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## A Tale of the Golden Age of Baghdad



MICHAEL FRIDMAN

Maggots of Heresy:  
A Tale of the Golden Age of Baghdad  
(Online PDF Version)

Michael Fridman

BLADE RED PRESS

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First Published worldwide (print), 2008, Blade Red Press

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ISBN: 978-0-9805782-2-5

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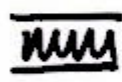
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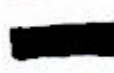
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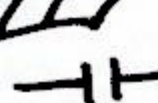
1. Malika's House
2. Amina's House
3. Naima & Samirah's House
4. Ali's House
5. Spice Market
6. General Market
7. Palace
8. Main Square
9. Park near Malika's
10. Hanan's House
11. Observatory
12. Samiyyah's House
13. Cemeteries
14. Main djinnology school
15. Other djinnology schools

 - Tigris

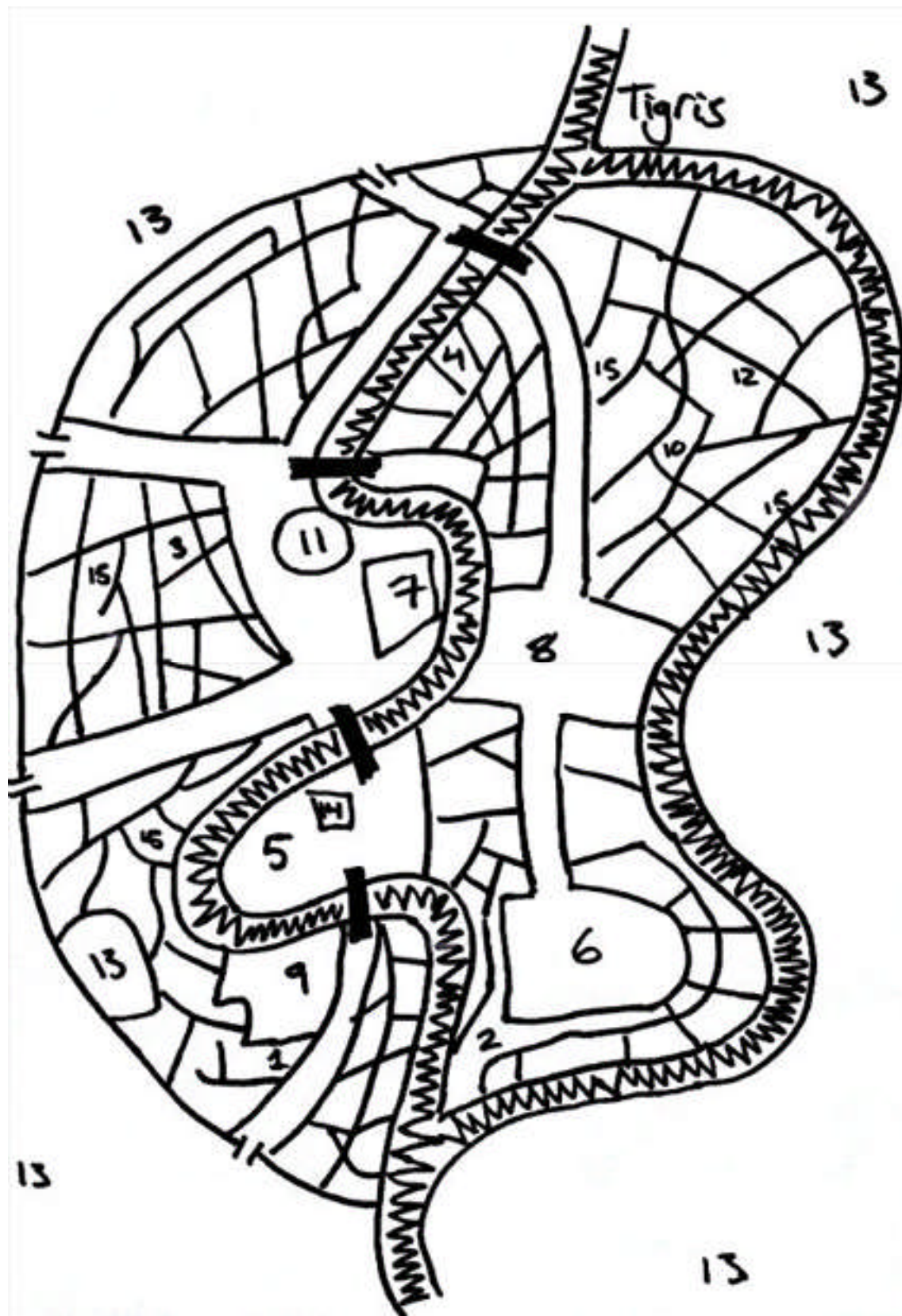
 - Bridge

 - Major street

 - Minor streets

 - City wall gate





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## Chapter 1 in which a hate crime disturbs Baghdad's dogmatic slumber

What made Baghdad's Golden Age golden? It was *not* the advances in sciences, military, engineering, mathematics, farming, food technology, hygiene or any such thing. These were great, but they were only practical things. The practical is not enough. For example, the Trans-Siberian was an astounding *practical* achievement but it only led to the Gulags. It is when we create what seems “useless” from a greedy perspective that we are a civilisation, because then we've abandoned the pure struggle for survival in favour of more lofty goals.

The mark of the Golden Age of the Khalifate was the flourishing of the “useless” arts. And there were plenty. Evolutionary sociologists amongst us will condemn the entire cult of djinnology<sup>1</sup> as one of these, serving little purpose other than social cohesion. Then there are of course calligraphy, poetry, magic squares and the rest. However, there were few epics.

Until one morning an epic descended on the City of Light.

The masterpiece was noticed with the first rays of the sun. It was the folk, not the art-savvy, that saw and appreciated it: street-sweepers, cooks, shopkeepers, donkey drivers, merchants, brigands, assistants and eunuchs who descended onto the Spice Market at the crack of dawn. With first light they saw that someone set up a magnificently daring installation right in the middle of the square. The installation was marked enough for the cooks and eunuchs to call their mistresses; the assistants their scholars; the brigands (and possibly Assassins<sup>2</sup>) their djinnmothers.

Soon a crowd formed around the installation. The idea of setting up the market didn't pop into anyone's head that day. The artwork took up less than a quarter of the area of the square, but in terms of mental gravity it took up twelve thousand percent. The base was bounded by two wagons tilted towards the centre. There was a strange border around the whole thing: about 70-80 bottles on the ground. This perimeter was provocative for it was hard to tell what the empty bottles had in them. There were no labels and they looked like they might have been from ordinary beverages or aphrodisiacs -- but it was also possible they contained the Poison of Fermented Fruit. So even the perimeter made the faint-hearted gasp. Between the wagons were 8 horizontal beams that supported a flat wooden platform. The platform was dirty, some said deliberately. Perhaps the artist had simply poured a bucket of faeces over it but it reeked both smell-wise *and* visually. On the platform stood a single wooden pole that forked into two stakes at the end making a shape like the Latin letter Y. There were more faeces over the base of the pole. The two forks were shit-free though. They had sharp pointy ends and a naked man skewered through them: one of the stakes going through his abdomen, the other through his eye, coming out the back of his head.

This was the centrepiece. There was no question of it being anything but a real corpse. But who said a murder couldn't be a work of art? Who said it couldn't be beautiful? We don't have to approve of something to declare it beautiful. A person can have beauty despite being an asshole. A murderess can be beautiful. So then can an actual murder, even one like this. There was something about the simplicity of the design. The level of contempt shown for the victim was Zen-like, every part of the work testifying to it. Not just the faeces but the fact that the corpse was naked -- the unceremonious, casual placement of the stakes -- the roughness of the wooden platform, every splinter and bump protruding from it showing this most deliberate contempt -- the fact that the whole thing rested on two tilted wagons, so precariously constructed that it looked about to topple over -- the bottles, the spokes on the wheels -- even the location of the Work and its orientation. The crowd watched the sun rise through the middle of the prongs of the Y -- it must have been deliberately aligned this way. Oh, and the fact that this man's Separator was nowhere to be found. It was as if it never existed.

It was beautiful in its ugliness. Ovarial. The blend of colours was terrific, as were the emotions of the growing crowd. It took about an hour for the first words to be spoken. Things were pretty tense before then: murders were extremely rare in Baghdad. Most of the “unnatural deaths” in the Khalifate occurred in the countryside. There was brigandry, Assassin'ry and poverty there, all of which were supposedly absent in the City. Of course, executions did not count as murders in the minds of the populace which made this execution by some Private Citizen even more marked.

“Does--does anyone recognise this man?” asked a voice that belonged to a street-sweeper.

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary

<sup>2</sup> Despite everyone openly saying they were no more, all privately feared them to death



"No, can anyone?"

"We can't exactly see the face, it's quite high. Oh, where are the Khalifa's guards?"

"Here! I see 2."

The guards arrived over 20 minutes ago (nobody called them but you can't stop the word spreading about in a situation like this) but they too were dumbfounded.

"Well, shall someone get him down?"

Two approached the sculpture with no small dread. It took an eternity for them to negotiate the faeces and wood -- getting pricked by a wooden spike covered with shit was a catapult into speedy gangrene and death. At last the victim was laid out on the ground and the front of the crowd came within 2 metres of him. That's the amount of space the people's collective taboo left him, with consensus.

"I know him!" said one. "He's -- *was* a model. For some sculptors and painters."

"...and he's ended up in a sculpture himself."

"Hmm. A waste, really. Look at him, he IS a work of art. There's no wasted flesh or anything, it's all muscle and sinew."

"Can someone cover the beard? It's the least we could do--"

"--I wonder if he had any family. We should seek them out--"

"--definitely a work of art. How could someone have destroyed something so beautiful?"

"And useful! He'd have made some lucky person a great husband."

"Probably fertile beyond belief."

"How do you know, based on comparing his body structure to your husbands'?"

"Well, yeah! He had seed for the most beautiful, cleaver, healthy, Intisar-blessed children in his loins, waiting to burst forth."

"I know what this is -- it's not just a murder. It can't be. It's a crime against humanity. Whoever killed him, she killed all of the future generations that would have sprung from him."

"From *him*?"

"--I--meant from whatever harem he'd have been part of." Most women had harems, and *each* male's seed was believed to contribute to the children's traits.

"Does everyone think the murderer was a woman then?"

"Who else would it be? Who would have the presence of mind to commit such an act -- and the mental capacity to carry it out so fiendishly?"

"A man would never have reason to do this." The notion of a rival husband was foreign to the Baghdadian mindset.

"We have to do something."

"True, I don't know how I can look *my* harem in the eye tonight if I can't guarantee their safety in Baghdad."

"Maybe we should set up a patrol in the next few days to police the streets for the sake of the safety of the men."

"What, and make it consist of the Fighting Sisters? I'm sure the Khalifa (peace be upon her!) has better things to spend her resources on." The Fighting Sisters were the most famous fighting unit. The smallest sub-unit was a Pair. As they were all female they had none of the males' brute force approach. Each Pair was efficient, exquisitely intelligent and fanatically devoted to her fighting partner. The two were virtually inseparable. During the campaigns, they'd be sharing the same meager plot of cold wet ground to sleep in, the same soggy loaf, the same weapons and medicines.

"Maybe it was the painter he was modelling for. I'm sure he had such magnetic eyes when alive -- such a presence... Maybe she looked at them and just one glimpse was enough for Yusuf to leap out of him and infiltrate her?"

"No man could be that magnetic," said one woman with a wily smile.

"You're forgetting that he's plenty magnetic even in his current state," answered her companion and pointed to the corpse, with a bleeding hole in its stomach and eye, unnatural positions of rigor mortis setting in and an eerie gaze from the sole undamaged eye.

"He was my neighbour!" shouted one man pushing his way to the front.

"What? You know his name?"

"Basim."

"Really? That's so sad. Well, may Intisar cause you to smile again in the Everafter, Basim."

"Yes yes, I can't believe we've all forgotten this! Begone Yusuf and enter Intisar!"

"Begone Yusuf and enter Intisar!"

"Begone Yusuf and enter Intisar!"

"Someone should adjust his--"

"--Separator? Yes, yes," said one of the more impatient onlookers and rolling up her sleeves went up and gently covered his Shame with an improvised cloth. "Now has anyone got an idea of what to do now?"

"I do." This voice wasn't like the others -- it had a distinct air of authority and impatience. Every face turned, gasped and parted for the Khalifa who has been standing there for Yusuf knows how long?

The Khalifa's head had a turban with a small colourful peahen feather sticking out. Her lips were thin. According to the leeches, thin lips indicated a dispassionate temperament. Nobody knew what colour hair the Khalifa had -- it was always tucked in. Her usual adornments: three or four gem necklaces and a silken shawl in cream and blue.

"What I *suggest*," she continued as every figure bent to a one-knee kneel, "is that everyone disperse and go about their day. Enough's enough. I've dispatched people to clear this and to start looking for the woman who did this. Meanwhile, I suggest we don't let one murder stop our great city in its tracks. There'll be no Spice Market today, but everything else should go on. Tomorrow even this place will have been cleaned enough for life to continue. Let's go about our day. Johara be with you all."

"Nibal be with you," was the formulaic answer that one could hear whispered a hundred times over by the crowd. Most did not lift their gaze to Nadia's face.

## Chapter 2 in which Malika finds things against her and we discuss the Pleasure Controversy

There was but little time until the guest would arrive so chaos descended onto the household. From outside passers-by could hear chickens, goats, bells, clanking cutlery, stamping little feet, rushing big feet. Today, the big feet were very purposeful. As the servants rearranged furniture to make it suitable for the auspicious leech to visit, Malika lined up her husbands in a semicircle. Mind you, it was a small semicircle, with but 3 members. Other nobles could support much more ostentatious numbers of husbands. But Malika was rarely ostentatious so 3 sufficed.

She scanned them with pride. They've always been presentable and didn't disappoint today, with neatly-trimmed toenails, nicely-selected pants, greatly-delightful tunics. She came up to Jamil, unceremoniously pulled up his Separator and kissed him on the cheek. Ayyub and Daud both slumped in mock disappointment at not having received one themselves.

"Well lads, we haven't much time but I think everything will go smoothly," said Malika addressing all three.

"What's the occasion of her visit?" asked Jamil.

"For all I know, just a friendly visit from our friendly leech."

"With luckily no actual ailment."

"True. Now have you fed the children and put them to bed? I hardly need them hungry and cranky."

"You mean have we done our duties as fathers? Indeed we have! Now, what about the--"

"--Separators?" said Daud, completing Ayyub's words.

"Yes, I thought you only wanted us to wear them when official people come, not personal friends."

"I did. However, not all friends are alike. What counts as acceptable when someone like Samirah's around may have eyebrow-raising effects on the doctor. Plus I *am* trying to be mildly careful. Best not to have too many people knowing you don't do the Donning of the Separator behind closed doors."

The Khalifate frowned upon a man's beard being seen by another woman. Hence the Separator, to be worn prior to any situation where foreign eyes may Peer towards a man. The reason was simple: women were sexual predators who men (with their natural timidity) had to be protected from. Otherwise most wouldn't be able to help themselves and warm institutions like family and trust would be destroyed. In aristocratic households like Malika's, men were expected to wear it indoors too, because of the presence of female servants. Malika had other ideas though. She knew the Separators itched terribly. They were woven

out of rough reeds from the Tigris and dried in the sun for days. Malika found the idea of protecting the Weaker Sex by imposing on it such an uncomfortable device ironic to say the least. Also she wasn't worried about anyone making unwanted advances towards her better-three-quarters. If any other woman tried anything, the consequences would be most unpleasant for all involved.

Malika dismissed them with a telepathic nod, then admired their grace from behind. They'd only been married for six months and there was still the ever-present sense of freshness. Malika expected this to continue. Not surprising: 6 months of marriage gave an average of only 2 months per husband.

A servant opened the door and Samiyyah entered Malika's house. She saw several divans<sup>3</sup>, cylindrical cushions and floor vases. Much less furniture than in most houses of nobility, but it was of impeccable quality. Malika was halfway between ostentation and abstinence, the doctor concluded, a good balance.

"Why you look just like always!" Samiyyah said shifting her gaze Malika-wards.

"As do you! Except for this strange basket which you dragged all the way here despite my most solemn instructions to provide nothing," said Malika hugging the doctor and pointing to the goose she brought.

"Well, you haven't even introduced your husbands! I think I've only met one before...can't remember which one..."

"So sorry. Ayyub. Jamil. Daud." As she mentioned a name, the appropriate one took a step forward.

"Nicely coordinated Separators, by the way."

"Really?" asked Malika, not sure whether to take this as a compliment or a test.

"Hmm. But it *is* rather hot. Perhaps we should disregard custom for comfort."

"You heard her. Off!" The husbands needed no personal invitation: 3 hands went to work and three beards were shamelessly and salaciously exposed in the middle of Malika's living room.

The table had the 5 of them plus Malika's father Salman, who came to live with them after Malika's mother died.

"So, this murder of Basim's been the n--" said Malika but was interrupted by the leech.

"That's all everyone's been talking about. It's not healthy to be this morbid, it upsets the humours. Rather, tell me about newlywed life, Malika," the doctor asked, "after all you're very much at the start of the journey."

"It--it's great. I'm very fulfilled. My husbands are providers of everything I might need."

"You were courting them for quite a while before you married them didn't you?"

"Yes: we've been married 6 months and my daughter is 3 years old."

"Right. So it was these very lads who produced your children."

"It didn't take long for me to know they have the right stuff!"

"I'm sure they have great quality seed. And how *are* they with your children?"

"Why don't you ask them?" said Malika noticing them running out from around the corner. There was Azizah and Abbas, a one-year-old boy. The boy went straight to his mother and sat on her lap but the girl went up to the doctor.

"Azizah, could you be so kind as to tell me about your fathers?"

Azizah blushed for a second. "They're great," she said coughing. "My daddies, they play with me, they take me to the markets..."

"What else do they do?" the doctor prodded.

"They teach me."

"Really? Like what?" said the doctor, her eyes lighting up as social conventions were finally being broken.

"To read. And Daud teaches me to write."

"I've only started", Daud laughed defensively.

"I think it's time for a nap," Malika interjected seeing that Azizah began to feel uncomfortable beyond a mere blush.

A servant led them into the recesses of the house. The table was still frozen at the strain of what Azizah blurted out. Finally after a few seconds of torture, the doctor coughed to get attention.

"Let's clear the air, because this is connected to what I wanted to tell you. Firstly I don't mind."

"Really?"

"You seem like capable, intelligent men," she said for the first time addressing them directly. "Why hire

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<sup>3</sup> See Glossary

a tutor for the children? It's probably better that a girl *is* taught by her fathers. I'm sure you'd be calmer than a tutor, so Azizah will grow up with a goodly balance of humours." The husbands bowed their heads in gratitude.

"You said this was related to what you wanted to tell me?" Malika asked.

"Right. The Khalifa gathered her scholars yesterday. She's commissioning a study. It's obviously about male literacy, silly, how else could it be related?"

"What?" Malika started. "That's...odd. But what will it involve?"

"A survey of all nobles, about the extent of literacy in their harem. Of course you need to be more careful. They're already talking about you."

"About me?"

"Well, since the study was announced you've been a favourite to get into trouble for having too educated a harem. Plus you've been hovering between denial and support for universal literacy."

"I know, I know. I've been sloppy. But now I may have just run out of luck..." Malika said, casting her eyes down, "...still let's not be pessimistic at a joyous occasion. Samiyyah, you still haven't told us about your view of the Pleasure Controversy."

Indeed she hasn't. There were several controversies raging in the scholarly circles of Baghdad. In medicine, whether the use of traditional aphrodisiacs is harmful. In astronomy, the exact inclination of the ecliptic. In djinnology, which djinn<sup>4</sup> has control over the lunar sphere (and hence the tides, menstrual cycle, calendar and time itself). In mathematics, the nature of second degree polynomials. And in physiology, the Pleasure Controversy: whether men are able to feel sexual pleasure or are merely seed receptacles for the purpose of reproduction. The Pleasure Controversy raged for almost a decade and was as serious as any other. Leeches had stopped associating with other leeches who disagreed with them, refused to treat patients who were associated with the opposing camp, and other nasty stuff. It was a matter of intellectual principle for both sides. Before she stated her opinion, Samiyyah briefly went through the basics for the benefit of her uninformed friends.

#### **Arguments against pleasure:**

1. There is no proof of males ever experiencing sexual pleasure. Nor *can* there ever be a proof since pleasure is a subjective experience that can not be verified in an Other entity. Meaning no natural philosopher can ever know if a man feels pleasure or not.
2. Personal claims made by men about their own pleasure cannot constitute evidence due to being unverifiable (see 1). Furthermore, men cannot possibly know the meaning of pleasure (as defined by the Philosophers) because this would constitute an experience of the subjective Other for *them*. Therefore they do not possess the knowledge to classify their own sensations appropriately.
3. Nature does not construct one organ or tissue with two purposes. There is no part of the male genitalia that is not used either for urination or ejaculation. Therefore there is nowhere for this hypothetical Pleasure Centre to be.
4. Women initiate intercourse. If males experienced pleasure they would also initiate it rather than being reactive.
5. Men are physically stronger, built for heavy manual tasks. If the djinns caused them to experience pleasure, they would be creating a wasteful creature that squanders labour at the expense of sex. If they intended to give them pleasure, they would have built them like women, unsuitable for heavy manual tasks.

#### **Arguments for pleasure:**

1. Both sexes are motivated to mate. If we can attribute pleasure as a driving force for one sex, why not the other?
2. If there was no pleasure, males would not have impetus to mate in the animal queendom. Even if you ascribe the motivation in humans to social reasons, this doesn't work for animals whose social structure is very primitive.
3. The actions exhibited by males during intercourse have their counterparts in women so it's reasonable to assume the causes also have their counterparts.

Naturally, each side had a counterargument for these, and each side considered the other to be the

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<sup>4</sup> See Glossary

epitome of circular reasoning.

Samiyyah told them she was on the No side. “Not because of any philosophical reason about whether we *can* ever know -- I'm a doctor so I'm more interested in medical evidence. It is because of the third argument that I'm convinced. What matters is not what we think about the experience of the Other (because that will only leave us arguing for centuries to come, with little progress) but what *organ* we can find for these experiences. If I found a pleasure centre for males I'd be convinced, but since I haven't -- and all signs point to the impossibility of it -- I'm unconvinced.”

“Interesting... What about your husbands? Would the Khalifa be going after them?” Malika asked, having the courage to resume the old topic.

“They are literate. But hardly literary,” said Samiyyah.

“I'm sure there are plenty of households like this,” said Jamil, breaking custom by speaking of his own volition. Instead of furrowing her brow, the doctor smiled.

“There *are* plenty of households where the harem is literate, true. But there aren't many like this one in the whole Khalifate,” Samiyyah said extending a smile of admiration to all 3.

“If I may be so bold as to enquire what makes this household so--”

“--please! Once Malika's daughter had told me she was being taught not only to read but to write, I opened my eyes. And Sha-Ul<sup>5</sup> hadn't reached me yet, I'm not quite blind.” I can see that you three don't just read and write. I can see you Jamil are following the same calling as me.”

Jamil's beard became even more exposed due to his jaw dropping and thus increasing the beard's surface area. This was a much stickier situation. Even Malika's father drowned out the scene by gazing into his plate so intently that a stampeding elephant would not have made him budge. Only Malika was calm: “You're absolutely right, darling. In fact, I was going to subtly broach the subject. I want Jamil to extend his training. But how did you--”

“--you? Subtly broach?! You should be ever-so-grateful that I saved you the effort of having to do something you're incapable of,” said Samiyyah.

“Right, thanks a billion. Back to my question.”

“Lift up your hand Jamil. It's stained from preparing a herbal concoction. The same concoction I believe your daughter drank, if I remember her cough correctly from when she was near me. A cough that's ending by the way, thanks to the mixture you made. Also, you have a cut on your hand. You have attempted some kind of dissection?”

“Just on the goats before the servant takes away the meat for cooking,” said Jamil.

“Well, good! If you can heal your family what does it matter that you can't attend a doctor's college? And yes Malika, I'll help him. But not yet. He's inexperienced. How many dissections have you performed?”

“But a few feeble amateurisms.”

“OK. I'll start showing you things after you've added another hundred feeble amateurisms. But not of goats.”

There was another silence - everyone at the table contemplated with horror the thought of human corpses being delivered to the household (and the political and social repercussions). The doctor erupted in a piercing laugh. “Did you think I meant-? I can't even say it without giggling. I meant a pig. A pig's body is probably the closest within the animal queendom to womankind. That and you can legitimately obtain them without attracting suspicion.

“I don't know what to say. Thank you so much,” Malika said laying her hand on the doctor's amulet.

“Just stay out of trouble at the Court. As for your thanks, save them until I'm in a situation as troubling as yours and I need your help.”

“I'll diarise it.” Everyone was glad the shadow passed (twice!).

Daud and Ayyub sat in their quarters. We don't know what they were thinking. Their thoughts have become lost through the mists of time, for there was no scribe to write them down or give them consequence. Perhaps they were deliberating, each to himself, whether in fact they did experience any pleasure at all. Or perhaps they found the whole debate ridiculous. Maybe they were even scorned, outraged and the like. We'll never know.

Jamil was nowhere to be found.

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<sup>5</sup> Sha-Ul was a djinn with a nasty habit of gouging eyes out with the most unlikely and disgusting objects. Like bloody animal bones, amputated human limbs and rusty shipping anchors.



*She's going to have a tough time ahead. I guess I'll humour Jamil. I didn't want to discourage him in front of everyone, but what kind of doctor he'll make (if any) is up for debate. Why, he probably doesn't have the stomach to examine my-*

Samiyyah stopped as she saw a dim Jamil-shaped figure approach her. *He must have snuck out the back entrance.* Of course, she couldn't tell for sure which one he was: the Separator was faithfully concealing his facial hair.

"I just had to thank you once again. And I hope I won't disappoint in my endeavours. As a token of my gratitude--"

--bla bla bla. No need to be so formal. What do you have?" she said, slightly annoyed at the thought of having to accept some worthless trinket. He pressed a paper into her palm, bowed and vanished. Samiyyah rushed to her house, quick as could be. The moonlit Baghdad canals and trees went by like lightning. She reached her door, bolted up the stairs, wrenched a candle from her housekeeper's hand and lit up the paper. It was an immaculate amulet against Yusuf -- one with a different wording that had a potency a hundred times greater than her current. Samiyyah sank to the floor, feeling her worldview tilt.

### Chapter 3 in which the Khalifa muses about the Golden Age

Malika headed off to the Palace, pondering how she might approach the Khalifa. Lying to her outright about her husbands was the safest short term option, but very risky long term. There was the option of minimising the damage by talking it down. This was dangerous as it would open a torrent of questions that would result in more scandal. Malika will appear to have concealed the nature of her household. Well, not just *seeming* to have concealed -- this option would involve actual concealment.

"You can always march to the Khalifa, tell her everything and insist that there's absolutely nothing wrong with your husbands becoming, doctors, calligraphers, djinnologists, poets etc etc. and she can get stuffed," Malika's cousin Amina suggested for a laugh the day before when they met for a chat about the situation. This had its own problem -- there was *everything* wrong with it. Except maybe the element of surprise! Other options were even weaker.

"There's only one thing I know -- I have to go tomorrow. I can't wait to be summoned to take part in the study. I need to be proactive and at least get the advantage of first strike," Malika told Amina during their talk.

"And then what? You march over there and tell her everything?"

"No. But still, I'll try maximise honesty. I'll ask her what the purpose of the study is. I *am* dying to know. I'll also say I've found out the rumours about me, which is also true. She should then appreciate my situation in terms of not wanting to turn my house inside out whilst still having to answer my critics."

"That's pretty good. She'll then be too tactful to probe too much. Or she'll turn a blind eye to it -- after all she's been known for tolerating *some* heresy in a person if her contributions to society are sufficient. Anyway, it's the best chance to give you some time," said Amina. "But then what?"

"Honestly I have no idea. It depends on the situation. However, I've a feeling everything will be exposed anyway, so my only hope is to convince the Khalifa that what I'm doing is right."

Nadia received news of Malika's arrival. *Should I sit or stand for when she comes in? I could sit, but that would be too formal. Too ceremonial. But then if I stand I might overwhelm her. Although I hardly tower over her. Shit, I've got to decide already or it'll take too long. Anyway what's she arrived for?* The Khalifa was rarely comfortable around Malika. Besides the obvious Reason, perhaps it was also Malika's name that was a symbolic threat to her autocracy. Or maybe the fact that she lived outside the city Centre, and generally didn't do things like most. Then again, the plum on the plov<sup>6</sup> could have been Malika's fuller

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<sup>6</sup> See Glossary

lips.

Nadia solved the problem in an ingenious manner. She approached one of the shorter divans and leaned against it, half-sitting half-standing. *Let her decide. Then I'll follow and our interaction will be in accord.* "Send her in."

The eunuch bowed and ran to the door to open it, careful to lift her skirt so as not to trip. The last eunuch who did this in the Khalifa's presence was made to scrub floors for a week.

"Welcome," the Khalifa said after Malika came in and kissed her hand in the customary manner.

"Peace and exultation onto you my Ruler." Saying the formula for the trillionth time, Malika still managed to make it sound authentic.

Nadia waved her hand in a vague direction which Malika interpreted to mean she should sit on the divan. Nadia finally sat down completely, clearly relieved by her dilemma being resolved.

Malika waited until the coffee was served.

"So, Khalifa, how have you been in these last twenty six days since I had the grace?"

"Very well thank you...can't complain," she said with a touch of a smile at her ever-so-minute departure from the norm.

"Intisar be praised."

"So what brings you here?"

"I want to inquire about the study."

Now it was Nadia's turn to let her jaw drop a little.

"*Rasha! Rasha!*"

"Yes my Ruler?" The eunuch was over in but an instant.

"Bring us some more coffee and the proposal the scribes wrote about the study."

Nadia waited in an almost subservient hush until Rasha left.

"Documents will be fetched. But what *about* the study?"

"You tell me!" Malika exclaimed, immediately adding "my Ruler" to cover up her momentary outburst. "I've only heard that it's to be a study of literacy among men. Can you tell me a bit more? I *am* intrigued."

"Well, I want to take stock of our culture in the Khalifate. Assess this Golden Age of ours." Malika nodded impatiently -- she'd heard the Golden Age thing 12,000 times before. She even mockingly lip-synched the words 'Golden Age' along with the Khalifa.

"Which of your subjects would you like to study?"

"Ideally, all. But that's hardly feasible. What I will do is inquire at least the members of Court."

"Right. And what is it you'd like to know?"

"Everything. But largely it's a historical issue. Is their household more literate -- and literary -- than it was a generation or two ago? How has the flourishing of the arts and sciences impacted on them? And of course those factors specific to men: which males within the household can read, what they read and for what purpose. As well as any other education and knowledge they might perchance possess."

"And what do you hope to...?" Malika paused, wondering if she was being too demanding. But Nadia nodded.

"This depends on what the study will reveal of course. We are not barbarians, jumping to action and conclusion. I do not wish to be 'inferring the antecedent' here." The analogy wasn't good but with Nadia's confidence it sounded authoritative.

The pair shuffled around the divan comfortably as the servants opened the windows and the pleasant end-summer afternoon flooded in. Nadia relaxed a little, sensing what would follow. And realising she had the upper hand, that it was *her* face that was uplifted over Malika's in this particular instance. That was a most pleasurable feeling.

"Of course, what I hope to achieve is the knowledge of how to develop my citizens. And make sure they aren't having their collective intellect dissipated too much by their husbands. But tell me, why do you ask? Out with it."

Malika took a breath, long enough to gather herself, short enough so as not to make it obvious she was gathering. "As you know, my Ruler, there have been some rumours about me lately. Rumours about my alleged unorthodoxy. That I have a household that's out of control. That in this den of iniquity I let my husbands run wild with any flight of intellectual fancy and treat them as I would my girlfriends. I've only found out about them a few days ago and was shocked."

Nadia smiled. "Yes there have been rumours."

"Well, I just wanted to find out how this study affects me. I obviously deny being a bad citizen or engaging in unseemly acts. But I don't want to turn my house inside out just to prove my innocence. I'm

sure you appreciate my situation -- this study affects me more than most because of the rumours.”

“And you wanted to ask me how to proceed?”

“...yes!”

The Khalifa rose quickly, the inertia of the movement sending a gush of air through her clothing. *This is it, she's looking to me for advice! But I better start now, matter-of-factly.* It was Nadia's turn to take her long-yet-short breath. “What do you expect me to say, Malika? Obviously I can't advise you to avoid the study. Or to lie. Or to,” Nadia chuckled at the thought, “flee the Khalifate, all from some slightly personal questions. Come and answer. Answer truthfully but you don't need to volunteer extra information. I know the gossipmongers will be most delighted if you're defensive. They'll have a ball creating conspiracy theories from each of your words, each intonation, each dot and tittle in the transcript of your answers. So just come and do it -- no more, no less.”

Malika bowed her head in gratitude. In a way, she was right, although clearly “no more no less” would have to be massaged a little. *But not much*, she thought, *after all I don't really let my husbands run wild, and I certainly don't promote equality...*

“Oh and you know what?” Nadia started as if being hit with an incredible idea. “Show them how you can contribute to the Golden Age. After all,” she said coming up to Malika and patting her on the shoulder, “you've yet to pick a career for yourself.” For the first time in ages, Malika found the Khalifa's smile patronising.

“So you mean I should--”

“Become a patron of the culture -- sorry, *cultures* we have here. After all...” She left the divan and walked over to a table, taking an hourglass to Malika. “Where else in the world could you get this made so exquisitely?”

The Khalifa was right. It magnificent. Two spherical bowls, perfect in a way that was only reflected by the perfection of the heavens. Made of the finest glass that seemed as if it wasn't there at all. Hemispheres connected by a fine cylindrical tube. Carved wooden base at each end existing for so much more than support (the outside decorative, with carved patterns and flowers finer than a baby's fingernail; the inside practical, with tables of time units). Ethereal sand. The whole room, the whole city, revolved around such ingenuity.

“You see what I mean. Malika, you can participate in our most radical advances. The world of quadratic equations, the aphrodisiac debate, the structure of the male body, the equinoxes. These can all be yours. And then the rumours will be just that, and nothing more.”

Malika nodded, again appreciating the irony of how the Khalifa's advice was actually useful to her, despite her real situation being quite different to what the Khalifa thought. “My Ruler, may I ask you a question?”

“You may.”

“Did you not want to do all this yourself? I mean what you're encouraging me to do? Before you assumed power? When--”

“--watch yourself. You don't know what you're asking.” Nadia tried to sound stern but her answer and even her manner told Malika all she needed.

“I'm sorry my Ruler. Of course, you're absolutely right. By the way, how did you get the idea of the study?”

“Oh, simple. It was suggested by a dear friend, who I was discussing the Golden Age with.”

“Really?” Malika was back on guard, making sure not to reveal her eagerness.

“Yes, Hanan, the philosopher.”

When Malika got back, part of her face was cheerful but the other part had a darkness over it, a darkness that lasted for a few days.

## Chapter 4 in which the Khalifa uses two methods to gather information about her city

The door closed but the Khalifa waited till she saw the top of Malika's head swim past the window. This was indeed a good meeting. She managed to pull out a lot more information from Malika than the latter had realised. She also managed not to show her own suspicions. *The girl must be mad if she thinks I haven't been put on guard by her pre-emptive appearance. Of course she's concerned pragmatically. If it was a matter of honour, she'd have been indignant. Here, she was a swan stepping on teacups. It's impossible she's not hiding at least a little. Woman, how I hate this whole culture! If only she could fucking tell me plainly just like Before, and I could answer her right back, just as plainly. But in courtly intrigue...*

Nadia sighed and hesitated for a second before ringing the bell and seeing Rasha appear.

"Yes, My Ruler?"

"I'll have my daily report now." This was a tradition Nadia's great-grandmother instituted. One the Khalifa didn't mind, for it brought the chaos of her daily business into a cozy cohesive ritual. The report consisted not of mere detached reading but of formulas of the spoken word. Like magic Nadia's labial twitches would turn into the twitches of the Khalifate's bureaucracy.

"Very well. The--"

"--but there is something I'd like you to tell me first. As part of your report."

"A rundown on rumours about Malika?"

Nadia smiled but inwardly trembled. Of course, it was Rasha's *job* to know everything there was to know. But lately, she reached the stage where she was too in-the-know. Was it time to replace her? Not yet. But Nadia did make a note that Rasha will have too much influence soon. *That's the problem with these eunuchs -- once they're in charge of anything, they do it better than anyone else could have. And soon, they're essential, indispensable.* Indispensable people are dangerous, they might become unavailable. Worse, they might need to be dispensed with. The problems of dispensing with the indispensable were crystal clear to this stateswoman.

"Yes."

"There is no direct evidence that she doesn't believe in the Great Djinn." Apostasy was a very serious offence where the normally-benign Khalifate would give out weighty penalties. So, it required substantial proofs.

"What about her general commitment to the Khalifate?"

"In this manner, I believe she is impeccable. To my knowledge of course," Rasha hastened to add. One can never be too careful about coming across as omniscient, even if Rasha almost was.

"No taxation problems? No breaches of etiquette? No weaseling out of duties? No dereliction in contributions to the army? No unseemly friendships or associations? No excessive contact with foreigners? No extensive travels outside the borders? No scandals? No unreasonable conflicts with scholars or djinnologists? No disrespect or coolness in obeying holy women? Not even in the slightest?" The Khalifa stopped, tired of looking at Rasha shake her head vigorously.

"Her husbands?" she asked getting to the accusations' meat.

Rasha felt herself blush: her nose and ears heated up especially.

"Don't worry, just say it like it is. It's important."

"Then you better sit down."

Nadia sat and slouched, having found herself pacing.

"They say that she lets her husbands do anything. They can choose when they get up, when they take their meals, when they go to bed and the rest. There is no discipline, they are like wild dogs. Most seriously, she even lets them suggest which of them she will have intercourse with. As in, she does not simply select."

Nadia squeezed her jaws. This was stuff that would make the worldliest intrigante blush but she was determined to show no surprise. She told Rasha to continue. Rasha felt the weight of the collective embarrassment press her head. Yes, there was only her and her Ruler in the room, but that was enough. She looked to the vase of blue and orange flowers on the table. How magnificent they were! While she was talking, Rasha swore she could see them slowly wither. Such was the power of the obscenities coming out of her mouth. The embarrassment was so great, Rasha finished what she was saying imagining her body from the outside, moving her mouth dispassionately, as if she were her own puppet.

"She does not cause them to wear the Separator. Sometimes she allows them to simply walk around

naked, and even encourages this behaviour. Her husbands are fully literate. All three of them. The rumours are unclear here. Some say she actually taught them herself, while others are convinced that their prior literacy was the chief reason she selected this particular harem over all others. Like it was the main criterion." Certainly each alternative was far, far worse than the other.

"They read almost daily. Whatever they want, not just male literature. They apparently each have an area of expertise in which they have reached a status almost rivalling top scholars. One area is djinnology, the other is astronomy and the other poetry, if I'm not mistaken. Malika obtains the latest developments and manuscripts using an elaborate network of gophers who are constantly collecting, copying, hiding and transporting these around all Baghdad. She has the ambition of advancing her husbands so that they will reach an *official* position of influence in the city. She also allows, nay *demands*, that it is they who teach her two children, not a female tutor. Obviously this means she is teaching her son to be *literary* from his extremely early age. Finally, although she may not be an apostate herself, one of her husbands is. Word is he rejected traditional djinnology and has developed his own. He interacts with the djinns -- may my lips that say such things fall off! -- in a totally new manner, all for his own gain and the advancement of her household. Or should I say HIS household. Animals are delivered there daily to be sacrificed in his rituals. Sometimes even children are taken there to be slowly dismembered, impaled or boiled alive. Cute baby girls who haven't even got their first set of teeth..." Rasha let the oppressive atmosphere reach its climax for dramatic effect and then continued in the most cheerful, matter-of-fact tone. "So this is the picture of the rumours. As you can see they range greatly in severity. And of course, that's all they are. All completely unverified. I've no evidence of any, and don't know anyone who has."

When it was over, Nadia found herself a turtle, its neck pulled back into its portable house as far as possible. It was times like these that Rasha truly frightened her with her dramaticism, her overpowering gaze and penetrative Word. What she lacked in genitalia and a uterus, she made up for in infinite resourcefulness. Perhaps it was time to increase Rasha's duties in the harem. Let her run the household for a change. Although how much work was there for her really, with Khalifa's great array of husbands that solely consisted of Mansur?

Forty minutes later, the Khalifa was in her private quarters. She dismissed all servants and, left in solitude, began to dress. It was close to dusk. The Baghdad sunset could be seen from her window, the sun's rays licking their last buildings before they receded. Nadia had about an hour to go out into town and return before she was noticed.

Having finished dressing, Nadia slipped out of a secret door (could the Khalifa's palace NOT have a secret door?). There were stairs that immediately led to the middle of the city. Nadia floated down and was soon immersed in the crowd of a middle-sized Baghdad street. There were many classes and occupations represented: male street-sweepers finishing up work; eunuchs, slaves, servants hurrying to their mistresses; cooks out shopping for a feast; tradeswomen hoarding their things home; vendors selling nuts, pickles, sweetmeats and spicy beverages; people of all ages, social positions and genders out for strolls; manuscript store owners, musicians, jugglers and entertainers hurrying to their night shift; the occasional thief. But none recognised Nadia, none bowed, none even turned: she was wearing the clothes of an ordinary Baghdadian. No turban, no peahen feather, no jewellery. This was Nadia's own invention, for she could not rely on reports alone. Nadia wanted to know what was *really* happening out there. She established a biweekly routine of wandering through the streets of Baghdad at night in disguise, seeing what life was like. And what people were saying about her. This was her work, her doing, nobody had done this before her. Nobody was going to do this after her. This made it all the more enjoyable.

She headed for the Spice Market. Here all hell broke loose in terms of a sharp tang of spices. This was a national obsession. Only in Baghdad could there be two main markets -- one for spices and fragrances and the other for everything else, whether food, clothes, fabrics, amulets, books, animals and things better left unsaid. Nadia encountered at least twelve different kinds of cinnamon. The mild batches, reminiscent of timid boys being chased by a girl. The spicy ones like a heavy meal served at a lavish banquet. The fruity ones, with an apricot or grape flavour. Nadia entered the abdomen of the market where the smell took on a multi-dimensional shape. If you were attuned to spices and fragrances -- and who in Baghdad wasn't! -- you'd be able to differentiate up to twenty different kinds of spices, along with dozens of flavours for each spice. Cardamom, cloves, ginger, ginseng (yes, they had ginseng in the Khalifate), paprika, red and green chilli, turmeric, sesame, hashish oil, mint, incense, coriander, peppers, various anointing oils and soaps were just a puny selection. She couldn't stop from smelling the spices and flowers for but a second.

Then there were the aphrodisiac stalls which she passed on her way out. Each substance was a colourful



liquid held in a different glass vial. Most were tightly sealed but some (the ones with the thinnest necks) were open so customers could sample them. The feeling around the vials was even more powerful than around the spices. Nadia felt it shake her to the core as she quickened her step to avoid distractions. *Perhaps they're right, those who consider the use of aphrodisiacs to be unhealthy. What other substance has such a tremendous effect on people's...psyche?* In the Aphrodisiac Controversy, some claimed they were actually harmful to a woman if she intends on getting pregnant, having unseemly effects on the foetus. Others considered the idea ridiculous -- in order for a healthy society, people should have a continued and active schedule of intercourse with their husbands. The alternative is stagnation and the introduction of new spouses into the household, creating tension. What harm then in drinking or sniffing some very strong liquids?

She eavesdropped catching snippets of the street from all around.

--what are you talking about? I bought that basket from another stall in full honesty. And I suggest you shut your---gone completely nuts. She now wants fresh and new flowers in her room at every meal! 'But they're out of season,' I say. Do you know what she---for your husbands? They will enjoy the succulent contents of this vial, as shall you. As it is written in the Odes to Johara---start the show? I'll be coming back from my sister's, hope to catch you playing---it was commissioned by the architect who probably communed with Yusuf himself. Have you seen the size of the entrance? Why it's as---the story of one of the Khalifas of old. Rumour has it she had a magic signet ring, which has been passed to the current Khalifa and which enables her---against the barbarians. But she doesn't have to leave for a week because they haven't mobilised the---pickle. However, most of these manuscripts will leave you breathless from---suggest that you leave immediately before I call the guards, I've never had a customer who---

After almost an hour of this, Nadia turned on her heels and, satisfied that all was well, hurried back.

There was a special room within the Palace. It was on the way from the large dining hall to the audience chamber. Not quite a museum, it showcased some of the more glowing elements of the Empire's achievements. Perhaps that's why most members of Court avoided it, preferring to move from the audience to the meal and vice versa through a longer route that was less taxing on the mind.

There were exceptions of course.

One such exception walked along the corridor and into the Space later that evening. A shadow: the Space wasn't lit (what for?). The figure strolled around like she owned the room, like this was how she spent many an evening walk in the Palace.

There was much *stuff* in the room: manuscripts with treatises, a few vials, a few star charts, some specimens in a jar, some small contraptions hauled here because they weren't too space-consuming. In all, it was what you'd expect from the Khalifate. It was as if someone broke the Golden Age with a single swift swing of the mallet, watched it shatter into all its myriads of golden shards, collected a few and lovingly placed them inside a palace. They were pale imitations of the whole state of affairs. But they were still impressive, reflecting some of the whole (as any respectable golden shard will).

The figure wasn't interested in golden shards. Instead, she walked to a dull poster. By dull, I don't mean boring, I mean the opposite of shiny. On the contrary, the poster interested the figure very much. It was a medical chart, displaying the most cutting-edge advances in anatomy and physiology. But it was much more than a mere representation of the human body. It presented the spirit of scientific enquiry in the Khalifate. Although the poster showed the internal organs it did not give the impression of a corpse. The image had long, flowing hair. And there was something terribly alive and vibrant in her gaze that was directed at the viewer. All in all it had the same perfect blend of objective enquiry and djinnological values that the Khalifate saw itself pursuing. Any Baghdad observer (whether scholar or boor) would have agreed the poster was *the* quintessential human.

The real figure, wasn't. She eyed the poster with some fascination and her eyes glowed a little in the dark, showing admiration, resentment, hatred and awe. She went up to the poster and ran her fingers over the edges of the body, let her fingertips trace the natural curved contours of the organs. When she passed over the reproductive organs, her finger trembled. There it was. What *should* be. What wasn't. The absurdity of that day, the blind cruelty that no human could ever find an explanation for. She didn't relive the pain of her experience. Going so deep after so long was hardly possible. What she did relive was the absence. The first feeling of not knowing what now makes her human. The shame. Always looking at her limbs and body from the outside. With every living cell in it feeling foreign, wrong, improper. That and the feeling that she can't just wallow in herself (or should that be in her lack-of-self?) all the time, that she needs justice done. What made this poster ironic was the amulet formula below. It talked of the sacredness

(and untamperability!) of the body and beseeched the djinn in charge of the body (Johara) to send complete knowledge of this perfection, "in order that it may be utilised for perfect healing and order".

Her musings were interrupted by a bell from the dining room. She took her finger off the poster without hesitation or regret. "Coming!" she shouted. Then she left the room, quickly and gracefully. In fact, she almost skipped like a young gazelle.

## Chapter 5 in which Malika and Hanan debate

As the servant told her the news, Hanan put down her coffee in disgust. A visitor? Now? That was highly out of the ordinary. Was she some public servant so everyone can simply drop by?

"Said, give her my regards. And then make her wait in the front room for at least ten minutes," she ordered the tall servant as he gave his usual silent assent. "Well, go on, visitors don't stall themselves!" She clapped her hands together and by her second clap, Said was no longer in the room.

Great minds don't have to be pleasant, especially if they're actually involved in producing something great. Since Hanan was convinced of the latter, she definitely believed in the former.

Hanan took a long breath in, then continued to stir the sugar, looking out the window into the nothingness of tree branches and the birds thereon. As was expected from a woman whose occupation consisted almost entirely of contemplation, Hanan knew the value of all those idle moments in her day. Only her day consisted of little more. True, she used them productively, as could be seen from the contents of her table as well as her dress. Both of these said one thing: "I am very busy and I am doing very important work so I have absolutely no time to expend on externals, appearances, style and the rest." Her dress said it in its haphazard arrangement. It wasn't poorly chosen. It was quite attractive to an extent. But it wasn't put on *for anyone*, not even Hanan herself. It was merely a chore, because this was custom and Hanan didn't bother questioning it. If it could have saved her time, she'd have walked around naked. Her table echoed the same thing from the fact that her work was mixed perfectly with her meal. The tablecloth supported plates with various fruits, flatbreads, jams, pastries, flaky cakes, nuts; but also about a dozen books (most opened to different pages, some lying with their spine up), writing paper, scrolls, drawings, manuscripts, quills, three or four out-of-place candlesticks and a gorgeous metal spice rack in the shape of rectangle with an elephant on each side.

Malika entered. She held out her hand with her palm towards the philosopher. Hanan returned the greeting and stood up. *Nice. Precluding me from sitting down. Even better, I'd rather walk and talk.*

"Hi Hanan. How have you been in these last five months since I had the grace?" Their last meeting consisted of only a polite hello at a court function. As did every prior meeting.

"I'm splendid. Progressing very well, thank you."

"Intisar be praised."

"So what did you grace me for?" Hanan had absolutely no time to waste.

"I wanted to...ask you about certain aspects of philosophy. Especially yours." No harm in some flattery from the start.

"Interesting--wait a minute! You have yet to pick a path for yourself, am I right?"

"Your suspicions are confirmed."

"What suspicions?"

"N-nothing." Malika's face reddened -- she wasn't used to being caught off guard with a stray comment. "You're right."

"And you want to explore the greatness -- and smallness -- of the world of philosophy."

"That's right. Or I mean, whatever little time you can spare today will be of tremendous help. I do know a thing or two about the Philosophers."

Hanan started towards the door, grabbing a shawl and throwing it over her shoulders in one motion. It seemed as if she was fleeing the room.

She just threw a little explanation Malika's way. "Then you'd know how She conducted Her talks, so

into my garden we go.”

They went into the garden, which was a magnificently tended private garden at the back of Hanan's household. Hanan didn't tend to it herself -- she left such worldly duties for Said. It was when she found herself amongst a hundred roses sticking out of the bush that Malika did remember that the Philosopheress conducted all her lectures on foot, so that she and her students could enjoy the physical exercise in complement to the mental. They even called her and her disciples the Strollers. Suddenly this whole visit to Hanan didn't seem so daunting or unpleasant. She followed on and they walked side by side.

“So where shall I start?”

“I'm not sure. After all one of the luxuries of ignorance is ignorance of the extent of one's ignorance.”

Hanan smiled outwardly and Malika inwardly, for she was saying all the right things. “Right. In that case, I'll start with a simple question. A bottle of perfume costs 10 dinars. The bottle costs nine dinars less than the perfume. How much does each thing cost?”

“That's easy! The bottle is one dinar and the perfume nine.”

Hanan stopped in her tracks. “Really? Think about it again.”

“What's there to think about?”

“Does your solution fit the problem correctly? What was the problem?”

