods is a food provider, that doesn't mean I want you all to be tasty spider snacks. Be careful out there and come back in one piece!

Oh and Maibecque, I'm not a great one for formality, so none of this "Mr Diego" stuff. Please. Call me Zen!

Let's do lunch when you all get back. Maybe we can dine on skyspider!

Zen

Maibecque doesn't take kindly to the thought of a film crew coming with them:

Mr Zen,

YOU'VE ORGANISED A WHAT?

Maybe you missed a news reel, but these places aren't called deathworlds just to lower house prices. And the last thing I'm going to want in my lap when the spiders decide to "do lunch" and dine on us is a bunch of screaming makeup girls and "best boys".

Just make sure that your movie friends know that anybody who tries to stick a microphone or spotlight in my face while I'm battling a giant bug or wrestling several hundred yards of cable-strength gossamer is going to have a lot more to worry about than the spiders.

I am now quite sure that I need a flame-thrower.

Maibecque, House Vinka

* * *

The first expedition is something of a mixed bag. Along for the trip are Winnifred (Fred) with the best ship, Maibecque, Peter and his friend Oskar and a media crew courtesy of Zen.

Having first obtained the proper clearances from House Omar, the team take Fred's ship down to the surface of Onloxia. The rather optimistic plans to blast the spiders from the air fall over quickly when it becomes apparent that the Skyspiders wait in the canopy to spring upon their prey which is trapped in the webs.

Fred takes the ship down and stays inside, ready for a swift takeoff.

Peter invites Oskar off to secure the area, but Oskar is far too distracted by the attentions of the camera crew, who have set up their heavy equipment near the base of one of the immense webs. Maibecque outlines to the group her plan to climb the trees to lure out a Skyspider, then allow the others to blast it with all the weaponry at their disposal. Taking her trusty laser pistol and a parachute, Maibecque is covered by Oskar manning an autogun on the ground. Almost at once, a Skyspider attacks and Maibecque dives from the canopy, parachuting safely to the ground. The plan has worked brilliantly, with the Skyspider riddled with bullets. The team repeat this to get another specimen, although they only have space for a whole body and another head plus some bits of leg and web and swabs of ichor that they pick up. The samples are rather damaged from the firing.

Everyone boards up and the camera crew set up inside the ship to get a few shots of the smug adventurers leaving with their prizes. However, the other Skyspiders have not been dormant and despite Fred's expert piloting, the ship gets caught in a web as it tries to leave the jungle.

With the camera crew filming everything, Maibecque grabs a flamethrower and climbs outside the ship, desperately trying to free it from the webs. Oskar and Peter barely manage to keep the Skyspiders at bay with their guns, but the ship is freed and Maibecque is able to get back aboard before the ship flees Onloxia.

The Skyspiders' body is four metres in length, although they seem bigger thanks to the eight legs (each six metres). The body is made of the head (about a third of the whole body, with many beady eyes and the venomous pointy bits) and the abdomen (where webbing is ejected). The legs are thin and spindly, jointed in the middle, and rather sharp at the end (making them good at

gripping trees). The spiders are dark – all the better for hidden in the foliage – and encased in a tough exoskeleton, covered in fine hair. They are surprisingly quick.

The forests of Onloxia are giant – the leaves are as big as blankets, the tree trunks as thick as Fred's spaceship. The skyspiders live in the canopy, weaving their great webs to catch food (you see the remains of birds, and the husks of giant flies, littering the ground where you landed). Once they feel something on the web, the spider advances onto it, waving their legs and baring their fangs – as you see when Maibecque lures one out.

Their silk is strong, and while it is not strictly transparent (being slightly off-white) it is a thin cord, which makes seeing it from the viewscreen rather hard. In a moment of desperation under fire, one of the spiders tried to throw webbing at the guns, but this webbing is softer and gooier – suggesting it needs some time to harden. Not all of the silk is sticky (the support threads in the webs aren't), but those that are do a good job of gunking up anything – even knives trying to cut through the threads. Fortunately, it does melt under Maibecque's flame-thrower.

* * *

This exciting endeavour made it to the news, though thanks to Zen Diego Karpeer spending time to make events look good, perhaps not quite in a truthful form:

Heroic House Vinka Explorers Tackle the Skyspider!

A new picture has been circulating the movie houses showing heroic House Vinka nobles taking on the fearsome Onloxian Skyspider.

See Maibecque Vinka single-handedly luring a giant Skyspider from its canopy lair before parachuting to the ground! See Oskar Per Vinka and Peter Ordos Vinka hold off a Skyspider attack while Maibecque frees their webbed ship with a flamethrower! See some other people from other houses do some things.

It's not just action though; the picture explores the reasons for the expedition: the critically ill children who could be saved with new medicine from the spider ichor.

This picture has been amazingly popular in House Vinka territory, but has also been spreading throughout the Empire. It looks set to widen the fame of Maibecque Vinka, and marks a significant work for director "Flash" Zachery.

* * *

Maibecque offers her opinion of the subsequent session of Court to her guardian, Peter:

Some fairy with a velvet teacosy on his head danced up to me, called me "darling" and told me I had presents. Think he was a film person, but not sure, since could hardly understand a word. Said we should "do lunch" and asked me if I "had people." Gave him your name to make him go away. Did not deck him.

Zenith Diego came to talk to me about recent film, and asked me to return to Onloxia for a mating pair of spiders. Did not

deck him. Tried to explain logistical difficulties loudly enough for him to understand.

Finally, made it very clear that if I went back there he'd have to come too and face the spiders himself. He agreed, and somehow we shook hands on it before there was time to think. Did not deck him. Think this may have been a mistake.

She also sits through the film with Zen, offering her commentary on what was actually happening at every stage:

"...alright, now ignore the placard, he's not really shouting 'well done, chaps, that showed them,' he's screaming, 'oh my god, it's coming back, It's COMING BACK!' and just there where the picture wobbles a bit and cuts to black, that's because a spider hit us on the starboard side of the hull so hard you could hear the metal screaming as it buckled, and everybody got knocked off their feet... OK, there, THERE, you see those out of focus blobs through the window, they're middle distance spiders we've just noticed, which is why we're running up and down, and there's a DOZEN of them, OK?"

"Look! No, ignore him; look at those dents in the metalwork behind him! Those were made by mandibles. Do you want to just think about the size and strength of any spider-jaw that could leave a... oh hang on; watch this – yes, look at the shadow! That's a rearing spider, and those people aren't staring out heroically, they're rigid with fear. And there's a... oh. That's me. OK. Yup."

"OK, he's really, really not jumping for joy, and I'm not going to repeat what he was sobbing, but his mother was involved. And... oh. That's me again. Ah, and in this bit your ****ing camera crew were trying to interview me about how I was going to get the ship disentangled, so I'm telling them to get the **** out of my way. And while I'm flaming the web, I could see something the film doesn't show, which is about six of those bastards skimming down their trees towards us fast enough that their legs were a blur..."

Zen is keen on a return to Onloxia, but Fred has other things to take care of. Maibecque, however, agrees and begins to prepare:

Mr Zen,

I think it is important that we make some plans regarding the proposed return to Onloxia. Last time everybody just about escaped with their lives because we had some good people and a lot of luck. We cannot count on having the same people or the same luck.

*You say that we can learn from the first trip. I have learnt that we need bigger ****ing guns and a total absence of film crew.*

I cannot stress enough the importance of having very big guns and people who can use them. I hope you can use your influence to provide us with the really big guns that these spiders deserve.

I will grant you, your plan to steal eggs is a great improvement on the plan to grab a mating pair of adults. This way, we need not blow every leg off spiders individually, then try to work out what gender they are. We need only blow the enraged parents to hell. However, for this we need really big guns.

I hope that you will be in touch soon to tell me that there will be no film crew, but a great deal of suitably big guns.

Maibecque, House Vinka

Zen replies in agreement, but is persistent about the potential of filming the expedition:

Hey Maibecque,

Don't worry, I fully intend to be shooting guns, not cameras this time around!

I'm going to request some of Karpeer's finest, perhaps you could assist in requesting some Vinka military personnel for me as my second port of call. Since a good proportion of the medicine I'm researching is heading for Vinka hospitals, it is certainly in their interests.

Whatever the case, I assure you that there will either be an armed escort, or I will cancel the mission.

Eggs may be easier to carry, but let's try for plenty as there's going to be some rather expensive trial and error involved in incubating them.

By the way, do you remember those ruins we spotted on the first voyage? I was wondering if you'd be interested in taking a closer look while we're in the neighbourhood?

Looking forward to joining you on the front line

Zen

PS. Are you sure I can't persuade you to a tiny amount of press coverage? I've a very interested client.

Despite Zen's protestations, Maibecque is adamant on the lack of media coverage:

Mr Zen,

I was reassured by your last message. I would very much like to look over the guns you have commissioned before we set off, and try them out in the range. I have found a number of volunteers from House Vinka, but many have more enthusiasm than training and will not do. A few may pass muster, but if you can provide us with more soldiers that would improve our chances.

When you say that you will be "shooting guns", do you mean that you will be shooting guns? Can I ask what experience you have of this?

Since the eggs (if there are any) are almost certainly concealed in the trees, we will need to lure out and distract the parents. I can't lure out spiders and steal eggs at the same time, so I suggest we use some livestock to tangle in the webs and draw out the spiders. It might be possible to drop in live cows from the air, but I think it would be much better to acquire some crates of swan-sized birds, preferably with more wingpower than sense. These could be released from the ground so that they tangled in the lower webs and drew out the spiders. Can you acquire some such birds?

We'll also need a very secure box for the eggs, and another very secure box to put that in. If they hatch, we don't want them running around the ship.

I am not sure I recall the ruins to which you refer.

And I am absolutely certain that I do not want any cameras, members of the press or film-makers on this mission. Nor do I want them seeing us off, or welcoming us back. NO, Mr Zen.

Maibecque

* * *

The second expedition is mounted with Peter providing one ship for Zen, Maibecque and Oskar and Oskar's daughter Bethina providing her ship, the Salvation as a military transport for Commander Niels Jakob Vinka and 50 of his "Troubleshooters".

The journey to Onloxia is interesting for those aboard Peter's ship as Zen manages to infuriate Maibecque one time too many after detailing his plans for a "cow launcher", and earns a knuckle sandwich for his troubles. He appears to take this in his stride – but then he has seemed rather spaced out. When the gallant team arrive in orbit, they meet up with the Salvation with its cargo of elite Marines under the command of one Commander Jakob.

Descent into the atmosphere is uninteresting, with Jakob's men taking a lander down and Peter landing his ship in one of the few clearings they can find. Jakob's men are as tooled up as possible, and quickly move to secure the area, set up perimeter patrols, burn out nearby spider webs etc. Their lander takes off again and provides as much intelligence on spider movements/web formations as possible by radio to the rest of the group.

The plucky explorers explain their plan to release flocks of birds to lure the spiders out, but Jakob doesn't seem optimistic. However, he defers immediately to Peter and provides a squad with laser rifles, saying his men are expert enough to shoot the legs off. Zen is very pleased at this, and the team set their trap.

The birds are released and Maibecque clambers up the tree to look for eggs, blasting stuff out her way with a flame-thrower, but can't find anything but more than animal remains. The squad are indeed crack shots, disabling even the fast moving spiders with precision shots to the legs.

Meanwhile, Zen persuades Oskar to take him looking for Legacy ruins...

Peter collects some marines and chases after them, but it's too late – a spider has leapt from a tree and blasted Zen with web. It's wrapping him up quickly; leaving no chance for even the snipers to shoot at the spider without hitting Zen, then hauls him off. Peter sensibly tells Oskar to stay put, and gets some of the troops to make sure he does before chasing the spider.

Maibecque parachutes down and joins the team racing after the spider...

She yells at Jakob to get some damn big guns instead of those fancy things he's been using up to now. With a click of his fingers, men are racing every which way, chasing the explorers with the most rapid firing guns they have.

The spider reaches the mouth of a vast cave by the time you manage to catch up with it. More spiders attack – Peter and Jakob lead the troops to fend them off while Maibecque leaps onto the back of the spider carrying Zen and flames its eyes out. It drops Zen and flails in pain – Maibecque loses grip of her flamethrower, so she grabs her sword from her belt and hacks the spider's legs off as the troops finish off the other spiders.

Maibecque jumps off the spider-corpse – still leaking ichor – and starts trying to cut Zen out of the cocoon as a shadow falls over them. It's a huge spider, about twice the size of the others you've seen. It descends on Zen and Maibecque – Maibecque leaps out of the way, as the troops to fire into the thing's face. Maibecque recovers her flamethrower and helps with the blasting. The giant spider is forced backwards, into the cave – you advance.

Peter notices a silken bag attached to the side of the cave. It's been damaged by the fire and there are spheroids (about

the size of a football) inside, which look like eggs. Jakob and the troops drag this out of the cave – Zen (still cocooned) confirms they look like eggs – whilst Maibecque and the others keep the giant spider back. Maibecque drags Zen off as reinforcements arrive. Peter leads the charge into the cave and the firepower being laid down eventually kills the giant spider.

Maibecque gets around to unwrapping Zen as the eggs are secured. Jakob directs his troops to blast away the webbing that has been made above the ship, and everyone lifts off.

As well as the Salvation in orbit, you encounter an Omar patrol vessel.

As nobody has got permission to go to Onloxia, they insist on boarding Peter's ship to search it.

They come aboard and soon spot the box of eggs. They want to know what's in the box.

Maibecque explains that the box contains Skyspider eggs, which may well hatch into little baby skyspiders and bite them – Zen nods at the appropriate moments. The men aren't dissuaded, so Maibecque repeats the very good reasons for not opening the box, at volcanic volume. Losing her patience, Maibecque decks the head inspector. He gets up and wipes the blood from his mouth, agrees that there are very good reasons not to open the box and leaves.

* * *

The results of this second round of Skyspider related action were again reported in the news:

Skyspider: The Movie An Apology (radio broadcast)

In a recent private showing of Skyspider: The Movie, Maibecque Vinka gave a commentary that pointed out many details of the adventure that the average moviegoer may have missed. Largely she pointed out the vast number of additional spiders which were almost "out of shot". All nobles present were shocked at the new information, and agreed that the danger the team faced was much more serious than the movie suggested.