“The bottle costs nine dinars less than the--but wait, if one costs 1 and the other 9 then the bottle costs only 8 dinars less.”

“Yep. So the real answer is--”

“--not as easy as I thought. So then...the difference must be nine and they must add up to ten. This isn't a trick problem, it's just an algebra problem disguised as a simple one-liner. If I then remember my schooling sufficiently, the sum of the sum and difference is equal to twice the value of the larger. So twice the perfume is nineteen dinars. The perfume is nine and a half and the bottle is only half a dinar! Then one really is nine dinars greater than the other. Wow, that's it!”

“Indeed. But the point was not to test whether you can remember the formula of the sum-of-a-sum-and-a-difference. It was merely to show that a philosopher must always question even accepted truths. It's best to accept as little as possible as being simply 'obvious' -- because then we can make some horrible mistakes. Especially when dealing with topics a tad more important than perfumery.” Hanan was actually enjoying her instruction. *This could turn out not to be a complete waste of my time.*

Of course, Malika did remember this exact problem, and its solution. But simply telling it would not achieve the results she wanted today.

“What about logic? Give me a counterexample to the reverse of the inclusion argument.”

“Perhaps I could if I knew exactly what it was, in lay terms.”

“Sorry, I keep forgetting. I'm hardly used to dealing with the laity. The inclusion argument is simply *all As are Bs, C is an A therefore C is a B*. The reverse would be *all As are Bs, C is a B therefore C is an A*.”

“Oh is that all it is? I still remember a few things about logic. Umm, a real-life example?”

“That's right.”

“How about: *all life is sacred, amulets are sacred therefore amulets are a form of life*.”

The answer brought another smile to Hanan's face, having impressed her by its tongue-and-cheekness.

“So you're saying the Philosopheress proved the existence of the djinns?” Malika was asking about fourteen minutes later.

“Oh, yes, my dear Malika. You'll find She has proved anything and everything. And if you take this up, She will continue to surprise you in her depth and breadth of observations. She actually proved it not once but many times. But I think we only have time for one. See this cloud above us? See how it majestically moves over the sphere of the earth? Soon it will leave us behind and then drift off beyond the Tigris, the Khalifate and Yusuf-knows-where. Perhaps if only to rain down on a barbarian peasant's plot of land so her family has extra income and food to cause mischief.”

“I didn't know you were a poet too!”

“To cut to the chase, why does it move?”

“Umm, to give rain to the barbarian peasant?”

Never before had Hanan laughed so thoughtlessly thrice in a one hour period, but she really was impressed and amused by Malika's seemingly coincidental remarks. “Actually, it's something the Philosopheress might have said herself. But I'm asking about the immediate, physical cause of its movement.”

“Sorry, in that case it would be moved by the wind.”

“Very good. And what then is the wind?”

“It is the movement of air, I guess. The atoms move.”

“Do they move by themselves or are they like the cloud, caused to move by something else?”

“They just move, I guess. What else do we know that can possibly shed light on this?”

“We have our eyes. Have you ever seen any object move of itself? I mean without any force being applied by another moving object. Does a rock ever fly off by itself into the air without a hand or sling to move first thus guiding it?”

“No. It doesn't. Wait, what about an animal?”

“It needs food. The energy locked up in the food is the mover. So can there be any object that would move of itself?”

“No. There wouldn't.”

“So it naturally follows that an atom wouldn't either. Inferring from the whole to the parts. It had to have been set into motion by another atom knocking into it, and that one would have also been set into motion in the same manner and so on.”

“Ad infinitum?”

“Well, therein we find a very interesting problem. Could there possibly be an infinite regress of causes, so that if you were transported back in time, no matter how far, you would always find more and more atoms, moving and being moved by others? You know the ancients believed the world was supported by a giant turtle?”

“Indeed. How we've moved on from that!” answered Malika. *Yes, we believe in djinns now*, she thought.

“Well, if I saw that turtle and saw that it was supported by another and it by another and so on, even if I were satisfied that there *are* turtles 'all the way down' so to speak, I'd still ask who put them there. If there is an answer, then this must have been caused by a Causeless Cause. A cause that's not material or influenced by the bumping of the atoms. A cause that actually *made* the infinite regression of movements. A non-material cause.”

Malika's eyes immediately lit up as if she had suddenly stumbled onto the treasure. “In other words a djinn?”

“Correct. And it works for the other case. If there is no infinite regress, there had to have been a first atom to have moved. And this had to have been caused by something that wasn't an atom, right (otherwise what kind of first atom would it be)? So again we have a causeless, immaterial cause.”

“So this argument *aims* to prove the existence--”

“--of at least one djinn.”

“Which one? How do we know about the others?”

“Well, we don't have all the answers in philosophy. In fact, very few. Part of my work is tying in the works of the Philosopheress to our djinnological traditions. But without going into details, let's just say proving at least one djinn is sufficient.”

“There's no argument for several?”

“No, there is. Developed by the Philosopheress. Of all people!” she said playfully-sarcastically. “But I think it would be too much for now.”

“Come on, I'm on a roll!”

“Perhaps. I'll abridge. No matter how much you look into the world, you'll see that like effects proceed from like causes. A cause must hence resemble its effect in essence, just like the movement of the bumped atom must be like the movement of the bumping atom. So the first cause had to have been perfectly simple, as its effect was the perfectly simple first movement of that first atom. But if we look out into the world again, we'll find many effects other than movement. There's thought, as well as emotion, perception, heat, generation. And many more. So there couldn't be simply the one cause, because in that case all we'd have is movement. Therefore, our compulsory djinn grows to a compulsory handful.”

“I thought the Philosopheress didn't believe in the djinns as we do?”

“Yes, even the best minds must have some flaw. The Philosopheress herself wrote so!”

“Actually, I just remembered a question I had some time ago,” Malika started, feeling ready.

“Fire away.”

“You were saying about food being the fuel and mover of the animal. And presumably the human. How do we actually know that? Maybe it's in fact an exception to the caused movements theory. How do we know about what goes on inside an animal?”

“Even if we didn't, we could safely assume that they needed something to move them by analogy to inanimate objects. And then food would be the best candidate for this something. However, we *do* know,

for the Philosopheress conducted a thorough investigation and classification of all kinds of animals and the processes they undergo. We know about feeding, breathing, movement, generation, growth, disease, death. Well, not everything obviously. But it is true that the food you consume is a direct cause of all your movement just like it's true that it is the female that passes on her characteristics to the offspring."

"So you think a person's intelligence or bravery or...lechery, are inherited from the mother only?" Malika was going to make conversational way to the literacy study but Hanan's remark sidetracked her. "I was under the impression, along with everyone I know, that each husband contributes part of his seed and hence some characteristics to the offspring. Isn't that why we *have* several husbands, to maximise the noble characteristics of our children?"

"There's a big difference between popular thought and reality. We may tell people that, because they aren't sophisticated enough to understand the truth. Aren't you a good friend of Samiyyah? She hasn't told you all about the generation of animals? It's a most fascinating topic, and very important for therein lies the purpose of at least the lower beasts."

"We don't really discuss her profession. But by all means enlighten me."

"I hardly think this is the appropriate time for a full account. But basically when insemination occurs, the male provides a trigger. The trigger is a mechanical catalyst that causes the movement within the female (the interconnected movement of atoms we spoke about earlier) whereby an embryo is created with the mother's characteristics. This embryo then grows into a full female. However, in just over fifty percent of cases, an error happens. As for why we have multiple husbands, the betterment of society sometimes requires a fabricated reason. For the masses' sake."

By this time Malika lost all caution. Hanan's talk was drenched with presuppositions and soaked with prejudices. They were so obvious that it was amusing (if not terrifying) to see Hanan oblivious to them. Malika's argumentative streak surfaced. "I'm sorry, what do you mean error? Are you saying that men simply aren't meant to be? Because according to your own account, they are needed to provide the catalyst for the formation of the embryo. So without this deviation there'd be not much to speak of. Or at least there wouldn't be anyone to hear this speech."

"True. But just because something is necessary doesn't stop it from being a deviation. For instance, disease and death are necessary for the progress of generations, but they're still deviations from health. In fact, the quintessential deviation. Same with the male species. And of course if all people didn't start out as females, why would men have absolutely everything in common with women in terms of bodily structure and function -- except for the things in which they are defective?"

"What? But aren't you just assuming these *are* a defect?"

"Thought must start somewhere. And if you start by doubting the most obvious of observations that can be performed with the senses (all senses in this case!) then you're only an enemy of society. Obfuscating. Deliberating on manure instead of helping society."

"Well, then I must say you're engaging in circular reasoning."

"A bold accusation," Hanan said spreading back her shoulders: not from taking an interest in a challenging conversation but more from the annoyance of hearing such stupidity. "I hope for your sake you have something to back this up with."

"It was just what you said. You're saying that a male body is a deviation because it differs deviantly from a female body; but also that it differs deviantly because it *is* deviant. The whole is a deviation because the parts are and vice versa. Circular reasoning comes to mind."

"Stupid, fucking stupid girl! You seem to remember the two or three lessons in logic you had when you were still in your nappies and now you're presuming to teach the wise? Of course, I speak not of myself, but of Her, for it is with Her you must contend. And lose you shall. Don't you think that the One who first described the concept of circular reasoning was not so careless as to include it in her own arguments? And mind you, these certainly are her arguments not mine. Maybe you should learn a bit more than *nothing* about them. Then see what you make of it, ungrateful fuckwit." It was delicious to watch how casually Hanan could slip these pearls into her conversation (especially since Malika was almost a total stranger).

"I'd have thought someone so elevated can keep restrained. But it seems you're a charlatan who thinks the thoughts of ordinary people and then wraps them up in the words of the Philosopheress. Whether they fit them or not. I don't really think you believe your circularity, otherwise all the hundreds of logic lessons you've had aren't even worth my two. So what *folk wisdom*'s really behind this?"

"Folk wisdom? Actually, what I have are facts. Even if you suppose I'm engaging in circular reasoning here -- the audacity! -- I still have many observations at my disposal."

"Why don't you give me a few then?"



"A few? I can give you hundreds. You can even tell that there is a deviation from language. Men don't use the plain root in a word but add a special particle. This deviates from the norm because their speech (which is a reflexion of their thought as shown by the Philosophers in Book XIV of 'On Humans') so greatly deviates from the norm. And of course our language is divinely ordained so it isn't just some arbitrary idiom as we have with barbarians, but something that has a true converse in reality."

"I shan't argue against that because it works if our language is indeed divine."

"What do you mean *if*?" said Hanan, her brow clouding.

"Let me answer this question with a question -- what language did the Philosophers speak? And write in?"

There was an awkward pause; Hanan wasn't used to such a line of questioning. "Well, what does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, she didn't even really believe in the djinns. I'd assume that she was a heretic which would put her out of bounds of being the Guide for our Khalifate. Unless she was right of course and we are wrong..."

Hanan slapped her across the face. Hard. Immediately. "Traitor! I didn't in my life think that you have fallen so low. Are you saying that our Djinnology isn't perfectly authentic? Or perhaps the methods of proving them are also circular?"

"Maybe they are. The one you explained to me definitely had its flaws. But actually what I meant was that a lot of our knowledge about the djinns seems made up. I mean, Yusuf's love of garlic? Come on, he sounds more like my father than a mysterious non-material (as you were so careful to prove!) force. Didn't the mentor of the Philosophers say something to the effect of: 'if horses had djinns, they'd look like horses'?"

"Stop!" her opponent hissed, "you have no idea what you're saying. Garlic? Do you think it's literal garlic? The allegorical aspect of our holy djinnology...if you understood even a pinky toe's worth of it, you'd be crawling on your belly in repentance for your boorishness. But then again someone as lost as you could never understand the allegorical aspect. After all, it's only revealed to the pure."

"See, people keep saying it, that there is this great symbolic Thing behind the plain facts of djinnology. But I have yet to see it. And people keep telling me I am not worthy to see it, either because I'm a member of the laity, or because I'm so steeped in sin. Of course, they could be right. The other theory is that it's all made up. Both result in the same -- people telling me I can't penetrate the Secrets. So I'm not sure which one it is..."

"You represent everything that's wrong with our Khalifate. I've never been outside it so I don't presume to speak about other worlds. You're educated, resourceful, hardworking, clever. And you think all those things mean that you are right. You think simply because you *sit* in a civilisation, that truth is on your side. But I can find many barbarians who are less removed from truth than you. You're a bigot. I don't mean just in your misandry, but in everything. You think you've followed everything from first principles, that your methods have been flawless. You haven't. They haven't. And this belief makes you one of the most dangerous women in Baghdad. You've already shown your propensity for violence," she touched her still-burning cheek, "so I've reason to be concerned. As long as you just spout to yourself and to your students in your garden or in the Academy, it's fine. You're not hurting anyone. At least directly. But now that you've given the philosophical inspiration for this study of literacy, our society could really suffer. You don't think men should be literate or literary, so what can I expect you to wish to be done with those that are? Nothing good, for nothing good *can* be expected of any fanatic. The end result will however be a dark age: if over 50% of the population are denied access to any literacy (and many of them are literate right now, even amongst the working classes!) our empire will crumble. There will be nothing but stagnation of learning, commerce, administration. Even the family won't be safe: husbands will resent their wife for this difference."

Malika stopped and so did Hanan, with her mouth wide open. As Malika looked around she realised with a shock that they were back in Hanan's room. She was so lost in her diatribe that not only did she reveal everything she had intended to conceal but she didn't even notice the end of their walk. After a few seconds, Hanan regained her original dignity of quiet contemplation and smiled.

"So this is it? This is why you're here? You don't want to be a philosopher, just a spy on behalf of the enemies of Baghdad. You just want to avoid this study."

"I do. But you were wrong about me not wanting to be a philosopher. I have no distaste for it. In fact, having met you, I think I'm more of one than you are. No offence," she added sarcastically.

"None taken," said Hanan, not to be outdone. "So you've managed to spill everything. Congratulations. I'll know whose machinations to look out for in the next few months. You're merely a traitor, masquerading

as a lover of truth and justice. Ultimately you will be hung (or worse) for your treason. Just to be...clear. So bring it on; you'll soon make your mistake and the study will reveal you for who you really are."

"Then you'll dance on my grave?" Malika could truly picture Hanan doing this. "In that case fare thee well until such a moment."

Three hours later, as Said told her the news of some new visitor, Hanan snapped out of the trance she'd been in ever since Malika left. She then ordered Said to make her wait a bit more.

## Chapter 6 in which Malika attempts to recover from her errors

When Malika stormed out of the philosopher's house, she was angry as hell at Hanan. About two hours later she began torturing herself about losing her cool and revealing everything. *I've never spoken to her about anything mundane, let alone about philosophy. How could I have possibly known she was THAT irritating, obtuse, bigoted and fraudulent? I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if she was the one who killed Basim. In fact,... Anyway, I couldn't have prepared myself for it. This was inevitable.* Still, it was annoying to have failed to check her bluntness. Could she now simply assume Hanan wouldn't go to the Khalifa and denounce her as a traitor? She guessed she wouldn't be executed but it would hardly help. Then again, Hanan implied she was aiming to see Malika defeated naturally, through circumstance. It seemed a matter of principle for her to take no action but sit back and watch a system she adored deliver the appropriate retribution. *In this case, what has changed?* Malika asked herself. Her attempt to calm herself down looked as if it was working.

"You want to do what?" Daud asked Malika. They were huddled in the sitting room some time later, the four of them having a family council. The divan housed 4 souls, their heads bent in the direction of each other forming a cone, their backs as the base and the space above their heads as the apex.

"I just want to send some gifts."

"But, you're sending them to the husbands instead of the heads of the households," said Ayyub.

"And with notes addressed to the husbands," Daud added, "with *text!*" This was the truly outrageous part, for this meant she was to make a public statement that:

1. The husbands of a household were autonomous enough to receive gifts themselves,
2. The husbands were literate,
3. There was nothing wrong with 1 or 2, and nothing wrong with it being publicly said, proclaimed and admitted."

"That's right. But I'm also sending them to important households. And they'll consist of things helpful, so whilst I get people talking about the merit of husbands receiving notes 'with text' (gasp!) I'll also be patronising the institutions of the Khalifate."

"My dear, I know you've thought this through (although I have my suspicions). But have you realised just how fucking risky it is?" said Daud.

"It's incredibly risky. It will make it obvious to all where I stand. Especially to Nad- I mean the Khalifa." Malika didn't like to mention her by name. She was worried it would make her husbands feel awkward, so she made sure to highlight her distance from the Khalifa. "I may immediately be outcast. But on the other hand it won't be expected. I'll be going into the open thereby ending the rumours."

"Yes, because everyone will know them to be true."

"Somehow I think the extent of the rumours is much worse than reality. You know about court gossips, they probably think it's you guys that wear the skirt in this relationship. Or maybe they also think I'm a witch. Anyway, once they find out, it'll hopefully put an end to some of the more silly rumours. Plus it's easier to endure conflict when it's hand-to-hand combat as opposed to backstabbing."

"Who is on our list?"

"Samiyyah's husband obviously. For him I'm sending 3 deer carcasses. Then there's Jamilah's husband. I forget his name, could someone please find out? For him I'll send papyrus -- the kind that can be easily

made into musical score paper. Then there's all the husbands of the four or five leading djinnologists in Baghdad. They can get a share of the many manuscripts Jamil dug up at the market last week."

The wheels of Baghdadian society were greased by the sending of gifts, that were to be reciprocated in the following month. It wasn't a case of thinly-veiled bribery though: people who had no business connexions sent gifts just as eagerly as those whose paths had crossed. This made Malika's plan a little less daring than one might have thought. She *had* to send presents to all these households in either case. And the gifts were splendid. Her only choice was to send it to the husbands. But what a choice!

"Has she gone mad?" Daud asked Jamil as soon as she left.

"No," said Jamil, "she hasn't *gone* mad, she's always been like this. Does this seem unlike the woman we married?"

"True. But we need to tone it down."

Ayyub shook his head. "How? We can only change two things. We can get the gifts addressed to the regular people instead of their husbands, or we can alter or remove the text on the cards. With the first change we're undoing her plan instead of toning it down. She'll chuck a fit. And justifiably."

"And if we get rid of the messages?"

"Most of the outcry will be from the fact that it was the husbands who received the gifts. After that nobody will care about the cards. They're meant to have cards."

"I don't think so," said Ayyub, "I think it may add insult to injury. Imagine yourself a lady of polite society:

'Did you hear about this crazy fucker Malika? Not only did she send gifts to some husbands, but she wrote them a note!'

'Yes, they were talking about it all day at the party. Truly, things have turned upside down. The Khalifate is done for, I say. Now let's go have quails.'

'We're all out. Had a feast of them yesterday.'

'Oh, that's right. Make it honeycomb, peahen eggs and elephant tails.'"

They laughed. And decided they had to at least remove the notes. They called the manservant who was to be delivering the gifts and told him. This wasn't the first time he contradicted Malika's request at their behest. After all, he had more cause to be afraid of them than of Malika. Malika didn't spend more than 20 minutes a day with the servants. Outside the household Daud, Ayyub and Jamil had virtually no power, inside they could do anything. Interestingly enough, this was common across most households: a natural consequence of so many men squeezed into the same space, occupied by conversation naturally involving the mistress of the household. It was inevitable that every household in Baghdad (with more than one husband) had some discussion of the wife behind her back. This is the beginning of domestic power.

"This isn't the most extreme thing she's done."

"Probably not. Remember when she thought that merchant was making eyes at you?"

"Do I ever! My eyes still burn from the bright purple of the bruise on her forehead... What do you think this will be known as?"

"In the chronicles of our time? The Great Gift Fiasco, I guess."

"What? That's a poor title. I prefer... Respectable Noblewoman Gets Drunk on Her Sense of Treason."

They continued talking and laughing late into the night. If one heard their laughter from afar one wouldn't think that there was anything sinister about their conduct. And there wasn't. They were going to tell her, if only after the fact. That wasn't a question. They always told. It was always after the fact though.

## Chapter 7 in which Baghdad's most famous Pair voice their opinions

"*Naima! Naima!*" they called but she was at the back. Malika and Samirah reclined on their divans. It was as if Malika, needing a break from her gloom, came to a house that resembled something out of...the Arabian Nights. There was even some of the usual paraphernalia around: the psychedelic carpet, the negilah<sup>7</sup> beside it, the obligatory scimitars on the walls. However, in Samirah's house, everything was with a slight twist. The negilah didn't have the usual tobacco and hashish mixture. And the blades -- let's just say they were NOT merely for decorative purposes. Only the carpet was perfectly ordinary.

Malika had known both of them for almost as long as she could remember. This place was a refuge from the normalcy of the life that flowed so unremarkably outside these walls. Samirah was in her normal boisterous mood, fiddling with the unlit negilah pipe, occasionally making unconscious movements with its end as if she were writing a poem in the air.

"So she wants to know about literacy, eh?" Samirah asked after hearing about Malika's misadventures of the last few days.

"Seems so," said Malika. "But shouldn't you be at least somewhat glad?"

There was an unnatural pause as Samirah was contemplating what she might have meant. "...you mean, as a poet I should be grateful that literacy is getting an exposure within the public limelight? Is that correct?"

"Is it?"

"Um, no. I for one think there's quite enough exposure to literacy in our grand city, thank you very much. Perhaps too much. There are just *a few* too many mediocre poets. Not that I think myself brilliant or anything," she blurted out after catching the hint of a smile in Malika's left eye. "But there is some rubbish out there. Especially the generic works that are shat out for idlers who have all day to waste. Have you actually looked at some of the trash they have? They're what happens when most consumers of text are those looking for a *diversion*, whereas the real potential readers are too busy making ends meet."

"I think the only box you need now is one in which soap is stored," Malika said smiling.

"True. But it does shit me so I'm allowed to digress."

"I take from this you're not the greatest fan of male literacy? Think it'll drop the quality of intellectual life in Baghdad even further?"

"Our intellectual life isn't bad. It's the *creative* arts that are in decline. And yes, of course it will. If this trash is what's being pooped out by female poets for the reading pleasure of the nobility's husbands, imagine what things would be like if these same *husbands* were out there! After all, when imitating, we're unlikely to do a better job than the one being imitated, right? So if what's being imitated is trash then..."

"Do you then think men can only imitate?"

"Malika, do I detect a hint of defensiveness in your voice? Of course, I don't mean *all* men. Some of my best friends happen to be men! And it clearly doesn't apply to your husbands. They are a cut above average. But yes, I don't think a man can become a poet because he may imitate but never assimilate or innovate. Men just don't have the complex emotional structures deep within them to summon the right qualities for a good poet. Do you know of any male poets? I think not. But I'm going to be quite unorthodox and say that it's precisely for this reason that men *should*, become involved in the other things. The ones they're able to contribute to."

"You mean the sciences?"

"Hmm. Well, it may be a novel idea, but their inadequacies may actually be of use there. In fact, the same things that would preclude them from being successful poets might be manifested in these other ways."

"So you'd be in favour of men in the sciences?" said Naima sitting down. Naima was always stealthy and therefore crept up behind them without meaning to.

"Indeed I *am* in favour of it. But I can't exactly shout it from the rooftops. Well, not yet."

"Who'd have thought I'll be finding allies in such unlikely places?" Malika joked, elbowing her friend in the ribs playfully. "And in such conservative friends of mine?"

Upon hearing about Nadia's study and all recent developments, a shadow came over Naima's usual loveliness. The more she heard, the more her chin drooped, the more she stared thoughtfully at the floor, missing the carpet entirely. Finally, she lifted up her index finger to say something.

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<sup>7</sup> See Glossary

"This is typical of the emptiness of our age. Our attitudes nullify our very real achievements. If we're arrogant about where we're at and think the people who *have been* involved in progress that are the only people *capable* of being involved (meaning only the female aristocracy) then we're on the way out. Something else will eclipse the Khalifate, something that is more merit-driven, and hence won't turn away potential contributors because of an external characteristic that may or may not have much to do with contributing."

"Or killing," Samirah interjected. Naima almost flinched.

"Samirah, you said yourself that you'd support at least the presence of men within the sciences? Can I hold you to that?"

"To be cowardly, yes, as long as it's in the privacy of either my home or yours."

"We certainly all live in cowardly times, myself included," said Malika.

They stopped and sipped their drinks gloomily, each one reflecting on how dangerous the alternative to cowardice was. Samirah saw a pile of skulls quietly rotting in the sunset whilst the ravens orgiastically descended on it. Naima saw exile, imprisonment, slavery. Malika pictured a fate far worse: her children being taken.

"No. I can't." These words burst out of Malika seemingly out of context, but Samirah nodded.

"Of course. Maybe it was good to be idealistic at some point but not at the cost of everything."

"What?" Naima interrupted. "Surely you didn't mean that our Malika was about to give up, did you? I'm willing to bet anything she meant that she *won't* change her decision just because of danger. Am I right?"

"You are..." Malika said softly. "When I stopped contemplating the danger, I saw something else. I saw the course of action I'd have to take if I decided to stay safe. The coward's way."

"Which was..."

"Having to divorce my husbands. Find another harem. To go through everything again, this time scanning to make sure I *don't* end up with a harem that would stand out from the crowd. Instead of teaching my children, my husbands would be ornaments around the house. Sure enough, I'd probably grow to love them anyway (the alternative is even more hopeless), but it would make me less. And what would *my* beloveds do? This would be the same as if I kept them but told them to simply be 'normal'. Who would they be? Where would this get us? I know every man can't be like them -- does this mean they shouldn't be like themselves?"

Heads nodded, feeling better.

"In that case have a favour to ask," Malika said, suddenly energised. "It's about Ayyub, who you even today implied was a cut about the rest."

"I did?" asked Samirah.

"Shame on you! I thought you'd have a better grasp of the Philosopheress. You said my husbands were different. Which essentially means all members of the class of Malika's Husbands are different. Furthermore, there is the premise that Ayyub is a member of Malika's Husbands. What follows by the most basic principle of deduction is that Ayyub is different. And even if you didn't say it, you must have meant it implicitly. Unless when making the original statement you meant to exclude him. But I'd be hard-pressed to attribute such an irrational motive to you. Not to mention--"

"Enough already! I think your bitching about not having picked a career is all a farce, you have one lined up quite nicely. So, what about your husband? You know, the real person (as opposed to the mere concept)?"

"I wanted to ask you to follow up on what you said and take him on at the Observatory. After all, if he is different, perhaps he can be of direct use even now."

"Does he like astronomy?" Naima asked.

"He does. And I've already set up Jamil as an apprentice doctor. It's about time I found occupations for the other two. He already knows more about it than me and everyone I know put together. Well, except you of course."

"Of course..." said Samirah. "Sure. I could see him being of great help. But how shall it be done? I can't exactly go to the head of the Observatory and ask he be given a permanent place."

"I'm sorry to say but it won't be nearly as hard as you make it out to be. Just sneak him through the side entrance on nights when you can show him things. Other days you can send things to my house through a messenger and he can return them."

"Does he have equipment of his own?!"

Malika took a slow, triumphant breath one is expected to take when realising they're about to pleasantly



surprise everybody. "Yes, do you think I'd have asked if he were only some wannabe who has to be shown how to locate the moon? No, he's even built some crude instruments."

"And where did he get the know-how to do that? It's even harder than it seems, and it seems pretty hard."

"From his silly male literature my dear," said Malika. "You see, he doesn't devote himself to manuscripts 'shat out!'"

"...Since you've got Ayyub and Jamil settled, what about Daud?"

"My Yusuf, what an idiot I've been! How could I have not brought him up just now? You'd be perfect!"

"You mean to give him a hand with something? Why, what is he interested in?"

"Things you'll definitely be able to help with. Like calligraphy. And warfare. Or have you repented and quit that life entirely?" she added before Naima got the chance to blush her way out of answering.

"No, not entirely. It's not like I vowed never to pick up a weapon again. We do have these still," she said pointing to the curved steel casually hanging on the walls. "But I am out of the business. For now. I do want to help though, so how about I'll start with calligraphy and then see how we go?"

Malika bowed her head in gratitude.

Rasha's description of the rumours about Malika (with her network of couriers sending around things so her husbands could pursue their interests) started out false yet was becoming truer every minute.

Malika explained all about her recent dealings, Samirah was describing the latest works she was attempting and Naima the new fashion of calligraphy she has been developing. To which Malika added a small sample of Daud's work which she had. All agreed that while Daud wasn't at Naima's level, he was ready to learn all she knew.

Naima and Samirah began to tell Malika about their collaborative work. One might have expected such a creative pair to be collaborating all the time. Not so. Scribes often scanned works of one, seeking (and failing) to find influences of the other. Their styles were different. Samirah's poetry was down the line, never subtle. She said things others found shocking, but her work reeked of such honesty that this was forgiven by even the most closed-minded Baghdadians. Naima was different, her calligraphy was described as djinn-like, with a smear of harshness in every piece. A small smear but a devouring flame. Naima's works were therefore less accessible.

Simple readers liked both equally, appreciating the honesty of one and the tempestuous nature of the other. The most experienced scholars also liked both equally as they appreciated the core of each. It was only the mediocre critics that loved Samirah and hated Naima. They had too much knowledge to appreciate Naima on a simple level but not enough to grasp the deeper level.

They finally decided to collaborate, largely to poke fun of the critics. A poem with Samirah writing and Naima doing calligraphy. It was an epic about a gazelle, with every page of calligraphy shaped like one. It looked so marvellous that Malika stopped breathing for a while as she hungrily looked at the curves of the beasts, the outlines made from silhouettes of the curved syllable-letters. And this on every page. Each gazelle was different. Not just by virtue of the letters, that would be too crude. Each page illustrated exactly how the gazelle would have looked from the poetry. Malika asked about the gist of the story so Samirah began-

#### THE TALE OF THE GAZELLE AND THE POACHER QUEEN

"Know and rejoice, Malika, that there was gazelle which lived in the steppes of a far-away country, where no djinns had influence. This gazelle had no magical powers, no amazing talents that would have made her stand out from every other gazelle. She was a bit ordinary, but then again all gazelles are quite extraordinary. Although to the average woman, all gazelles look alike, rest assured, oh Malika, that every single one is as different as you or I. And they are the loveliest creatures to ever have graced Johara's domain.

"Our gazelle did what every other gazelle did. Every day she would feed from the lush grasses of the steppes and feast on the healing waters of the nearby springs which would cure any wounds she had.

"She'd gallop around all day, race with other gazelles, be free and happy. She always saw a hundred miles in every direction as the steppes were completely expansive. She'd always see the first and last rays of the sun and moon every day because there was nothing cluttering the landscape. She was not even happy for there was no sadness to compare to. And she didn't have anything particular to look forward to. Time meant nothing to someone like her.

"Then, calamity struck. She was captured by some poachers, naturally by stealth. They laid out an ambush near the mystical stream. Then they scattered thorns all over the steppe, so that the gazelle would

be injured and would have to go to the stream. That was when they tied her up. Rather than killing her there and then, they mutilated her. They sawed off her horns, hamstringed her so she couldn't escape, put ONE of her eyes out and made a huge cut across her face. Just for the hell of it, to let her know who was boss. And to demoralise. All this they did right there in the steam. Her blood, as it was shed so cruelly, profaned the stream which lost its healing powers.

"The poachers took her to the queen. She was bound into the most meaningless, pointless servitude. For years, she dared not even dream of the open steppes, let alone her body. Instead, she fanned the poacher queen, told her the obvious, and other crucial tasks. The poacher queen wasn't cruel to her. She treated her reasonably, and even considered herself progressive. But this was hardly the gazelle's idea of progress. She decided to wait and bide her time. Plus the queen didn't consider her a threat, for someone so mutilated was clearly too demoralised to think of revenge.

"Unfortunately for the queen, she miscalculated, due to an obvious lack of empathy, herself never having been mutilated. The gazelle did lay in wait, and at the appropriate moment struck."

"How?" asked Malika feeling so eager to hear the allegory's ending that she had to interrupt.

"We'll have to wait and see. But what do you think so far?"

Malika sat there, shocked. She kept looking at the poem, flipping through its various gazelles, studying the shape and the rest. Finally she broke from her contemplation. "It's...just like you. I can't wait to actually read it. But 'twill raise a few eyebrows, I suspect."

"That it will."

Another pause.

"Well, don't you see?" Malika started, "You've just made the case for all those supposedly flimsy works you were fretting over just earlier."

"What?" Samirah asked.

"...Allow me to suspect that your poem is not just about a gazelle and a queen."

"Granted."

"And that many, or even most, would realise this the minute they set eyes on it. After they've finished admiring the djinnly presentation," she added, patting Naima on the shoulder.

"Yes, and--"

"Are you not familiar with many popular works doing the exact same thing? I mean Jamil was just showing me this manuscript of Rukan's. It's very simple on the surface. Childish, which is what makes it quite good reading. But then..." Malika proceeded to explain the ins and outs of this poem, that Samirah encountered before by happenstance. And to her credit, Samirah allowed herself to be convinced that perhaps there was more to some of these folk stories than she thought. It didn't even take 10 minutes for her to come around.

"So now you'll have to abandon your idea of men being unable to follow in your footsteps, right?" Naima asked, her eyes lighting up deliciously.

"What? Not at all. All this means is that not all folk literature may be shit. That doesn't mean male readers can produce decent works. Plus I've just thought of another barrier. A more practical one."

"Such as?"

Samirah laughed. "It's so simple I can't believe you haven't thought of it. Has any man even tried to write a poem? Don't you know what will happen? What about the markers on nouns?"

Malika gasped. Samirah was right. This was a complete oversight and any possibility of any man writing poetry were annihilated in her mind.

"Male markers are present on over four fifths of nouns. When a man says *table*, *gazelle*, or almost any other word, he must use the marker. And what then of rhyme?"

She was correct, too correct. The 3 of them all sat silent. They felt cheated, as Baghdadian had made rhymes by men impossible, or at least unreadable.

Malika smiled remembering the previous day with Hanan. It was cute -- the same argument she considered successful *against* the divine nature of their language (assuming the injustice of the deviation charge) Hanan considered successful *for* the charge of deviation (assuming the divine nature of the language). Oh well. As they say, "one gal's modus ponens is another's modus tollens".

"Perhaps we forgot because we've been talking all this time without a man whose speech would have reminded us," Naima said quietly.

"True," Samirah answered to no-one in particular, her hand lazily reaching out to the negilah.

## Chapter 8, in which Naima and Samirah's past and present is visited

The three of them flew through themselves due to the opiate-base in the negilah. This was by no means unorthodox in Baghdad compared to the usual tobacco or hashish mix -- just statistically more unusual. That's why they thought nothing of it. Although they did hear it was frowned upon by the barbarians. "Apparently in the West, they consider it a sign of being possessed by the most evil of djinns," Naima said as they passed the pipe around for the third time, "and of a society most disreputable. It is associated with the loss of mind, whereby when one is under the effects, no matter for how short a period, the great djinn Alexander possesses your mind and you are lost. Actually, they call them spirits not djinns. Anyway, much of the Khalifate is lost in the west's eyes."

"But they gorge themselves on fermented poison!" said Malika, her mild intoxication taking her sense of irony further than it would otherwise have gone. "So they'd be possessed by Alexander as well. Probably more than we are." This was whole-heartedly appreciated by the other two, as they looked at the colours and furnishings of the room with fresh eyes. Although they took pleasure of it, none saw it as being specifically for that purpose. In the same way as, when a barbarian from the West would take a glass of ale, she would not be thinking "Oh, I'm doing something hedonistic, let me suck all the pleasure I can out of this beverage." It would be something a bit more like "Oh, here's some ale, it would be good to have some." Hedonism is more a state of mind than a particular action. In Malika's time hedonists were hedonists for deliberately seeking things out for the sake of decadence that others were seeking out naturally.

"Naima, I wanted to ask you about the gazelle calligraphy -- now that you've had something that might loosen your tongue a tad..."

"You've chosen the right time, this state is the closest she gets to verbal diarrhea!" Samirah noticed.

"What did you want to know?" Naima asked Malika.

"Your method, and why you did it. It's that I've never seen anything like it. I don't mean in its brilliance of execution -- although it's great. But you seem to be turning calligraphy upside down, turning it into something else altogether. And it's not just that you can twist some letters into a shape."

"Hmm. I told you Samirah, you can't slip anything past her! All I did was use two approaches. The top-down (mathematical) approach and the bottom-up (intuitive) approach. The top-down started with me drawing the gazelle to the minutest detail, starting with the outline, and then to the contours and shadings. Then I broke the picture up into squares. I took each square in turn and simply fiddled with the appropriate part of the poem until that square was done."

"And the intuitive approach?"

"Even simpler. After I did a few top-down ones, I tried one with no planning. I started in the middle of the page, in the middle word, in the middle part of the gazelle, usually the stomach. Then I branched out, adding on all sides as I saw fit until I reached the contours of the gazelle."

"Did you have any help of the very same negilah we're holding?"

"Absolutely. But it was about getting inside the gazelle. Which I guess brings me to the meaning of calligraphy. You're right, I don't think it's just a bunch of pretty-looking letters. There's the gloriousness of the expression of literacy, the artifice of the abstract and the fact that calligraphy represents one of the greatest philosophical questions in the world: the relationship between our words and concepts and the world of reality. Only if we push the boundaries of calligraphy can we get to the true nature of the meaning and function of words. Then there's the mystical nature, the notion of our Holy Tongue having direct implications in the spiritual planes. Ours is the language all the djinns speak in." Malika noted the inconsistency of them agreeing just before that it was most unseemly for this holy language to have male endings that would prevent men from writing poetry. However, the thing about ingrained assumptions is that it takes a woman of amazing strength to escape even one of them. The fact that Naima did not escape two hardly detracted from her worth as a person, and Malika knew this.

This digression made their collective heads spin and they drifted off into an indefinite, relaxed silence, Naima mumbling something about this being the first time she was so *talkative* after using their negilah. In this, the retiring lass alluded to her past. Their collective past. And whilst they lay back, perhaps it's time to take a breather and do some reminiscing.

Samirah and Naima were truly a couple. A woman and a man married to each other (like the Khalifa and her husband) were not a couple. They were just an incomplete harem, a partial stage to a proper family. Two women, on the other hand, were a couple. Simply for the reason that there was no-one to add, at least

in the eyes of the Khalifate. So Naima and Samirah were the most famous *couple* in the Grand City. Also they were famous because they had stayed together far beyond the expected, (nay, prescribed) lifespan of a relationship between two women.

In the Khalifate, it was expected that in her youth a woman (any woman regardless of wealth or social status) would have at least one relationship with another woman. After all, it was perfectly natural. So natural in fact, that to have missed out was considered a blot on one's character. Malika often liked to tell

#### THE TALE OF THE CRIME OF THE TWO SISTERS

There were two sisters. They shared a business partnership manufacturing chemicals: perfumes, aphrodisiacs, fuels and more. Both were ideal family women with three husbands and three children each. One day a major official quarrelled with both of them. She was found dead in her home the next evening. Poisoned. With poisons that were manufactured only by the sisters. There was a scandal, an inquiry and a trial, for both. Fortunately for them, each looked very much like the other so it would have been impossible to decide which one it was. They seemed bound to get off, until the Head of Guards did a little investigation. She found out one of the sisters never had a relationship with a woman. She asked, cross-examining her, "are you attracted to women at all?" "No," she answered, virtually sobbing. "Interesting," the Head noted to the judge. "I think it's clear who murdered the official. For surely you'd have to agree that the murderer was a bit of a monster, a bit inhuman. And one would definitely have to be slightly inhuman to find no attraction, no fascination whatsoever in the female, to be unable to become hopelessly lost in Her soul, which is Intisar's finest creation. One would in fact have to be a sociopath." The judge agreed. Society agreed. The sister was convicted and impaled on a lovely stake. Case closed, everybody happy (ever after).

While Malika told the story as an example of a possible miscarriage of justice from an overzealous prosecutor, even she would agree somewhat. And would consider that the executed sister was more likely to have been the murderer (even if the evidence of her non-affair wasn't sufficient to *establish* her guilt).

So, some kind of inter-female relationship was expected. This was before the onset of marriage. Let people have both their fun and their deep complex emotional experiences. Before the more bland institutions of family, biology and the rest must come into the picture. Generally a woman before her marriage was to seek out an older woman who'd instruct her in the finer points of life, society, intellectualism and good manners. Thus there would be a kind of unequal mentor relationship. Of course, the older woman would almost always be married. However, for the sake of family harmony (for men were expected to tolerate only a new *husband* showing up), the older woman would usually arrange the logistics. And naturally these had to come to an end, which explains the Reason why many older women in the aristocracy tended to be uncomfortable around one (or two) women of the younger generation.

The other type of relationship (between two *young* women), was much rarer. It was much more likely to be considered frivolous -- simply two girls wasting time and feeding off each other's life inexperience as opposed to gaining wisdom. It was hardly frowned upon because it didn't last. By the age of 23, almost all women were with harems. Exceptions were seen as backward: like a child failing to move onto the next stage of life. Of course, even this had exceptions. When Fighting Sisters stayed together it was seen as perfectly great and noble. This made Naima and Samirah talked about, approved of, wondered at. Of course, before the short period when the 2 of them were Fighting Sisters, Naima's situation was different. She was originally an Assassin.

The Assassins were a secret society that plagued the Khalifate for 37 years until 13 years ago when their exploits suddenly ceased. Of course, many rumours flew around that they were merely in hiding, biding their time, or regrouping. The sum of the rumours was clear: they would come back. And with a vengeance. Then there were those who considered that there were no exploits by the Assassins simply because there were no Assassins to perform any. Either way, the Assassins were very real when Naima was one. As their name implied, they assassinated. However, their actual name derives from hashish, their preferred method of assassination. The group originally consisted of djinnologists who favoured the djinns Sha-Ul and Intisar. This created tensions between them and the Ninth Khalifa (Nadia's grandmother). To add insult to apostasy, they differed in their conception of these two djinns. Naturally such heretics were not to be taken lightly. The Khalifa ordered blood to flow in the streets and it was done. Rather than fight it out, the group (bonded in adversity) withdrew to the inhospitable mountains a few weeks' ride from Baghdad. There they set up base. It took months to build, and most died of cold, disease, hunger and despair. But the ones that survived..!

They were a fanatical sect, determined to strike strategic and ruthless blows on the Khalifate for as long as it was the Khalifa's apostasy (and not *their* apostasy) that was orthodox. This they helped by training of the most intense nature. And by an extensive network of contacts, spies and sympathisers, from holy women to street sweepers. After all, there were plenty in the common populace who liked Intisar and Sha-UI better than the other djinns. Their strikes were supplemented by the assassin(s) smoking a good dose of hashish or opium before-the-fact, to maintain a frenzied berserker-like quality. And Naima was one of the most feared assassins.

Samirah at the time was an idealistic young warrior. Rather than being cautious in an area close to an Assassin stronghold, she let herself be captured single-handedly by Naima. Since Naima's objective was hardly to slaughter this fool-of-a-lass, she took her back to the stronghold. Naturally, during her imprisonment, Samirah made Naima fall in love with her, abandon the Assassin creed and resolve to become Samirah's Sister in Arms. Thus one night, Samirah escaped from her cell and Naima was nowhere to be found. Interestingly enough, Samirah returned to her military outpost alone. Naima took another twelve weeks to join her. Whatever Naima did in that time, after the twelve weeks finished, all Assassin activity ceased and there's been nothing since. Nobody asked whether she single-handedly took down the whole sect. Nobody dared. Malika always begged her to tell the entire tale, but Naima said it wasn't for her ears (at least not yet), and that maybe when they're older and women of leisure, she'd open her sacred mouth about the affair.

So, the two became Sisters in Arms (Fighting Sisters). Each member fought beside what was her whole world. That's why every unit worked cohesively and that's why a unit being split (by only one member being killed in battle) was unheard of. A unit either came home intact and completely victorious, or it was wiped off the face of the earth *in its entirety*. But it was almost always the former, hence the Sisters' fame.

There was no stopping Naima and Samirah as a unit. They were madly, fiercely in love, and woe to the poor foe who would attempt to encroach on that! Plus there was that illicit yet successful Assassin methodology Naima utilised. As did Samirah, being the other side of the same coin. In just two years they became the best known unit. And then they found their creative outlets. "It was a natural progression," Naima liked to joke.

"At first we just killed people arm in arm.

Then we killed people and wrote about the joy of killing people whilst arm in arm.

Then we just wrote about the joy of killing people whilst arm in arm.

Then we merely wrote about the joy of being arm in arm.

Now we just write.

This fully documents our descent from useful members of society into being seedy bohemian dandies."

It was true too (except the last part). They got into the poetry as a natural companion to fighting. For Baghdad was blessed with an entire poetic genre that sung the epic deeds of the fighting sisters. It was a noble pursuit, to fight for one's country and Khalifa whilst being in the embrace of your dearest one. The unit represented a romantic escapism for all the city bumpkins, not just Nadia. And, to paraphrase the Head of Guards from the Tale of the Crime of the Two Sisters, who *wouldn't* be jealous of the image of two soldiers sleeping on the cold, wet ground, deep behind enemy lines, and yet caring nothing for the cold nor the wet for they can huddle against each other and their combined spiritual energy will warm everything around them? The image provided ample fertiliser for both low and high culture.

Eventually they quit the military to focus on other pursuits, but it seems they haven't abandoned the idea completely.

"So what's next for you?" Samirah asked Malika once the opium's effects wore off.

"Participate in the 'Golden Age'. Outwit Hanan."

"What?! Why I wouldn't wish anything to do with her on my worst enemy!" said Naima.

"Maybe we should come out of retirement for your sake and...disappear her." Naima frowned at her love's joke. She herself never joked about such things. Then again, Samirah had the luxury of not being in permanent guiltland for Yusuf-knows how many unjustly killed people. Nobody in Naima's world mentioned it but it was unnecessary. Her demons were plain. Once, Malika asked Naima in passing how many people she killed during her time as an Assassin. "Thirty-six," she answered without blinking. "Nineteen women, ten men and seven eunuchs."

"If you're going to come out of retirement, save it for when it matters," said Malika.



## Chapter 9 in which the al-Basimis discuss careers and magic squares

Amina took a sip of mint beverage and sat back down with her two older cousins. They had been heatedly debating for much of the afternoon.

"Took your time with the mint," noted Hamidah.

"I did. I needed a break -- we're going in circles."

"And what did this break achieve?"

"Well, nothing. I still want to be the thorn in your leg. I want to bring disappointment to you, my closest family. I want to trample on the memories of my parents and aunt. Oh, did I mention shame? I'm absolutely *dying* to bring shame onto all of us -- the mere idea fills me with some barbaric sado-masochistic delight."

"Shut up, you!" Malika said affectionately. "Of course, we know none of these are true. And we're sorry if we made it sound like that." Hamidah nodded in an overly-vigorous manner that lightened the mood.

"But we're concerned that with this literacy study our family will be under enough suspicion or...investigation. This may not be the best time to reverse tradition and start a career whilst unmarried."

"Oh, you're just saying this to try and pacify me, but really you just want me to be miserable. I HATE YOU!" screamed Amina and ran out of the room flailing her arms wildly. This was a continuation of her joke and she came right back laughing her ass off.

"Hey, if we just keep lightening the mood and nothing else we'll be here all week," said Malika.

"That's right, and then we'll all kill each other light mood or not," added Hamidah.

"So, let's just cut to it. You've admirably expressed your desire to pursue a career before getting married, thus going against one of the most established traditions of the Khalifate. You know this may put us in jeopardy in Court when combined with the literacy thing. We also know this is what you want to do. And we understand."

"That's right, we're all big, *big* empathisers here," said Malika nodding her head and bobbing her whole body up and down, feeling it was her turn to screw around.

"So what shall we do to y--with you? And yes, feeding you to the wolves, unleashing Sha-Ul on you and other alternatives have been discussed, and despite their comic value they were never viable," said Hamidah.

"And the comic value's worn off," Malika added.

"So tell us, dear cousin, what the fuck are we going to do? As a family."

Amina picked up a flower, straightened her back and tucked one of her legs in whilst tilting her head a little to the side. The flower spun in her fingers continuously. Malika and Hamidah looked at the twirling flower, mesmerised. This meant that their relation was actually thinking -- and once she got her act together and got to thinking instead of engaging in coquetry, she'd surprise them all with the degree of insight she'd have.

"I don't pretend to have a solution but I think there's at least an approach we can use for our problems. The main thing is that this is our collective problem. As long as we treat it separately we have two problems whereby each exacerbates the other."

"Right dear cousin. Terribly sorry to have chosen literary husbands and encouraged them not to bend in the wind. If it wasn't for this selfishness of mine, you'd have the *perfect* chance to pursue a career without marrying. Which would be exactly what, by the way?"

"I haven't decided," said Amina. "And yes I forgive you. Believe it or not, maybe it *was* a bit selfish of you. From one perspective, you've placed our family in the spotlight to make a point." She shrivelled under Malika's gaze. "But of course this isn't a perspective *I'm* taking. Anyhow, I'll embark on my career using the same discreetness you're having to use with the Khalifa. Because in essence we're doing something very similar, whether you want to admit it or not, dear Malika."

"So you won't go rushing into some academy making your...lifestyle choices obvious?"

Amina shook her head. "Much as I'd like to, I'll do things at a pace suitable for our family while I pretend to be 'looking for a harem'. If there's an easing of conditions, I can be more bold."

The sound of Malika's children playing brought them back to the mundane. Amina noticed an advantage the al-Basimis had. Hamidah and Malika both had several husbands, while many members of Court (including the Khalifa Herself), had only one. In that way, Malika wasn't such a paragon of unorthodoxy.

"So if the Khalifa starts questioning you or me we should just point the finger and say 'at least my kids don't come from *one* seed'? I don't think so," said Malika

"No, not at all. But it helps maintain the image of a healthy family. Which is why I'm not keen to marry yet," said Amina. "It's not like I have to acquire just one husband -- I must suddenly be burdened with many, and for what? You do know in the West, it's the norm for people to have just one? And--" Hamidah glanced at her with a look that said she'd slap her for starting an even more dangerous talk.

With everyone breathing easier about Amina's decision, they changed the topic to something a bit lighter -- Khalific magic squares.

"I *am* right, there is more than one kind of magic squares," said Salman to Malika, Hamidah and Amina. "Some don't have any mystical significance. They're just there for the fun of it." Hamidah furrowed her brow at the idea but Amina nodded vigorously in agreement, and the rest laughed. This typical of an al-Basimi gathering; the name meant "those who smile" in Baghdadian.

"You'll never convince her like that," said Amina. "Surely you have some at your disposal?"

"Right as always," Salman said kissing Amina on the forehead and leaving the room. He came back with 3 scrolls. Abbas and Azizah were running around on the floor amongst the great and terrible forest of adults' legs. They had been doing this ever since everyone got there.

"So father dear, would you care to show your finds?" Malika said.

"They're more like keeps: I've had them for years. It was a present from your mother..." There was the obligatory five second pause of respect (Malika's mother had died just under nine years ago) and he went on, unrolling each one and having it passed around. "See, there are actually three types of squares. The djinnological serves as an amulet. Each embedded sentence contains either a direct reference or an allusion to the protective nature of the amulet. The second kind is meant to remind of profound truths. Then there's the kind which is just for fun. These range from literary-themed ones to vulgar witticisms. And yes I've just brought one example of each. I've actually got many that we've--that I've collected over the years."