In response to questioning, "Flash" Zachery has issued a public apology to Maibecque and the other explorers. He claims that he underplayed the danger they faced in the interest of good cinematography and not out of disrespect for the brave team. He also wishes to thank house Vinka for keeping him and his crew safe on such a dangerous excursion.

Of the 15 man expeditionary team, no one was seriously injured. Research into the skyspider medicine is reported as "Progressing well", though this doesn't seem to be good enough for Maibecque, who is preparing to return to Onloxia for more samples.

The children of Vinka, captivated by Lady Maibecque's dedication, have been swamping her with letters and drawings wishing her luck in her next adventure.

New Food Sensation from GloboFoods (Court Circular)

Tasty snacks derived from the Onloxian Skyspider have become popular at exclusive parties.

Sadly, supplies are extremely limited, so the morsels have not yet been distributed outside Noble circles. Many food connoisseurs are eagerly awaiting GloboFoods to increase production.

There was also the rumour that “Skyspider snacks are actually disgusting, but the Nobles are too snobbish to admit it.”

LEGACY

Inspection by Victoria Harris

“It’s so good to see you again, Jarol,” said Amelia as she embraced her brother in law.

Jarol coolly took in his surroundings. In appearance he was the perfect mirror of her husband but years of observing their mannerisms had taught Amelia sosa Truniss to spot the distinctions too subtle for the casual observer to notice. To many Jaren appeared to be the more obvious head of house. Jaren was certainly more confident and more outwardly charismatic. Amelia, however, knew better. She had learnt early on not to underestimate her brother in law. Behind the scenes it was Jarol who took charge of the finer subtleties of politics, leaving his brother free to enjoy an existence of frivolity.

“How are the children?” asked Jarol as he idly tossed a plaything towards the small white kitten, which chased around his feet.

“Not bad. The two youngest are getting along well with their studies. Jalom has honed father’s power over material states and their instructor says they both are showing good progress at developing a second stream.”

“And Jahzeel?”

The only sounds in the awkward silence that followed were the small white kitten scratching and tearing at its new toy. Amelia carefully studied the features of her brother in law’s face, with one silvery grey eye and one oily black.

“He’s still got time, Jarol. He’s just a slow starter.”

“You’ve been saying that for years. We may have to rethink our options if it turns out he doesn’t develop psionic powers.”

“He will, I’m sure. We’ve been working on means to awaken latent psychic powers. If we don’t see any improvement we could enrol him in that program.”

“We can’t have a heir to the house that is in any way inferior.”

“I know. His blood is pure and both his parents were psionics. There’s no reason he wouldn’t have the potential.”

“Well if there’s any impurity in his blood it’s yours and not my brother’s.”

“The sosa bloodline has been kept pure for centuries. We’ve never bred outside the house. You could not have found a wife with better blood for your brother.”

Jarol, reaching down to the kitten and scratching between its ears, considered for a moment. The small creature looked up at him, seemingly pleadingly. He looked across at the toy that was now torn to shreds and reached down in to his pocket, from which he pulled a small pink scrap. He smiled as he threw it towards his new friend.

“Speaking of blood, I was just on my way back from meeting with your darling brother.”

“Oh, and how is dear Mitsy?”

“No need to be like that,” said Jarol grinning sardonically, “I hear he’s given up on most of his... hobbies. His wife has got a child on the way.”

“Well I’m so very happy to hear that.”

“I’ll pass on your congratulations then, shall I?”

Amelia gazed out of the window of the kitten sanctuary that overlooked the bustling metropolis of Carabos II. She had once served as Chief of Security on the planet, back when Valerio had been its Governor and before their falling out. She had founded the cat sanctuary initially as a means of frustrating her older brother but it had become something much more

in all the years since. As the years since then had passed time had taken its toll on her body and mind. But even having given her husband three children she knew that her reactions were still good and coupled with her control over physical forces that made her one of the most dangerous people in the Empire. That, and of course, their little secret weapon.

“Quite. Well then, shall we get on with the reason you came here?”

“Yes indeed. I just need to make sure everything is in order here. I suppose you better show me around your experiments.”

Amelia nodded and then turning to look at the cat at their feet, as if noticing it for the first time.

“Who was that anyway?”

Jarol looked first from the hand, that’s skin had been shredded and peeled back to reveal bones and veins, and then to the bit of tongue, on which the kitten hungrily gnawed.

“Oh just a commoner that was trying to start up a rebellion on Tellios. I had him sentenced this morning. Anyway shall we go?”

Amelia nodded and turned to lead Jarol out of the room. The kitten lifted its tiny head from its toy and watched to pair leave the room with soulless jet black eyes.

ALBION / CRUSADE

Night in the Desert by Ellie Williams

The desert was so cold at night. During the day the heat was oppressive but as the sun set the chill bit Tsung to the bone. She felt betrayed, left in the desert by her own wife, abandoned on the road to Eden. The back of her head still hurt where she presumed Leah had knocked her out. The note left with her had said that Leah had needed to leave her love behind, to get past the trials set before them on the route. Even knowing this didn't make it any easier to bear. She was cold, and tired, and alone. Her water had nearly run out but still Tsung searched the Limitless Plain for some sign of where Leah and David had gone. She had been wandering for days and was getting desperate. She couldn't give up yet!

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She sat down on the still desert sands and took out a bundle of prayer scrolls. She withdrew her brush and the single dragon scale ink stone. She took out a wicked looking serrated knife from her robes and made a small cut on the scale, green liquid oozed from the wound onto the soft pallet of the scale. Dipping her brush delicately into the ink she began to draw out the symbols for a simple imp summoning. Nine Fires was not with her and she was not sure if she would have asked for her help anyway feeling that Nine Fires would have disapproved of the whole affair, but she felt no qualms about demanding such services from a lowly unknown imp.

A soft wind blew and lifted the sand up, some of it landing in her ink pool. She muttered a curse under her breath. 'Really,' she thought, 'I should start again. Really I shouldn't even try to summon an imp in this of all places...', but it was cold and she was so very tired. 'Perhaps I shall get an imp with local flavour' she thought. Curiosity stirred within her and it was not unfair to say that the thought of ordering a Western imp around filled her with a grim satisfaction.

She completed the final prayer strip

and began laying them out in a circle. The wind was stronger now and began blowing the strips out of place. Cursing again at the wind she took out her incense sticks and speared the prayer strips in place. She lit the sticks and began the incantation and summoning.

At first nothing happened and Tsung sighed with disappointment. Then the wind dropped to nothing and an unearthly silence filled the air. Tsung watched as the incense smoke began curling around the edge of the circle tracing out letters in what she realised was Arabic but a very old dialect. The sand in the middle of the circle started to shift, seeming to both rise and fall at the same time. From beneath the desert sand itself, a figure began to rise from the shifting ground, sand pouring off its shoulders, arms and head. Before Tsung stood a figure of a woman dressed in loose trousers and an old waistcoat embroidered with gold. Her dark hair moved in a non-existent wind and her face and chest were covered in old Arabic script, black against her orange skin. Tsung tried to read the words adorning the imp but again the dialect was several hundred years older than any she had seen before.

"Tell me your name," Tsung commanded, speaking in Arabic assuming the creature before her would understand.

The spirit before her tilted her head to one side and gave Tsung a quizzical look.

"Please, do not make me repeat myself. What is your name?" Tsung's mouth was dry, there was a prickling at the back of her neck that made her feel uneasy. She hated the western demons no matter how fair a form they took and had never before been fearful of confronting them. Even in Egypt, walking through the camps of Dalemberthus, she had been more disgusted than afraid. Her beating at the hands of Azazel only managed to increase her revulsion, not fear towards the natives of Hell. Hell had none of the elegance or no-

bility of Di-Yu. There was no sense of redemption, only unending punishment.

The figure before her was different, the expression more kindly than any she had seen on a western demon, for even Choronzon's smiles were sharp as a crocodile's. The dark eyes seemed to Tsung to peer into her soul. She swallowed nervously as the silence extended.

The figure was the first to break the silence with a laugh like waterfalls and a smile.

"You are very presumptuous but I shall tell you my name and then you shall tell me yours. My name is Malika Nejwa Leila and I am pleased to meet you." The figure bowed deeply. "And you?"

"Err... my... my name is Tsung Chang Mai." Tsung stammered. 'Why am I so nervous?' she scolded herself, 'after all, its only a well spoken imp'.

"And what are you doing in my desert so very far from home Tsung Chang Mai?"

At this Tsung's fear fled to be replaced by indignation. "Your desert? Ha! I am certain it is not yours and your master would beat you soundly for such pretensions."

A vexed look replaced the serene expression on the orange skinned face. "Yes, my desert. You don't believe me do you?"

"Believe an Imp like you? Of course not. But I don't have to since all I need is for you to follow my commands."

"Follow your commands? Imp? What do you mistake me for?" The figure grew in size until it towered over Tsung and for the first time it noticed the Arabic words traced out in a circle around it. It read them with some care, a look of concern coming over its face.

With renewed confidence that her wards would hold, Tsung took a deep breath. "See Demon how I bind you within the circle. You shall be free when you do as I ask."

"Demon?" The towering figure looked

puzzled and her eyes passed once more over the smoke writing. Eyes widening in realisation she shrank back down to just a shade shorter than Tsung and walked to the edge of the circle directly opposite the Cathayan woman. "I am sorry," she whispered.

"Sorry?"

"Yes, sorry."

"For what?"

"For this." And she stepped neatly and easily out of the circle and came to stand next to Tsung looking into the now empty circle.

"But..."

"It was a fairly easy mistake to make."

"But..."

"I felt your power, and there is no doubt you have an abundance of that, and came to have a look."

"But..."

"I am sorry to have fooled you, it was not deliberate I assure you but I am no impling demon."

"Then... then what are you?" Tsung had regained some of her composure but was wishing Nine Fires was by her side now that there was nothing between her and this thing. She wondered what horror she had dredged up from the Limitless Plain. She cursed herself for trying a stunt like this.

"Why, a Djinn of course."

"A... a djinn?" The answer was not what Tsung had expected by any means "I had thought you nothing but a myth? Old stories of mistaken demons and angels..."

"No little one, we are real but the desert is our home as are the lands of Araby. There are few who still know how to treat with us. The Bedouin are few and those of the old empires are overrun with the blood and traditions of the Byzantines."

"And... and this is your desert? I thought we were still in the Limitless Plain, on the path to Eden?"

"Eden? You were going to Eden?"

Tsung nodded.

Malika shook her head. "Oh little one, why would you seek to go there? It is not a place for you or I. You seem to have wondered out of that place, and now you are in my lands, in the great desert of Araby. I am the Sultana of the Court of Dust and you are welcome here."

Tsung started shaking, with cold and sadness and the outpouring of all her bottled emotions. Tears poured down her face in the wake of this situation that she did not fully understand. She sank to her knees sobbing.

Malika dropped down next to her and laid her arm across the sobbing woman's shoulder. "Hush, hush now little one. It's alright, it's alright now." The wind picked up again drawing the sand around them into a great wall about them until Tsung realised they were in the eye of the thickest sandstorm she had ever seen. When the storm died down she realised that they were no longer in the same place but next to a calm Oasis.

"This is Al-Ahsa. I've been coming here for centuries. It... calms me to be here. Here we can talk in peace." From a bag that Tsung hadn't realised the other had, Malika withdrew two carved cups and an ornate stoppered bottle as well as a small wooden box. From the flask she poured out spiced wine for them both and from the box she produced several sweetmeats.

"Now tell me what troubles you and why you were so desperate to find Eden? And how did you come to be in my desert?"

Tsung took a deep draught of the wine and began. She spoke of how she had followed her wife Leah and her brother-in-law David along the path to Eden. How the twins had said they were going to make the world a better place, make things right again. She told Malika of the exorcism of Lilith and the journey across the Ford of Sinews. She began weeping again when telling of how she believed Leah had knocked her out and abandoned her in the desert, and the letter that was left explaining why she'd had to do this.

Through it all Malika listened carefully. A shadow crossed her face at the mention of Tsung's 'wife' but this was swiftly followed by a sad understanding and sympathy with her abandonment.

"I see now that it had to be done, so that they could go on. It's important that they get there but... but I didn't think it would be this hard to be left behind. I do not know how it is I came to be in your desert for the last I knew I was still hunting in the Limitless Plain for them but I had all but given up hope. I... I drew the

circle as a last attempt to find them. I suppose that is when I caught your attention. I... I am sorry for how I spoke to you before. I beg your forgiveness. I... I have no love for demons of the west despite my ability to deal with them. I, I had taken you for one of them but fair of face."

Malika then spoke. "I forgive you of course, for you speak well and truthfully no doubt, I see that in you at least. I came to your circle and the Djinn have been so hidden as to be almost invisible. I have not spoken to a mortal for decades, you were not to know better. And now I offer you three things in return for your honesty and because I think you need it. The first is love, the advice that it can be both dangerous and beautiful and sometimes both and sometimes even love is not enough to justify what you do. The second is that I shall take you to one place on this mortal earth where you wish to go. I cannot take you to Eden for that is beyond even my ability but anywhere else you name, I shall take you there. The third is a gift of friendship." She scooped up some sand and placed it in the now empty sweetmeats box. "Should you need my aid, and wish to bargain for a favour in the way of my people, whisper to the sand and I shall hear you."

"Thank... thank you. I do not deserve this kindness."

"Tcha! I shall be kind to whomever I like. Will you try and stop me little one?" Malika said with a laugh "Now where would you like to go?"

A moment later Tsung was standing at the quay at Haojing. Her clothes were stained after many months travel but there was only ocean behind her. As Malika had left, Tsung thought she saw the Djinn take out a small item – a locket perhaps or no, something slightly larger, a mirror maybe? – wrapped in cloth from within her waistcoat. Just before the sand surrounding Malika swallowed her completely Tsung looked at the eyes of the Sultana and saw such sadness in them she wondered what it was that could have grieved her so or that had prompted her to pass on her advice on love. Tsung wondered too if Malika had learnt from bitter experience but before she could say anything, the Djinn had disappeared and she was left alone on the docks.

CRUSADE

How Ungrateful Son got his name by Ellie Williams

"You Bastard"

Maha cringed as Rasha shouted at her camel. She tugged at her own new pet. It remained stubbornly still.

"Named him yet?" Rasha asked.

"Sandy?"

"Bah! Not good. he'll not respect you with a name like that."

Maha scowled.

"You'll be fine, won't you Sandy?"

She began loading him with bags. 'Sandy' looked with scorn at Maha, turned away and bucked throwing everything to the floor. Bottles smashed, boxes scattered, papers flew in the breeze. Maha dived to pick everything up. Calmly 'Sandy' lifted a leg and firmly kicked Maha away.

"Ungrateful Son of a..."

"Better!" Laughed Rasha.

CRUSADE

Panos (II) by Victoria Harris

He crawled on his knees through the pile of broken bodies with pale skin, so gaunt that it hung off the bones in such a way to reveal the skeletal forms beneath and their sunken eye sockets. A deep stabbing pain coursed through his flesh but he could not identify where it originated. The sky was filled with dark oily clouds that swirled and twisted in a nauseating fashion and reflected the pale light of the sickly looking crescent moon that sliced through them as a sharp blade would through flesh. He knew he was looking for something but in the incoherence of the landscape the memory of what it was had been strangled. He pulled his body under a ledge of rock— no, the wooden frame of a broken shack— no, a pile of bodies. Even around him the landscape shifted and reformed in some kind of cruel mockery of all that was good and holy.

He felt a presence beside him and he heard it speak in a low, dismal tone.

"What are you looking for?" it asked.

He struggled to remember what had brought him here. He knew that it must be of vital importance, which confused him yet further. Why would he have forgotten such a thing, he thought, as he listened intently to the pattering of the rain on dry bones.

"I'm looking for someone important to me," he replied.

Yes, that was right. He'd lost him in the foray. Somehow they had got separated.

"Really?" said the disembodied voice in its harsh grating tone, "And why is this person so very important?"

"B-Because... W-Well because I care a-about him. I c-can't give you a better reason than that."

The rain thudded down on the ground below, its sound methodical and relentless.

"And who is he that you care about him so much?"

"The person I love most in the world."

The voice broke in to a grating chuckle at hearing his response and all at once it dawned upon him with a repulsive sense of clarity. Not rain but blood, dripping

down from where the form of a young man was pinned. Four daggers held the rigid and helpless form of the man to the twisted wooden frame above him. Dark curls were plastered to his face with stale dried blood. A single lance pierced his heart, allowing blood to gush from the wound like an endless torrent.

He tried to scream out, "Demetrios", but the words caught in his throat.

"You see your sin was never what you thought," taunted the voice that may have belonged to angel, demon or even his own broken conscience, "Who was this man that you loved him so much? Loved him more than your own self. Who is he that he had more worth to you than anyone else upon this Earth? Did you dare even place him in your heart before God?"

"No, no its not true," he pleaded, "I always loved God. But I know He is not cruel. Please, I know I have sinned, but do not take him from me!"

He clambered desperately in the mud, reaching out for the broken form of his lover. The grit and sand tore at the skin over his hands as he scrambled helplessly but he felt no pain. If his mind had been in a rational frame it would have occurred to him he was dreaming.

He prayed to God to forgive his sins and he prayed even harder for him to show mercy to his lover.

* * *

Panos cursed himself for his neglect. Had it been more careful then they would have not got separated. He searched through the injured, feeling forlorn as the search proved increasingly hopeless. He tried to convince himself that this must be a good sign. If he was not amongst the wounded, then this was most likely an indication that he was unhurt. Most likely he was doing the same for him right now. As night began to fall a young woman with a lantern came out to call him back to where some of Karantenos's forces had made their camp. Reluctantly he followed her back.

Sleep, however, did not take him easily. Restlessly he crawled out his tent, pulling on the ill-fitting armour that the General had handed out to him. He picked up his sword. He knew how to use it. Well, not really, but he knew enough to make some attempt to defend himself should he be attacked.

Pulling his cloak about his shoulders he wandered out in to the unforgiving night. He considered the possibility

that Demetrios might have gotten himself mixed up amongst the Latins' forces and he determined that he would take a brief look there before he settled down. If he could just be certain that he was alright then it would set him mind at ease.

As he struggled down the slightly uneven slope he felt something sting in the back of his shoulder. He lost his footing and started to tumble down through the dirt and the rocks. Just on the edge of his mind he could make out the sound of slightly bleary voices. The pain in his arm started to spread out to the entirety of his body, enveloping him as he curled in on himself.

He was praying, his hands clenching at the blood and dirt on the ground, as he pleaded with God to show him mercy. He felt gradually a burning sensation building in the back of his eyes, which ached terribly. He was not sure whether this was God's way of speaking to him, or whether he was finally being punished for his sins. Gradually the world around him solidified and the shapes and colours took on context and meaning.

He was lying on his back in some sort of makeshift surgery.

"Are you alright?" asked a fairly pretty young woman with mousey brown curls in broken trade Greek, "You were crying out there." He looked at down at his body, which was covered in sweat, and the blanket that he had twisted around him. He also looked at the carefully bandaged shoulder.

"Yes," he responded in Latin, "I-I-I was having a bad dream."

The woman nodded and walked over to his side.

"You're Greek, right?" she asked, pointing to the cross about his neck and then turning to look at the bandages on his shoulder, "Its not actually all that bad but I think you must have passed out from the shock."

"Yes," he replied and holding out a hand rather limply, "I'm Panagiotis."

"Caliope," said the woman taking his hand gently.

She had the bearing about her, which suggested to Panos that she might hail from some low ranking aristocratic family.

"I was actually looking for someone. He's a Greek man. Dark hair and eyes and skilled with a sword. Would have probably been wearing the same uniform with me."

"I'll ask if anyone has seen him. But I still don't think you ought to have been out there by yourself. Especially not in the dark."

Despite Caliope's attentiveness Panos could not shirk the worry that gnawed at his mind and soul. He waited nearly two days for news to arrive, but in that time none emerged. The wounds in his body, however, were much quicker to heal. Though not perfectly mended, his shoulder was sufficiently better by the second day that the doctor said he was

confident that no infection was likely to set in.

When he awoke on the morning of the third day he was greeted by an irrepressible grin, framed by a mass of slightly overly long dark curls. With little thought for propriety he flung his arms about Demetrios's neck.

"Thank God!" He exclaimed, "I was so worried! I had no idea—"

"Yes, I know. I've been looking for you too. But that's no reason for you to go out and get yourself injured over me."

Demetrios pulled Panos back and stared at his shoulder, furrowing his brow in an expression of concern. Out of the corner of his eye Panos thought he caught a glimpse of Caliope, her mouth made in to a small 'oh' shape, and what he thought was a look of disappointment in her eyes.

"I-I-I couldn't forgive m-myself for losing you. I couldn't stand the thought you might be—"

"There's a few of us camped just east of here. Do you know where the rest of my father's forces are?"

"Yes, not too far from here. I c-can show you b-back there when I'm a bit better."

Demetrios nodded. He ran his fingers through his hair and rested his head on his hand, striking a pose that Panos thought looked terribly dashing and heroic.

"I don't care what the forces of hell have to throw at us, I'm never letting you out of my sight again."

WHITE CITY

From the viewpoint of Leonardo Velasquez

by Jareth Gones

"This time, *my* dream."

I stand upon the balcony, looking out upon the Great Hall. Outside of Dream, such a room could not exist. My mentor has taught me much, and this place is his masterwork. The floor a whirring mass of cogs, more complex a timepiece than even the greatest clockmaker in the White City could create. The images on the dome above, the stars above. The North Star, brighter than any other. The wandering stars, the constellations.

"Impressive! I knew you were *good*...Did you make this yourself?"

I had not heard Michael approach. He can move very quietly when he wants to – although so can I, here in Dream. Of course, I have to admit that this is not my work. But I still get a warm feeling every time he pays me these unintended compliments.

"So...tell me my fortune?"

My mentor would object, if he knew. Frivolous, he would say, a waste of this magnificent creation. But...

I step off the balcony, and float toward the centre of the hall. One more thing I could not do except in dream. I move forward, my hair streaming out behind me. I

know how much he likes that.

With a gesture, the hands of the clock turn backwards, the second hand becoming a blur as the year hand moves gradually back. The symbols on the dome shifting place and moving, the stars and constellations rearranging. Into a configuration I was not expecting.

"Very interesting. The Smith lies in the North. The sign of new beginnings, creation. And the North... You were born with an affinity for Dream. A destiny, you might say."

Our eyes meet, and we understand. Both of us born to this, neither quite belong in the south. And the moment ends, and with a gesture the clock moves forwards once more. The hands once again spin and blur, the wind from the mechanism ruffling my hair in a fetching manner. The time returns to the present, the stars moving into familiar arrangements. Interesting arrangements.

"The Star of First Light is in the ascendant, balanced by the King of the River

descendent. This seems to indicate... that you have let go of the past, accepted change and a new beginning."

I look at him, inquiring, but he is closed to me. He has his secrets, but I don't begrudge him that. Perhaps it refers to his starting Adventuring, perhaps... something else. And for the last time I gesture, and the clock turns once more. The dome above once again shifts, rearranging into new forms. Worrying forms.

"The Sword hangs over the northern mountains, poised above the Shrouded Lady. You... The stars say there will come a time when you will decide the fate of Dream itself."

I look toward him, troubled. But he simply smiles, and steps off into thin air. His control of Dream is as good as mine. And as he approaches, sliding his arm around my waist, he smiles at me.

"Interesting... Well, I'm sure it can't be that important. Otherwise you'd be more suited. But I can predict the next few hours..."

Of course, he is right. Only a noble such as myself is suited to such important matters. I allow him to guide me back to my room, and for a few hours I forget the Dream.

HUMOUR

Dear Korgoth by Tony Porteous

Dear Korgoth,

I have a red wine stain on a beige top I rather like. I have tried patting it through the washing machine several times but this has not worked. What would you do in my situation?

Thank you,

Clueless of Oxford

* * *

To Nancy Wine Drinker,

KORGOTH is not sure what beige armor is. Is that the like the overlapping spike plates, or curled shoulder guards for catching axes?

...

Stupid writing assistant tells KORGOTH this is some form of elfy girl color. While KORGOTH approves of your wide mouthed quaffing, KORGOTH does not think you have the fashion senses. Here is simple barbarian Code of Color:

Only wear colors on dragons you have killed.

KORGOTH once knew a barbarian who won legendary +5 winged boots of slaying... he knew barbarian color code... died fighting the legendary and ferocious Burgundy Dragon... Good Death... Terrible Breath Weapon...

But you not have nipple problems. You have problem with 'stains'. Well, stop your clue losing and be proud! Stains are like scars. They mean you have Real Manly Character. Do not trust men with no scars. They probably do sneaky evil things like accountancy and tact.

But in sad papery civilized life you will get no owlbear scars, warglaive stitches or even monkeybee stings. No, be proud of puny stains, and think how they are closest you will come to real Barbarian Might. KORGOTH will now teach mighty battle cry to shout when you next are stained.

First, throw down your tankard. Then stand up and shout with pride that

"I [Nancy Clueless Person], Have Been Stained in Honorable Battle! I Bear My Mark With Pride, And Stride On In My Quest. All Should Remember This Moment And Recall Its Glory!"

If fellows drinkers don't cheer, kill them.

Also, you wear tops. Stop it. Nipples are most potent barbarian weapons and deal 2d4+1 piercing and slashing damage (with correct feat choices). Bear your nipples with pride, and use them to slay your enemies!

KORGOTH, Barbarian of the Frozen Wastes

Nightflyer

X

Contains content of a sexual nature.
You have been warned!

Nightflyer X

BROKEN WORLDS

Backstabber by Lord Sandwich

"You have some nerve coming here, Quill," exclaimed the diminutive thief, as he clenched his fists and hardened his glare towards his former friend.

"I just wanted to talk, Valk," pleaded Catequill, "I thought we ought to clear the air—"

He was cut short as the thief threw a punch at his head. Catequill expertly threw himself back, the gears in his chest clicking and turning in to place.

"It won't work, Valk, you can't take me in a fight," Catequill responded, hot vapours pouring from his mouth as his boiler worked over time to keep pace with the thief's moves, "now just listen to what I have to say."

Valk charged angrily at the machinist's torso, brandishing a broken table leg as a makeshift weapon.

"Look, fine, Valk, if this is the way it's going to have to be," said Catequill as he swung fiercely at his one time companion's face.

Valk winced as the blow connected with his face and swung round to strike at the other man's stomach.

"You know it wasn't so much that you tried to take her from me, Quill, it was that you fucking lied about it."

The blow caught Catequill by surprise. It wasn't the force so much as the careful placing to use the mass of his own enhancements against him. He found himself knocked off balance and thrown to the floor. Without a moments notice the thief was on top of him, panting heavily, as the room began to fill with the steam from Catequill's boiler. Valk lifted his arm to strike another blow at the seemingly prone form of the machinist, when Catequill, with lightning reflexes, grabbed his arm. All of a sudden their positions were reversed and Catequill was pinning Valk to the floor, holding both

the thief's hands above his head. Both men were breathing heavily from the exertion of their previous scuffle.

Valk felt the weight of the larger man pressing down on top of him, but the feeling was not uncomfortable, quite the opposite in fact.

"You bastard, Quill. How could you lie to me like this? How could you betray me after all we've been through together? What did you do that I didn't? What game did you—"

Quill cut him off. Initially it was just an attempt to make the thief shut up but as the kiss progressed there was something comforting and familiar about it. At first it seemed like Valk was trying to pull away but soon his tongue was trying to force its way in to Quill's mouth, angrily battling for control. Quill pushed against the thief, plunging his tongue deeper in to the other man's mouth, exploring and in doing so reasserting his authority over the situation.