The magic squares are a peculiar artform for they are unique not only to the Khalifate but also to that time period. Centuries before, more simple forms of djinnology were common. Centuries after (as literacy plummeted) there were less and less who could appreciate the squares or spend money on them. They were pushed off the cliff of history. Very little information about them has survived unto the present day; we've had to satisfy ourselves with the shattered fragments of legend at the bottom of that cliff. The basic concept is simple. Imagine a square that consists of a number of subsquares. Dimensions ranged from 3\*3 and 4\*4 (the most common) all the way to 7\*7. The squares stopped growing in size for two reasons: the rules of the squares made even 5\*5s fiendishly difficult, and the Khalifate had an infatuation with the number 7 as the pinnacle.

Each of fragment had a word. The magic aspect of the work was that each way of reading the square edge-to-edge made an intelligible and grammatical sentence. For a 3\*3 this meant 16 sentences, for a 7\*7 this would increase to 32. Needless to say, even a 3\*3 is impossible in a language like English. For instance, consider the top line of a three word square. There aren't many sentence structures that match. One example would be "Sandra went home". Not very profound in djinnology, secular wisdom or literary merit but we have to start somewhere. This sentence immediately restricts the middle of the top-to-bottom sentences: it must begin with "went" and there are no grammatical three word sentences in English that begin with "went". In fact, any verb in the top sentence must be the start of a top-to-bottom sentence, which is impossible (excepting verbs like *is*, which can be placed at the start of question sentences like "is she home?"). A language that supports magic squares must have a more flexible word order than English: sentences must be allowed to begin with any part of speech and to have reverse word order.

Even if the grammatical difficulties are ignored, the main difficulty is picking words that make sense in all contexts AND make interesting or meaningful sentences that fit the overall theme of the square. This is what makes or brakes the square. It should be clear how difficult it was to create a poetic 7\*7. Finally, the square carried with it forever the imprint of the author -- all words had to be marked for gender. This made it impossible for a non-female to create one that read naturally. The gender markers took away from the essence of the square, which was succinctness, a punchy flexibility<sup>8</sup>.

Salman masterfully introduced all three and all agreed the work produced over the last decades has been of much greater scope and quality than they thought.

"The mystical square would be the only one most are familiar with," said Amina.

"That's right, they'd just hang it up as an amulet without even bothering to read it or to marvel at its sublime arrangement," said Malika.

"I have to say uncle," Hamidah started, "I'm surprised and delighted at this revelation. I'll have to get

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<sup>8</sup> See the Magic Square in the Appendix for an example of a square

some of those literary ones to put on my wall.”

“Just make sure you don't let your husbands read it, it might be too difficult for them and they'll go crazy,” Malika jested and mirth followed at the expense of Hamidah's conservatism. In fact, in the al-Basimi family she was a bit of a black sheep because of her orthodoxy.

“Yeah, they might learn something!” Amina added, not wanting to miss out on a cheap shot.

Hamidah nodded as if to say she expected nothing less. “Well, it would be interesting for *all* I guess. But personally I still find the peak of the art is achieved in the allegorical djinnological seven-by-sevens.”

“Yes but how can you know the meaning of the allegory?” asked Malika. “After all, none of us heathens are allowed to know it truly.”

“Well, you can fathom it a tad I guess, from looking at the words. They're not just a random collection of thoughts, they do make sense on the mundane level and then you can take that as a starting point to--”

“--a starting point but where will you arrive? Who in fact can tell us the meaning?”

“Alia can,” said Jamil after a silence. Alia was a holy woman and beacon of djinnology in Baghdad.

“Yes! We can ask her!” Hamidah exclaimed.

“I don't know,” Malika started, “sometimes her speech is so obtuse I think if she explained an allegory it would make it *less* accessible. I bumped into her, and she told me the most obscure prophecy, something like *he doesn't even know what's really buried there*. What the hell's that?”

“Well, it depends. If it's a *he*, how many men are you in contact with?” asked Hamidah.

“Yeah, how many?” Daud added with a mock-suspicion in his face.

“True. But anyway, how did Alia get to be where she was? Who did she train with?”

Salman took a deep breath. “I think I'll take this one, being the honorary fossil here.”

#### “THE TALE OF ALIA'S APPRENTICESHIP

“Alia started out as a minister for the old old Khalifa. The Ninth that is. Eventually she became disillusioned with the infighting that went on at the Court, as well as the pursuit of all things superficial. It was then that the Assassins spawned forth, during the initial persecutions that sent them to the mountains. They say in those days the Khalifa was absolutely insatiable. Blood ran torrentially and splashed against the walls of the Palace. Heads and limbs that belonged to former leaders of what came to be the Assassins were popping up everywhere. When one popped up underneath Alia's foot as she was taking a stroll inside the palace grounds, she had enough.

“She left Baghdad at around the same time the Assassins withdrew, and she happened to have wandered around the same mountains. Like the Assassins, she faced much hardship. For dozens of nights she slept not but shivered in the cold, her face red and swollen, her limbs numb. Unlike the *pursued* she had the luxury of being able to start a fire. On the other hand she was completely alone. Alia stumbled through to the overpass: usually 12 days' journey. It took her over 3 months. Nobody knows what went on in her head during this time but with the endless blackness of the sky and the endless whiteness of the snow it must have been sublime. When she came across the holy woman she had sensed that Alia had already progressed far enough to be able to learn everything.

“Alia noticed the woman's hut, moved towards it and in the time she used to blink away the last snowflakes from her lashes, the woman was there. She beckoned. Alia went and, knowing the kind of knowledge she was up against, prostrated herself despite the cold. Thus began her apprenticeship, silently.

“It continued over the next 3 years, also silently until the last month. Her mentor said not a word and Alia never dared initiate. She learnt everything intuitively, having never been shown or told explicitly. In three years she could do more than most of her ilk achieve in a lifetime. The mistress finally opened her mouth and for a month instructed her in the ways of the world, her options as to how she could use her skills and what paths she could take. She sent Alia away and nobody saw Alia's mentor again.

“Alia continued wandering. At first she did not come up into the mountains but stayed on the foothills, going from village to village. Any place she went, no evil eye occurred. And of course every household she ever set foot in had the stove light up immediately, and any animal that was sick became cured. Eventually they flocked to her from all round including Baghdad. She told prophecies that were never known to be wrong and she named children. Even the Khalifa tried to visit her once, incognito. Dressed in peasant clothes, coming alone and on foot, she thought she was well-disguised. However, when she was 100 metres from Alia (who had her back to her), Alia let out a blood-curdling scream. She pointed her finger behind her. She told the village that they must evict the woman who's coming immediately, because she is surrounded by a glow of incredible wickedness. The Khalifa would later tell that she'd never fled for her life with such speed and indignity as that day; when hundreds of peasants chased her with pitchforks.

“Alia decided to escalate her ministry. She finally went to the mountains to where her work would be hardest and most dangerous. She went to the heretic Assassins with the aim of saving as many of their souls as possible. All this despite them being the most efficient killers in the Khalifate, ones who would have loved to have disemboweled her personally. And she succeeded to an amazing extent.”

“She's quite charismatic even in her old age,” said Amina, interrupting.

“True. But the Assassins didn't value charisma as a virtue. At least not then,” he said casting a knowing glance at Malika. “Anyway she stayed alive. Those who converted said she'd come when they would go out on raids in pairs or alone. She'd appear to them on their last night camping, when they were ready to kill the next morning. She'd talk them out of it, and no-one withstood her. Not even those Assassins who didn't believe in miracles or djinns or anything but their ritual daggers. She showed them! They would all come back to one of the main schools of djinnology and write the most thorough miracle-inducing amulets.”

“Of course, there was that one leader of a unit of the Assassins who was determined to take revenge on Alia for taking so many souls. Rukan she was called. Rukan tracked Alia down by simply sending out the bait -- a young, fresh-looking Assassin on a mission, all alone. The youth did not know she was sent on a non-existent mission and that Rukan followed her, waiting for Alia to make her usual appearance. Rukan crouched at a distance with the dagger between her teeth and watched Alia work her magic on the decoy. Soon the decoy left, full of repentance and eagerness to embrace the orthodoxy. As soon as this occurred Rukan--”

“--where are the kids?”

## Chapter 10 in which Malika has an antidjinnological epiphany and Rasha dreams

Daud asked this suddenly. In a second everyone was in a panic. Malika was already outside, running around frantically hoping they'd be somewhere obvious. However, there was only the garden and courtyard and after several figure-eights, she finally took a breath and decided to make this organised. With a loud and firm voice of a mother who is in charge of the situation because the worry *belongs* to her (and she wasn't about to let anyone else have it), she called everyone back into the gathering room. Within a minute the property was broken into segments. Not that the property was large, but in these moments it's easy to get lost even inside your room. Amina and Salman were sent to the main quarters, Jamil and Hamidah to the harem, Daud and Ayyub to the garden and Malika headed outside.

She went down a lone alley that connected her property with a park. She didn't know why she chose this alley over a few adjacent others. To lose her kids--! Her jaw clenched at the thought. A stranger who happened upon that alley skirted away in a mixture of fear and disgust. Malika realised the poor woman must have interpreted the scowl as being directed at her. And having realised how bad her scowl was, Malika let out a laugh of resignation. *When did I see them last? I must have been listening to my father for at least fifteen minutes without paying attention to anything else -- where could they have gone in this time? Not much farther than the park.*

It didn't seem surreal. Not yet. She was still in the initial shock. Her only thought was a contemptuous pity for her enemies and what she'd do to them if her offspring were taken. If she had nothing to lose. Fortunately, the world didn't find out the full extent of Malika's rage. At least not *then*. As soon as she reached the end of the lane and entered the clearing, she darted to a large tree stump. She knew it was hollow inside. She also knew that her children were inside. And true enough, she saw the tops of two angelic heads from her elevated point of view.

Malika sighed. They already turned their heads up and yelped a cry of joy on seeing her. Because their mouths were open and turned up towards her, because they were sitting and because they were so small, they reminded Malika of baby birds in their nests. Tantruming for their parents to feed them. And feed them she did, with caresses.

“Where were you? Where did you go?”

"We just ran out to play but we got lost and--" Azizah stopped and pointed towards a place in the park where the trees were so dense that Malika couldn't see what was there. She realised they were frightened out of their wits by what was behind those trees. They were *hiding* in the tree trunk from whatever it was.

"What's there? What were you afraid of?" She looked at Abbas more than his sister when she asked this because Abbas was smaller and a boy and so he'd have less scruples about 'telling mummy'. Azizah was already at that age whereby if she told, her friends would make fun of her.

"There was--there is a woman there. She's...standing."

"Did she scare you? Did she try to hurt you?" As she said those magic words, her nails sunk into her hands in a reflex.

"No, she smiled. But she was standing in--in the air."

Malika saw Amina appear out of the alley opening and waved her over.

"Here? Thank Intisar!"

"Yes, Intisar indeed... Take them back. I have to check something out." Malika finished the sentence absent-mindedly, already looking back at the trees.

A woman levitating? This was hardly new: holy women did this all the time. Allegedly. But here, in the forest? Why?

The air had a tingle that Malika enjoyed. It was as if the air itself was telling her that this day was momentous, that the momentary disappearance of her Flesh had a Purpose.

She went into the space where the trees were clumped together and took about thirty steps in virtual darkness before reaching the next clearing. From there, she could see much of the Baghdad far in the distance. Everything was insignificant, removed, irrelevant. What was relevant was a woman levitating about 2 metres from the ground. She had to be a holy woman, she had an incredible beauty that immediately took Malika's breath away. But not for worldly reasons. It was a completely negative beauty, there was nothing sensual or physical or even mental about it. Malika drifted towards her slowly as she could see each fold in her garment rustle in the wind and give off a warm light. Eye contact with the stranger drove her forward. Malika felt her normal cynicism thin out. It was still there in the same quantity, just diluted with a new and foreign sense of the grand. The stranger smiled hypnotically and Malika started, not sure if this was indeed hypnosis, not sure if she should leave immediately and go back to her previous life. Or, follow this woman to the edge of the world and finally *start* her life. For the first time in a long time she truly felt light, like she can ascend to the same level as this One, or greater, like she could float up to the celestial sphere with nothing but her breath. Malika also noticed another feeling swell up inside her: an irrational love towards the woman, as if she'd known her all her life. This scared her because she never warmed to strangers. Not until they stopped being strangers. Even this fear drove her forward though, as the tingling in her fingertips and the surge of adrenalin made the feeling of goodwill exhilarating. Malika took another step, reached--

--and fell over, tripping. When she hit the ground her euphoria didn't end. No, that came a second later when she saw the rope that caused her fall. It was a small inconspicuous one used by the holy woman to prop herself up. Malika also heard a short scream that wasn't her own. She looked up and saw the novice holy woman scared out of her wits at being discovered in her fraud. Because one of the 4 ropes she was suspended on was broken, her body was tilted to the side. She was trapped and her arms dangled ridiculously. *Of course, that's why she's here! Where else but a deserted place like this can a so-called djinnologist<sup>9</sup> practice her...lies?*

She always suspected that virtually all "miracles" performed by holy women were false. But suspicion was nothing compared to experiencing firsthand. This then was the meaning of the day, from the discussion of the mystical magic squares to her scramble and false epiphany. Malika knew it was time to go home.

She got up, bowed to the woman in mock extravagance and said "your eminence, I humbly take my leave". Let her dangle.

In the Khalifa's palace, Rasha sat in an armchair and dreamt long dreams. She wasn't supposed to be working. Still, she'd have been distraught at having fallen asleep in the middle of the day, wasting valuable time. Fortunately, being asleep she had absolutely no idea she was. The result was a guilt-free dream about something she never dared think about in lucid moments.

She was in the palace garden picking plums off the trees for this evening's fruit jam. Two figures appeared. They were Mansur (Nadia's husband) and Faiz, his manservant. Mansur whispered something in

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<sup>9</sup> See Glossary



Faiz's ear, pointed to the crate of apples that were previously picked and left. A few more mindless minutes of Rasha at the plum trees and Faiz at the apple crate. Suddenly he approached her from behind.

Suddenly? Yeah, right. Rasha knew it, expected it. Dreamed of it.

He pulled out a bracelet and she gasped -- it was woven from the finest golden threads. She had no idea where he got them. She didn't want to know. He told her to meet him at full moon in that very garden.

When the moon was at the zenith. He told her

that he didn't mind,

that it wouldn't matter in the end,

that he was honoured to know a *woman* like her (Rasha went giddy),

that ever since she started to work in the garden he had longed for her to run her hands through his hair (Rasha undid his braids and penetrated his locks).

And she consented to all, because he truly was a find. She remembered watching him perform his tasks in such a manner that she could ascertain his soul from every action, and fall in love with it. After work he'd make stick figures from the twigs and vines of the garden. He'd play with the servants' children making puppet shows, chasing them and being chased himself round the labyrinth of hedges and plum trees. Faiz did this all without the least presence of ego -- and for that reason Rasha *adored* his ego.

Rasha blinked and the garden was lit up by the moon at, looking down witnessing Faiz. There was something magically illicit about their rendezvous. To be united under the shameless open sky, within the courtyard, in these circumstances, under the very nose of the very building that would most deny their union -- 'twas sweetness itself. Faiz touched her shoulder and finally slipped off his Separator so Rasha saw his beard and mouth for the first time. And it was breathtaking, at least for her.

Suddenly she was back amongst the plum trees. Only they were bare: the branches were plumless skeletons making an ominous black mesh. Underneath her feet lay thousands and thousands of prunes, perfectly preserved and shrivelled. She didn't remember if she picked them herself under Nadia's orders, or if someone else picked them but there they were. As her senses blurred, she was stunned to see the prunes start jumping up to find their original places on the branches. Once attached they started filling up, their wrinkles smoothing out and disappearing, their shape puffing up to a healthy plump roundness. From dehydrated snacks to living reproductive organs of the tree. From squished flatness to spherical perfection. From a bland taste to subtle flavouring and rich nutrition.

Her body reluctantly returned to the armchair. In reality Faiz preferred *women* so Rasha had little chance of catching either his eye or genitalia.

## Chapter 11 in which we confront our djinnological dilemmas

"Shut the door," she said to an unsettled Ayyub without looking up from her desk.

Ayyub slid between the obelisks of books piled everywhere. Navigating to a cushion he eased onto it with a relieved sigh. The piles were volumes on djinnology, its history and the history of the Khalifate. Since the Incident of the Levitating Lady, Malika was at her task. Enraptured, entrapped, engrossed.

"And what have you found after 12 days of searching?"

"That I'm much less efficient than I'd like to be," she answered, still looking into her tome. "Also my present-giving has still gone unpunished."

Malika looked over the top of the pages. It was a warm gaze that reached out to her husband from across a chasm of knowledge. A bittersweet gaze: she resented that this knowledge now separated them.

"You want me to tell you everything don't you? Because it's important to your own djinnology which you hold so dear and which Jamil is so good at. And," at this point Ayyub felt a chill across his back, "you want validation. That everything's all right in your world. That you've been following the right path and your wife hasn't turned heretic. Or at least a greater one than she already is. I don't think I can provide any of these." Ayyub didn't respond but gloomily looked forward, his relaxed (or dejected?) eyes staring intransitively. "What I can do is this. I've selected 3 books you should read. Of all those I've sifted though,

and *what* a sift it was!" She got up and found them, running her finger over the spines with familiarity.

"What are they about?"

"Oh yo-o-ou'll see!...Actually, they merely outline the history of djinnology, from when it was first developed. Beliefs of the ancients, each ridiculous and each corresponding to *some* part of our djinnology."

"So..." Ayyub stumbled, lost. "You think they're not real? That the djinns were just in the imagination of the ancients and we inherited them?"

"I can't be sure, I know far too little. But I do know a few things. Our djinnology claims to be the only complete spiritual system, that all other approaches are death. And yet this system has its source in something that'd be considered heterodox nowadays. Some of the greatest thinkers acknowledged by our scribes have not subscribed to anything like djinnology. The Philosophers and countless others whose works we've cherished, translated, smothered with admiration. And we live by their words (or at least the moralists will have us live by them) despite the fact that they were based on ideas *completely contrary* to djinnology.

"Not to mention that djinnology has not *one* authoritative belief. Two neighbouring villages do everything differently. Oh, this is its greatest strength, they say. Good to know the greatest evidence our beliefs are bullshit is also their greatest strength. The more I look at it, the more I see there *is* no system. No djinnology because there's no '-ology'. It took the greatest minds of the last 500 years to systemise and djinnologise.

"You'll find For instance, there was no first holy woman. They simply start popping up. First discreetly: no more than a few per region per generation. Then they multiply. Amulets written, people healed, Yusuf successfully kept away (no difficulty in this last task methinks). Everybody ecstatic. At this stage it's still about personal well-being: how to avoid bad luck, getting sick, having an unfaithful husband. Only later do the djinns start telling us how to behave. Strange, huh?

"It's a nice system, it stops pesky self-doubts. But there are trade-offs: it is Intisar who tells us she's personally scanned all souls and not found *one* good man, and therefore We must rule over You with an iron fist."

Ayyub found himself with his back against the wall. He retreated without realising it. The sacrilegious questioning of his male inferiority scared him enough to interrupt.

"My dear, you know what? The fact that you've hardly left your room in two weeks was bound to warp your mind a little. How 'bout you get out of here for a while and clear your mental sinuses? Then we'll talk. And if you're right, I'll personally burn all my amulets or start using them as toilet paper." The last sentence was squeezed out quickly to not give him time to ponder and abort. "By the way, you once told me your mother disobeyed Intisar's precept of disclosing all property."

"Yes, she kept a few trophies from her campaigns in the East. To avoid taxes. Why do you ask?"

"Do you think she was *right*, because the decree she broke came from a false Intisar and therefore has no reflexion in morality?"

"Ayyub, you weren't listening carefully. I said the problem was doing things only *because* Intisar commanded it. There are better reasons to do things. And no she wasn't right then. Investigations were launched."

"Things haven't changed much!"

Malika smiled. "Thanks for reminding me, I should go through the trophies some time. They're just in the cellar."

"And don't *hint* of your research even to closest friends. I'd like to continue having a wife. Now don't you have somewhere to go?"

"That's right," Malika groaned softly. She changed in front of him (no time for proprieties) and disappeared into the night. She was off to a shafra<sup>10</sup> Alia was hosting.

As Malika walked she smiled at the irony of visiting a shafra after 12 days of apostasy. She had to though. Patronising the institutions: Nadia's advice was still valid today. Even more now. She *needed* to show some support towards the "flourishing culture," otherwise she'd end up in a state far from flourishing. Also she wanted a *word* with Alia about her recent demons.

Alia didn't live in an ascetic hut these days. She settled in Baghdad in a house.

Malika knew she was near from the fact that she found herself in the company of beggars. Beggars? Well, no, as everybody knows there were no *real* beggars in Baghdad, at least not in this stage of its

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<sup>10</sup> See Glossary

glorious history. But there were those worse off, obviously. And wherever Alia was, there they were too. Especially before a shafra.

"Are you going to the shafra, effendah<sup>11</sup>?" Malika heard herself being asked by one of about five barefooted women going in her direction along the cozily narrow street. The five had their hands joined and were strolling and skipping merrily.

"Yes I am. But I'm not an effendah," Malika said.

"You have shoes!" the woman joked.

"Touché. How'd you hear about the shafra?"

"Oh, *everybody* knows about Alia's shafra."

"Pray tell, how are hers different to others?"

"You mean you've never been?" she said to Malika and all her companions giggled, unashamed at making a noblewoman lose face. Why should they be? They may have walked barefoot all year and they may have owned bupkis in terms of property -- but tonight this street was their street.

"I know, shame on me. Rescue me from my *base ignorance*."

"A shafra begins with a summoning of anyone who is poor to come in and partake of the sacred meals and dances for free."

Malika's face lit up. "Yes and it's become a formality. You mean Alia reall--"

--ladies? Why are you all here?"

"To *be* in the shafra of course," one of them said.

"To honour Johara" whispered another who Malika noticed had many missing teeth. Tonight this mouth seemed holy to Malika, more precious than one filled with teeth of gold.

Something possessed Malika to join hands with the 5 and they continued their journey. The moon was a welcoming soft gibbous, the light of which reflected on their white skirts<sup>12</sup>. As they skipped the skirts rustled.

In a few minutes other groups, also with joined hands, drifted from all directions. There were entire crowds converging on the house. Most were ordinary people, the kind Malika would not have daily contact with. But there were members of Court. Funnily enough, none of them joined hands with anyone. The entrance was a simple wooden door on the side of the building. From the outside it seemed more like an overgrown utility shed than a place of residence. What better way for Alia to highlight the temporary nature of life? The wooden door was open, people were coming in.

Malika encountered a beautiful figure dawdling in the garden. She was dressed in clothing more loose and free-flowing than normal. Rather than walking, the figure hovered. Her feet missed the ground almost entirely and Malika heard wind chimes as a natural accompaniment.

The figure looked up with recognition. The next instant saw her squeezing Malika tightly.

"Malika! -- My love -- I'm -- so -- happy to witness your -- presence!" Each gap signified a new kiss assigned to a new side of Malika's cheek.

"Hi Jamilah. What are you doing here today?"

"Dancing the dance of the wind. Listening to Intisar's breath. Untangling sacred vibrations. Diminishing the distance between me and my fellow woman."

"Translation?"

"I've come out of a meeting with the Khalifa about a performance I'll be doing at the next banquet. You're cordially invited of course."

Malika saw Jamilah was almost naked. Then she realised she was without her instrument. She was a *samnah*<sup>13</sup> player. The best in Baghdad, the Khalifate, the Universe. This would have been the first time she'd seen her friend without one. She enquired.

"After all those years of playing I've reached a new stage where I can Experience without having my hands on the strings. Of course, I'll have to play eventually. But composition has already begun," she said moving her hand across the crowd to show her inspiration and then tapping her forehead twice.

*Encouraging that she's just as crazy as usual.* "I'm sure you'll do great. And I'll come by some time for a listen-see."

"Do. But wait, how are those gorgeous husbands of yours going?"

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<sup>11</sup> See Glossary

<sup>12</sup> A must for any shafra

<sup>13</sup> See Glossary

“Keeping them busy”  
 “Did I doubt that for a minute?”  
 “What I was actually referring to was some projects they've started.” Malika figured Jamilah was too far in fairyland to be secretive around.  
 “Why?”  
 “Huh?”  
 “For what purpose?”  
 “...because they can? Because they want to?”  
 “Yes and I may want to be the Khalifa, doesn't mean I should. Of course, they're resourceful, smart I'm sure. When you attend the performance please don't bring Ayyub or I shall melt away into nothingness and float away to join the djinns. Or something. But this doesn't mean that they should be like us.”  
 “Us?”  
 “Yeah, members of Court. What'd you think?”  
 “Nothing.”  
 “That and I challenge you to find any man who can play the samnah. Technically they can of course, they have fingers and opposable thumbs. But I'd be hard-pressed to find someone who could deal with it emotionally, to give feeling to it.”  
 “Actually,--” Malika started just for the fun of watching her friend gasp. “I'm only joking. Perhaps you're right.”  
 “Perhaps? By the way, have you ever looked out at our City from the Palace hill?”  
 “I certainly have.”  
 “I did today. And it made me think something that's never occurred to me. How great it is that Baghdad is so equitable. You don't see slums or quarters or pockets where everyone is poor. There's no great divide in the town, we're all pretty much equal.”  
 Malika nodded, smiling to herself.  
 “Well, I'm going in.”  
 Jamilah waved a dramatic goodbye even though she was going to see her inside in a few minutes.

## Chapter 12 in which we shafra to our hearts' content

First thing coming in, Malika saw Alia. There was no verbal greeting -- only a look that spoke volumes more. It was then that Malika saw the people inside and the cacophony of the shafra. There was no furniture in the room, nothing decorative whatsoever, just a plain green rug over the room's enormous entirety. Scattered on the floor were cushions, scattered on the cushions were people. There were musicians playing (Malika noticed Jamilah), people eating ritual food, some whirling round in their trance, others simply sitting and chanting. Not that you could hear any chant, so pervasive was the din. There were thick bundles of incense smoke as well as the smell of the sacred meal: a gorgeous plov complete with the bones of the lamb, cinnamon, garlic, saffron and chilli.

Malika noticed a few of her friends in the crowd (by then numbering about 130) but she was apprehensive to join them just yet. Or at all -- it was hard enough getting over her cynicism *before* her Twelve Days but now the thought of participating made her queasy. Her neck and jaw clenched, so she decided to merely watch first.

The shafra was a communion with Johara, the djinn associated with the women of Baghdad. She represented a combination of purity of heart and power of the intellect that made the Khalifate what it was (the men of Baghdad were represented by Yusuf, who in addition to his evil had a great capacity for more evil. This was considered an allegorical sign of the great capacity of the males to do *good*, to be productive by putting together the building blocks of society with the mortar of work and sperm).

The shafra was a beseeching of Johara by all kinds of women, to guide them in their collective living and decision-making. In ancient times, the great matriarchs of the Baghdadian tribe would gather in a cave

in an open forum for all women to discuss the running of the tribe, voice grievances and offer suggestions. Nobody missed out, there was no rank nor class. And always they would beseech Johara to aid the decisions made on that night, to make them fair and just for all. One time Johara was so moved by the people's zeal for good she descended to the meeting, offering her suggestions. But this she did not as a dictator but as a regular woman. She waited her turn. She promised to return to all shafra. Incidentally before Johara descended, tradition has it that she cried tears of joy -- tears which fell into a rockpool in the cave, giving birth to the famous aphrodisiac potion Johara's Tears. Countless generations have passed and society has changed beyond belief -- but still each shafra seeks to emulate the First. All the dances and chants in the room were for her. As was all the food, which was to be eaten only with the sanctity of Johara in mind. Malika knew that even if Alia did believe in this sanctity she still used it as an *excuse* to feed the poor,

as testified  
by the proportion of women  
with bare feet.

When Malika blinked next, it was two hours later. She had fallen into an enraptured state induced by the twirling of the dancers and the wailing of the farizahs<sup>14</sup>, the dirgeful bass of the drums and the urapas<sup>15</sup>. She was very tired. Part of the problem was there was nowhere to focus on. In front and around and behind there were simply the waves of white skirts. This was the reason they had to be white: no other colour had this hypnotic an effect. Between the blurs of the skirts there were more blurs. Malika had nothing to think about, because the music was right up in her head, getting cozy with her mind as trance music is designed to. There was trance music and then there was *Jamilah's* trance music though. Jamilah's was an endless chariot wheel, spinning and turning, the spokes moving compared to each other and themselves, always changing direction. And then Malika saw her.

Hanan wore a thick white wool shawl, spinning much more than Malika would have expected a detached philosopher to be. A dangerous fanatic, yet she looked absolutely stunning in her intense unselfconscious focus. Here was a human being lost in the moment.

Malika wanted to whirl out of spite for Hanan's unlost spirituality. Or to start sobbing. But before this was to be, two things occurred. There was an immediate spasm of relief inside Malika as she felt better; and a split second after all the sounds and twirling ceased in unison replaced by a thick silence. The shafra was over: some people were collapsed, others sitting down by now, with sweat or tears exploding from their faces. Malika's relief was simple: she had many many things Hanan never did. Her husbands for example. *What kind of interaction could someone like Hanan (cold, cerebral, unyielding, rigid) have with her beloveds? Nothing like mine, that's sure. The orthodoxy may have djinnology, but I have this. So it's 1:1.*

Alia spoke up, breaking the ten minute silence. "Friends, thankyou for making this an amazing shafra. I'm sure you felt Johara's divine breathing today. She truly loves us. Adores us actually, each and every one, whether here or elsewhere. But then again you already knew that or you wouldn't be here would you? She is at her happiest when the women of Baghdad are working together to advance the Khalifate, civilisation and community. Which is why I felt the energy of reconciliation. Conflict is two fires turned towards each other. Each foolishly attempting to devour its sister. Reconciliation is combining the fires, having the ability to devour anything that stands in their way."

"Let me finish off with a Waliat<sup>16</sup>."

#### THE TALE OF THE FOOLISH DJINNOLOGIST

There was once a foolish djinnologist. She was most learned in the lore of the djinns -- their names, their attributes and habits, what they ruled over, how to talk to them. One day she was journeying through the desert. Because of her immaculate djinnology she had a flawless amulet against Yusuf. Because of her immaculate worldly idiocy she wandered off course not being able to find north. Suddenly, she walked into something invisible yet solid. Taking a step back, she saw the semi-opaque outline of a foot. Stepping back another few metres she looked up to find none other than Yusuf towering over her. He was 300m tall, he was. She ran, only to bump into his other foot.

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<sup>14</sup> See Glossary

<sup>15</sup> See Glossary

<sup>16</sup> See Glossary



"But I have my talisman!" she protested, pointing to the thing around her neck.

"Yes you do. And congratulations. However, it doesn't work so far from an established desert route. It seems you've stumbled off it a mere three hours ago," he said extending his claws that were larger than her entire body.

"Have I? Oh dear... But wait--there should be something I can do."

"There is. You can retrace your steps. But you don't know where to go so I guess you can repel me with a symbolic story."

The foolish djinnologist smiled with relief, for she believed she had just the story. She began

#### "THE TALE OF THE EFFENDAH AND THE WATER CANAL OF TABRIZ

"There was an effendah. She owned many properties and villages including the water-canals of Tabriz. Once, she was visiting because she was unhappy with the taxes her officers raised from the fellahot<sup>17</sup>. So she came to Tabriz herself, called the elders of the guilds and started telling them off. This was on the very side of the canal so when she got worked up gesticulating she fell in. Like most effendahs, she never had time or desire to learn to swim, so she started drowning and calling for help. The fellahot knelt down and stretched out their hands. They wanted her to give them her hand so they could pull her out. They shouted 'Give, give!' but in vain -- for she continued drowning.

"A holy woman was passing through and heard the commotion. She walked up to the edge of the canal and instantly appraising the situation turned to the fellahot. 'You have the wrong approach. This effendah has spent her whole life taking, whether revenue, work or respect. She's not used to giving anything. Even her hand, even to save herself. Let's try something else.' And, taking out a long handkerchief she had in her belt, she stretched it out saying 'Take, take!'. When the effendah heard a phrase she could parse, she grabbed the handkerchief letting the holy woman pull her out of the canal."

Unfortunately for the foolish djinnologist, the story's power was rendered moot due to an error in one of its details. As a result, Yusuf brushed the story off with a giggle.

"You can also perform a sacrifice," he suggested, bored by now.

"Of course, a goose!" said the foolish djinnologist, remembering this as Yusuf's favourite food along with garlic.

"I'll even help you," he said and a goose fell from the night sky onto the cold desert floor, along with a butcher's knife.

"I know the procedure inside out. First, I must puncture the aorta."

She proceeded to poke into the goose's breast, but of course failed miserably. She knew nothing of anatomy, only the outer shell of the ritual. She would never have been able to do any of the steps in her ignorance. And the djinnology made it worse -- it was confidence in her amulet that made her stop watching the road.

Having punctured the gall bladder, the goose and knife disappeared. "Cheers for trying," said Yusuf before snatching her in his claws, skinning her in one smooth motion and stealing her away to one of his celestial frying pans where she was subjected to temperatures of a thousand degrees for eternity. Such was the fate of the foolish djinnologist.

Ten minutes later people were standing in small groups and talking. Many discussed the Waliat that Alia told. A Waliat was supposed to have eighteen sacred interpretations in addition to the basic meaning. One for each of the main djinns. Malika didn't care to seek an interpretation, she wasn't sure there *was* one. She didn't even know anymore if this or any Waliat had a *plain* meaning.

After greeting her friends and talking to them briefly she headed to Alia.

"Today was a *very* momentous day for you. But I'm surprised you came. I mean, after your recent reclusiveness."

"What? Oh I guess there's not much you don't know. But I still find it fasc--"

"--but surely you're against falsehood? I know part of the reason you came. Go on, ask away. You know you want to."

"Well, then, is it true?"

"Yes Malika it's all true. I admit it now. I've been fooling people for decades. Humans are...weak, corrupt, restless and selfish. So we need to keep them in line to be at least civil to each other even if it's by

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<sup>17</sup> See Glossary

the means of some outrageously crafty lies. Right, I'm done -- was that what you wanted to hear?"

Malika gasped indignantly.

"Well, I'll say no such thing. Do you know the interesting thing about gold? There are so many counterfeits *because* the real thing is so valuable. As for the false, heed my Waliat."

"My dear, I'm fully unconvinced."

"I know. It's not your time yet."

"I know you can prophesy about my life to the last minute. Still, I'd like to be surprised by what happens, thank you."

"It's not about warning you. It's about trying to give you some empathy in advance. You will need it, and it will be scarcer than you currently think."

"Thank you for your empathy," Malika said flatly. She then hugged Alia and left. The strange thing was she felt this hug was the most sincere she's ever had with Alia. And it was because she was finally out of the closet and they could disagree openly, leaving all other aspects of their relationship in complete harmony.

## Chapter 13 in Rasha untr-----s, watc--s and sche--s

His wife's apostasy meant a great deal to him. *It would place her even more on the fringe. She would have to choose between keeping quiet or being executed. Although the Khalifa avoids giving the death penalty, it is realistic for a rejection of djinnology. Especially if she still feels scorned. My love will be in an impaled state. But literally instead of figuratively. And permanently instead of regularly. Oh, how can I make crappy jokes at a time like this? In any case to avoid unpleasantness she'll have to keep quiet. Which is hard enough for anyone, let alone her. Unlike Jamil and Daud, I'm not pretending not to be terrified. Every time I'll see her sleeping face, I'll be devastated by only one thing: she's left the clutches of Johara and Intisar. And I'll be afraid, for if that face (Sha-Ul forbid!) stops breathing in her sleep; if her heavenly belly (for that's where the real navel of the world is!) stops its expansions and contractions, her soul will cease to be.*

He decided this was enough for a self-pitying soliloquy and walked out of the room. The three books Malika recommended were on the floor, unread.

"What would you like for your evening meal?--My Ruler?"

Nadia stopped reading and caught a glimpse of Rasha. An eyebrow was raised. There was something about her demeanour as she spoke. Some bizarre hint of insolence that was so subtle Nadia couldn't accuse her of anything. But it was there. Self-confidence. "Umm, whatever you think best. I'm not picky today. But stay. You've yet to give your daily report.."

What currently interested Nadia most was the conflict. The Western army (the Great Rabble as Nadia called them), had been camping across the river in a far northern province for weeks. Finally Nadia's troops had overrun the part of her territory that the rabble wanted. This was so much more than a conflict over land: it was over the hearts and minds of an entire province. They were the people of Intisar; she presided over them. She made sure they'd be successful in their salt mining every year. She loved her children. She also had 60 shrines in the province, shrines that predated Nadia's Abbasid dynasty. But the barbarians wanted all. Now that virtually the entire Khalific army was moved to there, this danger seemed averted.

She was hoping to resolve things diplomatically but still she was actively deploying the rest of active forces to the area. The regular army wasn't enough. It was nothing compared to the Sisterhood. This was the unit Nadia really wanted on the scene as soon as possible. But that would take time. The Fighting Sisters cost the treasury an elephant's weight in silks, spices or precious stones. They were worth it. In a few weeks, the sleeping tigers will be awakened, and will descend on the place of battle, raining down a furious array of righteousness onto the barbarians if need be. Nadia sighed as she stopped her daydreaming.

Perhaps Rasha's defiance was due to Nadia's recent diminishing of her role. Although she never

followed up on her brainstorm to simply *move* her to the harem, she did a few things to curb Rasha's influence. So this reading was a test. The Khalifa had already started receiving her daily scoop from other assistants. Surely Rasha knew this. And Nadia knew that she knew, and Rasha knew that Nadia knew that she knew, etc. Nadia only wanted to see her reaction. When Rasha did speak Nadia merely looked at her, not paying the least bit of attention to specific words. As for Rasha, clearly aware of the degrading intent of the task, she went about it with an even greater confidence and glee. After 3 minutes of talking, when she clearly knew that "Her Ruler" wasn't listening to a word, she changed the words and started slipping in some nonsensical sentences. This led to a complete stream of consciousness. The fact that Nadia still hadn't noticed made it snowball. Her defiance grew as her speech became more jumbled.

*I wonder what it is, thought the Khalifa. What could possess her to be so cheerful. She actually seems chirpy, and this after her demotion. Maybe she's happy about something, but what could that something be?* Suddenly Nadia felt hot all over. By diminishing Rasha's role, she had in fact drawn her further away, in direct contradiction to the tactic of keeping one's enemies closer, as recommended by her grandmother. *Maybe I should reinstate her. To an extent. Otherwise she'll scheme behind my back, if she's not already. Oh, what the fuck else can she possibly be doing?* Nadia's self-assessment of her grip on the Khalifate was low at the best of times. She got through Rasha's talk by making a note to reinstate her, keep her under watch. And within reach of the blade.

As Rasha, she had a little thought-stream of her own. In fact, she positively glowed because as of yesterday evening, she was invited into the human family again. It was quite simple -- she believed in djinns and miracles and blossoms. Instead of dismissing that dream she had, she asked *why not?* And naturally enough, the impossible happened. Something about her changed attitude made Faiz see a Her instead of an It, and nothing was the same ever again. The feeling that she was turning the ruler's very subjugation against her was sweet in her mouth. What a mouth it was! She finally saw it as a sensual object, not a mere utility. Its contortions in telling Nadia about the military preparations and the price of fish were no longer its *only* reason for existence. It had an aesthetic dimension. Of course, other parts of her felt different too, but nothing like the mouth. As of yesterday evening she could *speak* for the first time since---

"Enough," said Nadia. "I...thank you. But I won't be needing you to do the report anymore, I'm sure you have better things to do with your time than update an old bat in her cave. Dismissed."

"Thank you, My Ruler." Rasha bowed quite subserviently and left.

Nadia was triumphant because she knew she succeeded in shaming the eunuch -- and showing her her place -- and counterattacking her insolence.

Rasha was triumphant because she knew she succeeded in getting freedom. And insolence. Just as she seemed more obedient than ever. She felt a spasm of pleasure echo from her wiggly toes to the crown of her head as she did the final exaggerated bow. But the glee was reserved for something else. She went to her room and started to get changed. Some blood dripped from her genitals, but instead of wincing she simply pulled away a cloth that was taped there to catch any bleeding and replaced it. Of course, she closed all windows and locked the door right before. Anyone who might have walked in, if she had any knowledge of medicine, would have seen that Rasha was in the first week of recovery from an outrageous, illegal operation, whereby the Stitches were Removed. Then the palace's physician would have lost both the bribe Rasha paid her, as well as her head. But it wasn't just Faiz who was responsible for the mood. She was realistic about him. But he was a stepping stone into *this*, her new Herness.

Rasha smiled as she remembered the post-op ceremony. She performed it by herself, at midnight, in the garden where her plum dream was set. She knelt down on the ground, cupped some soil with her hands, made a hole, placed the Stitches inside and covered them up. Just a burial. But how good it felt! So much had been taken from her already; but this time *she* was taking something away, something that gave her Hope and meant she had Allowed herself to hope. And here, changing her cloth, she ignored the searing pain and discomfort. She just looked at her body as if it was made of preciousness, whilst remembering the Stitches -- no longer sowing up her body thank Intisar! -- buried in that deep dank cavity in the garden.

It was a restless evening for Nadia. She retreated into her private chambers. She was one of the few rulers of the Khalifate who understood that in times of stress one needs *more* rest, not less, to enable her to give the right orders. However, after lying around on her divan for an hour, Nadia did her usual sneaking away.

She wasn't alone this time though. A figure followed her down the steps. It was a healthy distance away -- about 50 metres, so Nadia had absolutely no idea. The figure stuck close to shadows of the night and

protrusions in walls. She tailed Nadia throughout her walk through the streets. The figure (naturally!) belonged to Rasha. Rasha had a lot more time on her hands ever since being officially “distanced” from the Khalifa. Her operation gave the extra boost, as she no longer had any doubts as to whether it was right or not to do this. *Hesitation and moral conundrums are for victims. Now that I'm no longer a victim but a woman I have no need for them.* Rasha almost giggled from the shadows as she watched her, mocking Nadia's supposedly magnanimous nature. *How very kind of My Ruler to be concerned for the ordinary citizen!*

Rasha watched from afar, like a lioness stalking her victim. Of course, she wouldn't really know what it's like to be a lioness: her constitution was closer to that of a herbivorous animal. But as of late, she did feel a surge of power. She was like a carnivorous beast for several reasons. She crouched. She instinctively brought her hips, elbows and knees down. Her breath became inaudible. Awareness of self ceased -- all her attention was on Nadia. No senses of her own. She felt, heard and smelt what Nadia did. Not that it mattered exactly what actions she took: Rasha didn't care about the conversations the Khalifa eavesdropped on. It was her whereabouts and demeanour that were of consequence.

Every organ in her body became engorged euphorically. In the back of her mind, she knew it was her body's natural reaction to her operation and the blooming therefrom. This did not take away from the magic of it all. Her hormones chose a most wondrous moment to leap back into life. The world's pulse ran through her, interspersing itself with her tissue, paralyzing yet relaxing it -- allowing it to do things she would never have dreamed of months ago. It was like a broken leg that's just been taken out of its cast. From being inside the cast for so long, the leg is at first hypersensitive to anything tactile, reacting to the smallest movement of the air and feeling each hair dance its own dance. This hypersensitivity *was* her now, across her entire body and mind (the organ that was in a cast the most during Imprisonment). Rasha peered at Nadia enough to drill a hole in her back, licked her lips, took a deep breath in...

...the juice dripped down Rasha's chin. This wasn't hedonism. Why *shouldn't* she let it drip? So rare that she got to drink plum juice. And especially now that plums have acquired an extra significance.

“Thankyou very much,” she said to the host whilst pacing.

“No problems. So we've agreed? 450 dinars?” The hostess was an ineffable woman due to her being wrapped in a thick brown shawl. Or was it because of the contrast to Rasha's cleanly-shaven head? Despite Rasha's newfound vigour, she couldn't exactly let her operation be *known* by growing hair...

“450.”

“Right. Allow me to go over the terms briefly. I always pride myself on being exact with customers.”

“Do,” said Rasha with an unbusinesslike excitement.

The woman sat down and drummed her fingers on the table. She looked at her fingers like they were resting on a document that outlined the job. But that was moot: in her business there *were* no written records.

“3 incidents in the square, tonight. While your subject is walking around listening to conversations. Each incident will involve at least one eunuch, so we will get either four eunuchs or simply shave the hair of four of our women and get them to act the part. The first will have one complaining to another how much they're being mistreated. The other will reciprocate. It--I'm sorry--she, she will tell of her mistreatment in a large and established household. The talk will be emotional, effective, to the point. Your subject's heart will melt. The second will be a woman consoling a eunuch of the loss of a friend. This friend was lost due to the Baghdad General Curfew on Eunuchs. She broke the curfew so her mistress locked her in the basement. There was a fire in the house that night and i--she was horridly burnt to death. The third will involve 3 hoodlums targeting a eunuch who they identify because of her shaved head only. They will take her money threatening to hold her past the curfew if she doesn't give it to them. She will sob dejectedly.” She lifted up her eyes to meet Rasha's gaze in an almost haughty expression. “Is that all?”

“Indeed.” Rasha didn't fail to notice the irony -- despite her choice of pronouns the woman still believed there was no *outward difference* between women and eunuchs other than hair.

“I shan't disappoint. By the way, who is your target? The mistress of some big household?”

“Something like that,” said Rasha.

“May I ask what this will achieve? I mean if it'll soften up your mistress, she's hardly in a position to go to the Khalifa and get the Curfew lifted...”

“Actually, she has quite some influence in Court. Not as much as some,” she said smiling to herself, “but enough to make a difference.”

## Chapter 14 in which we see lots of dead fetuses and Daud questions the inferiority of men

It was rare for the 4 of them to be out together. They weren't all bunched up, Jamil and Daud being slightly ahead, leaving Malika and Ayyub alone. They were even wearing their Separators perfectly -- take that, foul fiends of propriety!

"Well?" Ayyub interrupted Malika's caravan of thoughts.

"I'm sorry dear. We were asking about...you rejecting it all? And giving up the thought of a future in Intisar's bosom--"

"--not rejecting it ALL. I'm simply cautious. I'll grant that there are things in this world I have no idea about. But let's not mince words, I *don't* believe in any of the djinns. And no I don't have the belief of being reunited with you in Intisar's bosom either."

"Do you then think all holy women are like the fraud you encountered that day?"

"I'd like to. It would make the most sense. I mean if the djinns are made up then so are the miracles, amulets, shafiras and Waliats, right?"

"But?"

Malika stared at him.

"Right! Alia..."

"Hmm. The answer is then that I don't know. Maybe she's the only one who really does all those things. Maybe her source is a power that's real unlike djinnology. Guess we'll have to wait and see." Malika darted him a sly glance just as she realised they were at Samiyyah's doorstep.

Things were going well for these reasons:

1. Samiyyah lived in a very courtly part of Baghdad. When they went inside, this was observed by households around Samiyyah. Malika felt no icy vibe, as she might have expected. Either they were all brilliant at self-control or the malice against her hadn't permeated the entirety of polite society.
2. Samiyyah had no news of further courtly gossip. Malika welcomed that because given the current situation anything would have been bad news.
3. Samiyyah had only wondrous things to say about Jamil's progress. He'd been receiving animal carcasses several times a week, dissecting them and sending some back. According to Samiyyah "he cuts up dead things good!"

So Malika was in a chirpy mood. Even when Samiyyah (pressed about the next stage of Jamil's apprenticeship), showed them into a side room.

It was time to progress to people. Well, not actual people -- potential people. Samiyyah's side room was about a hundred metres of shelf space filled with objects of potential personhood. As soon as Malika saw it, she knew why the good doctor had never showed this room to her. She also knew that virtually nobody must have known about this room -- *note to self: if things ever get ugly between us, at least I have something on her too*. Malika also knew she must leave the room or she'll be extremely indisposed. The shelves were lined with large jars of monstrosities. *I suppose you can call them human*. There must have been 200, each in a horrible state of foetal non-development, each floating in a different coloured liquid. There were fetuses with two heads, ones with an extra arm and so forth. That wasn't the monstrous part, at least not for Malika. The worst part was looking at some rather minor deviations that went against the very concept of humanity. Like the one with 4 horn-like protrusions on its head (non-symmetric) making it look like Yusuf. Or the one without a proper body that seemed to have arms and legs coming out of the same place like some horrid spider. Or the twins that were conjoined at two places: the forehead (no biggie, right?) but also both legs so the 4 legs melded into one. The result was like two mermaids touching tails and kissing at the forehead. Amazingly beautiful for a sculpture; but the same qualities in a foetus made Malika's left hamstring start to twitch.

This was not just a museum of monstrosities. It was Samiyyah's learning room, for she did much more than just look at these corpses from the outside. Many were carved up. Neatly, nicely, by a sober hand of precision. *Almost with loving care*, Malika noticed shuddering. There were single limbs floating beside fetuses, others had their heads split open or their guts neatly wrapped around the neck. Some jars were nothing more than a potpourri of human flesh that once belonged to a malformed stillbirth.

"Is your mouth watering yet?" Samiyyah asked Jamil with a smile. But he didn't hear. His attention was pressed against the cold glass of one of the jars, his finger tracing out a particularly unusual arm. It was then that Malika's sickness magically went away. She remembered that to him this was Interesting and



Important, in a way Heavenly. The tantrums thrown by her brain subsided as she looked at Jamil standing there all absorbed. The fact that she couldn't for the love of Intisar understand how he can be so fascinated, made her respect his fascination more.

"Yes it is," she answered Samiyyah on Jamil's behalf. "But we should leave him to it. I assume that we'll be getting one of these delivered to our house for him to have a play with, no?"

"You will. He's ready. I'm impressed you can speak of having even one of these under your roof so calmly."

"Have the 3 others you've shown this to fainted?"

"Hey!..It was five and yes," said Samiyyah. "Two I haven't seen since. Funny that."

"And now you show no-one. But do you actually learn from these, these...*deviations*?"

"More than I might from healthy foetuses. Of course, I can't know for sure about those..."

"Good, I was about to call the Khalifa's guard!" laughed Malika.

"In general my aim is to systematically go through the entire work of the Philosophers--"

"--what? Don't tell me she's in this too!" said Malika. She then related her encounters with Hanan. To all this Samiyyah only shrugged as if saying "what do you expect?". Malika noted she was right.

"The Philosophers wrote many treatises on anatomy, physiology, medicine, pathology, herbalism, diet, exercise and hygiene."

"Did she even have time to bathe as she wrote on every branch of learning? But I'm mean-spirited. I should be weeping that I didn't know this."

"Maybe you should! Anyway, She developed a method of inference for medicine whereby you look at a range of organisms. You formulate an idea as to the correct structure and function of any organ or system simply by comparing several deformities and several examples of healthy tissue. She did this with most animals She had access to."

"So you're replicating this for people? Just without the -- healthy tissue..."

"Oh no, for healthy tissue I *am* using a range of sources. My knowledge of living people. Accounts from clinics and other leeches. Treatises by Her about the human body even. Jamil should be able to help. Soon too, he's going extremely well."

Hearing his name, Jamil called out to her and pointed at one of the jars, saying that this boy seems to have had an abundance of the menstrual humour. It was at this point that Malika, Daud and Ayyub decided to duck out.