Valk's skilled hands made their way down over the smooth flesh punctuated by the jarring sensation of the burning hot metal belonging to the form of the larger man bearing him down. Eventually they grasped their prize. And now it was Valk's turn to take control, as his well placed strokes caused the other man to give in with gasps and moans. Catequill's tongue gave way as Valk kissed him with force and vigour.

Caught up in the throws of his passion, Catequill's hands moved almost as if under a will of their own, as they peeled away the layers of the thief's clothes. Slightly clumsily he caressed Valk's body, familiarising himself with every curve

and pressed his growing arousal up against the thief. Gently at first he prepared the thief and then pushed himself deep inside his prone form.

The two moved together in rhythm, with the thief pressing himself against the Machinist's chest allowing the heat of the friction to send shudders through his body. Along with the panting could be heard the whirl of the gears in Catequill's body, as they kept him moving in an almost inhuman motion. Eventually the heat of the friction and the almost burning sensation of the steam from Catequill's boiler against his face was enough to send Valk over the edge in an explosion of lights. Catequill collapsed on top of him as the intensity became too much for him also. Breathing heavily he planted soft kisses on the thief's face, their previous altercation all but forgotten.

For what seemed like hours they lay there, breathless from their exertions. Catequill was the first to move, picking up the dishevelled remains of his clothes. Tentatively he looked towards the thief.

"You know... I don't think we really resolved anything."

"What do you mean? I thought we..." replied Valk, before cutting off, the realisation dawning in his eyes, "You're still going to go after her, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry, Valk," said Catequill holding up his hands placatively, "I just..." he started but the words failed him.

Valk thought about calling out to Catequill as he turned to leave the room, but he could not think of what to say. Instead, as he watched his back retreat, he just muttered under his breath.

"Bastard."

CRUSADE

Panos (I) by Lord Sandwich

Panos stared out the glittering shafts of twilight that fell between the trees of the desolate woodland. He was shaking, although not from the cold. His numbing fingers closed around the cross dangling from the chain on his neck as he muttered words of remorse under his breath. He stopped in his tracks, the breath catching in his throat, as he heard the soft approach of footsteps through the damp grass. As the features of the man became clear, reflected in the eerie moonlight, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Demetrios, th-ther," he breathed deeply and began again, "there is something I-I-I need to say to you."

He was cut off as the other man wrapped him up in his arms and pressed his lips, almost forcefully against his own. Gently the Bishop pushed his lover away.

"I-I need to say I'm s-sorry," his features flushed as he stared in to the dark roguish eyes of his friend, "I-I kn-know its wrong, I know I s-shouldn't but I-I can't h-help that I love you."

Demetrios reached over, brushing back a mass of chestnut curls from the Bishop's face and resting his hand on his cheek.

"Don't be ashamed of how you feel," he replied, "If God is truly merciful then he will not judge you for it."

Panos wrapped his arms around Demetrios's waist and rested his head on his shoulder. The soldier felt the dampness of the Priest's tears as they soaked through his shirt. Gently he pulled the priest back so that he was looking in to his eyes. He ran a finger over his cheeks

and wiped away his tears. He studied very carefully every aspect of the priest's features. As he felt the fire burning relentlessly inside him his hands moved down, almost of their own volition, to unbutton the priest's robes. As his arousal became enflamed with his desire, he pressed himself up against the priest, and he pulled the young man's robes back, leaving his shoulders bare.

Panos's hands ran his lover's back and as he reached the nape of his neck he wound his fingers in to his mass of dark hair. He felt the weight of Demetrios's body bearing down upon him as he was pushed down on to the damp grass. Soft moans escaped his lips as he felt himself overcome by a mixture of shame and lust. He tugged at Demetrios's shirt, pulling it back to reveal well-toned olive skin. He felt an unfamiliar pleasure as Demetrios masterfully stroked and manipulated his own arousal, as well as some discomfort as he pushed his fingers inside him.

Tenatively Demetrios loosened his own trousers and pushed aside his under-

garments.

"It might hurt a little," he whispered in to the priest's ear, "please bear with it."

He pushed himself inside his lover, very slowly at first but gradually picking up his pace as the priest became more relaxed. Panos moaned as he felt initially pain, which gave way to ecstasy. He felt the warm lips of the soldier, which kissed him passionately on the tender skin about his collar bone. Rays of light burst through the trees as the sun peeked over the horizon. Demetrios wrapped his arms around the priest and pulled him close to his chest.

"You'd better go soon," muttered the priest, breathlessly.

Reluctantly Demetrios pulled himself away from the embrace and began to pick up his dishevelled clothes. He grinned as he looked down upon the pale form of the naked priest.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too," replied the priest.

Campfire Tales

NIGHTFLYER EDITOR

The al-Nazihah as a clan specialised in acting as guides and traders across the treacherous sands of the Arabian peninsula. Amongst the family were Maha al-Nazihah [*Ellie*], a somewhat naive summoner and dealer with the djinn; Rasha [*Helen*], an explorer and trader in antiques and artefacts of obscure and interesting provenance; Siddig [*Joff*], who ran the trading and caravan empire which the al-Nazihah built; and finally Zafir [*Adam*] who was a formidable warrior and slayer of monsters.

Into this group came Nadia Zalebyeh [*Frances*], a woman claiming to be a dancer. But, in fact, a djinn claiming to be a woman. And moreover an evil djinn who developed a powerful fascination for the innocent Maha.

It was Nadia who began telling tales by the campfires of the al-Nazihah. In welcome the clan responded in kind.

Later the renowned alchemist Mansoor Ashhad [*Ursula*] began to travel with the clan, and eventually married Rasha (even though he always pined for the touch of her brother Siddig). Mansoor too told stories by the flickering light of the al-Nazihah fires.

Fountain by Frances

"My friends, I thank you for the warmth of your campfire and the greater warmth of your welcome. Since this is a time for tales I shall tell one, though it is a weak and humble effort little worthy of such company, and I would hesitate to recount it if I had not promised Maha a story of old Bagdad and the djinn..."

"I tell a tale of times long past – of the days when Baghdad might look into the mirrors of its silver moats and canals and still recognise its own reflection. Alas, many of its wonders are fled, the grand promenades flanked by orange trees, the emerald-green dome of the Golden Gate Palace, the fair villas gleaming with white stone and gold as if some almighty hand had fashioned them from cloud and sunlight. The gilded hooves of the Caliph's horses no longer clash on the esplanade, the tables no longer overflow with figs and sweet wines, the great books have been stripped from the House of Wisdom.

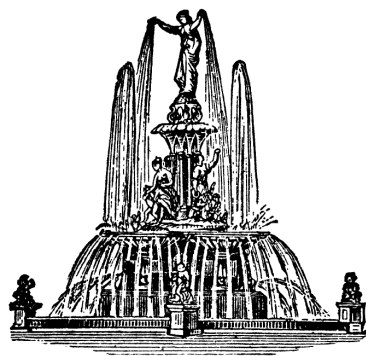
"But in the days of which I speak, such things were, and had been for a little time, and seemed eternal. And in those days there lived a woman of Baghdad whose skin was like opal and whose gaze was like the cool after a storm. She was much beloved, and one that loved her was a rich merchant of consequence, and another was a djinn.

"Both brought her a hundred gifts, for the reach of both was great. The courtier sent caravans to fetch her the finest silks and sweetmeats, while the djinn sent his imps to bring her necklaces made of sphinx's tears and flowers plucked from distant mountains. But in the end like called to like, and she loved the merchant. They were wed, and the djinn roared away into the desert, rending all he touched so that it whirled about him in a mighty column of shadow.

"The merchant's wife bore him many children, and was so busy she never left Baghdad until one day she chanced upon

a dried flower given to her by the djinn, and its scent filled her with a need to feel again the desert wind and walk the wild paths. So she strayed into the desert and there, on the banks of an oasis, the djinn came upon her. Many years had passed but she was still beautiful, and so the djinn knew her, and slew her, overwhelmed on the instant by the strength of his love. Once done it could not be undone, and he carried her with much lamentation to a secret cave where she would not wither, and where he might look upon her.

"The merchant waited for his wife to return, and only when a year and a day had passed did he surrender all hope. He resolved to build her the greatest tomb ever built, and ordered that in the middle should flow a fountain, so that like himself the tomb should be ever weeping. And he sent out orders for the finest mother of pearl, the most beautiful dark-veined marble, and the brightest gems that could be found.



"The djinn heard of this, so he went to his lady love and pulled off her fingernails

and toenails. Then he went to the Weaver who hangs her loom from the oldest tamarind tree, and offered her a hundred and one years of service if she would weave those nails into mother of pearl. She did so, and spun them into the fairest mother of pearl ever seen. In the shape of a master artificer the djinn took them to the merchant, who was delighted and put him in charge of building the tomb.

"When dark-veined marble was needed, the djinn returned to his lady love and took off her skin and her hair, then carried them to the Weaver. He promised her another hundred and one years of service, and she wove the skin and hair into marble. Again the merchant was delighted with the marble, and rewarded the 'artificer' richly.

"At last the djinn took out his lady's eyes, and took them to the Weaver. In exchange for another hundred and one years service, she wove them into two jewels fairer than any before beheld by man, with a coolness in them like that after a storm. When the merchant came to look at the finished fountain he found that the artificer had vanished, and that two beautiful gems were set into the marblework gleaming at him through the flow of water. They reminded him so powerfully of his lost wife's eyes that he could not move away.

"His servants brought cushions for him to recline upon, and food and drink lest he starve, but he never again took a single step from that spot, nor turned his head away from the fountain. He slept not, and those who sought to do busi-

ness with him had to remove their shoes and approach him reverently across the marble tomb floor. A year he lived so, before madness overtook him and then death. And all the while his true love watched and wept fountain water through jewelled eyes that could not blink.

"Many years later a man of great learning and wisdom chanced to visit the tomb, and heard the whole story through

the murmuring of the fountain. He shed a hundred tears, then two hundred, then three hundred, before he went on with his journey. The hundred tears were for the husband, who had loved so well that he had died of grief. The two hundred were for the wife, trapped forever in cold stone and forced to watch the calamities she could not prevent. But the three hundred were for the djinn, who had loved so

very deeply that his hatred could not die, and his vengeance must needs be eternal.

"Somewhere the djinn still works out his service to the Weaver at the Tamarind Tree, but his handiwork is gone. Baghdad is ravished, the tomb is stripped, and long since some brute soldier has ridden away with those weeping eyes in his saddle-bag..."

The Tale of Mulla Nasradeen's Shirt by Helen Walter

"Mulla Nasradeen, finding himself at home one week while his wife was away visiting her sick mother, found himself with a pile of laundry to air and little time in which to do so (being a man of a great many busy pursuits – gambling, drinking at the coffeehouse, watching the local women carry water from the well and advising them on how best to arrange their skirts so they might not slip and stumble...).

"I cannot take the time to carry all this laundry up to the roof and spread it in the sun!" thought Nasradeen. "Who will teach my young son to shave? Who will advise the local greybeards on where to buy the cheapest tallow to wax their gaming-tables? Who will hang around the smithy and gossip with the young men? I am a public servant! My time is most important to the people of this town!"

So he took a length of fine cord, and strung it between the two orange trees that grew in the scrub yard behind his house; and he draped the basket of thobes² and fine linens over this line, reasoning that the cloth would dry just as fast in the shade, since it was close to such fine and bright orange-trees.

Late that night, after Nasradeen returned home from his important business (which included, but was not limited to, arguing with the beggar in the marketplace about whether this was the hottest or second-hottest spring since the days of the Prophet, praise be unto him; asking the Muezzin awkward questions about how the shadows fell during the high holy days, and whether it was not disrespectful that they did not all fall in the direction of Mecca; and setting his cur dog among the chickens scratching in the dust before the town barbershop, so that the young women feeding them might squeal and run about), he retired straightaway to bed (after, of course, saying his prayers, for despite all his foolishness Nasradeen was a pious man).

Late into the night, as the moon shone full on the sleepy town and reflected like diamonds and cut glass from the water of the well in the central square, Nasradeen

awoke. Perhaps he heard a noise; perhaps it was only the wind stirring his excellent moustaches as he slept; or perhaps, after so many years of sleeping beside his faithful wife, he was awakened by the lonely, cold chill on the heart that comes to single men at the dead of night. Thinking to gain a breath of fresh air, he stepped to the window; and what should he see there but a white shape which seemed to float in the darkness – surely a robber, sneaking between the two orange trees in the scrub ground behind his fine house!

"A thief! Good god – whatever shall I do? I shall cry out! But no, young Tariq from next door will rush out and beat the scoundrel senseless, and then I shall be obliged to laud Tariq and praise him and feed him pomegranates in thanks for his help. And I have only two pomegranates in the house, and I had hoped to have them for my lunch tomorrow. But here is my bow, still limber! I shall stop the scoundrel in his tracks!"

And without a further thought, Nasradeen (who was perhaps a little older and a little slower than in his wild youth, but whose hands still remembered well the touch of his horse-bow, and whose nimble fingers still remembered the fletching of his arrows) snatched up the bow from under the bed, strung it, and had two arrows on the string and sailing towards the intruder as quick as the Djinn of the desert can make a mirage vanish before your eyes.

Nasradeen peered out to see the results of his handiwork; but just then the moon went behind a cloud, and though he stared and stared into the darkness, his eyes – which were growing on a little

in years, faster than his strong palms and dextrous knuckles – could discern nothing; certainly no movement, no shape of a man creeping about. Nasradeen decided that if the robber was not slain on the ground, he was surely sore wounded and had fled; and returned to his rest a happy and comfortable man, and slept the sleep of the righteous.

Early the next morning, up with the dawn for once, Nasradeen stepped quickly to the scrub ground behind his house, eager to seek track of the robber. He saw no footprint but those of his own curly-toed slippers in the dust; and no stain of blood upon the ground; nor was so much as a single leaf disturbed from the orange-trees that grew tall and twisted on his land. But as he cast about for signs, he quickly saw something that put all thoughts of the would-be burglar out of his head.

"Look! Look at this!" he cried to his wife as soon as she appeared home, later in the day. He thrust his fingers through the two holes in his favourite white thobe, directly over the heart. (The thobe smelled slightly of damp, and orange-leaves.) "Arrow-holes!"

His wife looked doubtful. "Arrow-holes, my sweet?"

"Undoubtedly," he confirmed, his eyes wide and his fabulous moustaches bristling. "I found the shafts themselves, all splintered to pieces against the wall. Oh, but thanks be to Allah and to the Prophet, praise be unto him; my life has been saved by the narrowest of margins – only that I was not wearing it at the time!"

²A thobe is a traditional Arab ankle-length garment, usually with long sleeves, similar to a robe.

Moon

by Frances

"Compared to your tales, my friends, mine are mere peas beside pearls, but I have promised to tell another so I shall do so. I shall tell a story something less doleful than the last, lest I douse your bold fire with words of woe.

"Many years ago, there was a place in the heart of the desert known as the Sea of the Black Sands. It was so called because the dunes rose like mighty waves, so high that they could have overwhelmed the tallest ship, and beneath the golden surface the sand was black as infamy. Many a traveller quaked with dread when he saw his camel's hooves graze the gold to show the black, for it was known far and wide that Sea of Black Sands was cursed, and frequented by a cruel and terrible monster.

"One day a young woman set out into the desert alone, for the man she loved was a wandering trader, and she hoped to bid him farewell before his people left for a city to the east. However she walked long miles and no bright caravans did she spy, for her love had left that very morning, quite forgetting their arrangement. By the time she turned back to walk home, the sky was darkening. She trudged for long hours, but there was no sign of the towers of the city. The dunes beneath her feet rose higher and higher, and when the moon rose she realised that her footprints were gashes of jet black sand, and she was terribly afraid.

"Of a sudden a howling began, so terrible that she threw herself to the ground in terror. It was like the chiming of a stone bell, the baying of a blinded dog, the wind in the cleft of a tree. And over the Sea of Black Sand came the monster, leaping from the top of one vast dune to the next, its talons leaving great gouges in the sand. It had a thousand black thorns for teeth, bristling from a jackal's muzzle. Its eyes were red gems, and its body was scaled like a salamander.

"Without mercy or introductions, the great beast caught the trembling girl in its jaws, and carried her away to a valley amongst the dunes. Here he told her that she must pray, for he meant to rend the flesh from her bones, but he had no argument with her soul and would wish to see

it go safely to Allah.

"Being a pious girl she knelt down to pray at once, but being much afraid she could not help but look around through her fingers, and noticed that in the valley before her grew a little garden, where only white flowers grew. Beyond that lay a mosaic of white and grey pebbles, laid out in patterns most pleasing. And beyond that stood a great throne, half-finished, fashioned cunningly from human bones. Most miraculous of all, when she turned to look at the monster, she noticed a single tear gliding down its scaled cheek.

"Pity entered that valley for the first time in centuries, and the young woman walked across to the beast.

"Why do you weep?" she asked him.

"The beast told her that he had been in love with the Moon for time beyond reckoning, but that she had never paid him the slightest heed. At first he had thought to woo her with gentleness and sweetness, and had travelled long leagues to find flowers as white as she that bloomed by night instead of day. But the Moon never came down to visit the little garden he planted for her. Then he thought he would woo her with skill and artistry, so he wandered until he found three-hundred and thirty-three stones of the same size, and arranged them in a mosaic of great beauty. But she never came down to tread upon those stones with her white feet. At last he was overcome by rage and longing, and decided that the Moon was cold and cruel, and must be wooed in kind, and started to slay men so that he could build her a throne of their bones, all polished to a gleaming white by the rasp of his tongue.

"The girl thought fast.

"O joyful day!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "Truly Allah must have sent me to you! For I am a lady-in-waiting to the Moon, and know all her secrets. She has not been blind to your pain, nor deaf to the beauty of your howled serenades. She is merely afraid of her husband the

Sun and dare not show her feelings. But once a month she slips from the sky, leaving a silver mask in her place, and comes to earth to bathe in an oasis. I know that she would wish you to meet her there. Come! She bathes this very night. I shall show you!"

"Suddenly tame as a dog, the beast followed her to an oasis, and there he saw his beloved Moon quivering in the water. He was baffled, for he could still see her image above him in the sky, but then he remembered that that was just a silver mask left to fool the Sun, so he leapt into the water. The Moon's touch was as cool and tender as he had imagined, and he sent up gusts of spray and a wild howl of joy.

"The sound drew the girl's beloved to the oasis, for he had belatedly remembered their appointment, and had been looking for her for hours.

"What was that sound?" he asked her. "Has the beast attempted to devour you?"

"Truly Allah must have sent you to me!" the girl answered quickly. "When the beast saw your warlike visage it was so frightened it leapt into the water and drowned. Come – let us leave!" For she knew the beast was new to happiness, and feared that he might devour her beloved out of habit if attacked.

"But never again did the beast end a mortal life. When he thought of mankind, he could but pity them, for which of them could know happiness like his? He had no malice in him even for the Sun.

"Ah, poor golden cuckold," he muttered, when he peered up at the lordly orb, "what is it worth to have her hand? 'Tis I that have her heart."

"The young woman married her beloved, and tended his shop and his children while he travelled to trade. "I cannot see him daily, but I have his heart," she told herself with a smile. And because she knew nothing of his string of silken mistresses, she too was happy."

Apples by Ellie Williams

Maha listens with rapt attention to Nadia's story before realising that Nadia is looking at her.

"Oh... um. Yes. I suppose I could tell one but it won't be very good."

She shifts position next to the fire and begins to speak.

"This story begins back in the days of old Baghdad where the caliph ruled over his great empire with an iron fist. In this time there was a fisherman who came across a beautiful wooden chest floating down the river Tigris near where he lived. He pulled it from the water but was unable to open it and so sold the chest, for so delicate was its carving, to the Caliph before departing on his way back to his village. The Caliph was most pleased with this new chest and ordered it opened that he might use it better. Would in a way that it had remained lost in their river for inside was a most gruesome find. The body of a young woman cut into pieces lay within. So the Caliph ordered his Vizier to find the murderer or face the punishment of death himself (for the Caliph had a great temper). For three days the Vizier searched the lands of the Caliphate hunting for anyone who might know of a missing woman or what had befallen her but he found nothing. The Caliph grew angry and ordered the Vizier's execution and that would have been the end of him if not for the grace of Allah, for at that time two men appeared at the palace both claiming responsibility for this crime. The Vizier although much relieved to be alive was also most confounded for now he had two suspects instead of none and unusually neither were claiming innocence as he was used to criminals doing. After some questioning the younger man described in complete detail the carvings on the chest that the body was found in thus proving his guilt. At this the older man broke down in tears and explained he was the young woman's father and the younger man was his daughter's husband whom he was trying to save but so great was the young man's grief that he would not allow it.

"The young man explained that his wife had been faultless and a loving mother to his three children but had been gravely ill. She had asked for a taste of

a rare apple and as a doting husband he had agreed. For half a month he travelled to find such a rare apple and after that long he returned with three perfect apples from the palace orchard itself. Alas his wife had weakened such that she could not eat the apples he had brought her. He returned to his shop and a short time later saw a slave walking past with one of the apples! He at once demanded how the slave had obtained such a rare apple. The slave replied "My mistress gifted it to me after her husband brought it back for her after a journey of half a month". Wracked with grief he rushed home and demanded to know how many apples remained, his wife brought forward two apples but the third was missing. Howling with rage the young man killed his wife for her unfaithfulness before hiding the body in many pieces within the chest and throwing it into the Tigris.

"Upon his return from the river his young son came to him with some trepidation and told him that he had stolen the apple but that it in turn had been tricked from him by the slave after the son had told the tale of the apple to him. This must have been the same slave that the young man had seen walking past his shop!

"The young man at once confessed to his father-in-law of his crimes and headed at once to the palace but his father-in-law saw in the young man a good heart full of regret and seeing his three small grandchildren, followed the young man to take his crimes upon himself so that his grandchildren would not become orphans.

"The Vizier recounted this tale to the Caliph as the young man knelt in shame within the throne room. Being a compassionate man the Caliph pardoned the young man instead placing the blame on the slaves head for the theft of the apple. However crimes must be punished before the eyes of Allah and so the Caliph ordered the Vizier to find the slave or face punishment himself, for as I have also said the Caliph was possessed of a great temper.

"For three more days the Vizier searched for the guilty slave but could find

nothing. Knowing that he must face his fate he said farewell to his family and as he held his youngest daughter close he felt in her pocket a round object, in puzzlement he asked to see it and she brought forth none other than the missing apple from the palace. He asked where she had got the apple from and she said she had got it from the Vizier's own slave. With no doubt in his mind that the apple before him was the one stolen from the young man he went at once to his slave and brought him before the Caliph.

"Now the slave was a simple man, a hard worker but prone to stupidity after too much time in the desert sun as a child. Upon hearing the trouble his small theft had caused the slave was terrified. The Vizier pleaded with the Caliph to pardon his slave for the crime was not done with malice but merely unthinkingly. As I said before the Caliph was a compassionate man and seeing the slave as nothing more than a fool took pity on the slave and said that he might go unpunished for the death of the young woman but that he would still have to pay the price for the theft and work in the palace until he had repaid the debt a thousand-fold. Which is not as bad as you might think, for a lifetime in service to the palace was far from as bad as death and even rare apples are not that costly."

Maha pauses and then wrinkles her brow.

"That is it I am afraid, I never was very good at endings and I am sure I have got something wrong somewhere. I am sure that when my mother told this to me there was a moral to the story, or that it was longer. I never did understand why the Caliph was so mean to the Vizier... Oh I remember what I missed! I think the Vizier tells the Caliph a story to calm him when he hears of the slave's crimes... but I cannot remember what the story was, ugh how infuriating! Perhaps I'll remember it for another night."

A Tale of Abdul the Shiftless by Helen Walter

"To cast my simple village tales of simple villagers and their simple ways before such illustrious narratives of the wonders of the desert and the Djinn, seems to be as presumptuous as the minor Djinn who sought to woo the Princess of the City Made All of Brass with a bowl of husked sesame seeds and a necklace of his mother's teeth. Yet his presumption was rewarded with the Princess's laughter, which – it is well known among my people – is as sweet as seven perfect pomegranate seeds; and so I hope that my presumption will be rewarded with your patience, which is as costly and rare a gift as the diamonds of the earth or the wisdom of sages.

There was a cousin of Mulla Nasradeen, Abdul al-Hakim ibn Tashrut, who was known about the towns as Abdul al-Hakim the Shiftless. While Nasradeen was, as we know, an upstanding and forthright man in the eyes of Allah and his Prophets, praise be unto them – if perhaps a little lacking in the finer faculties of wit – his cousin Abdul was no such virtuous man. Rather, he was well-called the Shiftless; for if there was a job which could be done badly, he would botch it; if there was a day's work to be left half-done, you could guarantee that he would be sitting in the tea-house playing at dice before the third prayer was called.

This man Abdul al-Hakim, finding himself without employment and in a new town (we shall not speak of what happened to expel him from the last town upon which he had parasited himself like an ancient boil; for there are youngsters present, and it concerns that which is forbidden in the twenty-third ayat of the Sura of an-Nisaa), sought, as such men do, to achieve two goals which are beloved of princes and peasants alike; to gain great riches, and to perform no honest labour.

Resolving, therefore, to use that which was available to him, Abdul caught up from the roadside a scrap of sackcloth; and with this cloth he enlarged his keffiyeh into a great turban, like those which are worn by the travelling scholars who teach reading and writing, being hangers-on of the great collegiate mosques. And he caught up from the roadside some discarded planks, and from the hut of a charcoal-burner he caught up a stick of charcoal, and from a farmer's unintended fence he took paint and a brush; and with these items he made himself a sign with the image of tablets and scrolls and styluses, like those which are displayed by the men who, in the sight of Allah the most merciful, charitably teach the poor and illiterate, the pauper and the child, to read the words of the Prophet (praise be unto him).

Abdul, of course, was uniquely quali-

fied for the position which he advertised with these items; for he could no more read a letter of the tongue of the Prophet, praise be unto him, or of any other man, than I can read the script which is written upon the face of the Moon. He had never thought to learn, preferring to spend his childhood days stealing eggs from the henhutches of old women and lazing in the sun on the mosque roof.

With this turban, and this sign; and with sundry other items which he caught up from unattended baskets and travellers along the way, he sat down upon a threadbare rug in the market square. And soon, seeing that a holy man had come to their village, the mothers of the children began to send their little ones to him; saying, "Go and take this loaf to the scholar, for he will teach you to read!" and "Go and take this coin to the scholar, for he will teach you to write!"

So falls the fate of men sometimes, that the least deserving are blessed with base cunning like unto that of the jackal of the desert, though they have no finer learning. So it is that Abdul al-Hakim would set the children who were sent to him among one another. And he would say to the one; "You, boy, write!" And he would say to the other; "You, girl, read what he has written!" And in this way, and with a great deal of luck and with smiling white teeth, Abdul al-Hakim did very well for himself in this small town, or as well as a wandering scholar can be expected to do; and he resided there one month and ten days, and began to amass a respectable purse and a respectable paunch.

After one month and ten days, there came to Abdul al-Hakim a man of the town named Misran, who had been greatly pleased with how Abdul had taught his daughters to read. (In actual fact they had taught each other, for the ways of the Prophet, praise be unto him, are never as manifold and merciful as in the eyes of a wondering child when she first begins to trace the letters of the first

Sura of the holy Qu'ran; but Abdul did not know this and Misran did not think of it.) He was himself illiterate, and his daughters not yet so advanced in years he could trust them with the burden he bore; for it was a letter from his wife, who had left to fight in the war some three months previous, and from whom he was most anxious for news.

"Ah, this man wishes me to read his letter aloud to him," thought Abdul, seeing Misran coming down the street with a hopeful gleam in his eye and the pages in his hand. "I shall progress along the riverbank to the well." But when he came to the well, he was flustered by six giggling shepherd girls; and he turned back, to see Misran in his path.

"I certainly cannot allow him to ask me to read this letter," thought Abdul, "I shall progress along the street to the mosque." But when he came about halfway to the mosque, the Imam of that town – who looked upon Abdul with a dark and suspicious eye, and whom Abdul was terribly afraid knew his secret fraud – turned the corner in front of him; and once again, he turned back, to see Misran in his path.