"Sorry for being such a poor host. But I was instructing him," said Samiyyah when she came out to join them. Jamil was wasting no time, still in the Room. "By the way, can I get you to help me in another study?" She produced three small jars. Malika burst out at the thought of Samiyyah demanding she immediately give birth to three very small monstrosities. So she can bottle them "fresh from the source". Of course, Samiyyah was only asking that they urinate in the jars. Like many other leeches, she was involved in studying the properties of urine, being of the school that aims to diagnose most of the body's ills from its smell, colour and viscosity.

Malika went first and handed her the jar without blinking. Ayyub shifted his feet uncomfortably, as if looking for a private room. "No no darling, there's no need. You're wearing no *Separator*, I think I can be in the same room when you pee in a jar."

"When you put it like that--" said Ayyub producing a full sample for her along with Daud. When they were done Ayyub was about to suggest they put their names on the jars for identification. Samiyyah shook her head. "You think I can't tell whose it is? Your urine tells more about your personality than your words. I can tell your gender, age, personal habits, occupation, disposition, state of health and more. I think I can identify *whose* it is!"

"Occupation?" said Daud shaking his head in disbelief.

"I'll tell you all about it later," Samiyyah answered.

"That's right Daud, later. I now have to speak to Samiyyah in private," said Malika.

Once they were alone, Malika began.

"Samiyyah. You know I'm very grateful about your patronage of Jamil. And everything in fact. I'd like the opportunity to repay you somewhat."

"Oh don't be silly!"

"Still. Many people in your position have patrons that may fund a certain timeframe of work. I know you have to take quite a few patients to get the cash to support it. How about I partially fund that for a few

months? You'll only have to take, say, half the patients you otherwise would. This means more time cutting up foetuses!"

Samiyyah's face turned red as she hunched up. "I'm afraid that won't be possible... Because I already have a patron. Someone made me exactly the same offer a week ago. I was in no position not to take it."

"Someone? Who?!"

Samiyyah kept staring, swaying from side to side and generally stalling. From which Malika gathered the name immediately.

"Hanan."

As soon as she said it both faces fell, Malika's in disappointment; Samiyyah's in dread. "Well. Seems she's trying to push me out even more."

"I'm really sorry. But you can't blame me for stalling, can you? I didn't know anyway, you only told me about her role in all this today."

"Sorry? Don't be. You still get the money. Plus it's good in a way. At least now I know to be ready for anything. She could have become the patron of any one of 100 leeches. She came to you. And she chose the time when you were least able to tell her to fuck off." Malika felt it was inappropriate to tell Samiyyah about her theory of the murder. Not yet.

Left to themselves, Daud and Ayyub sat for a while.

"Well?" Daud broke the silence.

"Yes. You've been--?"

"Thinking? Indeed. You?"

Ayyub nodded.

"Maybe it's not even true that women *are* superior beings," said Daud.

"What? But-but that's impossible. Who would then be the superior being?"

"Maybe there is no superior being. Maybe the only superior beings are the djinns themselves and nobody else. Or maybe it's even more extreme -- maybe it's the men that are superior beings..."

Ayyub dropped his jaw and stopped breathing for a while, from fear of something terrible happening (like a lightning bolt). "How could this be?" he said when the daze was over.

"Well, why would women be superior to men?"

"Um, no reason at all, except all of them. Why, do I need to recite them? You don't remember learning them as a child?"

"Of course. But humour me."

"There was even a song about it. You know the one I mean; the Sixteen Features. How does it go again?"

Daud cut Ayyub off before he could start and gestured for him to simply speak.

"Fine, I'll go without song. Since men are physically stronger they must have been designed for serving women. Just like the stronger ox, serves people so the stronger man serves the woman."

"Great. What else?"

"The more brute strength is present in a creature, the less versatile and intelligent it is. For example, a shark has tremendous charging and biting power but can do little else. A panther can run fast but isn't very smart. When you start being versatile and intelligent you *lose* your brute strength and all the other purely physical characteristics. People are very weak -- for almost anything physical they can do there are animals that can outperform them a millionfold. But a person is able to do more than all the animals put together. The same can be said within the humans. Women are weaker -- for anything physical they can do, there are men who can outperform them a millionfold. But--"

"But maybe this notion is easier to believe because most men are uneducated, illiterate and non-versatile."

"Exactly. Most men *are*."

"My dear Ayyub, do you really think *we're* that special? Are we *geniuses* because we learnt to read and write and are now doing something about it? Could it perhaps be because our dear Soulmate allows it? Could it not be that if it were generally allowed, such arguments might not stand up?"

"I've never thought about it. Oh, wait!" Ayyub was actually excited about this. "This doesn't change it! So what if men were slightly smarter? The first argument stands. All that's needed is for them to be different to women in either force or intelligence. To the smallest amount."

"What if they're not stupider? What if they're stronger and just as intelligent -- I think that would make them superior. After all djinns are strong and intelligent. Maybe if given the right chance, men are actually

closer to the djinns than any woman.”

“Do you really think so?”

“No,” said Daud, but from his tone it wasn't at all obvious. “But it is fun to think about,” he concluded slowly. “What else?”

“Speaking of djinns, our djinnology tells us of the superiority of the female.”

“I thought of that myself. I mean, who gathers us in the bosom when we're dead and possibly controls the moon and time?” asked Daud.

“Intisar.”

“Who takes care of children, crops and human relationships and makes each household harmonious?”

“Johara.”

“And who tests us, kidnaps children in the night, steals the souls of the dead and fries his enemies in garlic and oil?”

“Yusuf. And I suppose you'll have something to say about Sha-Ul too. But how does that prove your point? It again shows that the benevolent djinns are all female,” said Ayyub.

Daud turned to Ayyub and smiled making him flinch. His smile had a condescension he never imagined Daud capable of. But then again, Ayyub *didn't* understand the point of the smile -- like Jamil he was a devoted djinnologist. Which made Daud's smile somewhat apt.

“What else?”

“The fact that women were entrusted with childbearing.”

And so they went on, Ayyub remembering more and more arguments. After a while he stopped treating them as remembered and started considering them his own. After all, a large percentage of every person's thoughts that they think her or his own, aren't. They've been placed there by those around them. These placements might have been made for good reason, and the thoughts themselves may be perfectly true. But we still err when we think of ourselves as their *sole* creators. Ayyub spoke more and more, and there was no distinction between what he remembered, what he recreated and what he invented on the spot, fulfilling Daud's wish for more. To him it was so simple a fact that there was no need to even consider the origin of his thoughts. If someone were to ask you about why it's more pleasant to be healthy as opposed to being sick, you wouldn't differentiate between an answer you learned and one you improvised. The obviousness of the answer would mean that every passing tree and flower, every movement of air, every splash of water would be whispering you more and more arguments, more than you could possibly say out loud in a lifetime. When Ayyub stopped because he was exhausted, he was surprised to discover they were home! Neither of them remembered the way back.

That night, Ayyub couldn't sleep, he was sure there was something right in front of his nose that he was missing. He just couldn't know what. Jamil couldn't sleep at the excitedness of cutting up dead babies. Daud slept like a baby, exhausted by the argument and the fact that it was his turn to host Malika. And she also crashed, to spite the destructive influence of the Modern Philosopheress on her life.

## Chapter 15 in which the gazelle continues her marvellous adventures

“Have you made progress on the gazelle story?” Malika asked Samirah whilst back at their house.

“Hmm, attempted would be the key word,” said Samirah.

“So do I get to hear it? Or is it a case of if you tell me you'll have to kill me?”

### THE TALE OF THE GAZELLE AND THE POACHER QUEEN -- CONTINUED

“The gazelle woke up one day and didn't feel 100%... No shit! She'd been hamstrung for how many years now? Was there even a question of her feeling good? The idea lodged itself in the gazelle's mind: why doesn't she just fix it? So she got up in the middle of the night and sent off for the crow that lived in the palace. This crow was the poacher queen's right hand woman and would often fly to far-off places to fetch various objects. You know, enchanted scimitars that would decapitate your enemy from across town,

aphrodisiacs, spices, silks, magical amulets, sculptures made of rubies and the rest. But the gazelle was interested only in one thing. She forked over a lot for it and the crow flew off. In but an hour she returned with a small vial of the precious healing water from the steppes. Turns out it was easier to find than the gazelle had assumed. Of course, it's easy for the carved-up and downtrodden to think things are more hopeless than they really are.

"She drew a bath and added the vial to the normal water. Getting in, sitting there, hopping-and-skipping out, were the most exhilarating moments of her life. She wrote about them later in her magnum opus called *Untransformations*. Anyway, she knew she was ready. This time her plan would succeed. Nothing changed, except her. Our gazelle was a gazelle once more, and ready to face the-

There was a silence as Malika realised that was it. "And then?"

"That has yet to be collected from the Universe's great Loom of Stories. We have to eat and sleep too!" said Samirah.

Malika adored how serious her friend was. She would not for a minute have doubted that there was an objective story floating out there, somewhere with a life of its own.

"Well, I'm dying to hear the end of this. Seems the Tale has taken a most unorthodox turn. Would it even be possible to disovarise this work though?"

Samirah raised an eyebrow as if Malika has finally understood after all this time. "With every word I write I get further and further towards the treasonous and unsavoury. I believe I crossed into the undisovarisable a week ago."

"Yes so if we're executed in the next two to three years, you'll know why."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, the execution," Malika blurted out and immediately there was a sigh from all three of them.

"Interesting of you not to call it a murder."

"Right. Well, let me ask a personal question. Who do you think did this? Or rather, who *would*? If you tried to put yourself in the mindframe of the murderess, who would you be?" There was a short silence, as Naima was waiting to draw the whole sentence from Malika. She gulped and finished "...because of everyone I know, you have the most experience with getting into the minds of murderers. That would simply require going back to not 15 years ago."

"Right. Indeed it would. My darling, thankyou for being so frank. Most don't have the tits to say that to me. It's all taboo now." Naima leaned forward. "I don't think it's an Assassin. I know they still exist: although my operation was a success. But I'd be surprised if it was them. Firstly what would they want with some nobody in their eyes, some manservant? That hardly advances the cause. Even supposing they wanted him dead, they wouldn't do it like this. If I was on the mission, I'd never make a spectacle. I'd simply lay in wait near his house and sneak in at night disposing of the body afterwards. Nobody would know, because I'd get to him before he made a sound. Even if I wanted to send a message or make a spectacle I would never do this. I'd cut him up a little more gruesomely. Him and his household. But only after they're dead. And then leave them there, let the stink of their rotting flesh in jus-of-human go forth. This whole setup smacks of extravagance. This was more about ideology than efficiency. An Assassin would be more interested in getting back to her Djinnmother, or about performing her next kill." There was something fashionably bohemian about sitting in this pleasant house, drinking coffee and discussing this calligrapher's natural homicidal instincts. "Plus they have no sense of art, they wouldn't know how to make an artwork. No, this would be someone with a strong sense of the aesthetic. And with a terribly ugly soul. Unfortunately this sense of aesthetic means she is probably good at masking the ugliness."

"Disappointing. The person I suspect does not present any pleasant exterior. At least not to me."

"What? Who?" they demanded.

"The philosopher."

"You think so?"

"Have you met her? I'm virtually sure of it. All I need now is to find out for certain. But it's interesting what you said about the artwork of it all. Maybe she was just trying to make more of an impression on the City."

Malika told them about all her suspicions, from their talk. They didn't agree; she *might* have been the murderer but it was probably someone else. They huddled and talked and argued for hours: discussing every aspect of the murder, Hanan's philosophy and personality. Malika left late, late at night, when there was absolutely nobody on the street. She was almost choking from the negilah smoke and her head hurt from lack of sleep. But she was determined. The two things now merged in her mind. The literacy study and the future of men in Baghdad and the whole civilisation was one side of the coin. The execution was

the other. Unlock one and the other is opened. *And unlock I will.* She clenched her teeth just a bit harder, speeding to her house, Jamil's bed calling from afar. It was no longer about her and her family. Everyone's future depended on this coin. Not just male but female, and eunuch. She just needed to reach out for the coin. But first, sex and sleep. Malika floated through the empty streets.

## Chapter 16 in which we see Baghdad's scientific machinery in action

Hanan walked up to the stage and coughed carefully. Looking around revealed 1000 super-eager faces filled with the height of reverence. *Maybe they're not that crazy. She may be bigoted but she knows some things well.* Malika needed to be here. It was necessary to find an outlet for her patronage.

Hanan began and Malika leaned forward, catching every word. "Ladies. Distinguished patrons of the sciences. Welcome to the fourth annual mathematical conference. We're here to give ourselves not a congratulatory pat on the back, but much-needed guidance on matters before us. And criticism, and tough love. This is not a celebration but a public inquiry [*you'd like many public inquiries, won't you?*] into the state of things...

"The Quadratic controversy has been with us for many years. There has been no shortage of disagreements. I believe disagreement to be a most fortuitous thing. Just like many plants taking up root indicate fertile ground, so too many opinions indicate a healthy society [*wow, what a metaphor, I weep from the poetry of it all!*]. The fertile ground may attract weeds, but this only highlights the ground's good qualities."

She pulled out a large sheet with a bold juicy parabola smeared across it. "The main question is whether a parabola can be adequately described geometrically. Today if we want to draw one we need to square numbers. If we were able to go beyond this and find an intuitive way of representing it, we could easily construct parabolas of our own. Who knows what marvels we might uncover? After all, the wheel is nothing more than a geometric realisation of the circle, who's to say the parabola will be less momentous? A second question is whether we can solve all quadratics."

She paused for a few moments, as if to let this sink in. "Before I hand the floor over, allow me to make some brief comments on what I think [*oh, here we go*]. In terms of the solution of the equation, the answer is clearly no. For there are second degree equations that require the square of a number to be negative. This cannot happen under any circumstances -- it's a mathematical impossibility. And here I must object to any kind of compromise, any kind of Otherly solution. Take heed, friends and colleagues! Take heed and thence avoid the trap of heresy and sacrilege! *Inventing* the possible where it is actually impossible is against Intisar. Let us not do Yusuf's work for him.

"In terms of a geometric description of the parabola, I believe we can and must solve this. Because we know that in mathematics the purest form of knowledge is not in some abstract form. It must be related to the geometric. Until we see something concrete in this world, we are forever in the danger of having created a fantasy world on paper. This is something the Philosopheress was always against, in the strongest terms possible."

Speaker after speaker presented their papers. And it was actually a pleasure to hear. According to contemporary fashion it was almost mandatory to write treatises in verse. These manuscripts were often lavishly illustrated and decorated too, which meant that fashionable members of the court would purchase and collect them -- without having a clue as to their meaning. This enterprise was made much easier due to the fact that, 60 years ago, the Khalifate rejected innovations to its numerical system.

### THE TALE OF THE SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF NUMBERS

Farruka al-Kwarisma invented a symbolic notation that could reduce the writing of numbers from a few lines to a few special symbols. The genius was that using only 10 distinct symbols, one could express any number in the universe simply by arranging them in a judicious order. However, after trying it for a while, it was decided that the system be archived and taken out of use. The scholars and philosophers were



concerned. They felt there was a danger mathematics would become nothing more than the brainless manipulation of symbols, that instead of operating on a sublime semantic level, the average mathematician would simply be an automaton. So they excised it, for maths is one of the highest branches of learning (along with djinnology) and it should therefore relate the meaning of the concept to its instantiation in the real world in as clear a manner as possible. "Three hundred and fifty five" means something tangible in the world. Three symbols in a row (two of which happen to be the same) have no meaning. Maths depends on a harmonious relationship between thought, meaning and the world.

What's interesting is the mathematicians themselves didn't object. Most saw it as liberating, as it made operations easier. Furthermore, they answered the syntactic objection by saying the system allowed problems to be transported from the real world into the symbolic, to be solved symbolically (in a much easier manner than before) and then transported back to the real world to benefit the Khalifate. The Khalifa, guided by her philosophers, saw things differently. It was clearly heretical. The system was probably dangerous if it allowed for this mysterious "transformation" between the two worlds. Only djinnology could do that, and this wasn't djinnology.

There was unpleasantness. Much death followed -- this Khalifa *was* the Ninth, the same one who started the persecution of the Assassins. In fact, this persecution was merely a phase in the Great Purges. Many of the founders of the Assassins were actually mathematicians who fled to the mountains because of this numeracy debate. Whilst their sisters practiced killing and Contrarian Djinnology<sup>18</sup>, they were allowed to work syntactically, unmolested. Because this symbolic method had something Yusufically efficient about it, they got quite far. Many of the methods of the Assassins derived their ruthless efficiency from the symbolic treatises of their heterodox mathematicians.

On the plus side for Baghdad, it meant that with numerals suppressed, the treatises always sounded beautiful, for everything was written in full, warm human language.

Rasha sat forward in her chair, taking in as much as she could. Her interest was different to Malika's though.

*The Khalifa's getting up to make the final speech. She scans the crowd and -- what have we? A raised eyebrow at Malika. Must be a former sweetheart. She never told me. Malika's not returning the gaze though. No, she's not even noticing; she actually seems absorbed, perhaps genuinely interested.*

*I wonder what she'd use the parabola for. A tool of oppression like the rest of them? When the equation is solved (as it must be) it will square the misery of the servants, the eunuchs, the men. It will be used for more work, more efficiency, a better army. To be beneficial they need to increase the PROPORTION of good things in the Khalifate, not the absolute amount (without regard for who enjoys it). But there is something different in her eyes. Something that was missing from Faiz, hence no more Faiz. Nor anyone for that matter. For her, this lecture was a weapon: knowledge one learns only in order to defeat the enemy. To use your enemy's tools against her -- a thought most sweet.*

## Chapter 17 in which we see Baghdad through Western eyes

It was a diplomatic convoy, and as such it had to take care not to look like a military convoy. Diplomatic intentions had the pesky habit of appearing as military intentions behind enemy lines, and this in turn carried the risk of having your diplomatic intentions being literally buried in the sands around Baghdad.

Elizabeth was here on behalf of the Holy Roman Empress to negotiate a peace in the ever-tensening north.

She placed her palm over her eyebrows to shield her eyes from the sun. This gesture was immortalised centuries later by the greatest painters and sculptors of the West as the symbol of the European Peacemaker

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<sup>18</sup> See Glossary

marching into the barbarians' nest.

The more she approached the walls the more stupefied she got until everything became a stream of loud sensory data. The bright glow of the bricks, walls and houses. Its reflexion on the whiter and yellower sands outside town. The occasional blue raised above the flat tops of the roofs signifying a house of djinnology. The whole enticement of it all -- as if the exotic Orient was saying to her "here I am! take me or leave me, loathe me or be infatuated". And it wasn't too shy about it. The immense gathering of crowds, women in dresses, children on hobby-horses or hiding behind their mothers' silk pants (is there anywhere where children aren't children?). Men in their Separators. Elizabeth had heard of Separators but it was different to see them. She was immediately filled with a terrible longing to rip them off. She actually had to fight it. And it was worn by all of them too! Not a beard in sight.

An official came up to Elizabeth, bowed and introduced herself as the envoy of the Great Khalifa. Elizabeth requested an audience which was granted. She was led down the main street as the crowd parted. Her senses were crushed.

So much colour! Not like the grey and brown drabness of Avignon or Wilhelmaburg. Here, the browns were joyfully warm, the greys non-existent. To her surprise every tenth house had intricate murals or mosaics on windows. Delightful geometric patterns: thin lines of orange, lime, burgundy. Streets were clean, almost spotless. *For my visit? I doubt they'd bother to show anything but contempt. Unless this IS their contempt.* Some pleasant aromas of lush fruits, spices, jams, pickles, vegetables, perfumes and...could it be? Elizabeth heard many a wondrous fable of those magical Vials from the Khalifate that would increase and magnify desire. It had to be, otherwise what reason would she have to straighten her back, drop her shoulders, project her breasts forward and greedily suck in the air? Being in enemy territory rarely inspires such actions, such body language. Hurried on by the promise of more to come, Elizabeth floated towards the Palace, her convoy having fallen way, way behind.

"Greetings, ambassador" the Khalifa began. "What be your name, child?" she added with a smile. On this occasion she wasn't merely *allowed* to be patronising: it was virtually *mandatory*. The ambassador was at least five years her senior.

"Elizabeth, my Lady," she answered. There was a three second gap with enough awkwardness to last a lifetime, but luckily Elizabeth remembered she had to continue and that the greeting was inside her sleeve. Making a pretense of scratching herself, she went on.

"Greetings Khalifa. I am honoured to have the grace of our very first meeting. How may this first meeting find you?"

"Very well."

"Int-Intisar be praised."

Immediately Elizabeth breathed easily: there was less she could screw up. She wiped her sweaty forehead inadvertently exposing her crib notes to the whole room. Fortunately for her, no-one could read them and so her secret was safe. Not because these people couldn't read whatever European language it was in. On the contrary, many here were fluent in any European language. Rasha alone knew Parisian, Neapolitanese, Genoan, Venetian, Greek, Catalan, Calabrian, Cypriot and Viennese. And she wasn't even the most linguistically gifted of eunuchs... The plain reason nobody could decipher the writing was that everyone saw a few lines flash but it didn't register as writing. It wasn't. Elizabeth couldn't read or write to save her life, like most diplomats of the Empress. She had to draw objects that rhymed with the word she had to pronounce (Intisar). Which was hard for no words in her native Bavarian rhymed with it to any degree of accuracy.

All left the hall for the private audience except Elizabeth, Nadia, 3 eunuchs (not Rasha) and Naima, who Nadia asked to sit in as the most able military woman not already at the Campaign. If anyone could see past Elizabeth's bullshit it would be her. Before the audience, dinner was served. Again, Elizabeth's senses were assaulted, this time with the added pressure of having to eat under the Khalifa's eye. The food was like nothing she was used to. There were strange types of seafood, unknown fruits and vegetables and a few kinds of grain that looked like very small flat brown peas. The most amazing thing was the presentation: everything had spices on it, sauces and flavours that made her fight so as not to cough or choke. Her palate was twisted in knots -- she was used to eating rare meat with nothing but salt, pepper, potatoes. Here, she almost missed out on the taste of the meat, so hidden it was behind layers of chilli, yoghurt and mint.

Nadia was hardly a dandy but disapproved. The West did not have the Khalifate's knowledge of perfumery, as Nadia's nose testified. Elizabeth's two month journey through the desert without a bath didn't help the already dire situation. She used one out of four eating implements but soon devolved to using her

hands. The bones obviously went on the floor. The amazing thing was that both Naima and Nadia could tell that she *was* doing her best to be as cultured as possible, this truly was her limit. *I don't want to think how she'd eat in her comfortable tent* thought Nadia. *I hope this is how she eats in her comfortable tent*, thought Naima, *for then the conflict will be quickly over. If they make half as much noise in their battle tents I'll just win the entire war myself by sneaking up on them one by one while they're eating. I can gut her like a pig before she'd notice.* They both were in a good mood, Nadia from her obvious superiority to the visitor, Naima from the image of her gutting them all. Well, to each her own.

They spoke for exactly an hour. Elizabeth gulped down the strong coffee which had a tongue-loosening effect considering she'd never even had weak coffee before. In a nutshell, the meeting (which was conducted in Bavarian since both Nadia and Naima managed it quite nicely) consisted of the following parts:

1. Elizabeth praising Nadia's Baghdad in what humble superlatives she could.
2. Nadia extending her wishes to the Empress.
3. Nadia outlining the events leading up to the military occupation of the northern provinces of the Khalifate by both armies.
4. Nadia explaining that the only solution is immediate removal of all Western soldiers from the province, at least two rivers and two hundred kilometres back into their own border.
5. Elizabeth expressing her displeasure with the demand as a ridiculous/impractical one.
6. Elizabeth's counter-offer of changing the boundary of the empires to give three out of the fifteen contested Khalifate provinces to the West. The backing up of the offer by the notion that the citizens of that province are closer in culture and allegiance to the West anyway and if the Khalifate attempts to hold onto these provinces there's a good chance they'd revolt.
7. Nadia saying she will be willing to consider giving up only one.
8. Elizabeth lowering her bar to two provinces, insisting the Empress did not let her negotiate for anything less than that.
9. Nadia declining and saying that in open conflict the terrain, morale and supplies favour the Khalifate not the Great Rabble.
10. Elizabeth (by this time feeling the effects of her beverage) boasting that they have another 200,000 soldiers coming, along with "a few surprises that will make dog meat of your regiment".
11. Nadia retorting that she has a few surprises of her own.
12. Nadia ending the talk saying that it would be a mistake to underestimate the determination of a people fighting for their land, their culture, their djinns, their citizens. That this gives the army a certain fury, a certain desperation that would mean even if the two forces *were* evenly matched, the scales would tip in their favour. And they're *not* evenly matched.

In the end, Nadia and Elizabeth kissed and Elizabeth departed into the Palatial garden. Nadia said she needed a moment to confer with her advisor after which she will join her and show her the best of what Baghdad has to offer.

"So what say you?" Nadia asked with baited breath when the door shut.

Naima leaned back, relaxed, and even cracked her knuckles. "Easy. It's a piece of shit."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh I'm sorry your Ladyship. What I mean is that there are two issues. The first is that a diplomatic solution is impossible -- they want the land. The second is that once we pursue the military option it will be a piece of shit to annihilate them."

"Really?" Nadia said. "So you're not worried about the 200,000?"

"No. In fact, I await them eagerly." She paused and let Nadia's confused expression appear. "What I gathered from the interview was this. Elizabeth is one of the most able diplomats. If the wheat could be so boorish, what say you of the chaff? It's not just a matter of customs or table manners. She's undisciplined. She told us more than she intended, yet barely knows it. She allowed herself to become intoxicated on a stimulant, a substance she'd never tried, but had surely heard the effects of. She allowed herself to make threats, to lose her diplomatic demeanour. I say if the others are like her, all the better. And the more of them the better. An extra 200 thousand will only make their ranks more frazzled. Add 200 thousand boors to an existing 300 thousand boors and the result is *less* effective, not more. With stealth, we will pick at them until there's nothing left."

"Right. Maybe. But what if she's merely acting boorish to make us underestimate them?"

"I doubt it. She might have been able to fake some body language, or poorly chosen phrases, or skillless

flattery. But not the micromovements that one can't help but make. I watched her eat. She ate naturally, her tiny smacking of the lips, the fact that her tongue licked them every now and then testified to her genuine enjoyment of eating with her hands. Had these movements been more pronounced I'd have thought they may have been fake. But they weren't."

"Yes, she had quite defined lip and tongue action," said Nadia remembering.

"Then, there were the effects of the caffeine on the body, the minute shaking that one does not fake. Was the choice deliberate by the way?"

"Would you believe it wasn't? It was a standard meal with coffee -- I had no idea the coffee would have this effect."

"But aren't you forgetting something?" Nadia started after a minute's silence. "True, Elizabeth is what she is, no faking. But what if the Empress had chosen her for this very reason? There's no need for acting if you simply select the most unsuitable person for the mission to get your enemy off guard. Have you considered this?"

"I have. And it's great not to underestimate your enemy. But I happen to know a little fact from my old sinful days as an Assassin. When I was meeting with a few dukes in Thessaloniki (conspiring on the demise of your predecessor), I learnt Elizabeth was the Empress's right hand woman. That she trusts her with everything. And the barbarians I learnt this from were definitely chaff compared to Elizabeth."

"So you didn't even need to meet her to know this..."

"I needed to be sure, she could have changed."

"Naima, what would I do without you? Oh wait, I'm about to find out in the conflict! Won't you reconsider and revisit your sinful life again?"

"Sorry, I have retired for now. It will do no good if I go into battle unsure of what I'm doing there or whether I should be there at all. Someday, perhaps. But you don't need me, the Sisters will be enough."

"Did you know in the west they have debates as to whether men have souls?" Naima casually mentioned to the Khalifa as they rose to leave the room and join Elizabeth.

"Really? Makes sense. I always knew savagery has no boundaries."

Naima nodded with a reservation entirely missed by the Khalifa.

## Chapter 18 in which Naima shows Elizabeth some true Assassin hospitality

The Khalifa strolled with Elizabeth through the palace gardens. Elizabeth marvelled at everything but especially the peahens with the multicoloured tails and the ivory carvings. She was taken to the main house of djinnology, with the tallest Spire of Protection. She had ascended the narrow spiral steps with Naima, Nadia remaining outside.

"You know what your Khalifa gave me to take back?"

"No, do tell."

"A pair of elephants. I've never even seen any elephants before, let alone had two of them in my possession!"

"Yeah, she's quite something isn't she?"

"She is."

"So how do you like our little abode?"

"It's amazing! There's so much -- colour and light. And warmth. And the people around me seem really smart. I mean most courts aren't able to speak Bavarian to me even in *Europe*, how weird that I'd find my native tongue here!"

"We take pride in learning many languages. It's said one cannot be a member of Baghdad society without being fluent in all 37 languages of the world."

"Great. But I have to say your food is too refined."

"I know what you mean. I used to eat plain food all the time."

“When?”

“When I lived outside Baghdad in the...mountains” Naima answered with a smile that was lost in the darkness of the twisting staircase.

Naima toyed with the idea of how easy it was to send Elizabeth tumbling down three hundred steps. But she had other plans. She remained silent until they reached the top. By then Elizabeth was completely lost in her slack-jawed gawking on the City of Light. She saw a lush paradise around a fertile river. From the top even the desert didn't appear too harsh.

“So can I have a sample of some of your other...activities?” she asked evidently having caught a whiff of those potent vials from the market below.

“What do you mean?”

“You know. When a woman is...” she mimed with violent impatience.

“What?”

“Can you organise an orgy?”

“Excuse me? What orgy?”

“The ones you have. Come on, no need to pretend with me, I don't judge. In fact, I seek out. Who hasn't heard of the great orgies of the Orient?”

“I, for one. But please, do go on.”

“Well, you have access to several men. I mean you *do* have several husbands.”

“Well, not me personally. In fact, I have none. But I grant you that, most people have several husbands.”

“Exactly. Most people...*have* several husbands.”

Naima finally got it and burst out into her most explosive -- and sincere -- laughter in about a month. “Not like that! Ha-ha-ha, that's great... I'm sorry to disappoint you but your fantasies of lush and opulent orgies for every woman with a harem must remain fantasies. Did you think this is what goes on, this is what the harem is for?”

“Well, what else would it be for?”

“It takes several men to engage a woman intellectually. And to provide adequate seed for good children. And to use their natural talents of manual labour. And yes there's the marital aspect, but not like that.”

Elizabeth slumped her shoulders in disappointment (although the reasons outlined were most agreeable to her).

When they finally descended into the courtyard below, Elizabeth found the Khalifa and the entourage gone. The two of them were alone. Naima looked at the empty space and nodded to herself, as someone would in a planned situation.

“Listen Elizabeth. The others seem to have been called to a pressing matter. Let's find them. But first I want to show you something.”

Ominous music. A glimmer in Naima's eye. Elizabeth's stupid look of semi-realisation. But instead of anything serious, Naima merely called out and a dozen fair maidens came out of nowhere. Elizabeth looked relieved, obviously having missed that each of them had a long dagger coming out of her waist. A curved dagger that identified all of them as Fighting Sisters. Only half of the unit had been dispatched to the north, the other few hundred were still in Baghdad.

“Do you know who these are?”

“No, but they look like the djinns themselves.”

“Indeed they do. They are just 12 members of the Fighting Sisters, the deadliest unit in our whole army. Each of them fights for her country side by side with her lover-in-arms. Now, that makes for some grim determination. But I just wanted you to see something. Oh don't worry,” she said seeing Elizabeth's face whiten. “I mean something to *take back* to your Empress. I want you to pick one of them, any one.”

Elizabeth hesitated until a “don't be shy” from Naima pushed her and the lass was chosen. Naima walked up to the chosen one. “Which one is the partner, soulmate and armsbearer of this one?” she called out to the remaining 11 with a stern voice. A woman stepped forward, unsure of herself.

“OK honey. You love this woman more than life itself. You would rather die a hundredfold than see her hurt. You've been to the depths of hell and back together with her. You are in tune to her breath. When her toes touch the ground you feel that ground's texture. You will do anything to protect her, including die a terrible terrible death. She is your entire universe, no less. Am I right?”

“Yes,” said the woman with a shiver.

“I want you to stab her to death immediately.”

The woman placed her hand on her dagger and tightened her grip. She did not hesitate nor did her hand



shake. She swiftly drove the dagger into her Life's belly and watched the first blood appear. The victim was confused for a second, then sank to the ground and faded within less than a minute. There was a courtyard and there was them standing around observing and there was a body lying in a pool of blood. No sound at all was heard, from the time of Naima's order to the woman's death. Nobody cried out. Furthermore, Naima held out her hand, almost contemptuously towards the woman who she made kill her love. The Sister approached, curtsied and kissed Naima's ring. Elizabeth was shaken. And shaking.

Naima came up to Elizabeth and whispered to her. "What I've done just now is show you where our priorities lie. How much we're willing to sacrifice for the Khalifate, to the point of tragedy, stupidity, wretchedness. We have grim determination to win the conflict. Here are but 12 -- sorry, 11 Fighting Sisters. They will win the war because this is how tough-minded they are. As you can see this is their entire existence. Furthermore, I'm so confident in this, I was willing to waste one of them just to prove a point. Take *that* back to your mistress..." And then, using her normal voice as if nothing had happened: "Now let's find the Khalifa. Girls, dismissed!". Eleven went out the way they came. Two went the other way (one of them controlling herself so as not to break down). One lay on the cold courtyard stones, limp.

Malika walked to the palace where she had arranged to meet Naima. She knew Naima should be finished by now as Elizabeth departed half an hour ago, along with her 2 elephants, 2 chests of gifts, pale pale demeanour and servants.

It had been a busy day for Malika too. She asked around about Hanan's whereabouts during the murder. Of course, she didn't say it like that, but she did ask questions. No clear answers though.

Her frustration faded as she approached the Palace. She'll see Naima! For the first time in weeks... She could hear her talking to Nadia.

"So you're definitely lifting the Eunuchs' Curfew?" asked Naima. The topic immediately made Malika go back a few metres into the garden (so as not to appear as eavesdropping if and when the door opened), but also to eavesdrop as closely as possible.

"Definitely."

"May I ask what changed your mind?"

"I always listen to the will of the people. And when I heard that will from three sources in one day, I knew it was Intisar's light shining on the path for me."

They opened the door, Nadia greeted Malika. She then left the two friends who started walking home. For these purposes, either house was home.

"So you heard, no more curfew."

"It's about fucking time!"

"No, I'm actually worried. What sources? It doesn't seem like Nadia to change her mind so suddenly."

"It's something. Anyway, how did the visit go?"

"Splendid," Naima chirped.

"I heard Elizabeth left in a shaky state at best. Was it the meeting?"

"No the meeting was a piece of shit, just like Elizabeth's nerves," said Naima and outlined the meeting.

"Really? So the Khalifa did not put the fear of Sha-UI into her?"

"Nadia's a pussy cat. As in, a very clever pussy cat. But one with no claws."

"So it was Mine Truly that had this effect on her?"

"Indeed!" Naima said proudly.

"Is it a secret what you did?"

"Very much so. But you're very secretworthy."

"Thankyou!" she said putting her arm around Naima.

"It was a trick I pulled many times as an Assassin. Luckily not to any people from the West so Elizabeth had no way of knowing (although a smarter ambassador would have seen past it). Very simple but effective. You need some volunteers. I used the Fighting Sisters. Then, you get about 3 gallons of animal blood....."

## Chapter 19 in which we see the cosmos through Baghdad eyes

Malika and Ayyub slipped out of the house. Out the side door that is. They weren't slipping out so that their own household wouldn't see -- everyone including the servants knew what they were about tonight. It was merely for the good of society, for it is not fitting for a man to be seen on the street after the curfew.

The curfew for men was imposed ever since Basim's murder. By *imposed*, what I mean of course is that men were *discouraged* to walk after dark. For their own safety. The mean streets of Baghdad were no place for a man. Interestingly enough, the Khalifa did cease the Eunuchs' Curfew, as she promised Naima. This invited some talk. There were those that disapproved, openly and unashamedly, of the Khalifa's action. Some (eg. Hanan) went so far as to voice this disapproval to her face. People said the eunuchs would go wild and lose all sense of propriety. Social commentators painted dreary visions of hordes of clitorisless women breaking shop windows, thieving, kidnapping, gambling, becoming intoxicated and generally filling their proverbial lungs with the sweet sweet smoke of vice. Others worried about an organised rebellion, that they would surely now meet after their day's toil, in little underground hovels, planning the downfall of the empire. And naturally such a fiendishly clever race would do well at bringing the Khalifate down. There was even a hushed whisper in town -- or rather the shadow of a shadow of a whisper -- that the Khalifa was in on it. That she planned this deliberately to bring the eunuchs out of subjugation and lead them to an overthrow of the world as we know it. Of course, no individual owned up to this particular comment for the simple fact that she would have been put on the spike, and it's hard to preach whilst skewered. To be fair, this rumour, when repeated in coffee-houses and baths was grossly ridiculed. It was just too absurd that the Khalifa would conspire with the despised eunuchs to overthrow her own autocracy and replace it with...her own autocracy.

The reality was that the eunuchs did enjoy it, immensely. They didn't gather in underground dens. Everyone knew this because they could *see* them in town squares, streets and parks. They hung about, talked, danced, played music, performed shafra and did everything that normal women do at night -- only *more* of it for they had a lot to catch up on. The first week, there would be thousands gathered in the Spice Market until dawn. Most passers-by at first fled in terror, then walked by scoffing, pointing and scowling. After a week they were ignoring the eunuchs. By then numbers dwindled as most eunuchs had their share of fun and realised they also required sleep if they were to efficiently sweep floors, pump water, guard harems, copy manuscripts and edicts, administer agriculture and maintain the canals and sewage systems the next day. Of course, some citizens praised this as a great move. But they were a minority.

So on the night Ayyub was to visit the observatory, Malika came, as an escort.

"Welcome" Samirah said. "Don't speak. I'm not supposed to be having visitors. Certainly not bearded ones. There's still quite a few people, so I'll just take you around and show you the instruments."

The observatory was a large circular block with a building as its perimeter. Samirah opened a door on the other end and bade them enter the cold glorious Inside. They caught the breeze and Ayyub gasped at the magnificent minimalism. The entire middle of the observatory was nothing but an empty courtyard with no buildings at all! It was just a flat brick floor, 100m in diameter. Completely empty. Sure, looking around, he saw the perimeter building with its towers reaching up (like a plant would for the sun, except *their* aim was for less luminous bodies). But the empty space was great. It was inconceivable that just ten metres in the other direction, through the wall of a thin outer building, lay one of the most densely populated square kilometres in the world. It was constructed to be perfect for observations -- the tall walls partially blocked the light from the city allowing one to gaze upwards. Right in the heart of the Khalifate, too.

They sat in the courtyard. But not before an hour of Samirah showing them the instruments. The most impressive was a large room that had a model of the universe -- a globe in the centre and celestial spheres around it. You just turned a handle and this set the outer sphere moving, which had a domino effect on all subsequent ones. Malika did this with glee (it's not often one gets to simulate Intisar's role as Prime Mover!), excitedly observing the planets, each in her Sphere, travel round the earth. However, this became old for Malika fairly quickly. She wasn't really interested in the intricacies of celestial mechanics. Seeing her impatience, Samirah indicated they should go outside. "That was the warm-up. I need to see you in practice."

"No instruments Ayyub," she said when they were back in the open, sitting in recliner chairs she brought. "Nobody's here. You can take it off." Which he did. "And now that it's off and you're naked you might as well do astronomy with the naked eye too!" It was too dark to see whether he blushed or not.

They sat and talked. Or rather Samirah talked and Ayyub listened. Malika did neither. She only looked up, not interested in the technicals but enthralled by the rare chance of sitting in the open, gazing. No goals, no cares.

---there was the Hunter. Her skirt was caught in a strange shape which was the Crow. It was said the Hunter was Johara and the Crow was the crow that bit into her thigh and started the flow that became the Tigris. Indeed, there was a bunch of stars curving down to a point where they met the Tigris somewhere in the horizon. She then found the source of the second great river. This was a little harder. The Euphrates was Intisar's holy menstrual flow, but as a constellation she was merely symbolised by a tiny one called the Cook. Why the cook? And why did the djinns have constellations representing them that were completely different? Last time Malika asked herself this was age 12 -- then, the answer was complex and profound. With her apostasy, it was simple -- because one group of people made the djinns up and another the constellations. Then the djinnologists had to reconcile them. If they did it in a pattern the inaccuracies would be obvious -- so they made each match a Sacred Mystery, not to be questioned or understood by laity. Malika grew sad at the thought that there was such a long gap between the two times she wondered about this. Over a decade -- and what's she done in the meantime? One can judge a person by how often she looks up at Something in idle wonder.

---"so If we take the 4th calculation method we can get the inclination of the ecliptic by a simple sine function. The problem is we have no fixed point: every point being in constant motion. That's why al-Raifa came up with a 5th method. It takes into account the fact that there is only one stationary point -- the pole. Why not calculate based on that? I know, seems simple. The calculations are more complex though; but more reliable. What we do is define a triangle. One corner's obviously at the pole. The other, is not precisely at the equinox because there is no star there, but---"

---but she did look up. Very much, especially over the last few months. It was the only time she could forget about all the stuff and nonsense hanging over her. Or rather, put it in perspective. Back in the real world everything was of such consequence, she had children, family, loved ones. They could all be in danger. Probably already were. There were no loved ones There to lose. Just the comets, the Crow, the Hunter, the Sorceress, the First, Second and Third Snake.

---"that's how we can calculate the next phase of the moon. I guess it is a controversial subject, because of the debate as to which djinn is associated with the moon. But us astronomers aren't in charge of it. *I'm* interested in the facts only. Which reminds me actually. Do you know about al-Raifa's discovery of the precession of the equinoxes? If not for her we'd still be in the dark about that. No? Oh you must. Ayyub!" she moaned half-disparagingly, and proceeded with

#### THE TALE OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE PRECESSION OF THE EQUINOXES

"Al-Raifa was extremely anal about her observation of the heavens. She'd be as regular as could be. She shared this trait with her fellow researcher al-Iksandra. They would take punctuality to extremes. Whenever their calculations would predict a lunar eclipse they met exactly one hour beforehand on the hill opposite the Scribes' district. This would give them adequate time to prepare and observe. This they did regardless of what might be happening in their lives, whether drought, war, pestilence. Same thing happened with the equinoxes. During both equinoxes, they'd be watching exactly when it happened, year in year out. Once, al-Raifa was heavily pregnant, in fact scheduled to go into labour just an hour before. Needless to say, this didn't phase our Discoverer from---"

Malika realised there were some parts of the description she tuned out from so she listened up once more.

---"so there they were. Al-Iksandra recording and observing, al-Raifa in labour, a midwife attending. Whilst the midwife told al-Raifa to relax and do nothing, she observed with greater intent than ever. And then something happened. It was one of those deciding moments in history. She was looking up at the sky covered in the Sacred Pain, and saw something she'd otherwise have missed. The difference the precession makes in the sky is so minute that it was almost impossible to see any difference, and hence discover it. But the moment the first part of her son's flesh started to protrude, al-Raifa did notice something amiss. The equinox itself was fine, for there was no star to attach it to. But from her razor-sharp memory, she recalled that the stars moved in an arc slightly different to the equinox that she saw not last year (for in one year the change was too small) but as a young apprentice 35 years before. Which gives all the more credit to her mind and attention to detail. Looking at the pole confirmed it. Her son was born right in the midst of her realisation that the poles and hence the equinoxes, the Spheres and everything else -- precessed. So the next day she wrote the treatise entitled On the Probability of the Precession of the Poles and Equinoxes, her

most inspired work. None of which would have happened without her Sacred Pain.”

They were out of conversation so sat in silence, in awe. Including Samirah who seemed to tell the story so casually. It was all the more awe-inspiring since they themselves had no firm grasp of changes in the sky even in the last few hours. So the idea of noticing a miniscule difference over 35 years seemed quite the mean feat.

Ayyub snuggled up against Malika on the way back. There was something extra between them after the observatory. Maybe it was because they spent hours in contemplation while the rest of Baghdad slept, ate or sinned most mundanely. 'Twas if they'd been through some kind of ordeal together. A pleasant one mind you, but not an easy one. It was only a few hours until dawn, and that's perhaps why Ayyub was so careless in showing affection for his wife in public. The alternative was he simply didn't care by now.

“Malika..?” He very rarely used her name except if he had something important to say. “Just wanted to say,” he gripped her tighter at these words as if afraid she'd slip out into the darkness, “that I'm finally at peace. With you I mean. I know you were concerned about my reaction to your...de-djinnologisation.”

“Well, of course I'm concerned. I mean *was* -- it seems you've solved the problem. But yeah, if I wasn't, what kind of wife would I be? Or rather, what kind of sociopath?”

“Anyway, it came to me just then,” said Ayyub. We share so much and you're able to put yourself into my position and I in yours. Like tonight, you didn't care for the technicalities and yet you came and sat and loved it. Not just *for* my sake -- but because you *are* interested in a very different way. And that's OK. But I wouldn't be comfortable telling anyone my wife and I disagree on certain important things.”

“No, I think as far as polite society goes you're better off espousing all my official views.”

“And I will. But the point is we can have everything we have and still be on different sides of issues. To an extent. It seems so obvious, but it's not. Because most families *aren't* like ours.”

“I know, that's what happens when you let your husbands develop minds of their own,” she gasped in mock horror, “they sometimes come to a conclusion that's not the same as yours! So you're still a devoted djinnologist?”

“I am. I read your books and then I went back to my studies. They may have one or two things right but something just resonates within me when I write the correct amulet. You didn't want me to feel compelled to stop. I don't. I'll be the djinnologist and you the studious apostate and we'll still be the happiest cluster in Baghdad. Unless one of us changes her mind, which is still possible.”

Malika pulled up his Separator, placed a slow deliberate kiss and quickly closed it. Their hearts were racing from the sheer risk, and how much affection taking that risk showed.

“I have something to tell too. I don't know how the war will go. If things are escalated I'm offering my services.”

“Really? Interesting. I mean you don't believe in defending the holy places so why? I'm assuming you're not doing it for the sake of appearance,” he said,

“Of course not. How could I? Place my life and the life of my spouses in danger for some courtly politics? Not to mention killing human beings, for what is essentially the gain of influence. And no I don't believe in the holy places. Or rather I do. It might not be Intisar or Johara or any local djinn that make them holy. It's that they're inside the Khalifate in the first place. They're worth defending when the barbarians threaten them. If they take them they won't stop until they take Baghdad. They shan't be as magnanimous as the Tenth Khalifa when she captured Jerusalem, Cordoba, Tyre and Smyrna. They won't let men, children and the elderly leave. They will not know how to read the manuscripts from our libraries, nor will they care. They'll simply use them as or firewood. I'll be fucking dead and buried before that happens, as will Daud, Jamil and you my dear husband.”

“So maybe we go in a few months...” said Ayyub with an excitement that was from hearing something so matriciotic from Malika.

It was her turn to sleep in Ayyub's quarters tonight. The house was hushed, for Malika *was* the house. Daud and Jamil were in their rooms so it was just the two of them. Malika looked at Ayyub, disheveled from the night's mental rigours, and sighed. He was so pure and true. Malika didn't forget to tell him all those things as he paced the room blowing out all lights except the last. He then climbed into the rolled out cushion bed.

“Come and I'll give you a foot massage. Let's rub away all the mental wrinkles.” He presented his foot which Malika took. With a final sigh of satisfaction, Malika blew out the last candle and the velvety redness of the room descended into a warm black.

The next morning, with Daud and Jamil having been informed about the Conflict, there was a new cohesion between the 4 over the breakfast table. They were definitely a cluster about Something.

## Chapter 20 in which the Khalifa hosts a banquet

The Khalifa's banquet was finally upon Baghdad. The 200 members of Court spent the day making sure pants had silk flowing smoothly, skins were free of blemishes, Separators had no creases and the rest. Even Malika had to fall back onto convention a tad this day.

They flooded the Palace entrance 2 hours before sunset. There was no concept of fashionable lateness when it came to the Khalifa. This, combined with the fact that about half guests came with their harems, made the entrance constricted. People brought their husbands because it was a rare chance to bring them out into the world and show them off. It was a strange quirk of fate, but men could attend the Khalifa's banquets without raised eyebrows. There was no explanation. Others came alone because they weren't used to taking their harem.

Malika proudly came wielding Daud, Ayyub and Jamil like good luck charms that will give *her* the air of respectability on this occasion. Not that they disliked attending. Nothing wrong with arousing the occasional healthy jealousy from their wife. But it was also the knowledge that many women eyeing them were secretly wondering what was underneath their Separators, the shape of their faces, the texture of their beards, the way each individual hair stood... Though they'd be mortified at being accused of this, the thought was there. Even Hanan gave a nod in their general direction.

"Welcome welcome!" said Nadia coming up to them.

"It's an honour," said Malika bowing her head. "How has the Khalifa been these--"

"Please!" Nadia said putting out her hand. "No formalities today. Just relax. You've looked stressed the last few times I've seen you."

"Did I?" asked Malika, trying to see what (if anything) she could fish out from between the lines. But nothing. "Thankyou for your concern."

The Khalifa went to another group of people and motioned for Malika to follow. Soon they joined Amina, Naima and an aged al-Iksandra (the one of astronomical fame).

"How's your first year of retirement?" Amina asked al-Iksandra.

"Terrible. I force myself to look anywhere but up, because if I do I'll just snap out three weeks later having charted twelve more celestial arcs."

"So what's the terrible thing?"

"Oh, it's just so dull looking straight ahead!" she said as the company laughed. "No seriously! I'm used to everything being grand. And here it's just the mundane. A potter shaping her vase. A street-sweeper. A donkey. I guess this is what getting old is all about."

"There's also the sagely advice you can dispense" said Amina.

"Right. I think you have me confused with Alia," said al-Iksandra. "No, I'll have to content myself with my garden, my husbands, my children and grandchildren and my star-engraved negilah. Which I can't really stare at for too long lest I get tempted to go outside and look at the real thing."

"I could see worse ways to spend your retirement..." Malika said dreamily. "How many husbands have you?"

"Two now. Three originally but I divorced one twelve years ago."

"I see your point now" said Naima. "With only two husbands to handle, you potentially *have* a case for being bored."

"Does this mean I have the most husbands out of all of us?" asked Malika.

"You're right! It's none for Naima or I, one for the Khalifa and two for al-Iksandra so you top all of us!" Amina giggled at the idea.

"Hey, I may have two husbands but at least I don't let them beat me up!" said al-Iksandra pointing to a bruise on Malika's chin. Everyone laughed merrily. Her bruise was from a fall.



"Speaking of which, Amina, when can I expect an invitation?" Nadia asked the lass.

"Still searching..," said Amina.

"How's your other plan?" Malika asked Amina when they found a quiet corner.

"It's good. Because I found something..."

"...keep me waiting why don't you?" Malika said in mock outrage.

"Just gathering the courage to tell you." After a few seconds, she whispered one or two words into her ear.

"What? That's...great actually," Malika said as her outburst of disbelief was immediately replaced with overwhelming support. "Yes, well done. I'm behind you all the way. Go, do, be. Kick ass."

"I wasn't expecting you to be so placid. Whatever happened to your little hedonistic cousin ruining the family name?"

"Got over myself. Plus you might be instrumental in saving it actually. Have you started?"

"Sure."