"Ah, Abdul! I have here a letter thou must read for me!" said Misran.

"Oh friend Misran, I must go to pray," replied Abdul, skinning his lips over his teeth in something that might have seemed a grin.

"Noon is yet distant, friend; read me the letter."

Abdul, seeing no other option, clutched the page in his hand. He turned it about, and then turned it once again; and, not knowing whether or not the page was thoroughly upside-down, allowed all unknowing a look of despair and woe to creep over his face.

Misran, seeing this look, clutched at his breast; for he knew that Abdul had read some terrible news in the letter, that his wife was sorely injured.

"Oh friend Abdul, Abdul al-Hakim the Wise and Virtuous! Please tell me, please, does my wife live? Does she yet

have all her limbs, her sweet eyes? Is she poisoned, wounded, does she lie sickening? Tell me!"

Abdul froze, and for once his quick wit proposed no solution to Misran's searching problems.

"Please, Abdul, do not spare me from the terrible truth," pleaded Misran, "for you know I have three young daughters, and if their mother is gone to Paradise I must weep and grieve myself before I can break their gentle hearts with the news. Friend Abdul, Abdul the wise and just, should I tear my clothes?"

"T, t, t-tear," stuttered Abdul; and Misran took it as confirmation.

"Oh, friend Abdul! Should I knock my breast?"

"Knock," repeated Abdul, dumb as a parrot in confusion.

"Oh, friend Abdul! Should I cut my beard and my hair?"

"Cut," confirmed Abdul, too far gone now to contradict, his head hanging.

So Misran took the letter from his hand and went home weeping all in the dust; and soon his mourning was joined

by that of his daughters, all weeping for fair Samira who was lost to them.

One of Misran's neighbours heard the commotion, and asking what ailed the house, was told, "Misran has a letter; his wife is dead in the war."

The neighbour started up in confusion. "But from Misran's wife I have a letter myself, it arrived but yesterday; she is in excellent health, the battle is won, and she will arrive home after ten days!"

So the neighbour rose forthright and went to Misran, saying, "Where is the letter you have received?"

Misran handed it over, and the neighbour read it. And it ran as follows, after the usual salutations: "I am well and in good health and case and will be with thee after ten days. Meanwhile, I send thee for love the spoils of our battle against the Infidel; a wooden coffer and a rug of the Persian lands."

So Misran took the letter and returned to Abdul the schoolmaster, asking in a great voice of wrath and challenging him, "What moved thee to deal thus with me?" And he repeated what the neigh-

bour had said concerning his wife's well-being, and her having sent a coffer and a rug.

"Forgive me, thou art in the right, friend Misran," answered Abdul, his glib tongue returning as a snake's glossy skin returns after it has shed the old. "But I was much distracted with a matter of complex theology on which the Imam had consulted me; troubled and absent-minded; and seeing the coffer wrapped in the rug, there, thought that thy wife was dead – and that they had shrouded her."

Misran, too happy with his wife's new-found life to be much wroth at the well-meaning schoolmaster's mistake, went away convinced; and Abdul breathed a sigh of relief.

Nor was this the last time that the speed of thought overcame the innocence of peasants in the life of Abdul al-Hakim the Shiftless; though he came to a terrible death, in the end, in a far-off land where the gazelles sing lays like the poet, and the poets have wings like the swan."

FICTION

Tears of the Sun by Ellie Williams

Maha coughs slightly, "I have another if you'll hear it. This one I thought was so sad but my mother told it to me so I've never forgotten it.

"Deep in the Arabian desert there is an Oasis. Some call it Al-Ahsa while others call it the sorrow of tears.

"This story goes back to before there was an oasis at all. When the land was barren sand was owned by the Baghdad Caliphate but the Caliph didn't really care about it since all it was sand with a bit of wind and then a bit more sand on top. And so it was that a Bedouin tribesman called Sahir ibin Hilel Uyunid came to Baghdad and asked for that particular yet inconsequential piece of land for his tribe to call its own for while it was worthless and while it was useless, it would be still be theirs and that was what mattered. In return for this piece of land the man offered the Caliph a golden tear of the sun himself.

"The tear was so beautiful that the Caliph at once agreed and gave the land over to the Bedouin without a second thought. The sultan was most pleased with his gift but fearful that the sun would become angry that the Caliph owned one of his tears he kept it hidden and secret in a

darkened room and took it out only at night where the moonlight masked the golden glow. Now little known to the Caliph the man who had come to him was the son of the Moon who had stolen one of his father's tears and coated it in gold dust to fool the ruler of Baghdad. Every time the Caliph took the tear out to look at under the moonlight, the moon became angrier and angrier that this small man would mock him so.

"After seven years of this ridicule the Moon could take no more and swept up the Caliph's daughter on a moonbeam away from the palace and into the harsh desert. When the Caliph discovered she was missing he shed his own tears and wherever they fell a black mark was left on the ground. The marks are still visible now along the corridors of the palace showing where the Caliph wept for his missing daughter, or at least they were before the Palace was destroyed by the Ayyubids... and the Manticore.... Anyway... due to his sadness the Caliph found the only thing to give him comfort was the stolen tear that

he took out night after night and so the Moon's anger never ceased.

"Now the moon needed the girl not and had merely taken her to make the Caliph shed his tears and now that he had the girl he could not stop her also crying for the loss of her home and her family. After seven years of her endless tears he became a distraction to him and he despaired of what to do but his son, the ever watchful Sahir had an idea for after three years of listening to her tears and watching her he had fallen in love with her.

"'Father,' he said, 'Let me look after the girl, for out in the desert where I live you shall not hear her cries but nor will the people of the city and so she shall be kept safe and secret and quiet.'

"So Sahir took the girl out into the desert with his tribe to keep her away from both the Moon and the Caliph. But he found he had more problems there than he had thought for the whole desert belonged to the Caliph and he had eyes everywhere from the snakes that crawled under the sand to the hawks who circled

the air to the mice who ran from the snakes. He found he could never stop moving and never rest for fear someone would spot them. And then it came to him that there was one part of the desert that the Caliph did not own, and where no spies would spot them and where they could rest in peace for a time, the small patch of barren desert that the Caliph had given him all those years ago. Now as I said the place was barren and waterless and harsh but at least it was unwatched and the tribe settled there bringing water in at great cost on the backs of camels every day. However even now the girl still wept and nothing Sahir did could stop her but he had promised his father he would

look after her and he brought her fresh figs to eat, and dried dates and the coolest water he could find and he continued to love her even though she barely noticed him.

"For fifty more years the girl, now an aging woman, sat in that spot in the desert weeping until one day she suddenly stopped. She looked up from where she sat and saw that her tears had formed a great pool in the desert around which trees and grass grew and the camels drank freely. She gave thanks to Allah for that glorious sight and begged for some mercy after all the years of sorry she had known. And in his infinite mercy, and seeing the Oasis as testament to her long grief, Allah

took her up in a wind to paradise.

"The now older son of the moon returned with fresh fruit for his love and seeing her gone he dropped to the ground where he stood next to the Oasis, now the only thing left of the woman he had pined after all his life and there he sat, weeping his own tears that his love had never noticed him, until his dying day.

"The oasis is still there and if you ever drink from it you'll find it tastes a bit like tears of lost love and maybe you'll think about the ones you've lost and add some tears of your own."

Seeds by Frances

"My friends, I know that the tale we all await is the one that your brother Zafir shall tell of the defeat of the Manticore, a tale which I think shall celebrate the courage of many around this fire tonight. Forgive me if I recount a story first, even though it delays the telling of his. Rather have pity on me, for if my tale were to follow his, would not my humble offering suffer by the comparison, like a donkey trotting in the wake of a lion?

"There was once an old sheikh who was blessed with a fair-faced daughter, with seven strong and brave sons and with riches, but who was yet unhappy with his good fortune and sought to marry again. His eye fell upon a young and beautiful widow, and at the same time her eye fell upon his wealth. How like a queen I shall live if I marry him, she thought, for when he has draped me in silks and jewels, who will compare with me?

"He took her to wife, and for him it was as if the sun had lowered itself from heaven to dwell with him. For a sixmonth there was nothing he would not give her, nor could he say no to her in any thing. But although it is often the way with old men that as time passes their eyes grow more cloudy, with this sheikh he began to see more clearly the woman that he had brought into his house.

"He saw that she cast eyes of spite upon his good-hearted daughter, for all the pearls and perfumes that had been given to this greedy wife could not make her fairer than the sheikh's daughter. And yet all the while the daughter was eager that there should be peace in her father's family, and would do anything to please the woman who had taken the place of her mother. He saw that his wife strove to make him quarrel with his own dear sons, who were good of heart but

warm of temper, and did not like to see their sister made to run errands like a servant. And last of all, he began to see that her looks were lascivious, and that her eye would linger on every passing traveller in search of youth and strength which might do service in her embrace.

"Angry but fearful of mockery, the sheikh went to speak with a magician who was much feared thereabouts, and asked for help. The magician answered that he could prepare a draft which would remind the young wife of her duty, and send her to her prayers. And the merchant paid richly for the draft and went straight to the mosque to offer praise to Allah.

"While he was praying, however, the magician went in secret to the sheikh's wife.

"Beware," he said, "for your husband seeks to trick you. He plans to give you a draft that he thinks will make you meek and loyal, and trap you in his wrinkled embrace."

"The young wife was wroth beyond measure, and tore at the necklaces that her doting husband had draped around her neck. "Old fool! Is it not enough that I must bear his loathsome caresses, insipid daughter and quarrelsome sons but that he must make me little better than a slave?"

"The magician calmed her, and told

her that if she placed her trust in him he would rid her of all three, and that she should have a lover more worthy of her and yet enjoy her husband's wealth. And because the magician was young and strong she bent her ears to him and said that she would do as he bid.

"The merchant returned home and gave the draft to his wife, who drank it obediently. Straight after she pretended much new meekness, and begged permission to go to her prayers, a request which the old man granted with tears of renewed love in his eyes. She came to his bed that night with every sign of tenderness and modesty. When at last the old sheikh slept, however, she pulled out a box that the magician had given her, containing six seeds, and placed them in her sleeping husband's mouth. The poison was not slow to take effect, and as she watched the old man writhed and expired.

"The two lovers carried him out to the olive grove, and laid down his corpse, where it did twist wondrously, the old man's hair becoming leaves and his toes long roots. Soon there was no trace of their crime but a new olive tree more twisted than the others. The magician took the shape of the sheikh, and returned to bed with the sheikh's widow, where they took much delight in one another.

"The next morning the seven loyal

sons were summoned by what appeared to be their father. He railed at them, calling them ingrates and unnatural sons, and banned them from his house. So with great sadness they went forth, wondering at how a late love had so transformed their father. Only the daughter was kept within the house, for the widow counted upon her to run the house.

"The daughter however had loved her father well, and grew suspicious at finding him so changed. He forgot many things that he should know, and when his gaze lingered upon her it was not with a father's eye. At last one evening she followed her father and his wife to the olive grove, where she found them exchanging caresses against the twisted olive tree, exulting in the success of their scheme. The magician heard the girl gasp, and before she could run spoke a word that turned her into a hoopoe, which flew away in fright.



"Unbeknownst to the magician, the girl had promised to meet her brothers next morning at the well. When she did not arrive, they strode in fury to their father's house, for they knew that she

would never break her word.

"What have you done with our sister?" they demanded.

"I shall show you," answered the magician, and with a word changed them all into kites. "Go, seek your sister now! Tear her apart as is the way of your kind!" And away they soared, each forgetting everything but his own hunger, and pursued the hoopoe that was their sister until she lost them in the dusk.

"The hoopoe-daughter, however, remembered her own nature, for the magician had cast his spell on her in haste. In a tree of an oasis she paused to lament the fate of her father and brothers, tears trickling down her long beak. And the rain djinn who lived in that place saw her and was entranced by her golden crest and mellow voice, for even as a bird she could not help but be fair.

"Forget your family," he said. "Stay here with me. The berries on these trees shall swell for you and only you, and I shall cool the breeze that strokes your plumes. Bathe in my waters and I shall keep you safe from the fangs of foxes and stones of boys."

"But the daughter was determined to help her brothers, and begged the djinn to assist her. At last, for he could deny her nothing, he admitted that he could cause a single gold-skinned peach to grow on one of the trees. If she ate of the peach, then her brothers could be cured of their enchantment by eating her flesh.

"But do not go," he begged her. "Or if you must, stay with me a while first. Give me a year, or at least a month. Let me enjoy the sight of you this little while. Are not the eternities when I shall miss you long enough already?"

"But she would not be swayed, and so

with much weeping the djinn caused the gold-skinned peach to grow before her eyes until the bough dipped. The hoopoe-daughter nibbled at its flesh, and then spread her wings and went in search of her brothers.

"At last she saw seven specks against the living blue of the sky. Her brothers were soaring in search of rabbits and rats, but her bright crest and striped wings caught their sharp eyes, and down they swooped upon the little hoopoe. And because they had all seen her at once, there was much warring of hooked beaks, until her blood on the pale ground seemed a scattering of garnets.

"When the wind had chased away the torn golden plumes, seven men stood released from their spell. Before them lay their own sweet sister, who told them all that had happened, and then perished in their arms.

"The seven vengeful sons returned to their father's house, taking the magician by surprise and striking off his head whilst he lay in the sheikh's bed. The sheikh's widow, however, they led outside and chained to the tree that was her dead husband. She was brought food and water every day, but lived out her whole life tethered to that twisted tree, whilst briars grew around her, thorns sprouted slowly into her flesh and leaves crept in at her ears and nose. Thus the seven sons taught their father's wife fidelity.

"For a time by the rain djinn's oasis, there remained a set of delicate bird-prints in the sand. He took great care that they should not be disturbed by rain, wind or careless tread, but after a year a stray gust brushed them away and left him with nothing..."