Malika shrieked in excitement.

The Khalifa rested on her cushion as everyone began to eat and talk once more. *Stupid seating arrangements. If I had any tits, I'd change tradition to give concerts unplanned seating. It's ridiculous. She plays and the ones at the front don't listen or care.* The more high up the food chain one was, the closer to the front of the performance one was supposed to sit (men lined the aisles and the perimeter, regardless of the status of their wives). This meant the most overbearing and arrogant were invariably at the front. They chatted about their servants, husbands or which of the Fighting Sisters has been involved in a scandal; rather than listening to any part of Jamilah's music.

There were only two enthralled listeners: Naima and Rasha. Jamilah's playing, too violent and erratic for most, resonated very well with these two. The others appreciated the skill and passion, they just found it too confronting. Naima liked it because it reminded her of her reckless youth. Not the part about killing people -- the glory of struggling for something you believe in. The almost percussive, way Jamilah attacked her samnah had a violent energy. Rasha appreciated it because it reminded her of animalistic instincts which were amoral rather than immoral.

*What am I doing? Nothing! Sure, I rule. But ruling these days means putting my stamp on it. And who are these people that run my country? They come to a performance to talk through it, not simply oblivious but literally not caring. They don't need to care. Their social status is sufficient to BE their manners. Would people who are so arrogant be likely to do a good job serving the Khalifate? Probably not. Alas I can't just appoint Naima and others like her in their stead...*

The conversation started touching the eunuch reforms. Few would criticise Nadia to her face. But they could still disagree.

"This will actually increase the productivity of the eunuchs. If we treat them with dignity they will be motivated to do more," said Samiyyah.

"It's a mistake," said Hanan. "Where does it end? If we stop restricting their movements, we'll soon have to give them equal rights. But rights must be proportionate to the nature of something. For instance, an animal has no rights because it has no potential to be responsible for its actions. A eunuch is for obvious reasons *not* the same as a normal person no matter how much some of us would like to pretend. To give them the same rights will skew our world. Even if it means more productivity, we shouldn't do it. Rights aren't an either/or -- they're a continuum. Just like women have more rights than men. If everyone had the same rights it would require them to have the same nature -- anything else is injustice."

"What do you think, Khalifa?"

Nadia was listening somewhere at the back of her mind so she was able to muster a response. "I would disagree with my illustrious colleague. The rights *do* correspond to natures. I'm not proposing equal rights, merely considering the nature of the eunuch which has the ability to suffer from these restrictions. I'm extending their rights so as to accommodate that nature. I know very well their nature isn't the same as ours, which is why I--"

Nadia stopped, her mouth hanging open. Everybody ceased to talk, all eyes on her. Samiyyah was about to get up to see if she was all right when she breathed out and carried on, as if nothing had happened. "-- which is why I implemented this in the first place." She sunk back into her cushion. The conversation moved on but Nadia did not participate.

This is what happened: when she thought of the people outside the very upper class she could appoint, her mind jumped to Rasha. *She might be a nuisance but woman can she get things done! Oh, this is*

*interesting, they're talking about the eunuchs and she's just ten metres away, waiting on us. Surely she could hear.* Nadia then amused herself by watching Rasha's reaction to everything said. But when Nadia pronounced the word "suffering" something clicked. By the time she stopped talking, she was sure there was something fishy about the curfew business. She remembered that she changed her mind because of the suffering of 3 specific people, all in one night. By then she *knew* Rasha followed her through the Baghdad streets, that she had arranged this whole charade and thereby manipulated her.

*The question is what I shall do about it, she thought watching the banquet. I'm not going to repeal the edict. Not yet. The eunuchs have had their fun so now they should be more productive. Plus I can't afford even an appearance of indecisiveness. It was probably for the best. As for Rasha....* To give Nadia credit, this realisation showed she was by no means stupid or incompetent. She had the intuition, brains and luck to at least pull off running the empire.

Malika went to collect her husbands: she was leaving as was Hamidah. They were in the courtyard with Hamidah's husbands. Jamil was using his djinnological knowledge. Yusuf-knows where Jamil originally got it from, the fact was he knew heaps about djinn lore: their names and characteristics, how to protect oneself from them, summon them, appease them, what the various external signs like weather and colours meant. Of course, it wasn't a scholarly discussion with the niceties of constructed argument. Rather he was explaining something about the djinns as portrayed in the story Hamidah's husbands were reading. It was much like a djinnological lecture, with everyone crowding around listening to his every word. And he did it with such authority that Hamidah's husbands were convinced with every word anew.

This was the strange sight Malika and Hamidah beheld when they burst into the courtyard. The men were gathered around a wooden crate on which Jamil was standing. He had one hand supporting his side and the other with the index finger pointing at the sky. From this declamatory pose, everyone moved spontaneously as soon as the women entered so that by the time Hamidah looked at the courtyard, there was no longer a mini-lecture. No man moved much or changed his position much (of course they all saluted), but the atmosphere was different. Malika did catch a satisfactory glimpse of the situation though.

"What are you up to?" asked Hamidah.

"Nothing, just looking at some pictures from the manuscript," uttered one of her husbands (alas, I remember not *which* husband...)

## **Chapter 21 in which Malika walks the streets with important consequences**

Malika sat sourly on her divan the next afternoon and stared into space. She had yet to find someone to patronise, yet to find out who killed Basim, yet to find her vocation, to deflect attitudes away from her lifestyle. She--

--was interrupted by her servant. "My mistress, what is the matter?"

"Oh nothing. I've just been sitting. And thinking. That'd do it!" Malika laughed bitterly.

"It seems thy chest has become constricted, mistress, your breath has turned sorrowful. Why don't you take a stroll amongst the wondrous streets and bazaars of Baghdad? Surely this will improve things. Not to mention work up an appetite for the dinner I'm preparing."

"You're a Johara-send!" she told him, taking his advice.

The street was disappointing at first, but then again Malika knew she'd take an hour to warm up to the world anyway.

To be in the great city of Baghdad! Such a thing is indescribable. The centre of the Known and Civilised World. Walking through, Malika encountered more sensory experiences than some rural folk would in a lifetime. She had long to walk too -- no other member of a noble family would have placed themselves so far from the Khalifa. Who knows what may happen behind your back? And every step away from the Palace increases the area behind your back exponentially.

In her musings, Malika didn't notice she was panting. She turned around and realised that she had reached the hill of the Palace and ascended over 100 steps. Now that she had to catch her breath, she enjoyed the view of Baghdad. The palace was on a sizeable hill overseeing all. Most buildings were made of mudbricks and had flat roofs. And the colour scheme pretty much stuck to yellow, white and brown. However, within those parameters existed a million shades, tones, variations in weight and balance. Some houses had large inner courtyards while others joined together with neighbouring buildings to form a communal courtyard. Some had roofs on several levels, with gardens on the roofs. Some were built by paranoid owners surrounded by a wall. Since crime was low this was only useful if Baghdad were besieged. And that was still useless. Other houses were lightweight, easygoing, clearly stating their owner's belief that she was on the earth as but a temporary dweller.

There were 2 main parts to the city. The first was a giant island made by the River branching and coming together once more. This was connected by bridges to the second half sandwiched between the river branch and the city wall. There were 8 main quarters. The streets curved following the natural contours of the landscape. Malika could enjoy the sunlight reflecting off pavements because the streets were wide enough. It all looked so natural, so at ease. One might say Baghdad as a city wasn't just a beacon onto the Khalifate, it had great Feng Shui too.

Scores of public buildings dotted the landscape. There were the two markets, the dozens of schools of djinnology, libraries, squares, centres of education. The largest djinnology school had a tower that stood over the entire city, imposing on it a guardianship. All main parts of the town were connected due to its system of veins and arteries. The arteries were the aqueducts and canals. The veins were the sewage canals -- the first and only in the Khalifate and possibly the entire world! Even a cynic like Malika was proud of them. That and the fact that one could see splendour but no poverty. Baghdad's wealth, according to estimates, was greater than the rest of the Khalifate put together by a factor of five. Modern historians concur with the Eleventh Khalifa's accounting. There certainly *were* poor people, but in Baghdad this meant a smaller, less sturdy, less fancy house (and possibly no shoes). Malika knew from her schooling that in the West, most cities had beggars, filth, disease, prostitution, general chaos. This was avoided here. No doubt this was one of the reasons they were in a Golden Age. Malika's cynicism went into hiding for those few minutes in which she got her breath back and eyed the city -- because all of these things she did not explicitly disbelieve!

She walked back down to be in the streets themselves. The first quarter was the smiths', who toiled over iron for weapons, hoes, utensils and implements. Eventually a smell would arise; of wood, reeds, paper, ink, powder, paint and ochre. Baghdad did not have an extensive manufacturing quarter (leave that to the country boors!) so everything was packed inside a minute space. The nose wasn't assaulted because there wasn't enough of any particular ingredient.

The next quarter was completely bland smell-wise. It was the quarter of administrators, scholars, philosophers, scribes, poets, calligraphers, djinnologists. Malika felt relieved to be stepping into a more quiet world. The only sound was the brushing of brooms against the street. Most in this quarter were obsessive about cleanliness so it was no surprise that two or three sweepers were posted on every street corner, each looking after his part of the Khalifate's literati. *At least here the Separator makes sense*, mused Malika. *It protects them from the sun and stops the street dust from being inhaled*. Malika passed by, pondering. Were they employed merely to be occupied? She heard about similar tactics in the army from Samirah -- building discipline through making recruits dig enormous ditches only to refill them before the very recruits' eyes. The actions of the sweepers seemed just as useless: they appeared to be shifting dust from one corner of a junction to another and eventually back again. *At least in the army there's some point to it, here it really does look like they want husbands of working class people slaughtering time*.

As Malika was about to approach the final walkway to the palace, she thumped into a figure that appeared. To Malika's horror, the woman she nearly bulldozed was Alia.

"By Yusuf! I apologise for my insolence," she said, bending her knees and her neck downwards until she was noticeably below Alia. Which was no mean feat.

"It's nothing my daughter." She took her time in raising her hand which motioned that Malika should straighten up. *As usual, giving me a much-needed lesson in humility*.

"How are you Malika?"

"Much better now that I've decided to walk these streets."

"That I can see. But I see much more." At this stage, her countenance changed and her white flowing hair almost parted to reveal a glimmer in her eye. It wasn't quite a trance, but Malika knew it signalled

some revelation.

“Your bones and sinews ache with frustration and disbelief at what things have come to. But you're wrong. Things aren't coming to anything. They're merely beginning. You cannot fathom how much strife shall come between you and the rest. And how much you'll have to face. And in the end...” Alia trailed off as she looked deeper into Malika. Suddenly, she let out a little yelp. She lifted her ageless arm, turned her palm to face up and with an extended finger stroked Malika's chin like comforting a child. If it were anyone else Malika'd have been furious. Even now she was pissed. But-

“He couldn't tell you! It was his weakness yes, but for the best. Poor child! You'll--you'll find out, but don't be too ashamed, don't feel like it was a reflexion on you.”

Malika's stomach knotted but a second later Alia was her usual laughing self. Her toothless smile undermined any pompous overtones in the prophecy. *She's quite good like that.*

Malika realised that Alia had a small pot-belly which was shaking during the laughter. That must have been it: using her belly in breathing and laughing unashamedly was what kept Alia energetic and alive for so long. That and the “djinn”.

Malika visited the General Market and walked around talking to shopkeepers and looking at amulets. She eyed creatures in cages brought from far and wide: monkeys with obnoxiously red bottoms, snakes of every colour and shape, alligators. She sniffed aphrodisiacs, which today had little effect on her, meaning she was either truly down or her body had become desensitized to these toxins. She saw calligraphy including one very similar to a work of Naima's: a poem about an elephant in the shape of an elephant. Malika questioned the merchant but got no answers. It was a cheap imitation of Naima's unreleased work (one of the guests must have seen it). Malika purchased it to take it out of circulation -- and to bring it to Naima. She watched falconers whisper sweet nothings to their birds and gently stroke their beaks only to have them perform the most amazing stunts: flying through hoops of fire, catching eggs thrown up into the air with their beaks without breaking them, using their beaks to skewer a kebab thrown into the air. There were, the fire-breathers (dedicated to the djinn Al-Tarr) who also drove thick stakes of wood through their bodies.

There was even a Beardless Man, as part of a freak show. Malika turned away in disgust at the thought of there being nowhere the human spirit won't sink to. And yes, he was taunted by children who threw the occasional rotten fruit at him. Dogs would bark at his unseemly appearance. She felt much better having stepped back from life from a while. *I'll get it all done.* She noticed her chest was unconstricted, her vigour and drive were back and she started to head back.

Malika's way was blocked by a large crowd standing around a wooden platform. There were two figures on it. She pushed through the crowd, not caring about tact and at times flashing her sleeves (which indicated she was a member of the nobility). She saw and started with shock. One of the women was Fatima, the Khalifa's executioner. Now, during the 11th Khalifa there were so few executions (relatively) that this was a ceremonial post, Fatima doing admin work most of the time. Not like the previous Khalifas when the executioner had three hundred apprentices at her disposal and could walk into any coffee-house and have gifts literally thrown at her by an anxious populace. The other person, tied up and ready to be executed was some eunuch, as she could tell from the shaved head.

The method of execution was a particularly nasty one too. The stake, reserved for Treason Against the Khalifate and Apostasy. Its top reached the top of the platform. The executioner would pick the victim up and forcibly sit her on the stake. She'd be impaled all the way through; the wood would pierce her rectum, intestine, liver, gut, lungs, trachea, jaw, mouth, and top of the head. Not all at once, for her weight was too small for her to slide all the way down. After she was on the stake, the executioner would slowly pull her down. The most tortuous aspect was that the heart was not pierced, nor any organ in a way that would bring instant release. Victims could stay up there for hours, especially if the executioner decided not to pull the victim all the way down and pierce her brain. If the stake reached just to the throat and pierced the palate only, her fate was not to be envied. From her figure (her eyes were covered as per tradition) she was petrified. No philosophical toughness was enough to stop a very natural process -- you recoil when your body is about to be penetrated by wood.

What was this all about? What did she do? What didn't she do? And what the hell did it matter? These four questions hovered in Malika's mind until it was aligned. She obviously didn't know the victim; she didn't know any eunuch well. No matter, she was prepared for a challenge. She stepped forward and up to the platform.

“What are you doing?” asked the executioner lifting up her arm for Malika to halt. She may not have

executed many people in a year but she was competent and could overpower Malika with a flick of the wrist. No, this could not be a contest of physical prowess.

"I'm sorry?" said Malika, stalling for time to think of a plan.

"I'm about to execute this one. You can't be here on the platform. Get down!"

"Executing? For what?"

"What am I your mother? You can read the edict yourself. To do which -- by the way -- you must get down!"

"But I just wanted to--"

"--what you wanted is none of my concern. Now am I really to have you arrested for disturbing a public function? Come on, I can see your sleeves. Why would you even bother with one of *them*?"

Something in the way she said it made Malika's blood boil -- although she rarely bothered to talk to one of "them" herself. Maybe it was the fact that pronouncing "them" caused an inadvertent burst of the saliva of contempt to issue from the executioner. Some of it ended up on Malika's cheek. *Yusuf take you, you--- wait, that's it!*

"I think you'd like to hear this. This execution is not right. But not--" she said putting her hand out before she could be interrupted "--because the condemned isn't guilty but because it isn't following the correct djinnological principles."

"What?"

"It's quite simple: if this execution isn't protected against Yusuf, it will go badly. He will come after you and possibly those watching. It would therefore be a good idea for you to make the necessary changes such that it would be well with you."

"Look, I've executed plenty of people before and--"

"Ever done one of Them?"

"So?" she echoed but there was a sign of uncertainty in her voice.

"Executions of men are protected against Sha-Ul. Those of women from Johara. But neither apply here. It is Yusuf you should be worried about."

"How do you know this?"

"Because my husband is the foremost authority in djinnology in Baghdad" Malika said. Or rather, would have loved to say, would have given anything for the ability to say in fact. But alas, she merely mouthed a short paragraph from one of the relevant texts that made it obvious she knew more than the average person.

"What do I need?"

"An amulet for starters. One against Yusuf. A proper one -- not the one you have!" She grasped the one the executioner was wearing. *That's it, be authoritative. To pull this off, you have to be a bit rude, otherwise all's lost.* Malika looked at it and emitted a gloriously-mocking laugh. "You think this will ward off anything? Allow me to read an excerpt: 'Sovereign of the stormy skies and erupting mountains! Allow me to pass unimpeded bla bla bla'. If you think this impresses Yusuf I need to tell the Khalifa to look for another executioner. For this one's time is up."

"Is it really that bad? I paid 90 dinars for it."

"At the markets I suppose?..You must get the best quality in town. Executing a eunuch is serious business. It hasn't been passed down to you from previous executioners because this was extremely rare for them. Even during the Ninth Khalifa."

"True. So where can I get one?"

Malika frowned, as if too contemptuous to give the answer. *Wait till she asks again. She has to ask again. She must, she's into it now.* Indeed she was. Malika "reluctantly" told her the address of one of the more reputable amulet-authors (not that of her husband obviously). She thanked her profusely and apologised for questioning her motives earlier. She even tried to do a bow or two but Malika told her there was no time to lose, she must get it immediately and return to complete the execution. She'd take care of the prisoner.

Never had Malika seen someone responsible for killing Enemies of the Khalifate scurry off into the crowd to find a horse in so undignified a manner. It was sweet. She felt her pulse in the tips of her fingers but she forced herself to wait until the horse was out of sight. Then she untied the eunuch's hands, took off her eye-covering and stared at Rasha as if for the first time ever. This then was the course of action Nadia decided to take in response to Rasha's scheming. Of course, Malika knew nothing of the circumstances, she just stared into Rasha's grateful yet defiant eyes for a few more seconds. She took her by the hand (whispering for her not to act surprised) and led her off the elevation, through the crowd and away. The



crowd didn't hear the contents of the exchange on the platform. They merely shrugged, believing Malika's obvious air of authority.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, let's get you off the street."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To a very resourceful person. She'll know what to do with you."

## Chapter 22 in which everyone learns biology can trump society

And she did. Amina only took one look at Rasha and quickly showed them in.

"I got her--" Malika started but Amina was already in the kitchen, calling for servants to bring warm plov, tea and a spice rack. Rasha was in need of hot food, not so much for the nutrition but for warmth itself. Rasha ate slowly and silently but without any kind of dejection.

"So, continue, dear cousin. You said you got her where?" Amina asked.

Malika told the story. Her cousin barely blinked. There was no shock, no outrage.

"Well, it was expected!" Amina said after Malika stared incredulously at her credulous eyes. "The Khalifa was due for a show of authority. But I like your way of freeing Rasha. You lie so easily, maybe you *have* a career as a diplomat cut out for you! Ask Nadia to send you to the West. I'm sure they won't be able to pull the kind of prank on you that our Naima did!"

"It wasn't all lies..." said Malika.

"Oh yes it was. Or rather, none of it was true."

"But--it is true that it's Yusuf who presides over the execution of a eunuch. I made all the signs up but the basis wasn't false."

"Yes it was. I mean, it *is* true that Yusuf presides over a eunuch. But that's not who we have here," said Amina.

"And why on earth not?"

Amina noticed that Rasha just finished her food and sat staring at them, half-concerned, half-amused. So she came up to Rasha, gently grabbed her head and turned to face Malika.

"Look deep into those eyes. Do you really think a shaved head a eunuch makes? Look, look at that vitality, that defiance of her defilers. My dear Malika, you're not staring at a eunuch but a former one. Rasha is a woman! Isn't that right?"

Rasha answered in a most unexpected yet welcome outburst of tears of joy and tribulation. Nobody had known before. Nobody except Faiz that is, but that seemed so long ago. Certainly nobody had merely looked and Known. And it was so very different now. Before, she was under control of it all. She arranged for the operation and her attitude was under *her* control. Now, she saw it for the first time as something that *happened* to her. Like she played a role in it but it was merely a reactive one. The script was written by the Khalifate itself. *This* made her lose control. That and the joy of others knowing and not being shocked or appalled or turning over to the guards. These were "normal" people and yet there seemed more congratulation than condemnation.

"I'm sorry... I had no idea..." said Malika lowering her eyes. "Does this mean it could be...reversed? I thought it was just a myth."

"Not at all. Doesn't take much. It's only the belief that it must be done that's hard to come by. Not the execution. If others had this belief they'd find a way."

Malika was originally going to drop Rasha off but she couldn't leave now. They stayed indoors and talked all day. There was so much Rasha had to tell, so much that was bubbling under that tough ribcage of hers, waiting for a chance to burst into the open. So she told them all. About her childhood in the idyllic village in the mountains of the Hindu Kush. The capture, infibulation, training. Being presented to the Court at age 13, a good little eunuch who wouldn't dream of letting a spark of defiance show. Her hours of leisure in the palace garden, catching cicadas, crickets and snakes like it was nothing. Spending many many

nights most ignobly scrubbing latrines and taking other kinds of shit from her superiors for her constant flouting of The Woman. And then being discovered by -- who of all people? -- Alia on her visit to the palace.

Soon she was secretly teaching her over and above her bland literacy lessons in the Court. Rasha described her momentous rise through the ranks, a rise entirely due to her will and the tools of the mind Alia provided. During the story people kept calling on Amina and after sending away two visitors she instructed her servant not to disturb.

Time came and went and here they were, enthralled, especially Malika. She totally berated herself for not seeing what Amina had seen. Truly her little cousin was wiser and more intelligent than her. Malika felt totally useless; but also invigorated. Until today she had never even considered the situation of eunuchs to any further extent than an impersonal concern for the unjustness of their plight. But they were only human now. It didn't take long for Baghdadian Sisterhood to kick in. In just a few hours they shared childhood secrets, lifelong yearnings. Nightmares. Malika spoke of her own situation -- something she never dreamed of doing with anyone but her closest friends and family.

They then decided to do something special. Rasha was a title given to her by the assistant to the head of the expedition into the Hindu Kush. The same woman who had forever besmirched her cunt gave Rasha her name. When Malika found out, she insisted they name her again. It was no longer apt to use her childhood name. "This has to be something new," insisted Malika, "because you're not the same person anymore". So she got her head together with Amina's and they crowned her Z-----. Of course, she couldn't use this name in public but at least she had a secret proper name. Not that she could *go out* in public at all, at this stage.

"Great," Malika said once the name had been settled on, given and accepted. "And now, Z-----, show us your transformation." Which Rasha gladly did. Malika looked intently and was confused as to what she was feeling: disgust and anger at the disfigurement, pride at the excellent Reversal. "It's..." she called out. She was about to say something more but her world started to fade. Malika stammered and stumbled and sat on the floor. A quick thought popped in her head: Why am I fainting? It couldn't be because of what I saw, but what then... Her hands went limp and consciousness fled her body.

## Chapter 23 in which our Queen is deposed

Faint breeze.  
Pale yellow curtains rustling.  
Pale yellow spots from cuts in curtains.  
Making a radiant flower pattern on the wall.  
Slightly distorted from light at an angle.  
It jumps as the sun jumps around.  
Sometimes it's right in front of the curtains, sometimes not.  
Sometimes nothing comes through but a pleasant cool blackness.  
Sometimes the flower's symmetry is broken, stretching to infinity.  
Blue and red highlights surround the petals.  
They twinkle and disappear.

Changes in temperature. Coldness tinged with the feeling of hot sweat, existing somewhere out there. Hotness combined with heaviness. Lightness. Sounds of a household. Which one? Not Malika's: no little feet. Or rather, not *their* feet.

Sounds of orders.  
Herbs being boiled.  
Urge to vomit.  
Fingers tingling.

Despair at the thought of throwing in all fights, all battles and upcoming struggles.

After what turned out to be three days of hovering and twirling in and out of consciousness, Malika sat up and asked for water. It was brought by Samiyyah, to her utter surprise. What was she doing here? Where was "here" even? The next thirty hours consisted of faces blended in Malika's mind. She didn't process the vision, just recognised personhood. Samiyyah bringing her medicine. Husbands and children looking dejected, Azizah weeping openly (perhaps from knowing none of her playmates could see her and make fun of her for being so unwomanly). Naima, Samirah, Amina, Jamilah. All with the same concerned look. She couldn't answer or speak or hear a word. But surely she was getting better! They had all seemed like they were staring at a ghost. Even her father -- what the Sha-Ul was he doing Here? -- came and drilled his worried eyes into her inflamed forehead. Nobody touched her, nobody kissed her better. It was as if she had the plague. Even Nadia came, with Rasha accompanying her. Rasha?! But---she was a fugitive!

She snapped out. Her first thought -- even before the relief that she was at least on the mend -- was the realisation that there was something horribly wrong. It wasn't the sickness. She realised she was at the Palace. Her mind screamed for answers as Malika dug her now-overgrown fingernails into her flesh from frustration. But she didn't have to wait long. Naima came in and, seeing Malika was finally out of it, tiptoed as close as she could to the bed without coming up to it.

"I'm OK. Now tell me. Everything. Out with it. Now," she said. "Please," she added in an almost involuntary moan that made her ashamed.

"You collapsed. Amina was getting you transported to your house but the Khalifa's messenger was looking for you anyway so they carried you here."

"Rasha?"

"I learnt all the details and personally convinced the Khalifa to reinstate her."

"Good. Thanks."

"In the climate it was hardly feasible to get her out of the Khalifate."

"And now tell me the real news."

"Right. You're to be exiled as soon as you get better."

"My family?"

Naima paused, her discomfort rising. "Just you."

"Oh!" Malika had the habit of making understatements in times of crisis. But this time her "Oh!" precisely conveyed her despair.

"For my involvement in the Affair of the Eunuch -- as it will doubtless become known as?"

"I don't know. The Khalifa has not been forthcoming. Speaking of which I must go -- I'm not supposed to be talking to you. Remember you've just woken up. Or rather will wake up a few minutes after I leave."

"Right. Thanks. Wait -- will I get to--?"

"Yes. I couldn't convince the Khalifa of a pardon but you will get a goodbye from everyone." She got up, as if about to leave, but instead came up to Malika and hugged her silly for 3 seconds. She squeezed everything she couldn't say into those 3 seconds -- that of course she believes her and not the charges, that she'd known her as well as she knows herself, that she was doing her best not to break down etc etc. Then she left. Half an hour later Nadia strolled into the room alone.

"So..."

"So..."

They didn't bother exchanging formal greetings but instead stared at each other.

"I take it you were informed by Naima of the arrangement?"

"What?"

"No need to deny it. Of course, I knew she wouldn't be able to help herself. I can't blame her either. How are you feeling by the way?"

"Great. Well, not so good. But I should be on my feet in a day or two."

"Good. Because the ship is coming in twelve days. That gives plenty of time to recover."

"Where is it taking me?"

"The Caspian Sea. You'll still be within the Khalifate. Just in a periphery."

"That's not too bad. Now come here and tell me everything...your Highness..."

Nadia came up to her and sat on her bed without a shred of reluctance. Click. Click. Malika recognised the all-too familiar sound of Nadia's wooden sandals touching the floor and was transformed back into

another world.

"The Khalifate is the centrepiece of learning and culture, refinement and freedom. We are a beacon in what remains an otherwise barbaric world -- unaware of the mercies and intricacies of Intisar, treading on the weak, more keen on destroying than creating. For the last 300 years, while we were at the forefront of innovation, what were they all doing? Nothing. Nothing good that is. I won't bore you with elaboration. You know how I feel about it.

"I need to provide an atmosphere that helps our institutions. Which means I need to remove you, however loathe I am to do it. You're out of control. Malika, you're not a good citizen of the Khalifate. At least not here, not in Baghdad, not at Court. There's a place for you elsewhere but not here. I know about what you pulled with Rasha. And no it's not just that. In fact, I admit I over-reacted. And you stopped me from carrying out something I'd have regretted. But it does show a destructive and disobedient pattern.

"I've always known you're no lapdog. But now you're creating an atmosphere of dissent. You do things according to your values -- and they *don't* coincide with those of the Khalifate."

"How so?"

"It's everything. I know you've become an apostate. That you've been implicated in accusations against Hanan."

"What?"

"That you visited her and tried to blackmail her to ask me to stop the literacy study, which by the way is another indictment against you. And that then you tried to get suspicion in the murder to point to her."

"Ohh..." said Malika, as if relieved.

"Then there's of course your disregard for authority, as seen in the case of Rasha. And that incident of your unashamed radicalism when you sent gifts to the *husbands* of people. None of these have gone unnoticed. And these are just the facts -- how much more severe would your case be if I paid heed to rumours?"

"So why not execute me?" Malika replied unflinchingly.

"Perhaps I should. But I can't. You did not actually commit treason. You're always on the verge, always stopping just short of the damnable. None of your acts are by themselves sufficient to do anything. But when put together something needs to be done. Also, it seems a more fair and fitting punishment for you to be removed from the court, since you have shown you cannot coexist with it."

Seconds of silence. Each waited for the other to bite. The residue of things left unsaid -- for years -- weighed down. Malika broke it. "And the other reason? I'd like to hear it. Moreover I deserve to."

"You sure do," Nadia squeezed out nervously. "It's...obviously because of us. Our prior relationship."

"Right, what about it?"

"I guess I can't bring myself to kill a woman I was intimate with. Goes against my nature. Which is not unexpected. After all, it's a simple syllogism of the Philosophress:

All people hesitate to kill a woman they've been intimate with
I am a person
Therefore, I hesitate to kill a woman I've been intimate with

"That sums it up nicely. I know that as a ruler of the Khalifate I'm not supposed to engage in a legalism or put my emotions aside. This is the way of the barbarians. We don't go by the one-size-fits-all rule. Plus there's the other, more practical part. If I have you impaled on the stake meant for Rasha, people will talk."

"Exile will also lead to talk."

"True but if I execute they'll say I killed you from spite. That it was a lovers' quarrel, where one former lover happened to have access to the executioner. That I'm bitter about you abandoning me and being so happy with your *husbands* when I'm miserable with mine."

"So it's true then. You are unhappy!"

"Thanks for noticing. How kind of you."

"I don't mean it like that! Of course, I noticed. You've just never said it to me explicitly all these years. Anyway, there's always the possibility of taking on another husband, or divorcing Mansur."

"No, that won't do." She smiled bitterly. "Who will I marry anyway? Nobody sees me as Nadia anymore."

Malika squeezed Nadia's hand. There was of course empathy in her action; but a large part of it was to

gain a moral victory -- the exiled giving comfort to her exiler. Malika knew this image would be with her for long in the Steppes, that it would warm her considerably.

"You knew I had to go."

"I guess for all your apostasy against this horrible Khalifate of ours, this was a custom you chose to be orthodox about."

"You're right. I did choose it. I had no idea you wouldn't do the same, wouldn't do the 2.3-husbands-and-kids thing."

"No need to be apologetic. Not that you are. You know I have to do this don't you? I can't kill you but I can't just let you be, the place was crawling with stories but now these stories have been replaced with facts. If I did nothing it would be as much a blow for my authority -- as it would be if I shoved a stake through your gut. Under the circ--"

"--I know."

"But that doesn't mean that, given the right climate..." she stopped, afraid of what she might say. She played with Malika's hair for a minute and left, wishing her to get better.

Nadia turned around one last time. "Can I write to you? I don't expect you to answer. But read it, won't you?"

Malika nodded. The second the door was closed she was out of bed. The opportunities for denial were over. With a renewed vigour, she bawled, hit the walls, tugged at the curtains, dug her nails into the brick and performed any act of defiance she could think of. Abbas and Azizah, defenseless in Baghdad with no one to protect them from Treachery and Conspiracy. She wailed (but of course silently, so as not to give her captors satisfaction).

## Chapter 24 in which Malika gets acquainted with the Caspian

It was a steppe most desolate. A monotony of colours. Yellow-green and pale-brown in the grass, blue in the sky, unadorned with variation. It began to oppress the eyes after a minute of staring. It was soothing but oppressive. It felt like the unbroken line of the horizon burnt into the retina. Malika often tried it: after looking for any length of time, she shut her eyes and couldn't tell any difference between reality and the persistence of vision.

Her house of exile was about 8 kilometres from the nearest settlement. It stood alone overlooking the Caspian, just a few hundred metres away. This was pretty much the extent of the landscape: tall grasses, solid-blue sky, the sea also solid-blue (but of a different shade) and the house. Which was made of straw and reeds, in contrast to fashions of Baghdad where even the humblest abode was from mudbrick. Not that Malika's house was meant to be *specifically* humble. All houses in that land were the same. Also there was no need to remind her of anything. She could hardly miss the severity of her exile.

A road passed by. The road, which only added to the monotony due to being of exactly the same colour as the grass, connected the settlement 8 kilometres in the direction of Baghdad with another 15 kilometres in the other direction. But the two settlements were also joined by a river. The towns were sea-trade and fishing communities so naturally the river was the preferred means of communication. Hence the road never got more than 2 visitors a day. None stopped or even slowed. On her off days she felt it was because visitors knew her house was Accursed. *And that would naturally put them off -- the journey is perilous enough with Yusuf about. If I was them I'd speed up. Most are skeptical of their amulets -- I see them clutch them under their tunics half the time. Not to mention the possibility of brigands or -- worse still! -- the dreaded A-word....*

Malika was sitting and pining. There were only so many times she could re-read and re-memorise the letter her husbands wrote her. They were allowed one a fortnight, so one more week of re-reading. Other than that, she was idle. It wasn't that there was little to do -- in life there never is -- but there was nothing for *Malika* to do. She just wasn't ready. There was apathy. She was directionless. So she sat and pined. And



did a lot of staring.

The servant came in. She was allowed to take one person only, he was it. Not even from her household but one assigned by Nadia. *Probably a way for her to say 'look, we're so enlightened, we've even provided the enemies of the Khalifate with top-class help of the caliber we're using ourselves'.*

"My Lady? May I have a word?" He was very professional, perhaps too professional.

"Go for it."

"In a week it will be time to send back my report."

"What?" Malika was surprised more than outraged. "You mean about how I'm responding to the exile? If I'm being a good dog who's learnt her lesson?"

"Oh no, by Johara no. Far be it from me to judge the state of my Lady's mind. The honourable Khalifa would never have asked someone as unworthy as myself to perform those tasks."

Malika almost burst out laughing, so adorably-quaint was his subservience. Almost. "Well, then what's this report?"

"Only to ascertain whether I've been doing my job well. She would like to know the full extent of my inadequacy in serving my Lady."

"Oh." Malika was beginning to understand. "Would you like my opinion of your work then?"

"My Lady would be most Magnificent if she were to evaluate me personally. Then I can send my report with more authority. I know I myself will not be able to fully fathom my failings."

"Oh stop it! Anyway, the tasks. Cooking. Fabulous. Never had such tasty meals. Maybe because they're all I've got to look forward to."

"Thankyou."

"Housework. Good, but there isn't that much to do. Because this isn't really a house as such, is it now?"

"What about supplies?"

"No complaints. You always go to town when I need. You're prompt. And I lack nothing. Food-wise and supply-wise that is. I'd rate you as excellent!"

"...there's one more task on the list that I--"

"--oh yes. I know perfectly well. This is why you came to see me in the first place, right?"

"Y-y-yes my Lady."

"You're afraid of writing back and saying you haven't been fulfilling the duty of maintaining my sexual function (since we haven't copulated at all), right?"

The look on his face said it all. Non-copulation was embarrassing.

"Just between us two, I hereby relieve you of that duty. In full, for now and forever. OK?"

"But—but--"

"Look around! I'm in exile. In the middle of nowhere. I won't pretend otherwise. I'm not sending you away altogether. The Khalifa will be angry at me... Plus, much as I hate to admit it, I *am* a spoiled noblewoman who'll probably have trouble chopping her own firewood and hauling her own sacks of supplies from town. So I'll keep you here and enjoy your great help. But I won't have sex because I won't pretend that everything's fine, that I'm home. For some reason I feel it would be *weird*, with my husbands elsewhere and you not being one of them. I can't explain it in any more detail, I guess it's one of those irrational thoughts that are impossible to put in words. This is not because I'm dissatisfied with you, or don't find you ludicrously attractive."

His face changed in an instant. Poor fool's been thinking he was a bad servant all this time! The burden was lifted, his appendix of doubt removed, his gout of inadequacy melted away... He laughed, nervously at first, then with proper relief. Malika joined in.

"But still I don't think the Khalifa will appreciate this arrangement."

"You speak wisely. We have 2 options: tell the truth, and hope she understands, or be a little crafty."

"I don't think she'll appreciate the truth. I can just feel the sting of the cane on my back. But I can't lie to her."

"--oh no. We won't be doing that at all. No lies."

"What then?"

Malika shook her index finger side to side. "Let me report on this task too. You can put this in your report. You've performed *all* my sexual requests flawlessly and to my utmost satisfaction. You can even say I'm impressed with your level of dedication in satisfying my most unusual and unorthodox desires."

"Which will also be the truth."

"Well, have you ever been assigned to someone who made such a strange and marvellous request?"

"Of course not! I mean, out here, there's not much to do anyway. And it *is* certain that a woman has a

sacred right to sexual pleasure, such that even if she has been imprisoned or ex--"

--yes I know. And I do agree I have this *right*. But for personal reasons I'm choosing to waive it. To alienate myself from this most inalienable right."

"As you wish."

When he left, Malika looked out the window again and noticed her mood lifted significantly. *If I ever do have sex with my husbands ever again, my waiver will make it even more magnificent.*

The days passed without much change in Malika. She stopped staring and took walks instead, which was an improvement. But they did little. There was nowhere to go. The Caspian was inhospitable despite warm weather. One direction from her house was closed off entirely: the sea was only a few hundred metres away. Going deep into the tall grasses was possible but pointless. There were no landmarks, no possible destinations. After a few tries, Malika decided to cut out the middle-woman and just stay home.

Then there was the road. She couldn't walk along the road. Malika tried it once and turned back in disgust. It was unbearable, as if she was seeking out company. She may as well have written to the Khalifa begging her to take her back and promising to become blander than plain semolina. Speaking of which, she had her fill of it. It all started when her servant came back from town with an enormous sack of semolina and nothing else. She was caught by surprise. In Baghdad things were generally available all year round. *Of course they are you fantastically-gigantic fool! The Khalifate is an enormous empire -- its borders span several agricultural regions, so at any time something is growing somewhere, whether here, in Arabia or the Maghreb. And Baghdad taxes all. What did I expect?* Here, there was nothing except semolina available.

Thus began Malika's Month of Semolina. The unbearable taste seemed to crawl out of her every orifice. The sea and air stank of it. If a cloud passed by, she couldn't help but picture it consisting of anything else. Three squares a day. At times she preferred the hunger pangs, the shaking of her hands, the weakness that was present in every movement she made, every thought she conceived. She could never hold out for long and so the cycle continued. The hot weather made bringing dead animals from town impractical. The roughness of the road did the same for live ones. There was even no sugar to put in the semolina -- the cane harvest had not begun. Spices ran out. It didn't help realising that for the inhabitants of this place, every year had a Month of Semolina.

*Am I really that weak?* she asked herself. Her concerns over produce in Baghdad consisted of worrying whether a particular kind of spice would be available in time for a particular feast. And it seemed a real worry. She never considered herself spoilt -- but it only took three bowls of semolina to show her she *was* spoilt. This was not an indictment on her character (at least Malika herself wasn't indicting her character) but a testament to her rather rosy personal circumstances.

*I need to just shut the fuck up and train this muscle. I didn't know it existed until it started aching: atrophied, unused. When it's trained I'll be able to do more about my problems. I'll get that look I see in Naima and Samirah's eyes. They may like their creature comforts but they know what it's like to go without...well, everything! Once you've been through that, everything's different even if you're living in a palace.*

When she looked out the window she was shocked by what she saw: everything was flat. The usually tall blades of grass were all against the ground, for a brutal wind was passing. It was so strong that each blade was pressed in exactly the same direction. An infinite stretch of combed hair. There were no trees so she couldn't tell how intense the wind was from the shaking of a tree. But the noise -- it spoke to her in a thousand voices: screeching, howling, roaring, hissing, lisping. It was one of those winds that make you feel truly alone, because the sound can only be made in the middle of nowhere. For a second, she thought she heard the voices of djinns, whispering to her in the desolate wind.

## Chapter 25 in which Rasha and Malika rise

“Does my L- do you desire to get dressed?” the servant-girl asked Rasha.

“Yes, I *do*,” Rasha answered, stressing the verb. Since being made Grand Eunuch she no longer dressed herself. Unless of course she was sneaking out of the palace. She raised one leg, letting the girl take of it. She always looked into the eyes of the servants, as if to distinguish herself from the other inhabitants of the Palace. The girl in response peered deeper and deeper into her leg avoiding Rasha's gaze.

It would be fitting to explain the significance of Rasha's response, though it's impossible to fully explain it to someone who's never spoken Baghdadian, never made friends, conducted employment or conversed with husbands in it. Baghdadian verbs always had one of 5 markers. Three were endings: one emphasising a strong intent, one a weaker intent and one a completed action. For instance, if someone said “I have found the book” using the weak intent marker, it meant they found the book after a moderate amount of effort. The bare verb simply meant that the book has been found. Using the third marker meant the act of deliberate searching was completed. The other 2 markers were for gender (one for males, one for eunuchs). Each verb could only have *one* marker. Thus, a eunuch couldn't say “I have found [with strong intent] the book”. They already had to use the eunuch marker – so they couldn't attribute to themselves the act of deliberately planning an action with one simple verb. Rasha's statement that she *does* expressed her resentment of having to use the eunuch marker in this verb, and the fact that the servant didn't call her a Lady. If she were, Rasha could have said “do” with the strong marker. Of course, only a few knew; but how she adored dropping the markers when they spoke to her!

“Thankyou my dear,” she said and left the room. Immediately she was accosted by a horde, all wanting her opinion on this and that; they stood around her in a semicircle. She listened and answered, received and distributed papers and orders and manuscripts all at the same time. *At least now they bother to hide their contempt*. Rasha smiled -- one of her accosters was a fellow eunuch, her verbs were not like the others'.

Malika first met the critter at the end of Semolina Month. By then she resumed some daily walking. She saw him coming back to the house. Just a wretched dog going through a rubble of straw piled up outside the building wall, hoping to come across a morsel. He had an inconsistent coat, with some patches that were bald whilst others abounded in luxurious growth. He was the result of dozens of generations of the most chaotic breeding in the far-reaching roads of the East Khalifate; roads that stretched for hundreds of miles, that would fork and recombine, running through settlements, fields, mansions, mines, palaces, rubbish tips, farms and military camps. None of these offered shelter for a dog. Malika yelled for a split second. The dog growled but left, shaking his head side to side in a casual disappointed trot.

She saw him again the following morning, in the same spot, doing the same thing. *Stupid animal. Should I get the servant to chase him away? No, that's milksoppish, I'll do it.* She got a broom and went outside, shaking it at him. He started shuffling off. Malika brushed him away with the bristles. Rather than growling he actually slowed down his departure, making her dig the bristles deeper into his mongrel flesh. Only after a few seconds did Malika realise that he enjoyed the massage. The deep bass of his slow growl were a giveaway even to someone as unacquainted with dogs as Malika. She was surprised to discover the dog had a dimension beyond being a mindless combination of teeth, claws, growls and barks.

Dogs were never held in good esteem in the Khalifate. Only after the last Khalifa was routed by Turk overlords could dogs walk freely through its domains. The Turks were keen on them because they were indispensable in their tribal lands in the grasslands of Central Asia. The aboriginal Khalific culture held them to be filthy, sinful animals. In the sky, the Dogs preceded the Indignant Turtle constellation (associated with Sha-Ul). This didn't help their reputation as his minions.

The next day he was back. And the next. And the next. Instead of foraging he sat and stared at the house. Strange thing was, he didn't want anything specific. Malika had seen hungry dogs many times before, roaming in packs in the countryside. It was a hellish sight: stares of meanness, swift and greedy movements, constant vicious fights. Then there were packs that were literally starving, lying on the road, ribs protruding wildly, flies covering the entire coat like gourmet connoisseurs who might descend on a restaurant in droves and line up for hours waiting for it to open. This one didn't look starving.

“What does it mean?” she asked the servant.

“I think he likes you.”

“What? How? But I put him out. Twice.”

Not knowing what to make of this, she came out with a small bread crust (the Month of Semolina was

over by then). He sat, licking his lips and not moving anything but his tail which swept from side to side. He got a little closer and sat down again before taking off. The next day the same thing occurred, only the distance between the mongrel and the bread shrank. And the next day. This was becoming a ritual, with Malika not minding one bit. *One despised creature acknowledging another.*

When he finally took the bread everything changed. Malika started to play with him. She'd go on walks and he'd occasionally pop up out of nowhere, and run in enormous circles around her before disappearing again. He was not a pet. There were no pet dogs in the Khalifate. She did feel new though: someone who used to dislike dogs, when she starts to like them, she becomes a different person. The personality, the outlook on life alters as it must. Malika did not feel desolate because Iblis (that's what she named him) accepted her. This felt completely moronic at first: her, with so many connexions back in Baghdad, driven out of desolation by a dog? It did make sense. Her servant was not there by choice. This made Malika feel very slightly sick all the time. She was constantly apologetic at his presence in a way she never felt around her own servants.

Out on her walk one day, she saw a man from a distance of about two hundred metres. It was an ordinary pastoral scene. If she were in Europe instead of the Khalifate and if this was eight hundred years later, such a scene might have been immortalised by the Oil Mistresses. It was simple: a crop field and a man with a large basket gathering the crop. He was in ordinary peasant garb -- basic pants and tunic, no head covering or Separator. He worked so casually yet with such dedication. He wouldn't have moved an eyebrow if a chasm opened in front of him. If Sha-Ul and Yusuf combined stood across his path he wouldn't drop the basket, wouldn't shit himself. But if he misjudged the angle and a single piece of grain fell out, it *would* be a big deal. Malika watched him go through 100 patches. He was powered by some other-worldly force, she concluded. He was performing 5 shafras in each of his movements, and for some reason her mind went back to Iblis and his movements. *Is he Iblis's master? Or are the two of them one and the same? I haven't a clue. But I know what they're telling me. Enough inactivity. ENOUGH!*

Malika shouted this last word at the top of her lungs. It was intended for no-one, but also for everyone in her life. The only real recipient of the scream was obviously the farmer. But when he turned around to see what in the name of Johara was going on, Malika was gone.

With the conference finally finishing, Rasha's gaze rested on the young, apparently-shy eunuch. "Go so you're not seen but come back to my quarters," she told her through nothing more than a look. When you were a eunuch for so many years you developed methods of non-verbal communication with others. 3 minutes later, Habuba was sitting down in Rasha's room.

"So Habuba, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Honestly I--I don't know."

"Surely you've heard the story of my...fall from grace, my Treason, failed execution and reinstatement."

"I have! The Palace talks of little else. At least the eunuchs do," she added.

"So then you do know."

"Well, nobody's aware of what exactly you did to make the Khalifa (peace be upon her!) so mad."

"Yes, the Khalifa..." she said musing, adding a pompous "peace be upon her!" at the end,

"...successfully kept the details a secret. I'll fill you in some other time, Habuba."

"Anyway, I haven't been up close to you before. I know you as I know all eunuchs in the palace. But there is something about you..."

*Is she that blind? Surely her self-hatred can't have reached a point where she'd fail to notice the Truth! For shame.*

"Something about me?"

"Well, you seem so educated, so sure, so organised and...just really really sure of things. As if..."

"As if I was a..."

"...a woman..." Habuba moaned excitedly. But this was her excitement at verbalising an aspect of Rasha's behaviour, not her realising who Rasha was.

"Really?"

"Really truly. I just want some...some pointers I guess. I know you're incredibly busy but perhaps just a few minutes of--"

"--anything to improve the life of a *fellow*... This is the deal: you're actually in a privileged position. No social status whatsoever. And you're from a group almost universally despised. There will be about three exceptions in your life, so if you've already met two such people I'd be sad because statistically that leaves

only one more.”

“Lucky for me I have the potential to meet 2 then!”

Rasha eyed her with warmth. “Lucky indeed. And you also have the good fortune to spend your life walking atop a thin blade with danger on either side. Be too incompetent and it will be the end of you. Be too competent and likewise. So you're damned either way. But it is an advantage.”

“What? I thought you were just being sarcastic.”

“To an extent. Also serious. Most people if left to their own devices will not become remarkable. Some will, even given an easy existence but most will move through life like a hot knife through butter. Never encountering resistance and never cutting anything either. What helps *us* are the jolts, the inconveniences. They are the chisel that creates the remarkable. We have this opportunity on a silver platter. You have no need to seek out trials by fire -- for that, just continue your daily life.”

“Wow! I've never heard anyone talk like this!”

“That's because you're young and naive,” she said watching the child's face contort. “Just the way Intisar made you, of course. But seriously, you need to start learning. Even the trials of a eunuch's life are not enough to make Something out of you. They're too random.”

They sat for a minute whilst Rasha digested something and the next second she was on her feet. “Of course! It really is that simple! I'll set you up a few lessons with my former teacher, before I take over.” Rasha smiled at Habuba's frantic gratitude. “My teacher's still alive, and probably always will be.”

“Who, Alia?” Habuba said half-jokingly.

Rasha looked at her with stern affirmative. Habuba repentantly retreated her neck as if slapped. Rasha told Habuba to come to the palace garden in exactly a week at midnight. She then left her own room (Habuba still sitting in shock) to attend to business; but in her heart, she was gleeful about the Word being spread.

## Chapter 26 in which Malika charts the Spheres

Night caught up with Malika on her way home from watching the farmer. She'd gone out much further than she intended. It must have been a day of firsts, because she hadn't been out of the house at night since she was exiled. As soon as she saw it, she emitted an excited gasp -- also the first in exile. The sky was so marvellous here! It wasn't shitty and bland like in Baghdad. She'd never even been out of Baghdad for more than a few days. Living in Baghdad Malika didn't know what she was missing. It was like comparing the light of a glow-worm with the light of a dozen suns. The City of Light lived up to its name: were a satellite photo of the earth made at the time, it would have been the brightest spot. Brighter than Constantinople, Smyrna, Toledo, Avignon. More so after the murder, when they tried to improve security with added street torches. Anyway, the glow of the city impeded a clear and sustained vision of what's up There. Each star was merely a dot. Here, everything was real, 10 times brighter. For once Malika remembered herself sitting in school and learning about ancient science. The Greeks originally believed the entire celestial sphere was a dark solid curtain. There was a tremendous infinite light Outside (the Prime Moveress?) and the inside was dark. The sun was then merely a large hole in this curtain, as was the moon, the stars and planets. It sounded like absolute tripe to her in her civilised Baghdad courtyard. But here it wasn't. Here each star held a promise of an infinite light behind it. What's more, the constellations came alive. She saw the figures as they were meant to be seen. Of course, she had always understood that it was more real for the ancient Greeks. Even so, it was special to see for herself.

*They lived right under it, and with a lack of things to do at night, they naturally observed a hell of a lot more than we do. So they gathered and conjectured, dreamed and created, made up and categorised and fabricated. Could they but do otherwise? Wait a minute!... I certainly have a lack of things to do at night. Not to mention--.* By then Malika was racing towards her house. She ignored Iblis outside, whirled past the servant, grabbed a few loose things and sprinted out again. What made her run was a simple fact -- she could work out many things about the universe just by gazing up. And this made her interested. Within a



second of finding a comfy dark spot she located many features she missed in Baghdad when she had people and her arrogance around her. Her mind went back to Samirah's lecture to her husband. How she wished she'd listened to it a bit more! For now she was truly interested in the technicalities of scholars.

At first she just noticed that the clarity of her vision meant she was able to record measurements more accurately than those at the city observatory. *I might be onto something here! All this time, throughout the Height of our Civilisation, the main observatory had been in Baghdad. And all the best scholars studied there. Why would they go anywhere else? It was silly to leave the epicentre of learning (where the libraries abounded with hundreds of thousands of volumes), to go into the barbarous countryside. But it didn't occur to them that their urban superiority was costing them. Heck, it didn't occur to me until 2 hours ago... Now that I think about it, it's the simplest and stupidest thing in the world -- to go and observe in a place that's best for observation. We were just too absorbed in our sense of superiority to look outside the metropolis. Myself included. Well, now I'll show them.*

She had no training in astronomy beyond that of her school years. Her only advantage was her new-found ability to record accurate measurements. And a surplus of time and will.

The first challenge was determining how to measure a star. She knew a star on the pole -- the Pole Star of course. To get the vertical position of a star she measured the angle made between the star, her eye and the Pole star. If it was 90 degrees the star was on the equator, 45 meant halfway up the first quadrant etc. The other axis she had to think about for a little, but then realised it would just be the angle up in the sky formed by the measured star, the Pole star and any fixed star she defined as the axis. But what to choose, what to choose? So many stars -- but Malika knew which one. It had to be the Crown of the Lionness, for it reminded her of her little Abbas who she hadn't seen in 3 months.

After that it was easy. Relatively. Nights and nights were spent picking stars to measure, painstakingly shifting the angles of her makeshift instrument and doing it over and over again for accuracy. Very soon they stopped being strangers. They were no longer clones but each had a personality of her own. Malika only knew a few by name, the rest she started naming after her kids, her family and friends, even her enemies when appropriate. Hanan was a speck at the testicles of the Great Hedgehog. Hundreds followed, all written down. She was sure hers were better than the measurements of the dolts at the Observatory. She decided to let them know. *But only when I'm ready.*

#### EXCERPT FROM UNTRANSFORMATIONS<sup>19</sup>

A stitch hides much. A thousand thoughts, yearnings and potentialities.  
Undoing one opens the door and they emerge,

Crippled, malnourished and lame; but nonetheless vital and true.  
Woe to those who get in their straight and righteous paths!  
For like all animals they have talons most devastating.  
I left much at the cloakroom. But it is they who will collect it.  
They may leave a slight mess behind.

The sunlight caresses their skin, but they care not.  
The weight of multitudes inevitably slows their advance.  
In their thick darkness the multitudes can not even see me.  
They don't know they can unstitch, and they don't know that they don't know.  
I shout loudly from the rooftops. I cry and bleed and curse,  
But my courier pigeons keep getting shot down.  
I still send them.

I'll never sprint again, I merely hobble with my cane.  
When I greet people, I have to dangle a stitch  
Between myself and them,  
Instead of wrapping it around their neck and pulling  
Until their flailing ceases.

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<sup>19</sup> All stanzas rhyme, alliterate and resonate in the original tongue in a most amazing way that this boorish translation can only do injustice to

But I still have a few seeds left to sow.  
I wait for the right time to cast them, as all around me continues unperturbed.  
I waive my humanity and bide my time.  
And I can't wait to get to the cloakroom.

## Chapter 27 in which the Berry yields its juices

One night Malika was returning from her observations. 'Twas a cool night by then, autumn having finally descended unto the Khalifate. Celestial objects twinkled merrily and night-aves sang. Malika felt great. However, walking towards the house, she noticed there was more to the feeling. Of course, her astronomical success, the twinkling and singing made something feel very light in her heart. There was another source of lightness though. A great gathering of powerful forces that almost impeded Malika's walking. At one point she had to stop and sit on the ground to calm down. She felt her heartbeat quicken, all over her body. A few seconds later, she realised her breathing pattern had been changed for a few minutes and she didn't notice until then. She was breathing harshly with her diaphragm, almost convulsing. What could it be? Oh well.

The same thing had happened every night until she completed her observations. And then... Then she remembered the state and realised she wanted it, craved it, and of course needed to find out what it was. She left during daylight, making a point of carrying nothing to be free to observe.

Ignoring any supernatural, mystical or djinnological explanations for her experience, Malika headed to the place where it always happened. And what do you know, it started up again. This time she had this and this only on her mind and was thus prepared. She now easily identified the feeling. It was the sensation of sexual arousal, or at least the overpoweringly heavy arousal she remembered from her experience with traditional aphrodisiacs. Malika had never used them much. "I don't need to," she'd always jokingly brag to her friends. Of course, this was a clichéd boast in Baghdad so she could hardly ask to be taken seriously. The truth was they were too potent for her, making her a cork tossed about by the waves of hyper-sensation.

*So I have an aphrodisiac on my hands, eh? But where would it be?* She saw a tree just metres away, with red and yellow berries. It *had* to be it. Tiptoeing toward it, Malika had to cover her mouth, she was so afraid of collapsing in convulsions. Even back home she was worried about the side effects of such substances. All the more in this country where they came Alive. She picked 10 berries, placed them in her pocket and backed up with a marked intent to get away. On her way home, Malika took one of them out and looked at it up close holding it between her thumb and index finger. If there was any doubt it was gone by now. This was definitely the key ingredient of one of the most potent and popular aphrodisiacs in Baghdad. She remembered the stench from her wanderings through the Spice Markets. It was much stronger here, in a purer form. The berry was a sensual red-orange. The skin was shiny and the sun made a large highlight on it. The berry was quite large, about thrice the size of her thumbnail. The consistency was that of a cherry but it was apparent that there was no stone, that the juicy meat of the plant penetrated its centre. Malika squeezed it very slightly and saw a pinkish liquid protrude. Immediately she relaxed her fingers letting the dope get sucked back into the berry. Of course, smells are generally indescribable. But this one wasn't. It was sweet but only a little bit, like placing a teaspoon of sugar into a large glass of iced mint tea, to add just a hint of sweetness. There was a little bit of sourness, a bit like the blend of a rose and a lemon. Those two smells combined in ways that were subtle as a smells but strong for the intended purpose. *But is it in fact an intended purpose? My school djinnology teacher told me the existence of aphrodisiacs is one of the great natural proofs of the Intisar's existence. For how could something with such a clear purpose come forth spontaneously? But if I don't think Intisar is real, then whence the berries? But maybe they do something else. Maybe they don't have the single purpose of arousing humans. Or they arouse animals. In fact, why wouldn't I just experiment and concoct something? It's not like I have anything better to do.* As soon as Malika thought this, a voice of doubt started whispering to her. It told her that she'd

slip, succumb and have sex with her servant.

"Can you please be a darling and go into town?" she announced as soon as she crossed the threshold.

"What would you like?"

"Umm..." She hadn't thought this far. She had to make something up, something that would also take him a while to schlep back. "Semolina." She immediately knew she fucked up. "Kidding! Just seeing if you're awake. What I really need is some tea. And coffee and sugar. And a few kilos of rice."

He nodded. She could have mentioned 100 more things and he wouldn't have complained. This shat her.

"Also some spices," she added, remembering that she'd want to put some in the Brew.

"What kind?"

"An assortment. Get one of those metal boxes with 4 kilos."

"You're spending big today!"

"Yes I am."

"Well, it's about time," he said going to the door.

"Take your time," she said as he was about to leave. "You don't need to strain yourself."

Three minutes later he was a diminishing dot outside the window and Malika was giggling mischievously.

Thirty-seven minutes later, she had 5 glasses lined up on a table, each with 2 berries inside. Taking no chances, Malika had a face mask on (her own female Separator, she thought laughing as she made it). The berries filled half the glass, Malika filled another quarter with water. She carefully pierced each berry with a knife. She pressed the berries with a spoon. The juice unashamedly oozed out of each berry, clouding the water. Soon all the glasses were filled with a pinkish liquid. There was something almost unnatural about the colour; the sun's rays passed through it and splashed a painting onto the wall behind them.

Malika hid four glasses (making sure to cover them) leaving one for an immediate test. *If this is an aphrodisiac for people, I wonder if it would be one for animals?* She had no access to animals. Mostly. There was Iblis but she couldn't do this to him. Not to mention there being no other dog for him to approach. Not to mention that he was male, and thus insusceptible to the drug. The alternative made her shudder. There were always a few dozen rats in the cellar. Nothing she did could make them leave -- after all this was a paradise -- a jackpot of grain amidst a few dozen kilometres of bland grassland. There was no choice though.

She caught some and put them in a box. Don't ask how she did it, she did not remember herself. Let's just say she was determined. Pouring some of the liquid into a saucer and placing it in the box did nothing. They sniffed and convulsed a bit but refused to drink. In fact, they spread out into the corners of the box to get as far away from it as they could. *I guess I'll have to let them feel deprivation a little. Don't want to drink, my friends? You will.* Without hesitating, she placed the box on her window sill. Although it was autumn, the sun was still quite potent, and the house warm. She left the box to fester there, having also taken the saucer away and went downstairs to wait for the servant.

Three hours later, having received goods from town and eaten, Malika ascended. The rats were in a bad state. They all seemed shrivelled like prunes. That'll teach them. This time the effects could be seen. They lapped up the magic potion, and then it started, immediately. Malika could only ever describe what happened as an orgy of the most insane and depraved kind. They were all over each other, totally, completely and unfathomably. Traditional classifications of size, gender and fur colour were swept away into nothingness from merely a few drops of the liquid. She repeated the test over and over again, with different rats and it always worked. And on male rats too, which really surprised her. However, she had no idea what to make of this. For now, it was just a way of passing the time. Only once did she raise the question of whether she was being cruel to the critters. But then she saw they were all having quite literally the time of the lives, so the ethical consideration went as quickly as it came.

## Chapter 28 in which Malika defiles the dead

The building was 2 metres tall. From its shape and size it was apparent it was meant for storage. It stood a few hundred metres away from the road in a dignified solitude.

A dusty interior, no windows so the only light that came in was what seeped through the holes in the walls. Long thin rays of light stretched from the holes. Where they reached, you could see a myriad dust particles moving with the vigour of a storm. The building was packed with manuscripts: hundreds of thousands. Stacked in orderly piles spanning the entire height of the room. What did they contain? Nothing exciting. Nothing dramatic, no stories of djinns or far-away journeys of magic. This was a storage house for district records. Personally I'd sacrifice much to avoid having to look through records of harvests and taxes on peasants. However, someone did come.

An explosion of light shook the room from the outside. Two familiar silhouettes.

"Yes, your friend sure knows her stuff! Now why is it that she sent us on this wild Sha-UI chase?"

"Because Naima knew about this place," she said finally entering the room and excitedly running her finger down one of the stacks. "And because I don't really have much to do. Even though there are only boring historical records here. For me it's the most exciting thing this side of the Caspian."

"It's been abandoned for at least ten years. How does your friend know about it?"

"Well, my friend...she's very very special. She knows lots of interesting things. I believe this piece of knowledge she probably acquired through her years as an Assassin."

Malika continued rummaging through the records leaving the stunned servant to continue gazing blankly. "Malika, can I ask a favour?"

She pricked up her ears. How most unusual for him to mention her name and *ask* for something. "Sure."

"Can you just...just...read out what some of these manuscripts are? Just call them out as you look at them. I just want to---know."

She looked at him, as if for the first time. Realising she hadn't even thought of the possibility he'd be illiterate and suffering therefrom. *I've just become used to my husbands, I forgot what it's like to be a normal citizen. Shame on me.* "Sure. I'll call them out until I find something I want to take. If it in fact exists."

So out came the documents, one by one. After one or two hours, Malika sat on top of the pile she had created. "... I feel like a pig wallowing in my own faeces...taxation records...going back 20 years...let's see...wow, brought in 40,000 ducats a year and 12,000 tonnes of grain... I wonder how much ended up in Baghdad...oh wait, 60%. That's actually less than I expected.. Recipes...wait, they're all for fucking semolina! Whoever compiled that one must have had a sense of humour."

"Or she was like you and just couldn't endure Semolina Month."

"Right...a list of military fortifications in the area... I see, it's actually a cleaning bill. Costs 800 ducats to have 12 forts swept up and the sewage taken out. Some of the 10th Khalifa's soldiers apparently used a few forts when they went to an expedition into the Hindu Kush...but whatever for? Wait, it lists participants of the...hang on, this is interesting! What were the odds..." Malika finally snatched a document. She couldn't wait to go home. Instead, she asked him to wait, emerged from of the building into natural light clutching the account, sat down on the sand and began

### THE ACCOUNT OF THE EXPEDITIONS INTO THE HINDU KUSH

Know that in the nineteenth year of the tenth Khalifa (peace be upon her! may Intisar extend her life and reign! may she be inscribed as one of the righteous ones, gathered close to Intisar's sacred bosom!) there was a great and terrible rebellion in the Hindu Kush, east of the Caspian region of the Holy Khalifate. The Khalifa, in her bounteous wisdom, selected the best women at her disposal in order to immediately restore peace to the region. 67 souls formed a unit dedicated to bringing stability back to the Kush. The unit was led by Raidah, one of the most capable administrators under the tenth Khalifa.

The causes of the rebellion were quite simple. Firstly, the citizens of the Kush were terrible idolaters and heretics: they did not worship Intisar or Johara but gave their foul allegiance to the false, woman-invented djinn called Kamit. This has been known for centuries, but recently the great Khalifa in her infinite compassion decided to expend resources into bringing the Kushites into the Light of Intisar, including compulsory djinnological education for children from the age of 3. This resulted in mass riots. Djinnologists that were sent to the region were threatened, some even had their houses burnt down while they were forced to stand and watch with their terrified husbands and children. All this stemmed from the

Prophetess (may her name be blotted out! may Intisar banish her to the Five Circles! may her soul continue to be tortured a million unspeakable tortures for all eternity!), a smug and evil woman who openly proclaimed the superiority of Kamit and the non-existence of Intisar (may our eyes that read such horrors go blind and our ears that hear this wither away!). As often happens with evildoers, she had no problem gathering for herself a Rabble, which claimed to be in favour of the “right” of the people of the Kush to worship Kamit.

She had a second cause. For over a century the Hindu Kush was the foremost source of eunuchs. There were several reasons. Of all the peoples in the Khalifate, those of the Kush were the swarthiest and therefore the most removed from the Ideal that Intisar fashioned for womankind. They were the most fitting ones to serve in Baghdad and other places. Another reason was djinnological: unlike most other peoples in the Khalifate, these lived in the Darkness. Each eunuch that began to serve was as a result brought into the light by the Khalifa herself in an act of astounding generosity. Finally, the Kushites were physically fit and a very clever people (despite their low level of development), so they could be trained easily.

The wicked Prophetess shunned this honour and incited the Rabble to refuse to provide new eunuchs. At first, the Khalifa was going to be soft for she loved the Kushites like all her subjects. She knew some innocents might suffer in any retaliation. However, eunuch numbers dwindled and many a harem in Baghdad remained unwatched. The final straw was when the rabble openly raided one of the Induction Stations and escaped with over 30 eunuchs. Such a blatant theft of the Khalifate's property could not be overlooked.

The first part of the expedition went successfully. The battalion recaptured the booty of 30 like it was nothing -- a tribute to the prowess of Raidah. Incidentally, they also captured several granaries held by the enemy and distributed food to a hungry populace wearied by the Prophetess's despotism. Unfortunately the populace turned out to be most ungrateful and treacherous.

Know that the second part of the expedition turned out to be one of the toughest campaigns served under the Tenth (peace be...bosom!). For 4 long months the garrison fought off the onslaught of the Prophetess. Little did Raidah know she was dealing with a people most fanatical. They were ready to die simply to prevent *one* of their offspring from being Inducted. The campaign was fought house to house, street to street in the city of Latakh. Some of the Prophetess's followers actually ripped their own babes to shreds rather than give them up. Such is the nature of fanaticism. Nevertheless, the garrison collected over 300 new inductees between the ages of 8 and 11. These were immediately sent to Baghdad. Thus, Raidah had recouped the Khalifate's losses tenfold.

The Prophetess decided to use cunning where force had failed. She set up a meeting with Raidah and the other garrison leaders where she jumped from one ludicrous proposal to another. First she begged them to stop, as if logic and reason were on *her* side. When that failed, she cynically offered money. Let the Hindu Kush pay the usual tax of 50 eunuchs a year, but in money, she suggested. This, knowing full well the *devastating* impact it would have on the culture of the Khalifate. When this was declined, like a mad dog she darted to yet a third proposition: the girls would be given to the Khalifate, but as girls. They would not be Inducted, they'd simply serve. “They'll make better servants than virtually all the female servants in the Khalifate. The Khalifa herself would not be too proud to have them prepare her meals.” Of course, Raidah saw through this. The Prophetess did not wish for anything other than the downfall of the Khalifate. This plan would mean the breakdown of the family unit. About half the eunuchs in Baghdad are involved in looking after harems; if they were *women* they would instantly take advantage of the harem's inhabitants. Illicit affairs, breakups and a rupture of the social fabric would inevitably follow. This is almost certain with any woman left alone with another woman's man. The women of the Hindu Kush were to be particularly mistrusted. They were very beautiful, such that it would take a superhuman effort for anyone to resist them. The second part of the brilliant plan of the Prophetess (may her name...eternity!) was that these women would be put into a position to conceive and reproduce. Surely they would pass their subversive anti-Khalifate ideologies to the infants, who would grow up to be a force in Baghdad society. It would therefore crumble from within. They didn't even need to hook up with other people's husbands, they could simply find husbands of their own.

Raidah saw all these inevitabilities as soon as they were uttered. She realised she underestimated the evil genius of the Prophetess. There was little time to lose. The future of the Khalifate was certainly at stake. Raidah ordered the Prophetess seized and for the garrison to begin marching on her home town to root out her followers once and for all. Within the hour they were at Bin Palsi, the stronghold of the revolutionaries. It took no time to surround the town and penetrate the city walls. Raidah did this by creating a panic in Bin Palsi -- in a flash of brilliant strategising she had the Prophetess beheaded and the



head lopped over the city walls. When the Rabble saw their leader's head land there was an immediate onslaught of chaos and Raidah's army was inside. The town was a nasty one. They resisted to the last breath. Again, mothers and fathers slit their own daughter's throats rather than have them be eunuchs. Thus they were not only depriving them of the privilege of serving the Khalifa, they were destroying their souls by keeping them out of Intisar's love. Finally the last 20 survivors (of 1764) surrendered when they were surrounded and lost the opportunity to escape justice with a cowardly suicide.

There was no great bounty of eunuchs in Bin Palsi because of What the people did. There was one *moral victory* though. Whilst the garrison was counting the dead and tallying up the damage, one of al-Basimi's chief assistants went off for a wander into the ruins. She found a 10 year old girl huddled between two collapsed stones. It quickly emerged that this girl was the Prophetess's own daughter. The assistant took her and Inducted her.

After 6 months in the inhospitable terrain of the Kush, the garrison returned to Baghdad triumphant, with over 330 eunuchs in the end, many of whom ended up serving the Tenth Khalifa personally. Know that this is a true and authentic list of those who valiantly participated in the campaign (glory be upon them! may Intisar cause all their efforts for the Khalifate to prosper!):

Raidah al-Basimi

Fatima al-Sabri

Jafara al-Nakhshi...

## Chapter 29 in which Malika defiles the dead once more

Malika walked home alone in the blistering sun. She sent the servant back as soon as she finished reading; just stuffed the document in his hands and sent him away. She was tempted to burn or destroy it immediately which is probably why she took it out of her control -- let her decide what to do with it later, when she's more rational. Rational! As if one could be anything but the most fucking irrational hothead about something like this.

When alone Malika sat and bawled. She was not ashamed to completely break down. Nothing wrong with it. If she *didn't* start falling apart then there'd be a problem, she thought, because it would mean she were inhuman. Malika, or Malika's ghost I should say, floated around the surroundings of the storehouse. Rocks, twigs and sticks were kicked and trampled. At one point she fled from her own shadow. She couldn't bear to see any reflexion of herself, for everything that stemmed from her now had a Taint. And it was too late to fix it. The horrible things she read about could not be undone (obviously), but they couldn't even be atoned for.

After a few hours she started walking home. *This is the end. What shall I do now? How can I do anything? It's useless. Even if I spend the rest of my life fighting the fiercest battle for peace and justice, I can only ever hope to break EVEN. How could she?... And he? He watched over me for years, and kept it sealed.*

She stopped thinking. The brain, overloaded with grief, shut down. We must cease any attempts to penetrate her mind and simply stand back in awe. Her situation had elements of a Sacred Mystery to it. It would be wise to simply accept that we can never imagine what it was like and be silent.

And it doesn't help to conjecture that she must have been *less* traumatised than we might be, that the actions of the campaign in the Kush fit quite snugly into the violent milieu she lived in, so she couldn't have been *that* horrified. We think our world is "enlightened" because of things like men's suffrage. But would you say she wasn't as traumatised as you'd have been if you saw *her face* as she walked home? If we saw how much pain she was in, we'd forgive her all her transgressions. And then some.

She started spontaneously visualising a rose. Each petal was a different colour and the centre glowed with all the colours. As she walked and started to breathe again (a little) she saw this rose correspond to her breath. On inhalation the petals contracted. Upon exhaling they expanded and the rose rotated. It was only a hallucination induced by the sun, but it made her feel better. Then she remembered Alia's words. "He

couldn't tell you! It was his weakness yes, but for the best. Poor child! You'll--you'll find out, but don't be too ashamed, don't feel like it was a reflexion on you."

There was no mistake about it. Alia *knew* that day. But she wasn't comforted by this at all. It only highlighted to her how real it was. With a wail, Malika fell to her knees, not wishing to go on.

Malika walked home alone in the blistering sun. Her knees ached from the fall. She grazed her shins in many places. Not that she cared. When she got up from the fall, there was a grave grim determination about her. Her walk was saying: this is it, this is final, nothing I can do about it, so I'm just going to grit my teeth and see what I turn into. A small part of her appreciated the toughening experience of all this. A very small part.

An hour from home, Malika saw a dot far ahead on the road. No movement. She approached and saw it turn into a bundle. More steps saw it become a human being, or at least what *was* a human being. For the second time in 2 months Malika stood over the corpse of an unidentified man. At least this wasn't murder. He clearly died of "natural" causes: he was a beggar who must have spent his life wondering from town to town throughout the region. Didn't look sick, perhaps his heart simply stopped. Malika felt nothing in comparison to Basim's corpse. Hardly surprising considering her day. Malika looked at the face (no Separator). It was a novel thing: when most men's faces are Separated one does not get a chance to look at their expressions. She could have written an encyclopedia on her husbands' expressions. She smiled to herself remembering. It was Daud's turn to host her. They were getting ready for bed. The window was open, the gibbous just rising. Malika worked something out, from the way the moon highlighted Daud's face. They weren't even discussing the topic. She just said it. "You removed my notes from the gifts didn't you?" This was different though: here was a strange man with a frozen expression.

He was definitely smiling. *I guess I'll name you Basim too. Since there's no-one around to tell me otherwise. Since the other one had the same name. Since you're also smiling. Since I've already stood over another corpse of a Basim. Two actually, as of today...* But why would he be smiling at the moment of death? The usual explanation was the corpses who smiled were ones who were conscious when Intisar arrived to take them. This did not satisfy Malika. Luckily she remembered Samiyyah saying she found when a man is mortally wounded, the body goes into an ejaculation reflex. Could this not be an instance? *Wait a minute, wait a minute my friend! You wanted proof of the ever-elusive male satisfaction? Well, here it is, written in stone!* But alas there was no camera to immortalise the scene.

Standing there Malika was led to another thought. Here she was, staring at a man who had been subject to sexual arousal. And back in her house were some very potent aphrodisiacs she wanted to test. If she hadn't seen Basim II, it would never have occurred to her to connect the flesh of a man with the aphrodisiac. But now she desperately wondered what would happen if the two came into contact. *Why not check it out? I mean we've had the debate for years. But nobody actually bothered to see what happens when human flesh comes into contact.* The whole setup was even more daring because it required the assumption that male and female flesh were of the same *essence*. This did not fit into the scientific or djinnological worldview. The former held male flesh to be structurally inferior, the latter sinful in its nature. But why the hell shouldn't he be at least an indicator of what these things did to the female body?

2 hours later, she was back at the corpse, having fetched the servant and a large knife. He was to take the body a few hundred metres from the road and bury it. But not before detaching his hands. There was no question of the man being missed by anyone, he was clearly a vagrant. Too far to carry him into town and if they left him, his body would be befouled by robbers or dogs. At least this is what Malika told herself to justify the decision. "Poor Basim II. Hope you don't mind. And sorry if you do." The servant stood shaking his head. Not at what he was about to do. It was that he never heard a woman apologize to a man before, let alone a noblewoman to a dead vagrant.

Malika watched the two hands over a week. At first she merely placed one in the aphrodisiac, but then she realised she wouldn't know if any effects were from the solution or from rigor mortis. So she placed the second one in water and watched them side by side. The one in the water turned grey. The one in the aphrodisiac started shrivelling, managing to also somehow become swollen. There were psychedelic swirls of pink, yellow and green that began to show after 3 days. By the end of the week it was clear that aphrodisiacs *were* harmful. If they attacked human flesh in this way then taking too much will *certainly* speed up the natural deterioration of the body. Of course, they worked: they excited the female body terribly, probably the male too; but it was a poison.

*So I've got two things to write to Baghdad about. If I could get them to consider putting a man's finger in some berry juice to be an example of legitimate inquiry within natural philosophy, that would be grand.*

Malika smiled morbidly. There was something disturbing about the beaker with the aphrodisiac. When the sun shone through the window the opposite wall had a large red-green beaker-shaped blob that the liquid created. The finger was also projected onto the wall, enlarged and grotesqued-up through 100 changes in shape and colour. It looked like some accursed worm wriggling in red lava. And this image lasted on the wall all day. Malika was disturbed but inspired. It looked very artistic in its creepiness.

## Chapter 30 in which Malika teleports to Baghdad

"Have you heard anything from the Khalifa?" she asked the servant.

"No. But the Khalifa (peace be upon her) is very concise. Or so I remember from my last assignments that were similar."

"How many times have you done this before?"

"12, maybe 13."

"Were they all called back?"

"They were."

"I assume they had undefined terms like mine. And then Nad- the Khalifa relented?"

"Not quite."

"Are you saying all your former mistresses were recalled for the purpose of--"

"--let's just say they won't be requiring my services again."

"Interesting."

He bowed and virtually fled the room. She went back to writing. This was something she had been doing for the last week. All week. She stopped leaving her room, except for bodily functions. She was writing 2 things. The first was the description of the discoveries she made. She was encouraged by the fact that she actually *had* something to show for her recent existence. And then there was spite. One should never underestimate spite as a motivating factor. She was also composing another work.

Malika dipped the wooden pen into the ink, lifted it up, shook it a little to let that initial drop fall back, then gently carried it to a *plate* she had on the table and, touching the right hand side, wrote something incomprehensible. In an hour the plate was covered with strange writing. Malika decided to take a break. The plate was taken off her desk and placed in the corner, next to a heap of other objects, all with cypher writing. There were three dozen plates, shirts, some paper, pants, a chair, the back of a map and even a shovel. Malika did not forego any implement where a letter might have fit.

The unusual choice of writing medium was explained by the restrictions of the exile. She spent all of her paper on the first task, as well as the dozens of sheets she used to record star positions. But looking around the room and all the oddities (writing on an entire shovel?) it was obvious she felt it was more romantic this way. It meant Malika wasn't just a member of the nobility spending her leisure time in a cushy exile. By writing, in cipher, on a shirt, she became part of a larger tradition. It brought her back to the stories she read as a child. Like the mystical First Khalifa, who was imprisoned by Yusuf himself in a tower made entirely of ivory in the heavens. Of course, she triumphed, by writing in her own blood on the leftover chicken bones from her meals. She threw these out the tower's tiny window and her trusty servant Lea collected them. Lea drove Yusuf's minions from the Khalifate and rescued the Khalifa, all from a few chicken bones.

*Enough dreaming. Back to it, or maybe you WILL be taken back to Baghdad for execution and would have then wasted your wicked life. And there won't be an Intisar to cuddle you after the stake pierces your innermost thoughts. And organs.* Having thus motivated herself, Malika scanned the room for the next object, her gaze settled on one of his Separators. *This'll do. It's not like he needs one around me anyway since he's supposed to be servicing my every need.*

It began with Malika realising she still needed to figure out who killed Basim. Basim the First. It didn't matter whether she'd ever come back to Baghdad or live to see the Murderess brought to justice. She just needed to know.

Who was Basim? Mostly a model to Baghdad's sprawling array of artists and sculptors. He possessed a remarkably attractive body that looked as if it were made specifically for examination, whether the ogling of a common street person or the refined admiration of an artist. She remembered people talking at the scene. "Oh would you look at the way those shoulder blades magnificently point toward each other? Surely they are reminiscent of the tales of old, especially the one about Sha-UL's journey to the end of the world with Johara!" Malika then considered the way he was killed. Everything that could have been done to humiliate the corpse, was. Naked, no Separator, Poked by a stake right through like a spit roasted goat. This murder was done for the purpose of humiliating him, as a protest against his maleness. Sure, there might have been something that sparked this, but essentially he was murdered *because* he was a man, because he was fit only for being looked at, because he was hated for those two reasons. Malika couldn't believe she didn't pick it up before. Or rather, she knew it on some deep level, as she was sure everyone in Baghdad did. This was a murder done by a child -- throwing a tantrum because her favourite toy did not please her, then ripping the toy to shreds out of spite. And so nobody could play with it subsequently.

This is what made her uncomfortable. It was the banality of this murder. There was nothing outrageous about it. People were horrified only because murders rarely happened. But the way most wives and husbands were, Malika was surprised that it had not occurred earlier. Or in greater frequency. *After all, why shouldn't I be able to rip my toys apart when I'm tired of them, when they no longer please me?* She decided to embark on a meditation, to teleport to Baghdad.

She closed the blinds, lit a candle and lay on her bed. After a few minutes of relaxation, she imagined herself floating out of her body. She looked down at herself on the bed and then went through the ceiling and up over the landscape. A flash followed as she dashed off to the City. Hundreds of fields, rivers, mountains and forests passed under her in a second, along with hundreds of thousands of the Khalifate's subjects. And then she saw it in all its splendour. It dominated the landscape arrogantly, but there was a muchly-redeeming feature. Baghdad *did* at least have something to be arrogant about. Careful to avoid the harsh towers of the djinnology schools, Malika navigated to a house she had often walked past. Why this house? It was simple: she needed to get inside someone ordinary, someone she didn't know. She'd often see this ordinary woman out in the garden, so to this house she floated. By ordinary I mean there was nothing malicious about the woman, but nothing uplifting. Malika entered the house through a wall and then entered the mistress. The adjustment was surprisingly minor. In just one breath she saw what the woman saw, felt her limbs, thought her thoughts, itched her itches. She walked over and greeted one of her husbands, then asked him to go into a room where she objectified him to the best of her ability. Which consisted of staring possessively at his flesh, telling him to freeze and moving him from position to position by adjusting his limbs and torso. After each change she would come back to the couch and stare. But no matter how much she imagined her puppet would displease her, she knew that she as the Strange Woman on the Glassblowers' Street, could never do any serious harm to him. Well, she could indirectly. But she couldn't kill him. Blood just didn't fit into the mindset. It's not that it would have been completely morally repugnant to kill. Rather it wouldn't have been the course Malika would have taken *as that woman*.

Malika opened her eyes. This was something she had already known, just never thought about. It was not enough for the murderess be ideologically capable of killing Basim. For most people that wasn't enough. They also needed to be of an extraordinary mindset, one that actually wouldn't find a stake going through flesh and the blood spurting and oozing out, repugnant enough to put them off. That was when she remembered Hanan. Of course, Hanan had the ideology, this was why she suspected her in the first place. But had she the mindset? Malika decided to seek out anything written by her.

Days later, she curled up in bed with the good book obtained by the servant from the town market. She told him to get a copy and spare no expense, however he managed to obtain it for the price of only a few loaves of bread. Apparently adoration of Hanan only reached a distance of 300 kilometres from Baghdad. Not beyond.

She eagerly flipped through the pages, expecting something obvious to leap out. After a few hours, nothing did. Except the grand anti-climax. Disappointed as she was, she couldn't but admit the plain truth. Hanan's writings were the ravings of a fanatic but also an intellectual pedant. She anally tried to classify every experience, every phenomenon in the universe according to the taxonomy set out by her Idol, but in a much more detached manner. Her views on men were just like what she remembered them during her "private audience" with her: traditional but dogmatic. She wasn't hot-headed enough to follow up with a stake. Malika realised she exaggerated Hanan's hot-headedness, mainly because of the heated nature of their personal argument. *Because, she slapped me. But she wasn't the first person I've influenced to slap me*

*and won't be the last. No, she may be a monster, but I strongly doubt she's the murderer. She would have approved of it in principle -- but she don't have what it takes. Which means I must keep looking. Which means I must return.* Malika, pleased with her conclusion kept repeating it in her head. Each time she did so, the concept was more and more hazy, until she fell asleep, Hanan's book slipping out of her hands and landing face-up on the floor.

## Chapter 31 in which Baghdad teleports to Malika

The rider pushed on relentlessly. There was no need to spur the horse on, it flew. There was something about *this* rider-horse relationship that was reminiscent of the tales like one of the wooden horse that could go from Baghdad to Tunis in one hour (and girl did that save the Third Khalifa's hide!).

She looked over the countryside. Technically she was well within the borders of the Khalifate. But judging from the rawness of their surroundings they could have been anywhere untame in the world. She could see all the way to the horizon on her left, and this meant a flat featureless grassland. On her right she saw mountains about 10 kilometres from the road. The kind that are breathtaking in an ominous way. Most city dwellers would have found them unsettling -- an unwelcome reminder that the Khalifate's civilisation was finite, that there were still plenty of places where Yusuf reigned unimpeded, with the ability to snatch travellers at will. She didn't mind it though. It reminded her of where she used to live as a girl. Not that she had time to reminisce.

The wind inflated her pants and shirt, and made them float slightly away from her body, adding to the pleasantness of the flying sensation. A feeling of being cocooned in a thin layer of air that made the entire body free. She breathed in and out, realising her heartbeat was increasing. It was almost like a panic attack. She wasn't sure if she was anxious or excited though, just that she was doing something that needed to be done. She had a small knapsack with scant provision for the journey, but the most important things were in her hands. She was experienced enough a rider to hold things and ride at the same time. In one she clutched a tiny vial with a liquid. In the other was a curved dagger. She squeezed the dagger tighter than the vial -- every turn of the road was a potential ambush.

Finally she saw it: a small lonely house on the side of the road. She thought it was thatch, but the thought fled from her -- no time to focus on minor details. The goal was inside. She slowed the horse significantly about 800 metres from the house and by the time they were near it, they were at a walk. The inhabitants would not have heard anything. When they stopped, the rider jumped off, bending her knees on impact so as to make no noise. Still clutching her two items she went inside, peeked into the first room and saw a tall man peeling some vegetable. She recognised him and made a slight noise to get his attention. When he turned and saw her he went completely white. It was apparent she was not someone he was expecting. She put her index finger across her lips and he nodded, with dread and protest. Having silenced the first and only obstacle, she crept up the stairs and found the room she was looking for. It looked like the dwelling of a madwoman -- there were objects everywhere, all with tiny indecipherable writing on them. The rider shivered. Could this mean madness caught up to the inhabitant?

Her gaze fell onto The Inhabitant, sleeping on the bed. There was a book on the floor: evidently she fell asleep reading it.

"Oh, my Yusuf!" she exclaimed loudly when she saw it. Her outburst woke the Inhabitant who instantly sat up on the couch. "My dear Malika!" Rasha continued. "You seem to be reading one of the illustrious Hanan's works. I know it's difficult in exile but have you gone completely out of your fucking mind?!"

Many affections followed. Rasha was the first person outside the servant that Malika had seen in several months now.

"We must go," she told her after finally letting go of her and feeling Rasha's ribcage expand freely as the hug concluded. "This is not the place to talk."

"Why not, don't you trust..?"



"Oh no no. Of course I do. It's just that I've been stuck here for a long while now. I could surely use some of that outdooriness."

"Right, you *have* gone a bit mad in here. I mean writing on a shovel? What's that all about, *sister*?"

"I'll tell you later," she said smiling confidently.

They descended to find a scene Malika would remember for her entire life. The servant was standing at the bottom of the stairs. He was on his tiptoes, in a cat-like readiness. His eyes were peering over some imaginary fence, his neck stretched out to see who was coming down in a manner that would make the Lamarckian giraffe proud. But of course it was what he was doing with his hands and eyes that was the most interesting. He held a large kitchen knife, the kind you use to chop a rump. He was polishing it and staring up at the stairs in such a way -- let's just say neither Rasha nor Malika ever saw such conviction before. It seems he "somehow" misunderstood the situation and thought Rasha was here for a purpose infinitely more sinister than that of seeing her friend. After all, Rasha *was* part of the Khalifa's personal guard. But what was more surprising was he decided to stand up against the Woman, that he was actually claiming loyalty to Malika over the Khalifate.

It took a few minutes to calm him down and to convince him that, yes, they were both here and alive, and that contrary to his expectation there was no need to try slit Rasha's throat.

"Lucky I went all crazy on you!" he then said shaking his head. "If I was more rational I'd have gone outside and killed your horse to prevent your escape. Then we'd all be having a delicious kebab for lunch but you'd be our guest for a long while."

"He seems interesting company."

"He is. And he was quite shocked when I asked him to be completely derelict in one of his duties."

"Really?" Rasha's eyebrows gravitated up her forehead. "So you haven't-?"

"Do you think us non-eunuchs are all sex fiends? Actually, now that you *are* one of us, you can answer that for yourself. So, Z-----, are you a sex fiend?"

She smiled. "Just trying to figure things out. So you haven't been walking about. And haven't been going to town. And haven't been having sex. And haven't been eating either, if I might add," she said pinching a very small amount of blubber on Malika's belly between her thumb and index finger and staring at it intently as if to highlight how minute it was. "What *have* you been doing then? Other than going mad that is."

"Can we talk about something else? I promise I'll tell you afterwards. In fact, I'm very glad you came for a practical purpose: I have several errands for you back in Baghdad. And it involves that shovel, amongst other things. So all will be revealed. But can you please indulge me? I'd like to be pampered with the most stimulating, juiciest, goriest, most fantastical stories of the happenings of Baghdad. And feel free to embellish to thy heart's content."

They walked. Rasha wondered why Malika directed them very deliberately away from a tree they were about to pass with large juicy berries. *What on earth has exile done to the poor woman?*

"Where do I begin? So many things have happened in the City... Well, not really, but at some point I have to be matriotic and pretend don't I?"

"True. Well then, let's keep our matriotic caps on, and begin with the most important and special person in the entire universe. The illustrious Khalifa (peace be upon her! may Intisar extend her life and reign! may she be inscribed as one of the righteous ones, gathered close to Intisar's sacred bosom!)"

"Wow, where'd you learn to spout bullshit so brilliantly?"

"You don't want to know. But alas you will, and soon..." she said sighing.

"What would you like to know about Nadia? Lovesick are we?" Rasha leaned back to avoid Malika's semi-pretend lashing out. "Things with her are quite good politically. Unfortunately. The backlash amongst the nobility about her eunuch amnesty has abated. She has now consolidated more power. Word is the conflict begins in a month; by now she has all the old families behind her. She has finished deploying the army to the region, but there is word of some of the titled women forming legions of their own and tagging along to the battlefield with their armsbearers. Maybe half of them aren't even doing it for her favour, who knows? Hey, didn't you plan to go?"

"Plan? I *am* going."

Rasha rotated her head towards Malika in a slow owl-like fashion.

"Why do you look at me so? She'll bring me back just like *that*. She needs me...in the battle, that is. Plus I bring husbands, one of whom is a particular asset."

"Which one?"

"Daud. The art of war is one of his specialties. Also I'm the only hope she has of convincing perhaps the greatest warrior in the Khalifate to go. Considering she's retired."

Rasha stopped and became catatonic for a few seconds. But the dam burst, she couldn't hold in the giggles for more than that. Having exploded, she sent bits of spit flying all the way to Malika and beyond.

"Oh my Intisar! That's right, you haven't heard. Hahahahahaha! You think the Khalifa wants Naima to participate in the conflict? Why she'd rather lose the entire war!"

"What? What the fuck are you talking about? Naima might just single-handedly turn a defeat into a victory. I mean with her we've pretty much already won. We can start dividing the spiritual spoils of--"

"Yes. And Naima wants to go. You see, she's thought about it and changed her mind. But battle brings danger and Nadia does not want her love exposed to danger in any way, shape or form."

"Whaaaat?"

"Sorry, unrequited love. I conveniently forgot to add that."

"But Nadia and...?"

"Is that so hard to believe? Her own Mansur's a non-entity. She's been forced to send the love of her life away. In a little tantrum. To some Johara-forsaken land in the Caspian. Naturally, Naima's been in her sights. Ever since she helped out with Elizabeth."

"But Naima has not reciprocated?"

"Of course not. You know her better than that! Still, few in Baghdad are in a position to openly refuse the Khalifa."

"True...that's awful! How's my poor Naimy handling it?"

"As well as anyone. She's walking the plank and managing not to fall into the precipice. Yet."

"Samirah?"

"Oh, she's fine. It's Naima that's much more upset. Samirah believes in Naima totally."

They stared at the open sky in a sad silence that was accompanied by some far-off singing of larks.

"Well, that's that I guess. My family? Oh which reminds me, you also have to tell me about how the literacy study's going, sad as I am to be missing it."

"Your family... Absolutely no news. They're fine."

"What, you didn't visit them?"

"Of course I did. With Amina. And no news."

"How are they managing without a matriarch?"

"Quite well considering. Between them all they might just have a third of a woman's mind."

Malika laughed but stopped in her tracks, seeing Rasha wasn't joking. Interesting. Her demeanour was different compared to the last time they spoke. Now that there's been some time since the Untransformation, Rasha was evolving towards---

"The study's been done. 80 heads rolled."

"What?"

"You asked me to exaggerate! Of those questioned nobody's actually had anything done to them. A few have been censured for giving too much free reign to their husbands and their idle fancies. But not because they were literate -- at least that's not what's being focused on at the moment. It's more to do with them reading what they like, or studying, or reading things that are too literary -- basically anything that detracts them from their duties (a simple book is fine). But obviously the concept of a man teaching or engaging in his *own* intellectual curiosities has not even been considered. Or conceived."

"Hmm. Lucky I'm missing, my mere presence would remind them in many ways. There'd be little left unconsidered. And possibly little of me left to behold, what with the tremendous speed dead flesh decomposes these days."

"Malika! Don't be morbid."

"I have to be prepared. When I'm brought back I'll have to face a lot. But I guess by now nobody will be surprised. They'll be expecting things so radical, when I tell them the truth they'll be disappointed... Can you believe I tried at some point to try keep it all secret?"

"Yes. And girl were there rumours. Nadia made me tell her all of them that time you first came to see her about the study."

"Did she? But I guess even then you had plenty to tell."

"I did."

Rasha reached into her sleeve and fished out a manuscript. "A little something I wrote recently. I'm sure

you'll find it...helpful." She handed it to a grateful Malika.

"How are you going by the way? Still in the Palace?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I thought you might have ran away by now, or assassinated the Khalifa or I dunno... You just don't seem the type to stay somewhere and let things happen to you."

"Oh, I'm not."

Malika eyed her almost suspiciously, as if to question what deeper meaning lay hidden, but then let it slide.

"Do you see Faiz at all now?"

"Back then, I dreamt of him taking me away from the Palace, from everything. I was a eunuch though, so this was a natural thing to dream about. Now it is *I* who should be taking him away, and he knows it. But now that I'm no eunuch why should I? Besides, he's very flawed in his man-ness."

"So that's it then?"

"It is. I don't need someone for the sake of it. It was only fitting for me to live life in the dreams of pleasing a man as a eunuch. Not now. Plus let's not delude myself: I'll never have a normal life. I will never have children or husbands or anything like that. Rather than pretend, I prefer to focus on the present. And future. Not some fairy tale. So now tell me everything. What am I taking to Baghdad? What are the shovels about? And how'd you learn to praise the Khalifa so?"

"You don't let anything pass, do you? Well, that last one will have to wait I'm afraid. As for the others... It all started when I saw the open night sky again, as if for the first time..."

## Chapter 32 in which Rasha does legwork and Malika receives her just deserts

Rasha stretched her thumbs out, flicked them to and fro, stretched her spine most uncomfortably in her chair, looked out the window, eyed the dreary manuscripts on the table in front of her, looked out the window again, lamented this building's poor positioning in Baghdad and gawked at the wooden model of the naked person in the corner of the room. It was fruitless though, there was simply no alternative to waiting. When you wish to see the Khalific Doctor of Natural Philosophy of the Human Body, you wait. During her time as Grand Eunuch, Rasha came up with a formula -- waiting time to see a Khalific official is proportional to the number of words in her title. So today she was in for one hell of a wait.

Rasha looked up and down the figure one last time, promising not to look again, no matter how fucking bored she'd get waiting. It had perfect proportions, the subject truly was the ideal woman. Rasha smiled looking at the organs, even when her gaze fell on the reproductive organs. *Reproductive. What a strange word. Is it a designation? It implies this is the chief reason Kamit made them. Perhaps I should make a proposal of my own! To have it renamed to something more judicious. I'm sure they'd go for that no problem!* After another 12 eternities a man announced the Doctor would now "grace her with an audience".

"You're Rasha?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"You're a Eunuch of the Khalifa (peace be upon her)? In fact, the Grand Eunuch if I'm informed correctly."

"That's right." There was something strangely satisfying about answering yes to being the Super Grand Ultimate Eunuch of the Khalifa.

"Now, you say you have a discovery to show me."

"Yes Doctor."

She got out a new scroll and an old-fashioned long quill. "Name the person or people who made this discovery. Was it you?"

"It was Malika al-Basimi," said Rasha receiving a look of surprise.

"You mean the same al-Basimi who is exiled?"

"Indeed... The discovery was made during the exile."

"And when was it made?"

"About four weeks ago."

"No, that won't do Rasha," she said, her fangs contorting in an attempted smile. "I must record a date."

"Sorry. The-thirteenth-day-of-the-seventh-moon-of-the-eighth-year-of-the-reign-of-this-great-Khalifa (peace-be-upon-her!)" Rasha intended this as a joke but the Doctor simply jotted it down word for word, nodding. She was obviously impressed at preciseness, and oblivious to Rasha's humour.

"Topic of the discovery?"

"Al-Basimi contends she has evidence that aphrodisiacs are harmful to human tissue and indeed destroy it. At least if taken in immoderate quantities." The Doctor's open mouth revealed this to be an unexpected turn.

She asked at least 200 questions and patiently jotted each answer down. This was no audience, it was an interrogation. She was certainly an accuser of Malika's discovery. When time came for Rasha to open the box and show the hand in all its decomposed glory, she thought the Doctor would faint, but instead she smirked. Finally, upon hearing all, she flipped back over all her notes, reading them twice from start to finish.

"A very...interesting theory," she started after clearing her throat with grandeur. "I will pass it to my colleagues. The question -- the impact of these aphrodisiacs on actual flesh certainly deserves attention. However, there is one aspect of the study that greatly distresses me. It seems al-Basimi used a man's flesh in the experiment. This is troubling from a scientific and philosophical point of view. From the scientific perspective, male physiology and anatomy are vastly different from the female, and this experiment thus sheds little light on the true question of the effect of the aforementioned aphrodisiacs on women. From a philosophical perspective, your friend has even more to answer for... I mean she's essentially equating the male subjective experience with..." She paused stroking her chin and then nodded. "And *answer* she shall. I will write to the Khalifa recommending Malika be recalled from her exile to appear before our committee. There will be an enquiry." Rasha barely had time to let her mouth open in amazement. "I'm afraid there's a potential of heresy and treason charges being laid against al-Basimi."

Rasha walked into the reception room of the observatory and, unsure of what to do next, sat down on the empty chair. There *was* only one empty chair, the others each had a different man on it. She chatted to them for a few minutes and found out the reception was mostly used by servants who came to pick up or drop off details and payments for a horoscope for their mistress. Rasha realised she was sitting atop a fine machine, the cogs and pulleys of which were well oiled for turning skywatching into profit. The water wheel, modern irrigation, the catapult, all paled in comparison to this invention.

"Rasha!! What are you doing here?" said Samirah emerging out of nowhere.

"I'm here to see someone...about astronomy obviously."

"Is that someone me?"

"If you'd like it to be."

"Sorry lads," she said to the clients. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to let nepotism get in the way and see my friend even though she's last in the queue. But I'll send someone else in soon."

"Busy day today?" asked Rasha.

"It's been like that ever since yours truly developed a new technique, a month ago. It's increased the horoscopes' accuracy by 10%. Orders have flooded," said Samirah with full conviction -- as if to remind us that indeed there *is* a gap between our world and hers.

It only took 15 minutes to give Samirah the gist. When she first heard about Malika making observations she smiled skeptically and shook her head. "She was practically falling asleep when I first lectured Ayyub. And it wasn't the dry stuff either, I was trying to be accessible." However, she started getting excited when she realised Malika *was* the real deal. She came around quickly, remembering that once when she was on holiday from the City she noticed the sky was much clearer than back at home.

"Of course, I failed to see the obvious significance of this at the time. Because I was such a dolt. On the other hand Malika's a genius."

"What?! You said it was obvious."

"It takes a *genius* to see the obvious. And to have the courage to state the obvious."

"Really? I guess it didn't take long to convince you..."

Keen on testing out the results, Samirah snatched the papers from Rasha. She ran to her bookshelf and got out the latest tome of the Observatory's official measurements. Armed with both, she went into her own

world for an hour, emitting a gasp of excitement every now and then.

Malika's measurements looked very promising. They differed from official ones for stars of second and third magnitude but *not* those of zeroth or first. This spoke in favour of her accuracy as the brighter stars will yield an accurate reading even in Baghdad. Where they deviated, often they made more sense, For instance, placing Yusuf's Third Horn squarely on the celestial equator. According to official measurements it was slightly above. When the star sometimes appeared to move as if on the equator, a djinnological explanation was concocted: Yusuf was playing tricks with his horns: just as he misguides people journeying away from roads to trap, torture and kill them, so does he misguide those who read the stars. And now it seems Malika had inadvertently explained it without Yusuf. Samirah glowed but was painstricken at how such an important part of the history of Abbasid science had such a trivial explanation.

"I'll inform all my colleagues today: this absolutely cannot wait."

"What do you think will happen?"

"It'll be big. Very big. But I don't want to put your hopes up."

"What hopes?"

"Of the potential. For her r-----."

## Chapter 33 in which Malika is indeed r-----

"Hello my dear," Rasha said to Naima when Naima entered the Palace a few days later.

"Shall I go in?" Naima asked.

"Go right in. But be careful. And hide thyself."

Naima looked down thinking Rasha might have thought she had enough cleavage showing for the Khalifa to take it the wrong way. It turned out she was perfectly zipped, Rasha's comment must have been metaphorical. "Always," said the former Assassin, virtually kicking down the door that stood between her and Nadia. She wasn't about to let her life be dictated by some unreciprocated sexual tension. Especially not from someone she could kill at any second of the day, using as many methods as there *were* seconds in a day.