Tears by Frances

"There was once an Emir whose wife was beautiful and gracious beyond compare, but had been cursed as a girl so that she could not weep. Alas, this did not leave her to live her life in laughter, but it meant that all sorrows burned on within her, with nothing to quench and soften them. And the Emir who loved her well could not bear to see her suffering so, so he consulted his wise men, who told him that his wife would only weep when three tears from the Sultan of Rain were brought to her.

"And so the Emir called before him twenty men, and bade them all swear the most terrible oaths that, come what may, they would bring back three tears from the Rain Djinn. Most of these men were young and strong, but one was an old man who pleaded to go with them. For he

was deeply devoted to the queen, and had thought of naught but her happiness since the moment he had first laid eyes upon her.

"The journey to speak with the Sultan of Rain was a long one, for they took many false paths before they found the true one.

By the time they found the mighty waterfall where she sat throned, there were but seven of the Emir's men remaining. They presented the gifts that the Emir had sent and pleaded their case. But it was only when the old man spoke of the plight of his mistress that the Sultan wept

three gleaming, pearl-like tears, and let him claim them from her cheek. He kept them in a little bottle of blue glass next to his heart.

"On the way back to the Emir's lands, however, the tear-bearers were set upon by murderous bandits. They fought bravely, for they all remembered their oath to bring back the tears come what may, and each slew three enemies before he fell. And so it came to pass that at the end the only men standing were the bandit chief and the old man. The robber chieftain bore on his body enough wounds for three deaths, but he was a mighty figure, and in his last moment of life swung his scimitar at the old man's chest. It struck with a cracking sound, and a moment later the robber fell to the earth, dead of his injuries. The old man found himself unharmed but – alas – the bottle had been shattered by the thief's blade. Three pearl-like tears fell to the ground.

"He dropped to his knees, but not a trace of them could he see, not even a damp place on the sand. Then he saw a small golden flower sprouting in that very spot, and realised that the tears must have been drunk on that very instant by the flower. With eager hands he dug it up, for if the little flower contained the three tears he yet meant to return to his beloved mistress and fulfil his vow.

"Weary and lost, the old man struggled across the wastes alone, always taking care of the little flower in his pouch. One night, however, he was wakened in the night by a movement against his hand. He woke to see that a little mouse had pushed its head between his fingers, and had just finished eating the precious bloom. It scampered away, leaving him distraught. After a moment or two he recovered his wits, however, and recalled that the mouse itself must now contain the three charmed tears. And so he began a search for the mouse, following its tiny tracks in the sand, occasionally glimpsing a whisk of its tail as it sped across the scrubland.

"Just as he was ready to spring upon it, a young hawk plunged past him and struck the mouse dead with its claws, then bore it up into the skies. The old man could almost weep for frustration, but remembering his oath he followed the sky-speck that was the hawk, hoping that sooner or later it would descend to roost. Alas, when it descended at last it did so at speed, a deft arrow through its breast. The old man limped and staggered to the

place where he had seen the hawk fall, and found a stranger sitting by a camp-fire, picking his teeth, the bones of the bird's roasted carcase at his feet.

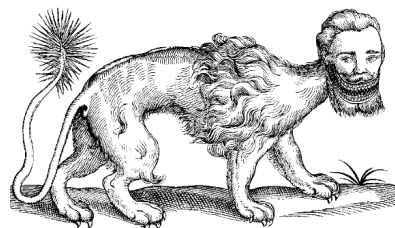
"The old man fell to his knees, told the stranger his story, and begged him to come to the Emir, for he surely now contained the three tears of the Rain Sultan. The stranger seemed moved by the old man's tale. He promised to attend the Emir and his wife if the old man would help him first.

"There is a camp less than a league to the west," he said, "where my beloved is held prisoner by a bitter foe. They will slay me on sight if they see me, but you are unknown to them. If you joined their camp, you might smother their torches and campfire so that I could come in by darkness and rescue my fair friend."

"The old man agreed, and limping to the west he did indeed find a camp of travellers who made him welcome, and even shared their food with him. As night fell and their sentry drowsed, the old man rose and put out the torches, then smothered the fire so that the whole camp was in darkness, and left quickly. When he returned the next morning to meet with the pleasant stranger, he found him counting out a big pile of gold, with no rescued maiden to be seen.

"Fool!" scoffed the stranger. "Did you really believe that I wanted the camp dark for any reason but to slit the throats of those rich travellers and steal their gold? And did you really think I would return with you to stand before the Emir and his wife, when I am wanted as an outlaw in every land?"

"On hearing this, the old man was gripped by a terrible anger, and he leapt upon the treacherous outlaw, striking a dagger through his throat. The old man blinked at the fallen man, for he had never killed before, then set about rolling him in blankets so that not even a single drop of blood should be lost, for he could not know whether those drops might contain the precious tears. Now weary almost to death, the old man began dragging the corpse across the wastes in the direction of the Emir's lands.



"The sun was hot, however, and the aroma of the butchered outlaw carried on the wind, so that in time a mighty cloud of vultures could be seen circling above the old man and his burden. Worse still, in time the reek reached the nose of a Manticore who roamed the region. Just as the old man had reached the outskirts of his Emir's lands, the beast appeared with a mighty fluting roar, flinging poisoned spines with a flick of its tail. The old man had no choice but to drop his burden and flee for cover, and could only watch appalled as the beast sniffed at the dead body and then devoured it, down to the last fingernail.

"He tore his hair and clothes, for the Manticore must surely now contain the three tears, and he knew that he could never hope to defeat such a beast and drag it to the Emir's wife. But at last a new plan occurred to him, and drawing his dagger he cut at his own arm, so that his blood trickled onto the ground. Near dead from exhaustion, injury and all the afflictions of the sun, the old man staggered on towards his goal. And, finding a trail of fresh blood, the Manticore followed after him.

"The old man collapsed at the gates of the palace, hardly recognised by the guards, and a moment later the Manticore reared into view, jubilant at finding itself with such rich choice of prey. Its shark-like teeth snapped up children as they fled screaming, its flung spines pinned guards to the walls. The battle was terrible and bloody, and when the beast was finally slain, the Emir's wife looked down from her high palace window. She saw her husband the Emir dead beneath the creature's forepaw, still clutching the spear he had driven through the monster's brain. She saw her two eldest sons lying piecemeal in the marble courtyard. And she wept.

"She was still weeping when she came to the execution yard to see the old man receive punishment for his crime. All that he could see clearly in the haze of the day was the silver cascade of her tears. As he knelt down to let the executioner strike off his head, his last thought was to wonder whether any of those tears might be for him..."

FICTION

Amal and the Sphinx by Helen Walter

"There once lived an ancient, cruel and wise Wazir; who had, in his time, been advisor to Sultan after Sultan of old Baghdad, each carefully directed under his 'guidance'. He had amassed great fortunes and three beautiful wives; the great majority of his children were as vicious and black-hearted as he, much given to poisoning one another and scheming over the scraps he let fall from his table. But his seventeenth son, a boy by the name of Amal, was so pure and virtuous - so far removed from the iniquities of his father and siblings - that, if he had not borne the distinctive hooked nose and tilted eyes of his father plain upon his face, the Wazir would have immediately had his third wife executed for adultery.

Presented, however, with irrefutable proof of the boy's legitimacy, and unwilling to raise his hand against the fruit of his own loins, the Wazir sent Amal out into the desert upon his eighteenth birthday, claiming that the lad was to be sent to prove himself. In all truth, the Wazir was confident that Amal - a gentle, quiet boy who would rather paint beautiful calligraphies and suras of the Quran while his sisters trained with daggers and rode with the city cavalry - would soon come upon one of the wild Sphynxii which were known to infest the desert in those days, and be summarily eaten. This would also, conveniently, remove the problem that the current Sultan - a headstrong young woman whom the Wazir had resolved to have arrested on some trumped-up charge, and murdered, just as soon as he could find a more appropriate successor - had, more than once, looked upon Amal with dark and thoughtful eyes; and Amal had returned those looks, with interest.

Amal was not three days out of the city when he came upon the first wonder of his journey. An old woman, bent-backed and shrivelled by the sun, was standing at the foot of a date tree, staring desolately up at its branches. "Daughter, daughter!" she would cry plaintively. "Come down, come down!"

Amal drew up his horse and enquired, "What is the matter, old woman? Who do you cry for?"

"Oh, kind sir," replied the elder, "my daughter has been transfigured into the form of a cat by the Wazir's second eldest daughter, who was jealous of her beauty. And now the cat, for fear of a local dog that barked at it, has climbed that tree and will not come down!"

Amal - considering such a feat not outside the purview of his half-sister, but nevertheless judging it more likely that

the woman was half-mad from heat and distress over her lost cat - nevertheless vaulted from his horse on the instant. He scaled the tree in a few short leaps, and returned to the ground with a starveling, half-feral cat in his arms, who promptly set about winding itself around the woman's ankles and mewling pitifully.

"Thank you, a thousand thankyous, young man!" cried the old woman. "I have no gold, but please, take this collar. It is said that the old Sultans of Kh-wazerm placed such things about their war-beasts!"

Amal, bemused, tucked the faded but elegant collar in his saddlebags, and rode onwards.

Two days later, he came across a mirage which did not fade the closer he rode to it. Shimmering above the desert floor, it first reflected his horse, then the blurred shape of a rider, then - as he stood close enough to touch it - his face, as clear as in a polished bronze mirror.

"Help me," whispered the mirage in the voice of the desert sands; and Amal was most disconcerted to see his reflection's lips move in time with the words. "I am trapped here, and cannot return to my home. Help me."

"How can I help you, O wise Djinn?" enquired Amal, respectful, as always, of that which he did not understand.

"You must tell me a secret known only to you," whispered the sands, and Amal's reflection took on such a look of longing and hope that he was quite overcome.

Amal leaned forward, and whispered into the mirage all those thoughts which were with him when he looked upon the Sultan with dark and thoughtful eyes. And the mirage, sighing with relief, vanished into the desert wind; leaving behind it a shard of fused glass, bright and polished as silver, which reflected only the

truth of a man's heart, and nothing of his false and outward face. When Amal looked upon it, in later years, he found it most useful for shaving.

On his tenth day into the desert, Amal was found by a Sphinx.



The Sphinx introduced itself first to Amal by appearing from behind a dune like a shadow, and suddenly and messily eating his horse. At the conclusion of some short, violent minutes, the Sphinx settled to picking her teeth with the horse's splintered ankle-bones and observing Amal. Amal returned the observation with interest, from a somewhat precarious perch at the top of a tall, half-ruined stone column, such as one finds in the desert.

"Come down, little mortal, so that I might eat you," the Sphinx requested, quite politely.

"Oh most honourable Sahibah, while I would dearly love to comply with your request, I have promised that upon my return to Baghdad, I will make zakah³ of some hundred shekels to the city orphanage. So if I were to come down and allow you to eat me, I would be committing one of the Seven Heinous Sins, which is to unlawfully take money from orphans!"

The Sphinx harrumphed and hawed, and eventually declared, "Very well. When I have eaten you, I shall take from

³Zakah or "alms giving", one of the Five Pillars of Islam, is the giving of a small percentage of one's possessions to charity, generally to the poor and needy. It serves principally as a welfare contribution to poor and deprived Muslims, although others may have a rightful share. It is the duty of an Islamic community not just to collect zakat but to distribute it fairly as well.

my pouch a store of treasure to the value of two hundred shekels; and by night I shall slip into Baghdad and leave it at the orphanage."

Amal smiled nervously. "Oh great and wise Sphinx, truly you are merciful! But if by my action I were to encourage one as great and potent as yourself to stalk the streets of Baghdad at night, would I not be committing another of the Seven Heinous Sins, which is murder? For surely then you will fall upon the people in the streets and rend them limb from limb with your sharp teeth."

The Sphinx harrumphed again, and chewed the marrow of Amal's horse. "Very well. I shall take an oath upon the old gods of the Desert, upon A'astar who is the consort of the Moon and upon Ba'al-Dagon who rules the sea, and I shall swear to eat no-one while within the bounds of Baghdad. Now come down so I can eat you, and swear, and make zakah to those orphans."

Amal realised, at this point, that while the Sphinx might not be so hungry as to be so determined to eat him, she was as stubborn as the desert rock; and with the bit between her teeth, she would never give up this quest while it seemed a challenge. Bravely, he continued, "Oh great Sphinx whose eyes are like jewels, if I allow you to make oaths to these heathen Gods I am encouraging Shirk, the belief in many gods, which is of the Seven Heinous Sins! Make your oath instead to Allah, cast off these idols and rejoice in the grace of the Prophets; find an Imam as soon as you enter Baghdad and convert to the true faith."

The Sphinx growled its impatience. "Very well, little man! I will find your Imam, I will convert to Allah, I will cast off A'astar and Ba'al-Dagon. I will make zakah and make my oath, now come down so I can eat you!"

Amal stretched out gingerly on the narrow rock pillar. "Oh, mighty Sphinx whose ears are like two sails of molten silk, if an Imam sees a Sphinx walk into the mosque of its own volition, he shall surely cry 'Sorcery! Sorcery!' – which is one of the Seven Heinous Sins. This will not make a good start for your conversion, I think."

"No, little mortal," growled the Sphinx through her sharp teeth, "surely it will not. I shall let you go first, then, and on my honour as a Sphinx, I shall not eat you until you have returned to Baghdad and explained to the Imam how this thing came

about."

Amal hung his head in sorrow. "Oh great and beneficent Sphinx, how could you ask such a thing? For we are locked in battle here, as surely as if we struck at each other with swords; how could you ask that I flee from righteous battle, which is to commit one of the Seven Heinous Sins?"

The Sphinx roared, loud enough to raise dust from the pillar. "Then we shall go together, little noble mortal! We shall go to Baghdad together, you may even collar me if you wish, we shall explain to the Imam, I shall convert, make my oath, make Zakah, and then, finally, I shall eat you!"

Amal, thoughtfully, slipped down from the pillar, inch by inch, and approached the Sphinx – who, though her eyes were black with rage, displayed no sign of attempting to eat him; for a Sphinx's word is as binding upon her as chains of iron.

"Let us go then, noble Sphinx; for you have eaten my horse and spilled my waterskins upon the sands, and if we do not set off now, I shall die of thirst."