"Naima! I've been waiting."

"Peace and exult--"

"My dear! Surely you don't see me as such an ogre as to greet me formally after all this time? I don't bite. And I'm Nadia to you."

*I prefer those that bite actually.* "I'm sorry Nadia, it's just that it's really hard to see you as a *friend*, given that..."

Nadia went up to her and, evidently unperturbed by her choice of words, touched her shoulder. This was the worst part. The Khalifa's body language was not the body language of regular people because the Khalifa was no regular person. This wouldn't have been possible with anyone else. It's not that Naima would have rejected them sooner. She'd just ensure such a situation wouldn't arise in the first place.

"What's new? Other than Malika."

"Umm, nothing actually. The last few days it's all Malika."

"Not surprising. But funny you exiled her to prevent commotion, but she caused more from away. And that with no formal training in astronomy or natural philosophy of the body she single-handedly--"

"--yes, yes, I know. I'm...aware of all the funny aspects of it all."

"Guess it shows you know how to pick a good woman," said Naima feeling brave and foolish all of a sudden.

Nadia gulped. Naima's answer was unexpected. "I guess I do," she said slowly and deliberately. She pointed to a coffee table on the other side of the room with some delicacies. "Could you please get me a glass of that sherbet? And don't forget to add cherries."

It was no glass, it was a jewel-encrusted goblet. She added the cherries from the preserve that was in a nearby box and put a slice of lemon on it, if only to use *some* initiative. When she brought it back Nadia



drank a few small gulps and offered it to her, making a point of not asking her to get a jewel-encrusted goblet of her own (and believe you me, that coffee table had plenty!). It was there and then that Naima realised she must stop being a moron. She drank very quickly and casually. She then pressed her lips together in an attempt to drain the naturally-passionate features from her face.

"So what are you going to do about Malika? Or do you think she's a fraud?"

"No, she's no fraud. Even if she's wrong. I fully support her astronomical observations. She may be very willful, and stubborn as Yusuf's Ass, but when she sets out to do something she usually does a pretty good job."

"And the aphrodisiacs?"

"That one worries me. And not a little. Firstly I'm skeptical of the conclusion. You've used aphrodisiacs at some point, haven't you? Do you think they're harmful?"

*There she goes again*, she thought grinding her teeth and pushing her lips together even more, until they were two fine pencil lines on her face. "I haven't had major health problems. But that could be because my prior life as an Assassin toughened my body so much. Anyway, my experience doesn't matter from a philosophical perspective," -- that's right, any perspective that wasn't personal was good -- "because Malika's experiment has gone beyond mere opinion. Maybe aphrodisiacs *have* affected me. And you, and every other person in the Khalifate. Maybe it's keeping our life expectancy down and if only we refrained we'd live to Intisar's Golden Age of 120."

"Would it be worth it?"

"Possibly not," Naima conceded with a laugh. "But this isn't what natural philosophy is about."

"I'm also concerned about her heresy. It has become quite blatant. This is why I'm unsure of what to do."

"Would you like some advice?"

"As long as you're honest and not a timid respecter of the position I *happen* to hold."

"I'm no respecter of anything. You have only 5 options logically. Keep her in the exile. Set her free: permanently expel her from the Khalifate. Bring her back."

"And the fifth? What's the fifth option?" Nadia realised she was almost shouting.

"Send her to the bottom of the sea... It's an option!" Naima found herself also shouting when she saw Nadia's reaction. "We need to consider all options no matter how ludicrous. I think these 5 cover every possibility. Now, you cannot kill her because you *cannot* kill her. Letting her wander around the Khalifate or keeping her in exile will mean you're ignoring the issues. And her discoveries. Expelling her permanently will mean giving these discoveries to our enemies, whether in the West or Byzantium. The only real option is then to bring her back to Baghdad."

"You're right, of course. Guess I just needed to hear someone other than me say it. But what then?"

"The Natural Philosophers of the Human Body have officially summoned her to answer their questions. No choice about that. The only choice is what to do about the astronomical discovery, and how she will live before the hearing."

"True. And what will happen to her after. But you are right: I must reinstate her. I need to reward merit, otherwise what is the point of it all? Especially since her exile was more of a precaution rather than punishment for any particular crime. But there's no reason for her not to be reinstated fully before the hearing. And after, assuming she's not convicted of treason or heresy."

"Right."

"If she's convicted I won't be able to save her from the stake. You do know that don't you?"

"I know you *are* able to save her but that you *won't*. And that I *am* a respecter of."

Nadia looked as if a great weight she was balancing across the top of her head lifted. Her neck relaxed, her body assumed a more natural curvature, her lower back dropped, her shoulders turned out.

"By the way Nadia, you conveniently forgot the battle. The one Malika must go to. And I. But only under her banner."

"But I thought we agreed! You won't be going to the battle."

"May I speak frankly? More frankly than ever before? Are you out of your fucking mind? We're both going. And you need me. You know you do, and you know the Khalifate does. I'm going because I'd actually like to help out. I've spent a healthy chunk of life fighting against people I shouldn't have been fighting against. It's about time I put those skills to some use. I'll be going not because our cause will be lost without me or any such melodramatic bullshit, but because this is war. We cannot afford to be merciful, or to pass by *any* opportunity. We cannot withhold *any* of our weapons or fighters."

Nadia nodded sadly. It wasn't easy for her to visualise Naima and Malika venturing into harm's way.

And together. But she knew Naima was correct.

“Do you think it'll be easy for me to send the both of you out there?”

“No. That's why I want you to promise me that you will.”

“And then?”

“And then I'll tell you something.”

“Fine. I hereby promise...to bring back Malika al-Basimi and send her to the battlefield to join the army, along with you and all who care to join her banner.”

Naima opened her lips, ending her bilabial firmness. “Good. Now listen up. You've earned my honest opinion. You pine for Malika but she's yours no longer. She will never be yours. You pine for me but I'm not yours. Nor will I ever be. Ever. So stop thinking about either of us as your soulmates, start thinking of us as your *subjects*. Deal with whatever personal feelings you have and utilise us as pawns, like any good ruler. Or you can have me on a stake. Although I must say I'll do anything in my power to prevent that from ever happening.”

Naima didn't expect to go that far. She took a step back, almost waiting for some sort of explosion. Instead, Nadia kissed her on the lips with the most regal kiss imaginable, that dispassionate authoritative kiss reserved by rulers for their best henchwomen.

#### THE KHALIFA'S LETTER TO MALIKA

The Eleventh Khalifa of Baghdad greets you, Malika, and wishes you long life. Let it be known that it has been 5 months and 11 days since the Khalifa has had the pleasure of your company.

The Khalifa hopes your exile has not appeared too harsh in your eyes. It is hoped you have enjoyed the finest exile location in the Khalifate, in terms of landscape, freshness of air, richness of soil and quality of help. It is especially hoped that your servant has been to your satisfaction; his reports which tell of your approval warm the Eleventh Khalifa's heart.

The Khalifa also hopes that you have received adequate opportunity to correspond with your children and husbands. With respect to the reason of your exile, you are surely loyal enough to understand it, even if you do not agree. Furthermore, in sending you off to the Caspian as opposed to another punishment, the Khalifa has expressed her gratitude for everything you have done for the Khalifate, as well as her hope that you can become a productive member of the Khalifate again one day. Well, that day has come.

It was the purpose of your time away that you be bored. The Philosopheress says that “when a person is bored she is able to grasp parts of herself that she would not have otherwise realised she had, and develop them to a fuller extent” (On Solitude, book 12, chap. 3). She also says “a true human being is never bored, her mind is always in action and even were she imprisoned in the plainest of cells for decades, she would find enough in her existing thoughts to cultivate the grandest state of mind imaginable, and would therefore emerge all the stronger for it” (On Human Nature, book 3, chap.7). The Khalifa agrees with the statements, and hence hopes that you were bored during these 5 months and 11 days; in fact sufficiently bored so as to have become a better person and a better subject.

Having assumed that this has in fact been the case, the Eleventh Khalifa now recalls you from your exile, effective immediately, and orders you to return to Baghdad as soon as possible.

It has further come to the Khalifa's attention that you have used your exile time productively, and have in fact come up with two scholarly hypotheses. By this you show excellent signs of rehabilitation. Your ingenuity and accuracy in measuring some key stars have met with startled admiration from all members of the Baghdad Observatory. It is on this merit alone that the Khalifa might have recalled you, as well as to provide you with the opportunity to further collaborate with the Observatory.

There is also the question of your participation in the unfortunately-looming conflict in the North. You have expressed an admirable will to put your life in danger for your Khalifa, something that is accepted with gratitude. It is further understood that you will be accompanied by your husbands and any friends who wish to march under your banner. It's no surprise they are willing to rally behind *you* and not nominate *themselves* to lead, out of reverence for your mother (may she always find grace in Intisar's bosom!). The Khalifa remembers participating in her expeditions during the Tenth Khalifa's reign (may...bosom!), and feels that Raidah's warmth, dedication and leadership have been passed onto you extremely well. So carry the banner, and may you be granted victory over *all* our enemies.

Finally, the Natural Philosophers of the Human Body have reviewed your claim and wish to question you further. This will occur after you safely return from the conflict (Johara-willing), so as to give you adequate time to prepare.

The Eleventh Khalifa hopes to see you soon and looks forward to the day you will eat again under her

roof.

Signed and sealed, the Eleventh Khalifa of Baghdad and the Khalifate, Protectress of the People, ambassador of Intisar, torchbearer of the Golden Age.

[Underneath, in rough handwriting]: Come quick, my dear, for we all have much to do!

## Chapter 34 in which Daud shows that a beard is no impediment to scientific discovery

Once again it was a steppe most desolate. The monotony of colours continued to oppress the eyes. Malika didn't mind though, she was relaxed on top of a cart. Iblis stirred next to her. She was going home.

Each of her muscles was as loose as it had ever been. She didn't even bother to move her eyes around, satisfied to look in the same direction. A nice change. So during the journey, she let the servant do Everything: sitting back and watching him load, navigate and urge the horse on for days at a time. They decided not to rely on boats for their return but take it easy. She even requested to remain on the cart at night, sleeping in town squares near horses of other travellers. Most nights though, they'd be hours from any town. The cart would simply stop on some field 30 metres from the road and they'd sleep under the stars, again without bothering to set up camp or disembark.

It was there that she disclosed it all to him: the observations, smells, potions, rats, more observations, hands, conclusions. She went on to the astronomy in more detail: the stars, the naming conventions and co-ordinates, her measurements. He picked it up surprisingly quickly, maybe because that was the first time someone had explained something without *expecting* him to fail to grasp it. Soon he was able to measure the location of any star with a reasonable degree of accuracy, name over a dozen constellations, point out features on the celestial spheres and more. Malika continued the process night after night, revelling in the monster she created.

Sometimes she felt guilty about telling him anything at all, it might only make his life more difficult in the long run. "It's not like you'll be able to use this knowledge. In fact, efforts must be expended on hiding it."

"So what?" he retorted. "Am I to cease looking in an upward direction now because I fear I know too much? I have no aspirations to become an astronomer. If I'm going to be a working mule all my life, if all of consequence I'll ever do is carry graceful riders, then so be it. But I shan't be a mule who only looks at the ground."

And that was that. Malika didn't press it further, nor did she stop telling him as much as she could (should?).

The trip back took 12 days. Malika did not attempt to do anything constructive. She had her baggage: there was something wonderful about her sitting on top of her very writings; for those constituted all her baggage. Clothes and books were left behind to make room for her magnum opus. This she packed: all the shirts, pants, skirts, furniture and appliances she wrote on. And of course the shovel, which she sometimes held. Everything made her feel unreasonably excited, but especially the shovel. Perhaps because it was the closest thing to a weapon that she wrote on. On the way to the Caspian she laughed at the mere *thought* of being afraid of robbers. On the way back every speck on the horizon was an army of brigands. It was not the idea of the attack itself that frightened her. They could (Intisar forbid!) actually be after her possessions -- what if in the struggle they made off with anything that had her work on it? She shuddered.

She passed village after village and saw inhabitants with a new sense of reverence. She *had* to revere a population for which every year had a Semolina Month -- which some years had even had a Half-Semolina Month. Malika had not interacted with people at all during her stay. But she felt she understood them a little better.

As they crossed province after province and the landscape became more urban she noticed the Khalifate more. Every granary, aqueduct, sewage canal, palace that she saw, was built on the backs of backwater provinces, through both supply of goods and taxation. It would be presumptuous to attribute too much class

consciousness to Malika. This was not the time nor the place. She simply did not have the tools to look deeper at the how her society worked. The other thing was the Khalifate *was* a paradise compared to some queendoms in Europe. The real injustices of the Khalifate were buried a few centimetres under the surface. But this is a truism, unless the society in question is some brutal dictatorship. Which the Khalifate wasn't.

The change over the last week was most dramatic. The spires of djinnology schools became progressively taller as they approached Baghdad. The schools themselves became larger. Crowds swelled, there was no sense of unpeopled desolation she had in the Caspian. Less straw houses, more from mudbrick. Fancier clothes. More eunuchs on the streets, which indicated more officials and nobility residing in these towns. Malika made other observations: less dogs, more aqueducts, canals and fountains, more people carrying manuscripts, more colour in the buildings, less worryingly-thin children, more buzz about the war. Anyone (traveller or merchant) they talked to on the way, no matter how placid she seemed initially, would become animated as soon as the war was mentioned and start gesticulating with little restraint. There was little else of importance going on. *Well, I'll show them.*

It was rather a sorry sight, the front of her house. The first person she saw as the cart turned that last corner was Ayyub. He was shaken but regained some sort of composure. As soon as Malika's mind went past his figure and focused on the background, she froze. They were all standing there. Lots and lots of people. All lined up in front of the house, almost parading themselves in front of her. It was as if the setup stated "look what you've abandoned". Which was silly but such are the feelings of loved ones. This is what makes them endearing. And almost all were crying. The two people who weren't, were Naima and Rasha, both smiling at her beckoningly. Malika nodded, understood, appreciated.

She only gave herself 10 minutes for the initial hugs and trivial catch-ups and blabberings. She then had the servant start loading her stuff into the house and excused herself. There really was no time to lose: she had to take Samirah to the observatory now. So off they went, Malika promising to catch up with everyone as soon as humanly possible. Abbas and Azizah accompanied them, in fact Malika was surprised she could carry one in each arm. Must be all that semolina. And the general deprivation of the exile. "Speaking of overcoming deprivation," she whispered to Daud, "I remember that it's you tonight." This was a surprise to him. Malika didn't keep track of what day of the week it was or any other calendrical calculation, but the natural rhythms of her marriage were embedded in her very being. Inside her bone marrow she was still head of her clan. Whilst most signals decrease with distance obeying an inverse square law, her connexion to her husbands was exempt.

"So so, my darling darling!" Samirah began when they were in the Courtyard and the kids have come down from their high. "I await thee for all these long months, with no word, no presence, no nothing except what Rasha told me from her illegal visit and this is what happens?"

"What?"

"Well, I thought we'd all sit down and share. Or something. But no-o-o! Her Majesty wants to discuss astronomy! Well, who the fuck wants to discuss astronomy at a time like this?"

"I see you're still quite the poet. At least if I judge by your hissy fits," Malika said giving her yet another hug. "But this is *exactly* what we need to discuss. In fact, there's someone who is not here but who perhaps should be. In a perfect world that is."

"What are you talking about?"

Malika told her the story of the servant and his recent astronomical binge. Samirah shrugged, this was nothing out of the ordinary to her, in fact she saw much more potential in Malika's own husband. "Fine. If we *must* do this now let's do it properly. How did you first decide to do this?" As Samirah asked the question she pulled out her concise copy of Malika's measurements from her pocket. Not only did she have multiple copies made for all Observatorians, she carried hers like an amulet, like an object of prime necessity. And woe to those who dared suggest it wasn't!

"I dunno, I guess it just hit me when I was looking up there. I must admit, it was almost by chance that I looked anyway."

"That's OK, my friend. I forgive thee. Most people *don't* look. At all," said Samirah. "Why Naima only looked first when she became an Assassin and needed to use the stars to navigate through the treacherous chills of the mountains."

"She made up for her prior lack of observation though."

Samirah nodded with a smile that warmed Malika from the inside. She imagined Samirah explaining to Naima everything she could possibly communicate about astronomy, in a way that made it more than the sharing of information. Malika didn't have this with her husbands, not to the same extent. Possibly because

they were only starting out, possibly because she was only starting out.

"And then the obviousness of it all hit me. 'Wow, everything really does look clear here. Now why the Sha-Ul would I not take advantage of it?'"

"Yes, it was too obvious for anyone with any training in astronomy to see."

"So this is what becoming entrenched in a discipline does to you?"

"That's right," Samirah smirked, "you get tunnel vision: you're like a lens. You can focus on your subject with any degree of tenacity, with more detail than others can ever imagine possible. But then you can't look to the side. You make your contribution, your miniscule cut or scrape on the sculpture of progress. It changes only by one scrape but that's enough. But then you die and rot and only a decade or two later someone shows you up, shows your ideas to be wrong. Actually, not wrong. It would be *great* to be wrong. This is far worse: shown to only be a special case. Or worse: irrelevant. I know, because I've done it before. To my heroes."

"Even al-Raifa?"

Samirah dropped her eyes. "Especially her. Have I convinced you to become a natural philosopher yet?" But Malika was silent.

It was an enormous relief to finally close the door of Daud's room many hours past midnight. Kids in bed, visitors gone, just the Her and the him.

She closed the blinds for some reason. Actually, a simple reason: the need to withdraw completely from the world. She lit six candles and climbed into bed, admiring Daud's silhouette in front of her. Malika was ready to let herself go and open her mind and genitals to him. But Daud wasn't moving. There was something cryptic about the way he stood there, in an almost mocking pose.

"What's the matter? I take it you've something on your mind."

"You're wrong. I *did* have something on my mind. For a very long time. And I ground it up, over and over in my head. But no more."

"You've resolved it?"

"You could say that," he said, increasing his smile.

"...would you like to tell me what it is?" Malika prepared herself for some emotional disclosure.

"It's a surprise."

"I bet it is! Well, go on then, show me."

"Better still, I'll read it to you. It's a poem."

"Umm...sure..." she answered but with goosebumps of weirdness on her forehead. "Who wrote it?"

"*You* did. Shh--" He put his finger across her lips. "Just hear it."

## THE CURVE<sup>20</sup>

Oh sacred curve! That for so long hath troubled  
The peoples 'neath this striking blistering sun  
That 'cause of its complexity has stricken  
And pierced the mind of all the learned folk.

How truly fiendish are your twists and turns  
That up till now even Yusuf have stumped  
And sent Her (al-Raifa) to her grave.  
Intractability, that truly is thy name.

You are the simplest of all queenly shapes  
And yet have gorgeousness beyond belief.  
How many greats have taken thee to be  
Symbolic of Johara's holy bow  
Or Intisar's sweet bosom into which

---

<sup>20</sup> Despite being rendered in poetry the nature of the piece is quite technical. It is provided for the sake of historical completeness. However, most readers can safely skip it, unless they're quite interested in maths. Especially since the translation from Baghdadian has destroyed the rhyme, which was the principal adornment of scientific poetry.





Let us then also draw another line  
From our Ayn to the same point under Ba  
That we'll call Qaf and let the line we made  
Be parallel to one from Ra to Lam

Finally let's construct another line  
That splits the box Ayn-Qaf-Lam-Ra right down  
Its middle in a horizontal path  
This ray's extremities are Ha and Sin

Now, since Ba-Ayn is equal to Ba-Lam  
The squares of each must likewise be the same  
And furthermore the square of line Ba-Ayn  
Is actually the sum of two more squares  
That of Ba-Qaf and also of Ayn-Qaf  
By virtue of the great Geometress  
And her esteemed Triangle Theorem that  
Applies fortuitously in our case

But since Ba-Sin can add up to Ba-Lam  
If we Sin-Lam add to the noble total  
Then the sum of the aforementioned square  
Equals the square of those two smaller segments  
When added. And conforming to the custom  
That the square of a sum is equal to  
The sum of squares added to twice their product  
We have our values shown in a new form

For thence the square of Ayn-Qaf surely is  
The squares of Ba-Sin, Sin-Lam, twice their product  
Less once the square of the segment Ba-Qaf

But since Sin-Lam to Qaf-Sin is an equal  
For Ha-Sin surely line Qaf-Lam bisects  
Then let us substitute one for the other  
And then expand once more. (Ba-Sin  
is the sum of Ba-Qaf and of Qaf-Sin.)

Now if again consider we Ba-Qaf  
Being the difference of Ba-Sin, Qaf-Sin  
Its square must be those same two squares combined  
Less twice the difference, meaning that it's prudent  
To rearrange and to consolidate

Leaving no more than two of Qaf-Sin's squares  
And twice Sin-Qaf times the two lengths combined  
Of Qaf-Ba and Sin-Ba, which can again  
Be as Qaf-Sin plus twice Ba-Qaf be written  
Considering that Ba-Qaf is the difference  
Of Ba-Sin and Qaf-Sin we can then write  
This as twice Ba-Sin less Qaf-Sin which means  
The curve hath gracefully permitted us  
To find a final, simple, cleaned up form

For Ayn-Qaf's square -- Ra-Lam's square to be sure

Is twice that of Qaf-Sin less that same thing  
And four times Sin-Qaf combined with Sin-Ba  
Which means the height of Ba (Ba-Sin) is then  
Proportional to its breadth's very square  
Meaning that we've described the noble curve  
That hath been plaguing us for all these years!

I have created yet another proof  
That's even more remarkable than this  
Alas! Outlining it's beyond the scope  
Of this most flawed and fallible treatise  
For I'm most feeble when it comes to rhyme  
And metre and style and other grand aesthetics  
My pen is numb when I have to express  
The subtle nature of a proof more complex  
Than the same one I dealt with in this text  
So let me simply give my best assurance  
That what I'll say will hold forever true

If you let loose a ray of light from Ayn  
And off our curve at Ba it will reflect  
The path of this reflexion always is  
The line Ba-Lam extended ever upward  
No matter where on earth this Ba might be

Interestingly I find this very fact  
To be more wondrous than the seven wonders  
That fashioned were without flaw by the Djinnns  
To give this world that extra bit of marvel

And so I take my leave of thee, oh curve  
Having become acquainted with thy nature  
(At least I did in my humble, frail way)  
I hope my rant can be considered useful  
If not for the sake of posterity  
At least for some further advancement of  
The lore of all things parabolic

I finally shall thank the great Johara  
For her fantastic patronage of me  
Unworthy as I am, daughter of flesh  
For all her bounteous longsuffering love  
And may we all be gathered finally  
Into the bosom of sweet Intisar

## Chapter 35 in which Basim is re-investigated, with bizarre results

It was good to participate in something normal again: Baghdad larks singing a song most courtly, the taste of strong tea and negilah, the chatter of those close to her. In this case it was Amina, Jamilah and Rasha. The four were sitting at the end of a long table as part of a large feast one of the nobles was giving. Here were 80 of Baghdad society's finest (Nadia was away), but the four of them were a world unto themselves. Malika could finally relax: her kids were back to their usual chirpiness as were her husbands. All it took was 3 nights. In fact, it took *exactly* 3 nights.

"Malika," Amina began. "We have so many things to ask about from your time away. But--"

"--time away, dear cousin?" said Malika. "I was never a fan of euphemisms. I was *not* away. I was exiled, cast out, hauled out, ejected, but not away."

Her cousin burst out with a shining laugh she had not emitted for months. "So-o-o sorry! We'd all love to ask you about many things from when you were cast out. But first to catch up on loose threads you left--"

"---yes, you won't have to worry about the literacy study since it---" said Jamilah.

"---she knows!" said Rasha. "Are there other threads?"

"Of course," said Amina. "You seem to be forgetting the murder of that unfortunate."

"That's right," said Rasha. "You were trying to figure out who offed him weren't you?"

"Really?" said Jamilah. "Wow, I admire you. To boldly try tame the untamable steed of truth, that's a great thing indeed. Only you have to hold on like hell to the mane. Did you have anything specific in mind about the murder?"

"Originally I thought it was Hanan. This was actually one of the many, many things that contributed to me being exiled. Not sure if you know that."

"I didn't," Jamilah said, fascinated. "But you said *originally* -- does that mean you've gripped the mane at another angle?"

"Umm...in a way."

"What? But the hatred of men that seeps from her is more than doctrine. She really means it," said Amina.

"She does mean it," said Malika. "But she hasn't the capacity to actually kill someone."

"And this coming from her biggest enemy! Someone who's been physically attacked by her too..." said Amina.

"Exactly!" answered Malika. "This lends more credibility to my change of heart. I'd only defend her if the facts supported it. She truly does believe only women are pinnacles of creation. And she'd go far to *widen* the gap between women and the Others. But only socially. She'd love to set up extra restrictions within society, but she wouldn't pierce a man's heart, smear him with dung and remove his Separator... I've read enough of her writings to Know."

"So the exile did you good then." Amina giggled. "It was meant to give you an opportunity to think about what you've done (including suspecting Hanan). This is exactly what happened!"

"True, I never thought of it like that."

"But if not her then who?"

Malika squinted. "An even better question is 'why'? I can think of a lot of reasons why he was killed in such a manner. The murderess is quite the drama queen. Still, why? Why Basim?"

"Why?" echoed Rasha, half-expecting Malika to know the answer. She was right.

"Yesterday I asked around. It didn't occur before that I should find out a bit about who he was. Maybe because I was a moron."

"Or more preoccupied with your own skin," Amina said, coming to her defence.

"Yes, please stop your feeble attempts at self-flagellation. What'd you find out? I'm very interested," said Jamilah.

"It's simple. Yes he was a model. But he was also a literate man." Malika's companions sighed in sudden realisation. "He worked as a junior clerk on the side. A clerk to one of the Khalifa's irrigation administrators."

"Well, there's something you don't see every day! And this was well-known?" said Rasha.

"It gets better," said Malika, her voice growing with excitement. "He was set for a promotion. His patron was to make him a level three clerk."

"A level 3 clerk?! That would make him--"

--the first male level 3 clerk. Ever."

"At least in the Khalifate," said Amina. "Naima once told me in Byzantium, they--"

Malika flashed her a good one. "Dearest cousin," she whispered quickly, "please shut the fuck up, this ain't the setting for such talk." Amina leaned back in her seat. Malika was right.

"Anyway, I also found who he modelled for on the night of the murder."

"What? You *know* who saw him last?" Rasha was leaning across the table as much as she could, her large earrings dipping into Malika's stew.

"No, I don't. The *murderess* saw him last. But yes, I do know what happened just a few hours before. The artist's name is Zaynab. She was hosting a collaborative session so there were about 20 others."

"I was there," said Jamilah. A very short silence of disbelief: why wouldn't she have told before? Jamilah apologised and stated the plain truth that she attends many gatherings of artists, it was no surprise they'd all be mixed up in her head. "Especially since her head also gets quite a bit of exposure to substances that *help* one's thoughts get mixed up," Malika whispered to her cousin who tried so hard not to laugh out loud she blushed and held her breath for about 15 seconds.

"I remember him now," Jamilah continued. "We were all drawing him."

"Even you?" Amina asked.

"Even me. Do you think I can't have other interests? No no, my dear, it is essential to use *all* parts of one's brain to maximise your *samnah*-playing. In fact, drawing helps you release energy through the tips of the fingers and trains you up to play. By relaxing, you move your awareness outwards, so you can then sense things a moment before you come into contact with them. And naturally that's good for the *samnah*."

"I wouldn't know, I don't play," said Amina.

Jamilah smiled. "You merely *think* you don't. Actually, everyone of worth does. Even if they don't pick up the physical instrument. No matter, that's the puniest part of it anyhow. You still have yourself listening to the breathing of the world. You can hear Intisar's sacred breath when *you* play *samnah*, that's for sure."

Jamilah took the idea of a non-linear conversation to its extreme. Which was enjoyable to listen to, especially if you understood what the Yusuf she was saying. This time Amina understood.

"Back to that gathering. Did you hear Basim announce to all that he'd become a level 3 clerk?" Malika asked.

"Oh, sorry darling! Couldn't help floating into fairy-land. It was her fault," Jamilah said pointing a mock-accusatory finger at Amina, "for doubting the connexion between the *samnah* and drawing. I remember. It caused quite a commotion."

"I'd say. But was anyone angry or outraged?" asked Malika.

"Nope. Except myself," said Jamilah.

"And then nobody remembers who he left with."

"So you're saying someone left with him, walked the empty streets of Baghdad with him and killed him afterwards? And that it all happened almost *under our noses*? And that I was in the same room as the *murderess*?" Jamilah asked these with a dramatic crescendo.

"Definitely. What's more, it makes sense psychologically. The room was full of artists and the murder says 'artist' like nothing else. By the way, why were *you* so angry at Basim's declaration?" asked Malika.

"Because the djinns are too delicate to tolerate such imbalance. There are certain lines that simply must not be crossed. This is one of them."

"You mean a man being a level three clerk?" asked Amina.

"I mean a man *masquerading* as a level three clerk. There are three breaths of the universe that are open to women and women alone: the breath of artistry, the breath of literacy and logic, and the breath of emotion."

"So Basim was trespassing on the breath of literacy?" By this time they were the only people talking, the other guests having turned their attention to their conversation.

"Actually, trespassing on all 3 breaths," Jamilah said. "Certainly literacy and logic. But as you know even mundane jobs that require literacy are also about creativity. The administrator needs imagination too."

"Are you serious? I mean I understand not everyone in Baghdad might want men to do everything... But still, is this clerkhood such an affront?" asked Malika.

"It is. A broken mirror can never be mended. Old leaves that have once been shed can *never* hop back onto the tree. A man can never fix the mutation that is his body and mind. This is clearly a great wrong. I was outraged then as I am now." The nods around the table showed Malika once more that she was in the minority. Rasha was smiling almost wickedly.

"That's why I killed him," Jamilah added. Immediately there was a clang as Malika dropped her fork. Its



metallic sound was the only thing that could be heard in the entire room, everyone else was sucking up Jamilah with their eyes. “When a dog is about to do something vicious, you don't try talk to it. You also don't talk to other people trying to drum up support for your position that the dog should not be doing this. That would be stupid. No, you simply stop the dog, right on the spot. Otherwise the damage is already done. That's exactly what I did. I asked him to accompany me home, I detoured to a dark alley. I feigned my shoelace as being untied and asked whatever-his-name to tie it for me. That was when I killed him. I skewered him, dragged him to the Spice Market, got some animal excrement and the rest is history. Yeah!”

There was another split second followed by a raucous laughter. Everybody else (including Rasha and Amina) thought it was a great joke. 5 seconds later, the guests were buzzing and chattering away about other things. Only Malika sat there, dumbfounded. *Did I just witness what I just witnessed?* Of course, she had some reason to suspect Jamilah anyway. Her views on men were very close to Hanan's. In fact, Hanan must have been an influence on her. And she was the quintessential artist and drama queen. Malika just never thought she *could* do something like this.

Jamilah wasn't kidding. This was a plain and simple confession. She did it. And nobody took it seriously. Malika continued to chatter about a thousand different things because she didn't want to make it clear *she'd* taken Jamilah seriously. Out of the corner of her eye she always stared at Jamilah though. She understood. Jamilah *wanted* to say it, because she thought there was nothing wrong with it. And the murder was largely forgotten, it was only Malika who was still asking. As for the others, they were all willfully blind, or... She decided she'd need to think about it all, and consider what to do. It would all figure as part of her grand plan somehow, the plan that was sitting in her room in the form of a shovel. Until then, she'd keep her trap shut. Still, the disappointment of discovering the murderess in such anticlimactic circumstances left a bitter taste in Malika's mouth.

## Chapter 36 in which we finally obtain direction

“I think the hardest part of being absent was missing your little love affair with the Khalifa,” Malika said flicking Naima's hair.

“Well, I'm sorry to have chosen such an inconvenient time to be...chosen by the Khalifa,” said Naima. “Anything I can fill you in on, your majesty?”

“Naima don't be difficult,” cut in Samirah. “I mean all our friends were naturally curious, why shouldn't Malika be? She cares about your well-being, and mine.”

“And of course our great Khalifa's (peace be unto her!). I'm assuming by your use of past tense that this is no longer a worry. What happened then?” asked Malika.

“I did the same thing you did to Hanan,” said Naima.

“You falsely suspected the Khalifa of being Basim's murderess?” Malika could make the most ridiculous statements in the most serious of conversations with total solemnity.

“I went up to her and told her. The truth: that I know what's going on and that her attempts at manipulation are just that -- attempts. Oh, and that I will never be hers.”

“How'd she take it?” asked Malika.

“Surprisingly well. She realised I meant business and hence there was no point trying. She's no fool. Ain't that right, Malika?”

Malika nodded, hiding the blushing happening on her cheeks.

“You said you were mistaken in suspecting Hanan. Have you then been convinced of her innocence?” asked Naima.

“Yes, since I *know* who did it. Unfortunately I can't reveal who it is. It's premature and would place everything in jeopardy. But I promise; all will be revealed. Most definitely.”

“It better be,” said Naima. “I'm becoming extremely curious. What have you concocted?”

“Nothing. Unfortunately I found out the truth in the blandest manner possible.”

“Like what?”

"The murderess spontaneously confessed to me," Malika said.

"WHAT?! To you?"

"Nope, to a dinner of 80. All heard... *You were there!*"

"But-- I don't understand...they--we all heard her confess?"

"And not one person took it seriously. Which is why I can't exactly go to the guards and tell them."

"That's bizarre..." said Samirah. "But then, you'd need to get some actual evidence. I mean she's not so important that evidence will be overlooked?"

"Oh, she wasn't overlooked because of importance. It was something else... But thank you for the idea, I actually hadn't thought of it. I got so wrapped up in frustration I forgot I could actually do something about it."

"Now what's been happening with your household? I mean we know about what *you* did, but nothing of your husbands," said Samirah, giving Naima a wink.

The three of them leaned towards each other. Malika proceeded to tell them about Daud's recital of "her" poem about the parabola. Daud used markers that implied a female author. This wasn't just to hand authorship to his beloved wife, it was a practical necessity, for it is impossible to complete a work with male markers. She even recited some stanzas. Four eyes widened, as the two audience members became increasingly captivated. When she finished, there was a long silence. Samirah and Naima each leaned back, in their seats and deep contemplation.

Samirah spoke first. "That's amazing. Absolutely unbelievable. I mean, who'd have thought the al-Basimis were such a talented family? You now have *three* important discoveries to your family name, and all within the space of a month or two."

"So tell me, he's *conclusively* proved a bunch of rays coming from the focus of a parabola will bounce off and always proceed in the same direction?" asked Naima.

"Why, is that important?" asked Malika.

"Critical," Naima breathed.

"Well, then yes, it's right."

"Great. Samirah, can we make a note of this? I have an idea for one of our little projects," Naima said in an almost-hushed voice.

"What project? The p--"

--the Project That Dare Not Speak Its Name."

Samirah nodded. It was obvious she knew what project Naima was referring to but had no clue how this discovery could be applied. *In any case, they're bound to have an interesting evening after I leave, applying it to whatever it is that popped in that head of hers*, Malika thought.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Samirah asked. "Daud's treatise I mean."

"I haven't decided yet," said Malika. "Thing is, it shouldn't even be my decision anyway. This is one thing I don't want to do: act as if I own it. He did the work, and should reap the benefits. I won't act like I wrote it, as politically convenient as it may be. Johara knows, he's tried to convince me!"

"Ooh, the heretic speaketh!" said Samirah. "Mind you, due to your status in Baghdad at the moment, it might be less controversial to put *his* name on it."

Malika smiled an almost evil smile at her. "Thanks for that. Anyway what do you think?"

"You should just get him to publish it. Under his name. With no apologies, or things withheld," said Naima. "I mean let's get to the point here. Your aim is to overcome factors which prevent some citizens of Baghdad -- nay, of the entire Khalifate! -- from doing what you think they should be entitled to do. Right?"

"Right," said Malika.

"So what will you do about it?"

"That I'll tell you in a sec. In the meantime, out with the advice."

"Because we know you *will* do something about this, what better thing to do it with than with a document that shows the benefits? I mean forget *arguments* as to whether men should be allowed to be literate. Here is *proof* of how the Khalifate will benefit if they take part!"

Malika stood up and paced the room for a minute or two, lost in thought. She noticed two things: the massage-like quality of the carpet that stimulated her feet from ankle to the toe and that the walls of the house looked different. She scanned them absent-mindedly to see if they'd changed paintings. Nothing. What on earth was it? Malika excused herself to the outhouse, needing to pee and decompress.

The two of them sat on their divans until Malika was out of sight.

"When are we going to tell her?"

"The Project That Dare Not Speak Its Name or this?" Samirah said pointing at Naima.

"Well, the project is a surprise. But there's no reason not to tell her of the other. Especially since if we tell her both and explain their connexion she'll think us crazy."

"OK, sure. So you tell her when she's back."

"When it makes sense to."

"Fine."

Malika came back a few minutes later. Being away caused the observation to jump out. The weapons they had on the walls: the blades were all polished. Malika took a mental note and filed it away, as something to come back to. No point asking now, they had better things to talk about.

"It's time you hear something," Malika suddenly said, with an almost-quivering voice.

"Good. It's time *you* hear something. And I trust the two things will not be entirely unrelated," Naima said softly. "But you go first."

"That I shall," said Malika. "I've made some decisions in the exile. And before and after. Even five minutes ago. And I think I should tell you where it's going, so that I can ask for help. Or so you can denounce me to the authorities," she added smiling. "Daud's treatise, he can present to the Khalifa's mathematicians with my full backing. If they accept it, great. And if they have a problem with this...tremendous breakthrough, because he has a dick...well, then they're not mathematicians. He can go and present to the Byzantine empress for all I care. In fact, I'll help him. I'll go with him. To Constantinople."

"Ah, a road-trip!" Naima said rubbing her palms together energetically.

"My point is larger. I had two problems. The first was that I did not know what to do with my life. The second was that my family was under threat from the literacy study."

"Right, but that's passed..."

Malika shook her head. "It hasn't. Don't you see? Of course, on some basic level it passed me by: I can't now be censured for being an apostate since I was *already* censured for being an apostate. Hardly the point though. Even now I still have to sit here and consider the consequences of releasing Daud's treatise to the public. How fucked up is that? And *all* my husbands are very talented. So what are we to do? The supposed storm has passed, but really nothing's happened."

"What would you like to happen?"

"Let me spell it out. There are three sexes in the Khalifate with different roles and abilities. Many restrictions placed on the Other Two are unjust, not to mention moronic. I'm not saying men should be Khalifas, but to dictate to my husbands what they can and can't learn or produce? I mean I've always taken it for granted but I've never actually said it out loud. Do you agree?"

Naima first broke the pause. "I do. The situation of men and eunuchs is terribly unjust. It has also been made worse by the current Khalifa. This despite her repeal of the eunuchs' curfew. And you're right, I've never said it out loud before either. Feels very good. Try it."

"OK," said Samirah. "Eunuchs and males of the Khalifate are in an unjust situation...hey, it works! I've known it for so long I've become used to feeling it wasn't *necessary* to say it. But it is."

"Great. We have progress. Perhaps I shall try the same with Amina," Malika said.

"And Hamidah while you're at it!" Samirah joked.

"Well, if I can get to *her*, there wouldn't be a problem in the first place. Most citizens of the Khalifate (members of Court included) don't feel that way. They think the reverse is true, that the Two Others have too many rights. But there is hope. I've come back. I can use the momentum to gain the attention, see if I can stir some minds. At least those ready to be stirred. My question is this: can I count on you? Helping me will involve the opposite of glamour. In fact, there should be a warning label on my forehead. 'May be hazardous to your health and social status in the Court of Baghdad.'"

"I would be deeply honoured to do whatever I can. For you. Whatever I can," Naima repeated, her eyes sweeping the weaponry on the walls.

"Me too," said Samirah.

"Great. Didn't expect anything else."

"What about your career? Or do you intend to make fighting the Khalifa your occupation? That career carries with it a multitude of hazards," said Samirah.

"Hmm, especially to the bowels and gut," said Malika. "But that's my point. I'm *not* doing this out of my sense of justice. The outrage I felt when I saw Rasha about to be executed on the whim of an unstable maniac (and the sinking feeling I got looking at Basim's body), may be enough for me to act. But, I'm doing it more for myself. If Jamil, Daud and Ayyub were free to do what they want with *their* lives I might not lift a finger. I can't pick an occupation for myself though, before they have theirs. I do need to provide for

my family after all. So until such time, this will be my occupation.”

“What do you expect to achieve?”

“Nothing that shatters earth. A slight change in an attitude would be welcome. And even feasible. My plan, my trick and salvation, is to sell the idea to the right audience. I have no wish to convince Hanan. She operates on arguments, tradition and social convention. Convincing her will be like convincing Nadia that her rule is unjust and she should abdicate. I can't expect Hanan to go against everything she's arrived at, after decades of tortured logic. But we can affect the people that count in this matter. Is it the socialites that are most important in science? No. No matter how much they think their gossip and backstabbing contributes to civilisation, it does not. For science we must go to the scientists, and likewise for every discipline -- and argue on the *merit* of the contribution.”

“Then you *were* influenced by my idea about publishing Daud's piece in his name?” asked Naima, to which Malika responded by rising, walking across to her divan and prostrating herself at Naima's feet for a few seconds. And no, this had not a hint of sarcasm therein, just genuine, boundless gratitude.

“I was. Just like I've been influenced by many a council from you. I also have another platform. When I placed that dead man's hand in the aphrodisiac it wasn't just physiology I was interested in. It was good fortune that made me stumble on a *man's* corpse not a woman's. I sent them a conclusion that had two aspects: they had to admit it was groundbreaking in terms of science *and* it thumbed its nose at many of their presuppositions. And lo-and-behold, I received a summons to appear--”

“--wait a minute, wait just a minute! Are you saying you planned this all along when you documented your experiment? That you'll be called to an inquiry?” screamed Naima almost lifting herself off her divan. Malika nodded very casually, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Although I must say the results surprised me. I wasn't expecting to be defending a charge of treason and formal heresy, that's for sure. Anyway, I anticipated *something* like this would happen, so I wrote my rebuttal in advance.”

“...your junk with coded writing on it!”

“Yes. And I'll be sure to let them know all. But hang on! I'm being so rude. Or rather you're being so rude: you've been questioning me and have *somehow* managed to avoid revealing the slightest thing about yourselves. What have you been up to? And what's this you have to tell me?”

“Well--”

“--and how's that poem going? Has it gone epic yet?” Malika asked.

“Oh, that!” Samirah said. “Actually, that's stalled for a little bit. You see, we're out of ideas.”

“What? The two great collaboratoresses? That's a bit far-fetched!”

“This is all we have since last time:”

#### “THE TALE OF THE GAZELLE AND THE POACHER QUEEN -- CONTINUED

“Now that she had her being back, the gazelle acted. She wanted to do something to relieve the suffering of all the other herbivorous critters mutilated by the Khalifa. If only she could just get them to take a bath! Alas, the trauma of their injuries meant most were afraid of water. Instead, she started with something more realistic. If she could convince the Poacher Queen to at least let the innocents out of her lair things might improve. She knew no appeal to ordinary compassion would do, she had to resort to hyperrealism. She got an artist to depict the most horrific scenes of the other gazelles in their cramped quarters, literally standing in their own filth. Wasn't much of an exaggeration really, but the Queen relented. And then found out. She was horrified and had our gazelle led out of the lair to a death most ignoble. When--”

“---when? So it's not done? What are you waiting for to finish it?”

“We need to get a little bit of...experience. As you like to say: all shall be revealed in due course.”

“And I should have my baby first,” added Naima unflinchingly, “or at least wait to swell up a bit, so that I can ride the Holiness that comes with the pregnancy. Ride it all the way to the end of the poem.”

A full three or four minutes passed without anyone moving or breathing or saying a word. Malika did not take her eyes off those of her friend. She kept drilling into them, until she was a gnat that has burrowed a hole under Naima's skin. She couldn't have been that far into her term. *Then again*, she thought (disappointed with herself), *I didn't even notice Rasha's gender...*

Imagine a flipbook showing the animation of this scene. It would show two frames at this point. One has Malika sitting on her divan. The next has her at Naima's belly, hugging her torso and caressing the belly itself with her warm cheek. These are successive frames. There is no gap between them: Malika is there in one and here in the other, and that's that.

"How? When? Who?" Malika babbled.

"All in good time. But I'm grateful for your support. You have even more than I thought you would -- and that was a lot. But can I tell you something?"

"Please."

"Let it be known that I *want* this child. You will later find out some other reasons I had this baby, but this was only to do with the timing. I was always going to have the Sacredness of the pregnancy enter my womb within the next year or so. This other thing has only made me...proceed earlier."

"I have no idea what you mean but I promise to keep it in mind."

"Thankyou," said Naima.

"So you won't even say who the fathers are?" asked Malika.

"Oh, that's no secret. Faiz."

"Mansur's servant? And nobody else? Interesting..."

"You'd rather it was the Khalifa's husband himself?"

"Well, yeah! Then again when it comes to seed quality, he's not exactly the most shining egg in the basket."

"We thought so too," Samirah giggled. "Plus Naima didn't want to hunt for more than one father."

"It's not all about seed," nodded Naima.

## **Chapter 37 in which Malika finds things out about husbands, cousins, servants, Court members and just about everyone else**

There was but little time until the guests would arrive, so chaos descended onto the household. As the servants rushed about preparing for the feast, Malika once more lined up her husbands. This was the first time in 6 months they put on Separators. When Malika saw them so needlessly obscured, a voice spoke to her. It became louder and louder until she could mount no arguments against it. She walked up to Jamil, carefully peeled it off and threw it on the floor.

"Malika...what are you doing?" he said as she proceeded to do the same with Daud and Ayyub.

"I would like our guests to see you. Not the cloth, you."

"But -- but -- it's not just Naima coming," said Daud.

"All the more reason to do this. Naima has already seen your face. This is for the others, those who have not seen. Those who *shall* see for the first time."

"Have you gone mad? This feast is supposed to be in honour of your return and departure for war. It was meant to celebrate you being *forgiven* by the Khalifa. Now you're doing us in?"

"I can't say. But neither can I say what direction blind obedience will send us in. Listen, I've told you about the hearing. I'll have to put everything into the open anyway, there's no point pretending."

More silence as they scratched their heads, at a loss about how to respond, really.

"There's nothing they can do to me, to us, that they wouldn't do anyway. Do you think they'll say 'oh, she's an apostate and a subversive influence on Baghdad but at least her husbands wear the Separator, let's not kill her'?"

Ayyub shook his head, acknowledging her point.

"I was wrong all those months ago. I was wrong to try negotiate some middle ground, to feebly attempt to play politics in the ridiculous hope the Khalifa will somehow not find out. I guess I still had the option of burying my head in the sand then. But this is it. We're in the final battle for survival, one that will make this campaign we're going on seem like a friendly tussle."

"Well," said Daud. "If *you're* really going to go all out, then we all must. Most importantly, we can't blush or flinch or act like we think there's anything wrong. We have to act as if we're doing *exactly* what we should be."

"But you're very good at such trickery," laughed Jamil. "What are *we* to do?"

"Let me teach you. Firstly, it's in the posture. And the way you conduct yourself. Someone who thinks



they are committing a major faux pas will have her upper back tense. What you need to practice is having your shoulders pulled back, rolled out, dropped down. Good Ayyub, you're a natural! Now, the way you walk is also important. Step confidently. Not like a thief in the night. A little more confidently than usual. But not so much that it's marked. Shall we go for a little practice walk?..."

The guests arrived over a divine melody played by Jamilah. There was something so graceful about the way she played, despite the fact that Malika knew her to be a murderer. Malika could now sense the cruelty that was submerged deep beneath her flowing robes. She felt goosebumps go up and down her spine, belly, armpits and the back of her knees every time Jamilah squeezed out another note or interval.

The first to arrive was Amina. She greeted the Three without so much as flinching. Malika noted and frowned at the fact that Amina's gaze at Jamilah had no Recognition, despite Amina being right next to Jamilah when she made the confession.

"How are you? Are you ready?" Amina asked Malika.

"For what?"

"You know... The-----battle," she said winking. She was *not* referring to the upcoming battle with the barbarians. "Although judging from your little setup," Amina whispered looking around at the room and its open beams, "you're even more ready than I thought."

Five minutes later, the room was buzzing with activity. Waiters galloped around carrying trays of nuts, dried apricots and chicken feet. Interestingly, none of the guests brought up the lack of Separators. A few stopped in amazement for a few seconds at the door, but afterwards it was like nothing happened. Malika drew only one conclusion: members of Court were fabulous at pretending nothing was happening -- better than her own husbands. *Well, what do you expect from a class of people who are experts in twelve kinds of backstabbing and machination? Although I wouldn't have been surprised if people scoffed openly.*

After chatting to various people for an hour or so, she found Amina and whisked her away to an empty spot.

"It's all been me me me with all that's happened. I haven't had a chance to ask you about anything, not since I've been back. How's your Plan going? Please tell me you've found something suitable by now. And have successfully pretended to look for a harem."

Amina smiled. "Some progress in both accounts. But I must tell you: it's much easier to pretend to be looking for a harem than it is to unpretendingly look for an area to excel in. With the haremlooking I've attended many a party, feast, gathering, celebration and shafra."

"Really? You went to shafra's? Whose?"

"Not Alia's. That would *not* be a good place to be false. Just regular boring ones. And what I did at all those marvellous functions was talk to as many men as I could. Nothing too detailed, but enough to be seen as talking to them by those who count. At male-free functions I just discussed obtaining a harem with my fellow females."

"Do you think you've managed to convince them?"

"Most definitely."

"But you won't speak of it again before you've found something to do though, right?"

"As I said before, Nadia herself promised to find me something. And she has. I'm assisting in the planning of the Palace restoration."

"You're going to design buildings? So that interest in masonry of yours worked out! Well, good for you," Malika said and gave her a kiss. "No, really. I can't believe my little cousin's going to be doing something worthwhile! Especially since you've found that something well before me. If it was me I wouldn't really be comfortable participating in *this* project. Course, it *isn't* me and therefore none of my business, except for my natural nosiness, and the fact that you're my blood. Or maybe I'm just prejudiced against the Khalifa due to our history."

"What? That's bullshit! You're prejudiced against the Khalifa because," Amina began but then dropped to a whisper realising she was talking in a dangerously loud voice, "because of who she is and because anyone with a sense of justice will be against her. Not because of the past. I mean, my relationship with my Mentor ended in a similar way to yours, but I don't have anything against Samiyyah, do I? Because there's nothing intrinsically wrong with who she is as a person. Unlike a certain someone."

"You're probably right. As always. By which I mean you're always *probably* right, not probably always right!"

"Oh, you! Come to think of it, if Samiyyah was the autocrat of the entire Khalifate, she might not be

much better. Or I guess she will, but she'll be no Khalifa Haruna... Intisar help us all if Samiyyah ever becomes Khalifa. And Intisar help us all *twice over* with our current one. As for whether I had any qualms about participating, of course I did. And do. But this will be my best chance to prove myself. Besides it's not like I'm helping the Khalifa continue to mismanage the civilisation and alienate her subjects. Not by extending a wing of the Palace or two."