The Sphinx snorted. "Put your collar upon me, little mortal, and I shall bear you to Baghdad swifter than the swiftest horse."

Amal complied, and at a gesture from the noble beast raised himself upon her back, just behind her wings. With the sound of a hundred whirlwinds, the Sphinx leaped into the air; and soon the desert was speeding past, far below Amal, as he watched, wide-eyed.

They arrived in Baghdad by night, and began, piece by piece, to conclude their business. The Imam was shocked, at first, to see a very real, very large Sphinx lurking in the doorway to his mosque; but this was Baghdad of old, where such wonders were nearly commonplace, and with Amal's explanation he soon accepted her as a Muallaf, placing a veil made from great sheets of black linen delicately around her ears and beneath her muzzle.

This done, Amal proceeded with the Sphinx stealthily towards the orphanage; where they left some two hundred shekels in a cloth sack upon the doorstep. Vows made, zakah made, they relaxed under a spreading date tree in the central market square.

"Much as I am loathe to introduce the subject, little mortal, for I have become somewhat fond of your wit and learning, the time has come for me to eat you," commented the Sphinx.

"You are quite right, Sahibah," sighed Amal. "Might you object if we waited here, under this tree, until the dawn prayer? For I would dearly love to see the sun rise behind the thousand minarets of Baghdad one last time, before I die."

"That is quite agreeable, little mortal."

And so they waited, thoughtful, and praying from time to time, until the Muezzin climbed to the top of the tallest minaret in Baghdad, and called the crowds to prayer.

Sphinx and man knelt down together, along with the crowds who were beginning to fill the marketplace; they faced Mecca, and together they prayed. This complete, the Sphinx turned upon Amal with a rueful expression.

"And now, my little mortal –"

"Infamy! Adultery! Scandal!" cried a cracked and reedy voice from the balcony of the Palace which faced onto the market square. "The Sultan herself, caught in such horrors! O, infamy! O, blasphemy! Surely such a degenerate is no longer fit to rule you!"

The Sphinx and Amal turned to see Amal's own father, the Wazir, with two of his most loyal guards restraining the beautiful young Sultan, bruised and tearful. Amal started forward as the Wazir continued his accusations, braying what Amal knew to be lies about the Sultan's supposed crimes; but the Sphinx extended a paw and held him back.

"I have seen a mirror, young mortal, among your packs, which I think I know of old," growled the Sphinx in a low voice. "Lend it to me."

Bemused, Amal handed the mirror over; the Sphinx gripped it in one delicate claw, and angled it so that she could see the balcony, the Wazir and the Sultan in its reflection.

Satisfied, the Sphinx licked her lips and handed back the mirror.

"That man," she said in a slow and deliberate rumble that was nevertheless heard about the square, much louder than the wailings and whinings of the Wazir, "is unjustly accusing a chaste woman. And that, I am reliably informed, is one of the Seven Heinous Sins."

And with one terrible bound and one terrible boom of its wings, the Sphinx cleared the square and leaped to the balcony; and with two great snaps of its sharp jaws, it ate the Wazir from neck to ankles, leaving only his beard and his boots.

The crowd, awed by such a display of piety from such a monster, were frozen;

the guards ran screaming; the Wazir's other sons and daughters, lurking in the palace, thought briefly over their own history of sin, and made hasty and discreet exits, never to be seen again.

Amal was busy climbing the vines to the balcony, while the Sultan, brave but trembling, prepared to face her inevitable death with dignity.

The Sphinx thoughtfully picked at a shred of Wazir caught in her teeth.

"You may not take after your father the Wazir in any way I can detect, young man," the Sphinx informed Amal as he vaulted his way onto the balcony and stood bravely between the Sultan and the monster, chin up and ready to be eaten, "but I have consumed a great many mortals in my time; and I have found that, by and large, taste tends to run in the paternal line. The Wazir whom I have just

eaten was unreasonably bitter, with an aftertaste of cardamom. I loathe cardamom; therefore I have elected, for the moment, not to eat you."

The Sphinx grinned at the Sultan and Amal, who were clutching each other's arms for comfort, with its white, white teeth.

"Besides, I find this collar which you have placed upon me to be very handsome. Go about your business. I shall doze under that date tree over there."

And Amal and the Sultan, after some trembling, did indeed go about their business. Their business, as it turns out, involved a brief but elegant courtship; a marriage; and some fifty years of wise, just and bountiful rulership of Baghdad by the Sultan and her consort. During this time, we are told, any man with pointy shoes and a dubious beard who presen-

ted himself for the position of Wazir was considered very closely indeed; and those who did not meet with the approval of the Captain of the Guard, who just happened to be some twenty-five feet long, winged and sharp-toothed, all vanished under mysterious circumstances.

Amal, being a virtuous man, prayed from time to time for his father's soul; while the Sultan and the Sphinx sighed behind their hands at his foolish generosity. And from the day he was born until the day he died, old and fat in bed, two days after the Sultan had herself passed from the world and surrounded by their wide-eyed and sniffing grandchildren, Amal did not once show the faintest sign of taking after his father."

Beards by Ursula Searle

Once, in the mountains at the edges of Africa, there lived a young boy with his father. Now this boy's father was a man of the world and the wild, his hands bore the marks of one who toiled under the Sun, his body was lean like the mountain goat's and his strength was that of the savannah lion. The boy, on the other hand, was too young to be as strong and wild, and his father loved him too much to let him slave as he himself did. Little did he know that this frustrated the boy, who wished to be more of a man, for the other boys he met herding goats were bigger and stronger than him and mocked his little stature and his soft features.

Many years went by in the mountains and the boy grew to become a man, but still he was clean shaven while his fellow lads were bearded, and fine featured while they were rugged and tough. His father was aged and frail now and desperate to help his poor son, who he knew to weep at the shame he thought he'd brought upon the old man; so in his desperation he sent the boy across the land to the alchemist known as Basir Hakim, who was known to have seen the essence of purity itself and still kept his sanity and eyesight (something which was uncommon, but not completely unheard of).

With his pack on his back, the boy walked for months towards the home of Basir. He passed wonders that none would believe, seeing pyramids of goat's milk in the distance, only for them to dissolve before his eyes; he saw snakes whose colours were more vivid than those of the few flowers of the mountains, and great beasts whose heads were those of beautiful women and whose bodies were of desert beasts (he was lucky enough to skirt round a fight between two scorpion women and live to tell me the tale).

Eventually, when he had passed through cities of gold, of mud and of solid stone, when he had seen the markets of Cairo and the Valley of the Kings and when his water-skin was almost empty he came across a hut in the shifting sands. Standing outside the hut and waving enthusiastically was an old man with a large pipe which wafted foul-smelling smoke across the winds. The man, was of course, Basir Hakim...he knew an "alchemical pilgrim" when he saw one.

The inside of the hut was many times larger than the outside and was made of clean stone and silver. Basir casually explained that he had perfected the essence of laboratory many years ago and so it was no problem for him to transform the inside of the hut, he then rattled off a list of ingredients which the poor boy could not hope to remember. Once the list was ended, the boy begged the alchemist to make him into a man.

"Are you not yet a man sir?" the scholar exclaimed, "you certainly look like one, and you have proved your manhood to me simply by crossing the deserts and mountains alone! You managed it

without a camel for goodness sake!"

Again the boy beseeched him to bestow upon him the essence of masculinity. "Humph, I'm not sure I can help you sir," humphed Basir, "such a thing is usually reserved for retired eunuchs"

Again the boy beseeched.

"Homph, very well then" homphed the scholar, "but I warn you, this may have side effects. As I said, it was designed for eunuchs"

So for a single hair of the boy's head (the boy was a virgin you see), the alchemist handed the boy a small vial filled with powder. Once uncorked it let off a variety of smells, some pleasant and some decidedly unpleasant, but this was of little consequence as the boy tossed it down his throat within a few moments.

He thanked the scholar and set off home after that, but this is far from when the story ends.

As the boy walked he noticed his muscles were larger and more bulky, he was now covered in hair like the boys at home and, best of all, he was finally growing a fine beard. However, after a week or two, when he wished to groom this

new beard of his he found it could not be done. The hair would simply grow back, even longer than before. He stopped at every barber in every city and every town on the way back to his mountain village, but none could tame the ever-growing beard. When he returned home, his father did not recognise him and the other men chased him away with stones.

In the end he decided to climb to the top of the highest mountain and jump off the edge. So at once he found the moun-

tain and began to climb. He climbed and climbed and stumbled and climbed until finally he saw snow and ice. Then he climbed and climbed and slipped and stumbled and crawled and climbed until finally he reached the top.

The man jumped, and fell. But unlike he had expected he fell sideways and not downwards. Little did he know that he had climbed up so high that he had become caught in the sky. He cried for help but all that could be seen of him was his

beard, all that could be heard was his deep booming voice, and all that could be felt on the ground were a few salt tears.

This lasted until the poor man landed on top of a pyramid to tell me the tale, before jumping off again, this time with a reawakened sense of adventure.

So if you see a small black cloud in the sky and feel a few drops of rain, think of the man with the ever-growing beard.

Why Dolphins swim in the Sea and the Nightingale Sings so Sweetly by Ursula Searle

When Allah created the world long ago there were only the fish and the whales in the sea. Those dolphins, which are so friendly to mankind, were not yet there: but far away, in the palace of the world's second Pharaoh there lived a harem of beautiful women who were the wives of the Pharaoh and also of his highest advisor. With these women lived a score of eunuchs who cared for them like brothers care for little sisters.

Now the Pharaoh was good man, except for the fact that he was prone to pride, and through that all other manner of sins. For we all know that pride can lead to jealousy, jealousy to hate and hate to the dark path. The vizier was, unfortunately, the model of many viziers to come and wished to overthrow the Pharaoh, so he set about exploiting the Pharaoh's pride to spell the poor man's downfall.

First the vizier went to the harem, and finding that not even his own wives were as corrupt as he, he resolved to search for one who would work with him. Finally he found a hideous old witch who had begun working on alchemy to try and make herself beautiful. The vizier made her a deal, if he were to use his influence and riches to supply her with ingredients then she would marry him and enter the harem; and from there the vizier would be able to carry out his plan. The witch herself was not evil, but greed blinded her to the vizier's intentions.

Once the witch had completed her potion, she soon became the most beautiful woman in Egypt, outshining even the wives of the Pharaoh. Were it not for his pride the Pharaoh would never have cared, but now he did not possess the most beautiful woman for his wife he became jealous. The vizier cackled to himself when he sensed this, as he watched his new wife in the harem and saw the Pharaoh watch her also.

The head eunuch, Jamil, watched the Pharaoh also, and it saddened him to see what the vizier had done; it frightened him also, as it was his job to protect the wives of the Pharaoh and if the Pharaoh were to marry again, then one of his current wives would have to die and be replaced (the Pharaoh was too proud for divorce or an unlucky odd number of wives). Jamil loved all the pharaoh's and vizier's wives as if they were his own sisters, as did all the other eunuchs. Jamil also had a plan.

As the most beautiful of the eunuchs he was able to disguise himself quite easily as a woman, and he took the name Najwa while doing so. His skill at making sweetmeats was also exceptional and so he made two, then dressed in his Najwa costume (that of a servant girl) and walked out into the garden, where the Pharaoh was taking his morning walk. After first offering him one of the sweetmeats, which the Pharaoh most gratefully took, Jamil (Najwah) asked in his sweetest voice: "My master, I have made here two, one for you and one for your favourite wife, to whom should I give the last sweetmeat?"

"Divide it into twenty pieces", said the Pharaoh, "for I love all my wives equally." Had he been of weaker constitution Jamil would have fainted, for this was the worst answer he could hear. Unable to choose which wife to kill, the Pharaoh would des-

troy all his wives and settle for the one who he'd take from the vizier (one was the only lucky odd number).

The flame of jealousy in Pharaoh continued to grow, but he was unable to approach the witch, for she was the wife of another man. It seems the flame went beyond the vizier's control. Soon the vizier was finding snakes in his bedchamber, spiders in his bath and scorpions in his shoes. Whether these were punishments from the heavens or the Pharaoh was not entirely known, but one day a horde of carpenter bees in his robes stung him to death in his bedchambers. Now his new wife was a widow, and available for the Pharaoh. She had learned to love the evil vizier and refused all the Pharaoh's advances.

A dangerous game to play.

This game lasted until one day the Pharaoh swore he would destroy all the women of the palace until she was the only one left, and then she would be his.

Jamil overheard this, and suddenly strange things began happening.

The witch would only be served by women and refused even the eunuchs. But all her servants began to disappear, until there were none left: and similarly all the eunuchs seemed to be reduced in numbers. Also, the wives in the harem went up in height by a few inches and their features were not as fine, but as the Pharaoh wanted only the witch, he

did not notice. He did not know where the servants were going, and assumed his soldiers were killing them as he had ordered. He also failed to notice the new birds which were flying around the gardens, even though they sang the sweetest of songs, songs about love and fate and murder.

The witch watched the birds and smiled, she had saved the women, and now they were free. She had also noticed the women in shawls disappearing in the night, lifted onto horses by eunuchs wearing their clothes.

But all was not well.

The Pharaoh had decided it was time to destroy the women of the harem.

He ordered them all to be transported onto a boat and then forced the witch to come with him and watch the slaughter of his and the vizier's wives.

As soon as they got out to sea from the Nile however, the eunuchs, surround-

ded by soldiers, defiantly pulled off their costumes, with Jamil standing defiantly in front of them, beaming with a rebellious grin, tainted only slightly by the knowledge of his imminent death.

His was the first head to be sliced off, by the Pharaoh's own sword.

The other eunuchs followed, but just as they were being executed the witch threw a vial of powder which exploded and covered all those on the boat. The dead eunuchs fell overboard and became the beautiful dolphins we love so much, the soldiers fell in and became the swordfish and the Pharaoh was pushed in by the witch and became a great shark. We all know how dolphins are famed for defeating the shark; and so it was here.

The witch herself became transformed into a beautiful nightingale and flew back to the Royal Gardens to sit with her companions and sing of what had been.