"Have you sussed out your chances of advancing without being the family woman that The Woman expects you to be?"

"Yep. They're not great. "

"--have you considered a fake harem?" Malika said dropping her voice from a whisper down a few extra notches.

"A what?"

"I just thought of it now. You find two or three willing males and marry them. But you'll only be married in the eyes of Baghdad. In your own house you both do what you like. There have to be some men out there who'd be interested in the social protection that only married life can give. Without being ruled over by a tyrannical wife."

"Wow, you are good! The Khalifa was certainly right to exile you. For you have a knack for putting your stick into society's shit and moving it about very rapidly. I'll have to think about it. Ooh, ooh, I don't even need to have children. If I have a harem I can pretend we've been trying, and then I'll be the poor barren wife. I can even visit Samiyyah who'll make sure to 'examine' me. There's the excuse for doing what I want *before* children."

"And then when you do choose to have the Sacredness descend, just go to a shafra and -- hey presto -- Intisar will have magically cured your barrenness!"

"I love you! You're such an al-Basimi!"

"I love you too," Malika said, suppressing her frown at the al-Basimi comment. "It's just as well there aren't too many of us, or the world would be fucked."

"You're right. Just as well there's only *two* of us, really," said Amina pointing at Hamidah who just walked in.

"I better go talk to her and others. But it's all great, what you've told me, keep it up. Who knows, you might design a roof with a faulty brick that might... I don't know...mysteriously collapse on dear old Nadia one dreadful evening."

"Just before we share a meal at the al-Basimi household, I'd like to say a few frank words," Samiyyah called out to the room which fell silent in seconds.

"It was I who organised this evening. Malika wouldn't do it! In fact, she would hear nothing of it. But I realised it was important she be honoured. Al-Basimi is a shining example of the fact that everyone can get a second chance, that no matter how far they may have divorced themselves from the Khalifate, there's always a way back. We are not barbarians, eager to destroy those we find inconvenient. If I may be very bold this evening, I might even propose that the measure of a society is the way it treats its outcasts, those it finds inconvenient, or those who say things it doesn't want to hear. Malika shows our society's measure. Because she is such a brilliant human; we rewarded her with her just desserts.

"Al-Basimi is one of those people who are not of this world. They were probably fashioned by Intisar directly, as one of her glorious side projects far from the run-of-the-mill creation of womankind. They have all the radical ideas and are responsible for all the progress. They are also the persecuted and the chased. This is usually due to having other excesses that are natural by-products of genius. Nevertheless, if we are to survive as a civilisation, we should not stifle some of the most valuable members."

Malika scanned the room, noticing that everyone had the perfect undecipherable face. Half of them didn't give a shit about Malika or scientific discoveries or the Conflict. But they felt the obligation to pretend Samiyyah was saying some profound truth they agreed with, that they were saints for listening to her "tough love".

"Malika is also leading a company to join the anti-barbarian campaign in the north. This highlights her loyalty and righteousness. She is prepared to die for the same Khalifate that exiled her, which shows she truly *is* the real deal. We are fighting against a culture (if you can call it that!) based on brutality, falseness and the law of the jungle. If Malika were in the West, she'd surely be impaled by now. Actually, I lie, they don't impale. She'd be drawn and quartered. We should all remember this. For those who will stay, this might mean showing a little extra compassion towards the unfortunate, since this is what separates Us from Them. For those who will go, the al-Basimi banner you will be under is a most illustrious one: We know

the reputation that precedes it. Malika, you won't disappoint. Now, to food."

Hamidah sat next to Malika.

"What are your husbands reading at the moment?" Malika asked her half-jokingly.

"Just things to pass the time. Tales of Sharif. Poems by Amina-daughter-of-Fatima. Things sold in the marketplace. The illustrated manuscripts of Zaynab."

"Really?" said Malika, as if to imply 'is that all?'

"It's pretty good, it keeps them occupied. And sharp. What else should they be reading?"

"Whatever is enjoyable and useful of course. But I just mean that maybe that's all they're reading because that's all you expect of them."

"I don't go out of my way to take my husbands places they're not supposed to go just because they *are* male. Or rather to places they would never have gotten to otherwise."

"Do you take them places?" she laughed -- she knew Hamidah didn't.

"I meant as a metaph--"

"I know! I meant the same thing. Because *I* don't. That would be too tiring. They do that for themselves. So if you spend your own energies to extend them, more power to you."

Hamidah said nothing for a full course of lime soup, but when rabbit was brought she finally turned back to Malika.

"So, seems you're the most popular gal in town. What's it like being back?"

"It's great, why?"

"Well, it's just all so sudden. I mean, here you are in the Caspian sea, then in an instant the Khalifa sends for you. Have you stopped to think why?"

"I thought it was about the 2 contributions I supposedly made."

"Those two things don't seem particularly big though, do they? I mean they're kind of obvious."

"I guess they are."

"Meaning there was probably another reason for her to bring you back. I mean she might actually be looking to do you some damage. Or even...to judge you to the extent of the law."

"...wait a minute, wait just a minute! You think---you actually think I didn't deserve to be brought back! And that I was justly exiled, and should have *stayed* exiled. Or worse. Right?"

Hamidah looked away and shrugged softly.

"Well, at least have the guts to say it to my face. What, did I bring disgrace to the al-Basimi clan?"

"Not that, dammit! It was because you *rightly* brought it on us for tolerating your...tantrums. I mean look around! Your husbands aren't even wearing Separators. You think that you have something to share with the world, fine. But that something is not your husbands' beards, which are being literally shoved in our faces. If you go around parading them before all, you only show yourself as an extremist, a hater of womankind. Nobody will take you seriously. In fact, nobody does, myself included."

Malika looked at her as if for the first time. She furrowed her brow, thinking. Of course, she was hurt, especially since she and Hamidah loved each other usually. But maybe that was the key to this whole thing: Hamidah's entire behaviour was unusual. *In fact, from her manner of talking...*

"...you're with Hanan now aren't you?"

"What?! What are you talking about?"

"You're a loyal follower. In my absence you must have been brainwashed by her. And now you think I'm an evil subvertress pervertress who must be stopped. My husbands remarried to someone who will make them wear their Separator, throw away their books, studies, lives and the rest. You're probably trying to spy on me on her behalf, aren't you? Well, away then."

Malika got up to change seats. Her cousin lifted her hand to feebly clutch her robe between her thumb and index finger. Malika pulled it away as she walked across the room. In the din, nobody noticed. She noticed Jamilah looking at her husbands. She was surprised to see it was not a look of desire. There was some, but that wasn't the predominant feature. There was also some hatred, but that wasn't it. The main feeling she saw in Jamilah was that of possession. Jamilah owned Jamil, Daud, Ayyub. She owned them despite the fact that they were married to Malika, despite her not knowing anything about them, despite anything and everything. She possessed them, like she possessed every other man, including Basim, and Jamilah knew it with as much gusto as she knew the sun would rise tomorrow. This was what Malika read in the gaze.

Her mood only really lifted later. This was when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a door on the far end of the room shake very slightly. What was that? She motioned for one of the servants to open it, but for

some reason her servant averted his eyes, pretending he didn't see it. Most unusual. What in Sha-UI's name was going on? Malika came up to the door herself and burst it open.

This was one of those moments where the whole world seems to stop. All the chatter was killed with a zap, just a silence, as everyone gaped at two of Malika's male servants whom the door revealed to be naked in a most heartfelt embrace. Malika also froze, not sure of what to do. The 2 servants definitely froze, their erections vanishing with miraculous speed. Some murmurs made their way through the guests, talk of flogging for disobedience. This might have escalated if Samiyyah did not make a loud announcement: "Friends, it isn't right for two servants to be ducking out from work tonight. But Malika can deal with that. As for anything more serious, that's out of the question. Think to yourselves this: what *could* two men possibly do that might be worthy of any reaction or comment whatsoever?"

As soon as she said this, the merriment resumed just as suddenly as it died. Malika, still amazed, looked at the two servants and shrugged to them, as if to say "well, there's your answer. Apparently I've just caught you doing absolutely nothing". She then closed the door, very very slowly, feeling just like the time when Jamilah confessed. Only this was even more bizarre.

## Chapter 38 in which we lick our wounds and prepare for more

Malika finally sat down and enjoyed the silence. After the bulk of the guests left it was only her and a few others huddled in the back courtyard. They were sipping tea, not talking, just looking up at the stars. Malika could feel a soft and almost melodic ringing in her ears. She knew it was only because she was exposed to so much din before, but the ringing still felt magical. It was as if Intisar was whispering to her.

It was well past midnight and Malika knew she'd be up until dawn. Those who remained were those marching under her banner.

"All right people, shall we start? I just want us to talk a bit (before we disperse). So we can make plans, voice fears, dreams and contradictions... First I have something to announce. Although I'm supposed to be the leader of this al-Basimi banner, I won't be fulfilling this role completely."

"What?" asked Amina. "What do you mean -- you abdicate your leadership? You milksop!"

Malika smiled at her. "Not exactly. I can still be the leader. If you people don't depose me, that is. Which you're very welcome to do. What I meant was this would be the al-Basimi banner only to the outside world. Our little secret will be that we're just a regular band of people. I shan't be taking my family banner to battle."

There was a cluster of bewildered gasps. Malika saw everyone lost. Everyone but Rasha, that is. For some reason she did not move or flinch, almost as if she expected this. In fact, Rasha gazed into Malika's eyes and Malika thought she saw the most imperceptible of nods, the most imperceptible of smiles. But that was silly, what would she be smiling about?

"I understand this comes as a surprise. Rest assured that I have very good reasons. One day you will know. Now roll call. I'm here. Jamil?"

"Present."

"Daud? Ayyub?"

There were only 15 people in the unit. Malika called out the names of some of the other husbands and male servants. These would form the infantry. The horse riders were three: Amina, Rasha and a friend of Malika's whose name has not survived through the ages. When Rasha's name was called out, she left her seat, opened the door to the house and brought out what looked like a mini-soldier. She was dressed in the most immaculate white robes. Her feet were in bright yellow sandals that looked like they'd support her body no matter how many arduous hours she marched. The only difference between her and a soldier was age: she was clearly no older than 15. Oh, and she wasn't really a she, outside this house at least. Her head was shaved.

"May I introduce my arms-bearer, Habuba?" said Rasha. "She will be accompanying m- us, to the battle."

“What? Sorry child, but you're way too y--” started Malika but then she actually looked at this little soldier and gulped.

Indeed, this was Habuba, the little eunuch who had the courage to come up to Rasha that day. Turns out Rasha's offer to mentor her was more real than anyone might have supposed. Little Habuba made considerable progress. This could be seen in Habuba's eyes: those little fuckers were like a drawn spear ready to burst forth with energy. They also indicated an enormity of self-control, for the possessor of those eyes had to spend the bulk of her day in the Palace being the paragon of subservience. I mean, for Johara's sake, at 15 she'd have had all the chores and belittlement of a eunuch without even the perk of having wisdom and experience. Yet her eyes were not resentful. They just spoke of her determination to channel every bad thing she's put up with, every opportunity lost due to her lost clitoris, into her own purpose. In this case the purpose was being Rasha's arms-bearer.

“I'm sorry to have jumped to conclusions so quickly, Habuba. You are very welcome,” said Malika.

“Yeah! Always room for one more!” someone said. They got talking and within five minutes Habuba became a favourite. Despite the killer grip she had on Rasha's weapons she still had the elements of an endearing silly girl.

“Always room for one more, you say?” called out a voice from the dark as two figures approached. “How 'bout 2 more?”

Naima and Samirah casually strutted into the courtyard. Malika knew they wanted to come, but until now it was all theory to her.

The whole company erupted in a cheer; but what other reaction could there be from a room of largely *would-be* combatants when two of the fiercest fighters in the Khalifate (and hence the universe) walked in? In 30 seconds their company's collective skill went up five or six levels of magnitude.

Habuba and Amina leapt off their fancier chairs and offered them. There was a lot of questioning, exclaiming and excited babbling, which seemed not to end. Then Malika's face contorted for a second.

“Naima dearest? Was this what you were holding out to tell me?”

“Yes, Malikaleh.”

“This is why you had your weapons polished?” Malika added slyly.

“Oh, does nothing escape you?”

“Not the fact that you're pregnant.”

“Right. This was the choice. I *wanted* to have a baby. My only choice was to either have it before the battle or after. I chose before.”

“Hmm. To be pregnant whilst in harm's way?”

“Don't you understand? That's the beauty of it! I'll be fighting whilst experiencing the Sanctity of Sanctities. And it won't impair me; it's still very early.”

“That alone can't be the reason...”

“Samirah, I told you nothing escapes her! The main reason is this: I want to be fierce. Fiercer than ever before. Because we must win this. And because I haven't done this in a long long time, I may be out of practice. This is my way of ensuring I won't hold anything back. When I'm fighting side by side with Samirah in order to protect Three Things -- well then woe to the poor fool who stands in my way! This baby will keep me alive.”

Malika opened her mouth to rebuke her but then something happened inside her and she just laughed.

“Well, I admit it's unorthodox, but hey, that's what we're all about. Still... I love that my friend is such a psychopath!”

“That I am. On the other hand, my womb *is* the safest place to be in this dangerous world of ours, even if I'm in battle.”

It was even later in the night. The Company dispersed, and everyone went to bed. There was only a short time left before she'd be leaving. Malika did not know if she was coming back. Sure, the prognosis (which never looked too bad) began to look even better with the joining of Naima and Samirah. But this *was* war. The only guarantee was things would *not* go according to plan. That they will experience a bubble of venom and vehemence far greater than anyone going could imagine now. It's only natural, for who can imagine pain from the comfort of a safe, affluent Baghdad home? You can *try* visualise it, but it's not the same. In any case, the uncertainty of return meant she could not put this off any longer.

She went downstairs. Salman was still sitting on the divan. In the dark it was unclear if he was asleep or not. Malika shuddered a little when she saw his figure, supposing he might have caught on when she announced she shan't be taking the banner. She felt an increased love for him, for she knew that he knew



and was still prepared to go through everything. But this didn't mean he wasn't dreading it, hence the pretense of sleeping.

Malika kissed him "awake", then silently left to fetch a candle that bathed the room in a private glow. Only their outlines could be seen -- with a lack of colour differentiation. The yellow-brown of their skin looked the same as the yellow-orange of the furniture, the same as the yellow-white of the flame. It was all the same now.

"...Daddy..." she hadn't called him that in a long time. *Not since my mother died*, she thought shivering. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

"What is it?"

"Do you not know already?"

"No."

"Fine. For the record I know you know."

"Then you already know what I'm going to say?"

"Of course not! Even if I did, I still need to hear it."

"Go on then, tell me."

"You're *so* stalling!"

"Indeed I am. It's one of the qualities I learnt from your mother."

Malika began to shake. She did not shake when she rejected Nadia years ago, nor when she learnt she was sentenced to exile. But this time she was jelly. And proud of it too. For those other things were trivialities of life that came and went like leaves tossed about by wind. This...this was real. The other ordeals merely happened to her. This *was* her.

"She led the...the expedition into the Hindu Kush?"

"I spent months and months and months here in Baghdad. Brooding and waiting. And pining, of course."

"Right. Well, I learnt something else. My mother was responsible for the downfall of the Prophetess. Instrumental in the desecration of hundreds of people in the Kush."

"Desecration?"

"It was an expedition to bring eunuchs. And girl did she reel them in."

"Where did you learn this?"

"In the exile. I found a dilapidated building with the region's records. Amongst them was this," she said casually pulling out the manuscript. She looked at it again, almost surprised that it was still there, that instead of destroying it she carried it back hundreds of kilometres like a precious heirloom.

Salman also looked with surprise. Even if he anticipated the question, by no means did he anticipate the evidence. He snatched it from her (very slowly and respectfully, but it was still a snatch), and scanned the pages. Malika could see the transformation. The shadow that touched his face began to creep across his wrinkled cheek and jaw. The candle's power receded the more he read. Finally he put it down and looked at her.

"All right."

"All right? All fucking right? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you warn me that--"

"--that what?"

"--that I'm the daughter of a monster. That I'm part of a family that's done more harm to the world than *most* families in the Khalifate. That--"

"--now wait just a minute. Or don't. Look, I'm not going to tell you how to respond to this. Intisar knows, you don't need my advice anyhow. But at least put yourself in my position. Firstly I was not aware of things to the extent this manuscript shows. Secondly, with what the pittance I knew, what should I have told you? Especially you, of all the children Johara could have blessed me with."

"What's that supposed to mean?.. I don't mean to sound angry, just need the answer."

"You've always been a special one. Do you think it's only now that you've begun to disagree with things? When you were 4 we got you a story book filled with djinns, dragons and eunuchs. Except you took a quill and methodically scribbled out every eunuch from the picture, every mention of one from the text. You said story books aren't supposed to tell such wicked lies. Do you remember?"

"No," she smiled. "But I can imagine it."

"Try telling a little girl like that what her mother's expedition was about. Or a little woman like that. Or a big woman like that."

"Of course, I understand why you didn't tell me. *I* wouldn't have told me. But I *haaaate* it... I have so many lovely memories of Her that bathe me with warmth on a cruel day. I've lost them all. I can't reconcile

my smiling chattering kind mother with reality.” She paused gulping and resumed like a marathon runner entering her final stretch. The words came out slowly but surely. “I don’t want to fall back on the safety net of lies. I’d rather grieve and get it done with. Won’t you let me grieve, daddy? Please?” Malika dropped her eyes.

“Do what you have to do.”

“Why didn’t you do something? How could you stay with her? And don’t give me that shit about not having a choice, that’s just too----subservient.”

“I won’t. I’ll only say that I stayed because I loved her more than anything. Even now, having learnt more from that...*thing* you brought, I can’t go your way. I can’t reject her. You will probably only be in a position to understand in another 20-30 years.”

“Fine, don’t reject her. But don’t mention her in this house. Even when I’m not here. At least until I’ve had some time to mull over it. Like...20-30 years,” she said laughing bitterly.

She was about to get up and say good night when she remembered something. “Wait. Remember the trophies she brought back from the expedition? They’re still buried under this house supposedly.”

“You have a keen memory. Why, what are you thinking?”

“Just the obvious. Tell me afterwards if you still can’t bring yourself to reject her.”

“What do you think they are?”

“Doesn’t matter. A single coin looted from the Kush is enough for me. I *have* to see it though.”

The two figures left the house and went to the basement. They had a torch. Other than that, the entire landscape was pitch black, from the al-Basimi house itself to all the other rooftops. Even the sky was bereft of celestial bodies, the moon being new. There was fiddling for a long time -- and during that time the world awakened. It wasn’t sunrise but the first signs of light appeared, with the sky about the horizon changing from black to a very dark shade of gray. It was the beginning of the beginning of a new day when a muffled scream could be heard in the basement, followed by a wail. They found what they were looking for. If we were to peek into a small hole in the wall we’d find a curious sight; one that I dare say has never occurred before that moment and will never ever appear again. The two of them were sitting. Malika was bawling completely, without restraint or reason, so much that she was actually silent. Salman was not, but looked even worse; his face was that of a man who had lost all hope. Around them were hundreds of small curved blobs. If we were to wait a little longer, until more light penetrated the hole we’re looking through, things would become clearer. The objects would become greyish-blue. Despite their unnatural colour they could still be identified as mummified uteruses and clitorises. Raidah’s booty from the expedition: the organs of every eunuch she so skillfully “reeled in”.

## Chapter 39 in which Naima's donkeys endure hardship

Jamil, Daud and Ayyub were clad in the standard soldier garb of the Khalifate. This was the same for both<sup>21</sup> women, men and eunuchs. A white robe, washed to perfection, wrapped around the body thrice completely. A yellow belt around the waist. An orange headband and an orange Separator for men. Yellow sandals. The standard-issue war amulet round the neck. That was it: a minimalist costume. It was the Fighting Sisters who designed it, their philosophy being that even the clothes on a warrior are a burden. The warrior of the Khalifate was supposed to endure the desert’s frightening temperature change in this outfit. No extra clothing was allowed. The icy nights and blistering days were taken in the same dress. The Fighting Sisters thought it built character. Naima of course agreed. But she was in the minority; most people in Malika’s company weren’t that hardcore. They were interested in building character, but not this much.

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<sup>21</sup> That statement would have sounded much better in Baghdadian, which for obvious reasons had a word for comparing or contrasting *three* things.

The Three Lads didn't just wear the costume, they *owned* it. Something about the outfits just fit. Jamil and Ayyub had spears, Daud a scimitar.

The entire company was here, just getting ready to leave. It was early on a winter's morning. In the few days since the Night of Uteruses, temperatures plummeted. Many shivered already.

They were quite a group. Every woman on horseback stood beside her horse, holding the spear in one hand, the scimitar in the other (you were supposed to use both when on horseback). Except Rasha, who had Habuba hold two spears, two scimitars, two large iron maces and a bow. The other exceptions were Naima and Samirah: in true elite fighting style they had nothing but a staff that reached from the ground to their eyes. This was their extra minimalism. The staff would be used for everything: holding up a tired body on the march, cooking, as a killing machine and for any odds and ends that would surely come up. They wouldn't touch a horse either, all was done from their two feet. As Malika looked at the 4 magnificent examples of feet she wondered if it was true that they'd even take off their sandals before conflict. Only one way to find out. Come to think of it, Malika was also an exception in terms of attire. She lacked an amulet.

"What else do we need?" They already had 12 mules loaded with water and provisions.

"I'm bringing something," said Naima. "They're supposed to be here any minute."

Sure enough, a few minutes later Samirah's servant came in and whispered something to Naima. She nodded and he proceeded to pull some loaded donkeys out of the corner. Malika counted 9, 10, 11..17 in all. All loaded to the max with wooden boxes. This was preposterous.

"Naima, my soldier...what have you brought?" asked Malika. "There's more of whatever's in those boxes than we have provisions."

"Just a little idea I had. As you like to say, you'll find out when the time comes," said Naima.

"But- but surely whatever's there can't possibly be more important than extra food. In fact, if we unloaded these donkeys we'd be able to carry enough extra to--"

"--to fall asleep on a full stomach whilst the enemy stabs us and consumes our flesh? No thanks. Trust me, we are most definitely taking the boxes. All of them. And all of you need to guard them fully. Pretend like there's 17 soldiers here, although they'll benefit us more than 17 soldiers ever will. Anyway, just *trust* me; all my experience in war, ambushes, killing and anything else foul and nasty is telling me that this is essential."

"Fine, fine!" Malika replied hastily. "We'll keep them. Did everyone hear? Guard these with lives, and the lives of your loved ones. Got that?"

She got plenty of nods not sure if she was mocking or serious.

"Would anyone else like to say something, before we get a move on?" asked Malika. "I don't want to get all weepy here but maybe *someone* has something they'd like to share."

"No, let's just go!" said Habuba, echoing the sentiment, but Rasha put her hand out.

"Hold on. Let's be honest. Chances are we won't *all* be coming back. Most will, but barbarians are not members of Court. They know no politeness, no sense of the sporting, no honour. They have the intelligence of women and the brutality of animals. Which makes them formidable opponents. Personally I don't know what will happen to me. In fact, something tells me I shan't be coming back."

"Rasha!" Malika said, but then seeing that this name wasn't enough she decided to use something stronger. "Z-----!" Malika smiled when Rasha shook a little at the unexpected open use of her true name. "What is all this gloom? Of course you'll be coming back. I personally vouch to--"

"--please don't. You don't know what may happen. Anyway, I just wanted to let you all know that I love you and that I'll never forget how you made my...situation a little more bearable."

"No, I won't have it either," Samirah said. "Thank you for your kind words but I choose to let them in one ear and out the other. I'll only hear them from you once *we* are back."

"As you wish."

The whole of Baghdad lined the streets to see them off. Young and old came alike, women, men, eunuchs. Streets were lined from Malika's house (which had become the most talked-about house in Baghdad) all the way to the gate out of the City. It reminded Malika of the crowds that came to see Elizabeth. The only difference was there was simply no comparison. Elizabeth they came to see from curiosity, which only thinly veiled their xenophobia and distrust of anything barbarian. Here they came because they were *with* Malika. Most of the common people couldn't care less about her notoriety. In fact, her exile and "redemption" made for interesting gossip. Plus they liked seeing someone who stood up to the mighty Khalifa on more than one occasion, someone they knew will continue to stand up to her. Finally, the great appeal was her company. Most members of Court stayed in Baghdad on their divans. This

company represented the last drop Baghdad could squeeze from itself, and since it consisted of nobility it was seen by the masses as a fine drop. A drop of true nobles, not the frauds that live merely to eat and shit.

“Malika!” yelled a woman out of the crowd, jostling her way to the passing company. “My child has been struck by fever last night. I know you have long to go, but surely you can find it in your heart to bless him? In Intisar’s name?”

Malika looked at the child. What was she going to do, say “fraid not, there is no Intisar”? She took the bawling lad in her arms. “Hello, precious. What’s his name?”

“Hamid.”

“Well, Hamid, I think you’ll be fine,” she said whispering the appeal to Intisar into his ear, stroking his hair.

“Oh thank you, thank you. I will never forget it.”

This incident repeated itself perhaps a dozen times. Malika could do nothing but accept, nod, smile and bless in her most authentic demeanour. What’s more, during those moments she truly did believe in the blessing. Or rather she made herself believe, because the thought of whispering a formula you know to be false over a child in need of a real one was too horrible for her.

Malika laughed to herself. *So this is how holy women are made. I just had no idea I am on my way to becoming one. Or rather that we all are.* It was true: she was by no means the only one getting hassled. The next most popular person to be approached was Naima. This was, of course, the other reason the crowds turned out: it wasn’t every day you got to see the best warrior in the Khalifate leave for battle to join the regular units. If only the pregnant women asking for a blessing had known about Naima being one of them!

The others from the company were all unknown. This despite Rasha having led the guards in the streets of Baghdad for years. In fact, she was the first present during every major commotion in the City for years. But who looks at a bald-head? As for the men, well they were just figures with a Separator. Who they were posed absolutely no consequence.

Nadia was standing at the gate with Mansur, who seemed lost as usual. Nadia was also lost, just in a different way. As they passed through, she gave each woman a ceremonial kiss on the forehead, and anointed the same forehead with the Tears of Johara, which she had obtained from a holy woman all the way from Damascus. Nadia moved from woman to woman, dragging her feet and rustling her clothing. The reason was so that Naima and Malika would not hear the intense beating of her heart she knew would occur when she came up to them.

Nadia merely nodded at Rasha (what else would protocol have her do?) who nodded very slowly in return. Before they walked out of the City, each member of the company did something that was very natural for them. After each one got kissed (or nodded to) by Nadia, they came up to some child in the crowd, to kiss her goodbye. There was something universal about the feeling they had: they didn’t want their last experience in Baghdad to be a kiss from the Khalifa. Finally the donkeys, their teeth clenched in hardship, went through the gate and that was that.

## Chapter 40 in which the Company is suspended in Intisar’s palm

The sun blared down but did not warm. Hardly surprising -- they had been transported up thousands of metres into another world. The world of the mountains had its own rules and customs. On the surface it was rejecting to those who entered it. Beyond the surface it was even more so, unless you were exceptional. Someone like Naima who spent years living in the freezing cold and endless danger, to the point where she could call it home. Or someone like Alia, who from the stories was immune to any discomforts of this world.

They were two weeks into their trek, with probably only a few days to go. The meandering mountain paths squeezed their rank to a width of one person, slowed them down by a factor of three, froze them, endangered their provisions and donkeys. But it was uplifting when you saw the tablelands you had

ascended from, as well as the cities, towns and farms thereon. Sure, Baghdad was too far to be seen, but this didn't stop the landscape from being majestic. The rider admired the thousand precipices that she could see, the thousands of square metres of vertical cliffs, the millions of spikes that would slice and dice a body into an infinite number of pieces, in case they weren't dead enough from the fall itself. If you turned to the left, there was the endless abyss, an interplay of crag, snow and the occasional plant that somehow managed to survive this far up. Of course, you'd have to be careful looking aside, at times the path was the width of 4 or 5 handbreadths. On these occasions the company moved at the pace of a tortoise, each person helping her animal across the curved-and-narrow, supporting it with her hands, guiding it where to step. The women had come down from their horses days ago. There was no talk of riding until they reached their destination. Naima's donkeys fared a little better: their centre of gravity was low as the boxes weren't piled high. In fact, Naima would often joke, the fact that she overloaded them with these Indispensable boxes actually helped them keep their grounding. Finally if you looked forward there'd be nothing. The path would wind on and on but it would rise to some indeterminate apex beyond which you couldn't see. There was supposed to be *some* sort of destination but this was only a theory that people virtually stopped believing by now.

There was a slightly more convenient way to get to the northern provinces, lest the reader think this is how people moved between Baghdad and the north. No, the Khalifa's officials did not hoard the thousands of sacks of produce they took as taxation over these passes. They carted them across the tablelands. But that was a long long way around and the company had no time to waste. The campaign has been going on for weeks and they expected to come in right at the point when they were most needed.

Naima was asked for advice being the honorary mountain expert. "We're not trying to survive here on a long-term basis. We're just passing through. For that all you need to know is keep warm, keep to the path and think thrice before each step." Habuba asked about her time in the mountains as an Assassin. "Over the years we moved around several times coming back to the fortress regularly for councils. You can't afford to stay in one place if you're part of an illegal organisation being hunted down. Not even in the mountains."

"So the mountains were a bad hiding place?" asked Habuba

"What?!" Naima's nostrils flared. "We weren't hiding. We fled to the mountains so we could watch the enemy from afar whilst she couldn't watch us. So that we could swoop down like eagles and attack her when she was at her weakest. So that we could train ourselves to our full capacity. If we wanted to hide we'd have gone to Africa or some other ridiculously far place. But the so-called Khalifa wasn't about to drive us out of our home, to fl--"

"--my dear, I thought you repented!" said Malika, emerging from the darkness. "And are you trying to scare the youngest member of our company?"

"Trying is the key," said Habuba. "Far from it though, rather she's made me even more fascinated about her time as an outlaw."

"Speaking of which, I should answer your question."

"That's right Naima," said Malika sitting down beside them. "And then we can talk a little about our upcoming enemy."

"We could not afford to stay in the same place for long. Firstly, it deteriorated our element of surprise. Secondly it deteriorated our toughness. Thirdly it would have made us complacent, we'd have felt like we were home. We spent time in caves. And we had a permanent stronghold we built out of stone -- a tiny building right on the edge of the cliff that was abandoned for 6 months of the year. But I digress. Other than caves we sometimes built small shelters. This was when we decided to descend a few hundred metres to an altitude that supported forests."

"Was it colder than here?" asked Habuba.

"In the forests yes but only by a bit. In the caves, much much colder. We didn't mind though. There were plenty of clothes to sleep in. And during the day you were constantly doing something strenuous enough to keep warm." She said that last phrase with a smile and her eyes flashed with years of fond memories. It didn't matter that they were ultimately psychotic and femicidal. "I mean sometimes your face would swell up at night. That was the downside: the face wasn't covered up. That and giving birth -- that was always a challenge, even for those like me who just helped."

Habuba sat right up like someone had pricked her out of a slumber.

"Naima," said Malika, "when we're all back in the safety of Baghdad you can spend as much time as you like talking to Habuba. You can describe the image of an Assassin's waters breaking on the snow, or your Mound of Afterbirths to your heart's content. But now..."

"...Mound of Afterbirths?.." Habuba whispered in horror, fascination, envy. Naima got to lead the



assertive life she had only dreamed of.

"...but now, let's focus on the task at hand," Malika continued,

"Right. So we shall, oh great leader," said Naima. "By the way, I think I know why you didn't take the al-Basimi banner."

"I'm listening," said Malika.

"Oh. Well, it's a bit out of place," Naima answered turning to more people who had joined the circle. "I'll be sure to tell you next time we're at the Spice Market purchasing some aph- sorry, I forgot all about your discovery. Some cinnamon. Now about this enemy of ours?"

"I heard they never bathe," called out a voice – many from the company having joined them at the fire.

"Yeah! And that they don't shave. And that they're monogamists!" This caused a burst of laughter from the circle (which by now had included everyone), the laughter that happens when someone mentions something that makes everyone a tad uncomfortable.

"I heard they're cannibals," said Rasha. "That the first time they crossed the border into the Khalifate they attacked three large villages of ours. They destroyed them all, killed the women and *put the men and children to roast*. A two-day orgy of feasting on the grilled corpses and drinking blood out of children's skulls followed."

"Don't forget the pyramid of skulls they piled up," another voice called out.

"How long ago was this massacre?" asked another.

"About a year ago."

"And the Khalifa waited this long to launch the campaign?"

"Actually, to give her credit, she moved the bulk of the army in very quickly. But yes, the campaign's only been going on for the last month. Not that the barbarians dared do much marauding with our forces stationed just a few kilometres away."

"Still, to have been all diplomatic for so long!"

They carried on for a few more minutes until Naima had the sense to stop them.

"Enough." This word could not have carried more force had it been uttered by Intisar herself. They were ready to listen to their true advisor. "Forget the Khalifa. I know that nobody here is exactly burning with love for her. I'm certainly not. But this doesn't mean we should lay all the blame for everything at her sandals. I advised her during the visit of Elizabeth and she made the best decisions she could possibly have at the time. Let me assure everyone, as someone who has taken many a life, that it's not something you want to rush into. *Even* if the enemy is feasting on civilians. To get immediately involved can result in the annihilation of our forces and the downfall of the entire Khalifate. And another thing. Our enemy is certainly not the paragon of civility. Don't know if this massacre actually happened or if it was simply the fog of war talking. It *is* something to shudder about, however we need to forget all this when we line up on the battlefield. We cannot underestimate them by thinking they're 'just' barbarians. They're not, they are a sophisticated fighting force. If we have the image of them drinking from the skulls of children, *our* children, emotions will cloud our actions. We'll rush in swinging wildly and get killed. No, we need to see them as people, capable of brilliant thought as well as callous action. *This* will enable us to win, not fostering some exaggerated hatred for what may or may not have happened.

"And keep this in mind: Yusuf doesn't give a shit which army is the strongest in some abstract absolute terms. He will award victory to the one with the determination, the planning and creative edge, and the willingness to avoid unnecessary heroism. There is nothing heroic about war. We're not in this so that gorgeous poets like Samirah will make epics about us, we're here to win. Which means if you get the chance to attack from the rear or to strike the enemy whilst she's down, do it. Swiftly thrust the spear through her side back or genitals or whatever part's exposed. Without needlessly trying to increase her pain but also without hesitation. Luckily for us, the civilian population in the area is ours, so there's no temptation for us to use them. This will be the only thing I ask Yusuf. I don't ask for victory because I'm fairly confident of it. I've been following the reports for a while and we're good to go. What I *do* ask is that we can go on with our lives when we return. That we are able to live with ourselves. This will require some luck."

There was a silence that stretched to infinity. Everybody sat, stunned, digesting. The cold was nothing now, there was only what was going on inside each head. The company sat under the somber eyes of icy stars.

The road stretched on. Daud watched his every step. Not that this was strictly necessary -- he was not first. Still he liked to be extra crisp in where he placed his sandals. Every few steps he scanned for key

points. The front and rear of their company, the horizon (if visible), the sun and the four cardinal direction points. He also kept his knees slightly bent, letting them absorb the uneven steps he was forced to take. Each of these idiosyncrasies came from a stray sentence Naima told him during his training. This was Naima's last surprise for Malika, to top off her pregnancy and her attendance. She had been training Daud for the conflict for the entire duration of Malika's banishment.

"War is the great equaliser," she'd often say. "It is the opposite of society. In real life, you are restricted in what you can do, who you can see, how much of your self you can reveal (both literally and otherwise)! Only in war do you get the chance to emerge victorious over a great lady. Or be slain by the most base of men. So don't mind anything about your opponent. Don't mind her gender, don't mind her affluence or lack thereof. Don't mind her methods of fighting. Because you'll be surprised."

She one day illustrated the point by going against him and his scimitar armed with a rickety wooden chair. Daud charged and slashed but Naima avoided him very successfully. Right up until she stumbled, or at least he thought she did. What happened was that she started falling back, causing Daud to come forward. However, she placed the chair behind her and used it to break her fall. Her arms then showed their incredible strength, as she lifted herself off the ground pushing down on the chair as she fell back and knocked Daud's weapon right out of his hand.

She never taught him technique, stance, etc. She often told him he knew enough of that by instinct. What he didn't know was what it felt like to push through the pain of an almost-severed limb and still drive that weapon through the opponent, letting her collapse in a pool of your own blood. Until he had, he needed to be tested in every way imaginable.

Daud looked down at the lone tree growing about a hundred metres below the people. It had wedged itself into an almost-vertical ledge to stubbornly stem upwards. One of its sides was flat, completely pressed up against the cliff face. The other had branches that tied themselves in knots, desperately reaching for some photons of sunlight, no matter how illusory these might have been. There were no leaves, not at this time of year. He smiled, because the whole picture reminded him of one of Naima's "tasks". This one involved him climbing to the top of the main djinnology tower and onto the roof. From this point (the highest in Baghdad), he was to sit and stare at the wall for 24 hours. So, not only did he have to endure the boredom, hunger, thirst and elements, but also the realisation that just behind him was the most spectacular city panorama in the world. "That was nothing," she told him after he emerged from the task, shaken beyond the core of his core. "In the mountains we had to do this for three days, in a cave, in the freezing cold. It was worth it though. If you can manage to score victory against the most challenging opponent you'll ever have, you might just stand a chance against more mediocre ones."

Malika hopped over yet another gap in the pass. The gap stretched down hundreds of metres. It was impossible to fall in because it was narrow, but the glimpse of what's below was enough.

There was something melancholy about the landscape, and for a while she tried to figure it out. There wasn't really anything to be melancholy about, was there? Certainly not in the landscape -- her life had uncertainties but the mountains themselves were nothing but uplifting. Just the grey sky, the grey and white of rock, snow and sleet...

Malika could see 30 kilometres in each direction and see down at least 2. It was like standing on Intisar's sacred palm, being raised up to the heavens. If any place was closer to Her being, it was -- it was clear now. She had never crossed the mountains before, not like this. Her experience of the mountains consisted of reading about them and seeing them from afar. Actually, being here, she could see, hear and feel based on her childhood reading. The entire place was chock-full of djinns and spirits. In traditional djinnology, they manifested themselves most clearly in the mountains. An ancient proverb stated "in the city, djinns can be felt at a distance of three blocks, in the village three streets, in the field three leaps, in the forest three steps, in the desert three handbreadths, in the mountains three hairs". This was completely and utterly true. Here was the birthplace of the djinns of old. She knew people invented them *here*. Right here. It was easy to let your imagination soar here, because it was already halfway there. There was none of the mundaneness of ground level, just the sublime -- extended to ridiculous dimensions. It was here that the first myths were born. Those who communicated with the first djinns (long before Intisar, Johara, or even an oldie like Ygwolm came onto the scene) probably walked these very paths, probably stepped where she stepped. Malika saw them too now. Every bump in the rock was a different spirit. For the first time Malika saw them face to face, and she was sad to be watching such illusory beings. To her they were only dust and ashes, which is why seeing her surroundings come alive made her almost mourn for the dust and yearn for the ashes. *Now I realise about Alia. Of course, it was here that she began her*

*quest. Here, everyone is her own djinnologist.*

Her thoughts were broken as a tremendous light hit her eyes. But this was no djinnological experience. This was her stepping out of the mountain pass onto the plateau. She was so wrapped up in her thoughts she just didn't notice, but they were at their destination. On the horizon of the plain, Malika saw the outline of tens of thousands of people. Destiny beckoned seductively.

## Chapter 41 in which we are “welcomed” to war

Three or four people emerged from the swarming mass and approached the company. By now it was definitely *Naima's* because Malika had withdrawn more and more into the background. The party consisted entirely of men (a man on a horse?!), an unusual thing in military rank. In fact, something about them looked unmilitary, as if there was no natural leader to discipline them. It was like a colony consisting entirely of worker ants. They approached one of them (what made *him* the leader? he was the same as the rest). The man greeted Malika first, but everyone could see his eyes wondering towards the Warrior of Warriors.

“I am Hajib. As you can see things are hectic here. We've only had the campaign in full swing for a week, but what a week!” he said with a forced laugh that showed just how tired he was.

“Hajib, give us the quickest rundown of how many people are here,” said Naima coming forward. It was clear the martial spirit within her was waking.

“Certainly, my Lady,” he said looking at her feet more than her eyes. With Separators it's hard to tell though. “56,000 souls of our army against 50,000 of the hordes. Of ours, 27,000 are from the regular army, 12,000 from the eunuchs' battalion, 14,000 from men's battalions, 3,000 Fighting Sisters. And your illustrious company. Although...” he said looking at Habuba but Malika cut him off.

“Our company is exceedingly well prepared. What of battles and casualties thus far?” Naima asked.

“Negligible on both sides. It's been a series of skirmishes. And--”

“We must go,” Naima said. “Please have *all* the boxes on my donkeys carried over to where we can pitch our tents. They are very fragile and important. Break one and it'll cost us the campaign and your your life.”

“Perhaps some provisions?”

Naima hesitated for a second, as if considering whether asking for provisions would be showing weakness (to herself). “Some water and limes, and your freshest plov.”

Their tents were set up between the eunuchs' battalion and the Fighting Sisters. Immediately Naima with Samirah and Rasha went to their respective battalions whilst the rest remained. Malika could not believe how the fuck someone can just march for 2 weeks in the mountains (stopping only to freeze at night), arrive at a logical break point and then go on to more activity without sitting down. *Then again, what am I expecting? I'm weak and green. At least here.* So she sat back and watched camp life go by.

Although Naima and Samirah were not Sisters anymore, they were still considered honorary Sisters. Sisters obeyed Naima unquestioningly (as shown in the incident of Elizabeth). If Samirah told one of them off, that Sister would be in ecstasy. Samirah reserved a rebuke only for those she thought had *some* potential.

Naima asked what the Sha-Ul had actually been going on. Evidently she did not esteem Hajib's explanatory and military skills and needed a Sister to explain it.

“The enemy will attack tomorrow morning, I'm sure,” one of them proposed. Incidentally this was the sister “murdered” at Naima's whim. “They know that any more time and we'll begin. And the barbarians don't want to lose initiative.”

“Well, it's about time,” said Naima.

“Where are we to go when it begins?”

“Are you then going with us?” some Sisters asked eagerly.

Samirah answered that Malika's entire company was to go with the Sisters.

Rasha approached an entire hoard of eunuchs who immediately turned and yielded. Those at the front recognised her as the Grand Eunuch, who had wielded influence against all odds from right behind the Khalifa's nose. Those behind the first rows had seen the recognition of those at the front and so on, ad infinitum. They began to listen. This was when Rasha for the first time spoke her mind. Or, that's what we think happened. The words she delivered on that day of her communion with thousands of eunuchs became lost. Who would transcribe something one shaved-head told to a bunch of other shaved-heads? All that's left are some accounts of people who happened to see the gathering from the other side of the camp. Despite them being far from the spot, they describe an amazing scene. There is Rasha standing on an elevation of some sort, perhaps a box. She is speaking and the crowd is literally trembling, the waves moving through them like goosebumps. Of course, we don't know what she's saying, but she pointed to her shaved head and one eyewitness says she saw Rasha drop her pants from afar. We might conclude that this was where Rasha had first Revealed herself. What we do know, is that once she left, the entire eunuch battalion was transformed. Others couldn't put their fingers on it, but they did feel it. The eunuchs all looked...more determined than ever before. Considering these were *soldier* eunuchs, that made for one formidable battalion. It was probably that eunuch unit, which returned to Baghdad with a new state of mind, that was the catalyst for the spectacular changes that took place within the Khalifate over the next decades...

Rasha came back to the tents at sunset, just as things began to heat up. Tomorrow a battle was imminent, so the Khalifa's loyal subjects were going to make the most of tonight. For the Sisters this involved a host of games. The first were drinking games. Now, one might reasonably ask what room there is for even *one* drinking game in a society that consumes no alcohol, where repugnance to it is such that even the most rebellious would not consider taking a sip? The answer is simple: there were plenty of other beverages available. There was tea. This concoction was a specialty of the Sisters<sup>22</sup>. When Samirah brought some to the company only Rasha and Habuba had the tits to try it, and immediately afterwards they were shaken to the core, literally. This tea was the strongest drink that could be imagined, it seemed a hundred times stronger than chewing on the tea leaves themselves. But that's because of all the other additives. There was no sugar, just lots of spices, chilli, cinnamon, ginger and even a hint of garlic to get the bodily juices flowing. This was the drink to have before going into battle. Even if you were an 80-year-old hag you'd be overflowing with vigour.

The Sisters had devised dozens of games with this "tea". These ranged from the physical (arm-wrestling) to the ludicrous (staring contests) to the sublime (improvised poetry recitals). The beauty of this last one was, the more you won the more tea you had which in turn helped you win more. For the drink was a nice impetus to flights of the imagination. Samirah of course was invited to have a go, although she said that being a *composer* of poems actually made her mediocre at improv. Nevertheless, this was her winning entry, as related that night, near the fire, in front of the plov, before the Company and Sisters:

"My bed and nightgown  
Are surely drenched in tears,  
My ribcage heaves, makes sobs flee from within  
For I am not a thing to my beloved  
He looks at me like I were a night-table (or some such furniture)  
In vain do I give my life  
To war, to heroism, bravery  
There are two choices before me:  
Either I'll perish and rot  
Unlamented by the One that matters  
Or victory shall be mine  
And I'll go back to my shafra of solitude  
Uncelebrated."

As soon as she finished, there was raucous laughter and applause from everyone. Even Habuba, who having not studied the Classic Poets wasn't in a position to appreciate the parody, adored it. The lack of traditional rhythmic patterns -- that was the proof of improvisation, but it also made Samirah's speech

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<sup>22</sup> See the Tea Recipe in the appendix

playful. She took her well-deserved tea and sat back down next to an all-approving Rasha.

"See, this is what war's all about," she joked, lovingly elbowing her on the side. "Most people try talk up the killing, the sadism, the atrocities, the famines and that sweet sweet bloodlust. And whilst those things *are* pleasurable indeed, the real secret is this. Just sitting round with your friends (for in war everyone in the battalion is your Sister) without a care for society. Or normalcy."

"You're right!" said Rasha. "When someone asks me about the conflict I'll talk of this and won't even mention the atrocities as a selling point."

There was a silence, but it was only short. It was far easier to joke and laugh about drinking out of babies' skulls than it was to think about what tomorrow might *actually* bring. Even for Naima.

They dug into their plov. The rice was very slightly salty -- just in the right quantity. The carrots and onions were crisp, the spices three-dimensional, the mutton comforting. There weren't many better foods for a military unit out on an elevated plateau in the winter. Each mouthful travelled to the stomach leaving a warm sensation.

The other drinking games centred around aphrodisiacs. This was something every woman in the army had with her, with the exception of Malika and possibly three to five others amongst thousands. The night before battle, every woman had to "relieve" herself. No exception. The aphrodisiacs were there merely to facilitate this. The reasoning behind this -- one of the few historical examples of mandatory mass masturbation -- was simple military logic. It was inconceivable that anyone could fight if she had unreleased sexual energy. This was dangerous, so it was a necessary part of the checklist. Before battle: you inspected your weapons, your horse, your sandals, fastened your spirit, had an orgasm and a good night's sleep. Now, some women like Malika had their husbands with them but this was a rarity. The majority simply had an aphrodisiac and retired to the privacy of their tent. Of course, the aphrodisiacs were taken with a bit more gusto by the Sisters, since they'd clearly go to the tents in Pairs. In fact, for them it was the most essential part of making sure they fought as One the next day.

We know nothing about how this custom was manifested in men, if at all. Nobody was interested in what they did the night before a battle, since the whole question of whether or not there *was* anything to release was the scientific debate of decade. As for the eunuchs, it was obvious there was nothing they could or should do. You had to be human to require sexual release.

The barbarians attacked that night, an hour before sunrise. It was meant to be a surprise but of course it wasn't, everyone in the camp knew. It was just that most expected it to come a few hours later. When the horn blew, everyone was calm and collected. Every woman, man and eunuch went to their designated areas and began their attempts to drive the Barbarian back. It truly was a smelly and filthy Barbarian body (military body, I mean). They wore rags and it was obvious they hadn't released any sexual energy for some months. This alone was enough to lean the battle in the favour of the Khalifa's army. All in all, the barbarians were driven back by early morning. A quick body count revealed they lost 700 people, the Khalifate 400.

Of course, they were attacked by only a small fraction of the army, but it signalled the start of the campaign proper.

What came next were 3 extremely hectic weeks. The longest time that went by without Malika being in hearing range of someone dying was four hours. It was clockwork. In fact, exhausted from the constant rotations, Malika et. al. slept using the blood-curdling screams of the wounded as timekeepers. After about three days they weren't even blood-curdling. There were no atrocities, nothing too dramatic. Just the everyday business of armed conflict.

The 50,000 were divided into 5 equal groups. Two were sent to chase after the remaining barbarians from the division that attacked them. They returned five days later, having overrun several villages. When the barbarians retreated they took everything they could from each village and burnt it. About half of each village was killed, but it wasn't anything like the stories told in the mountains. "Perhaps it's only because they were on the run," someone suggested, "they didn't have much time for fun."

The other three groups were sent in a merciless rotation of round-the-clock attacks. This would involve sneaking away from the plateau and approaching one of the barbarian camps (they were spread out over 15 kilometres) by either crossing a river, slipping under a rock, charging from a hill, etc. The day was divided into three 8-hour shifts. Each group was divided into units. Malika's Banner was a unit, the Sisters were large enough to form dozens of units, and so forth. Units came back in one of three conditions: either they were full, or they lost 10% of their people or they *kept* 10% of their people.

The 3 weeks were hectic but bland. The one constant was the brutality of reality. There was absolutely



no time or energy for anyone to think of any higher ideal. The notion of protecting the northern Khalifate completely disappeared. Sure, every participant that returned (and the history books show this to be a formidable 33,000 out of 50,000) was glad of the results. But only in retrospect. In war, everyone is a nihilist thinking of but sleep, food, excrement and death. 'Twas blind and pointless right until the last battle.

## Chapter 42 in which focus is obtained

The last battle didn't come suddenly or spontaneously. It was planned by the brass of both sides. Not that they met (although it was not unheard of for the leaders of both armies to actually meet and plan the climax of their mutual decimation). No, in this case the leadership wanted to meet the Hordes of the West head on. The hordes would answer the call and accept the battle.

That morning, they all crawled out of their tents, Hajib and others instructing every single person to get at least 9 hours sleep ("the first sensible decision he's made," Naima would say). A count of all divisions was quickly made. Malika's company had so far escaped with no fatalities. Amina did have a broken arm but this had been mended with a makeshift splint days ago (thank you Samirah!) and she had gone to work since then. As they stood under a blistering sun (what happened to winter?), Malika sweated and constantly returned to her tent for more water. She noticed Naima and Samirah smiling. They seemed to be pointing at the sun and its cruelty and having a lively chatter about it, like it was the best thing that could have happened on a day like this.

Were they out of their minds? There were a trillion discomforts here and about three comforts. One of these was the cold. Malika found herself fresh and alert even after a tough mission. Even if she had to sprint down a two kilometre forty-five degree mountain slope whilst being chased by a relentless mass, at least the cold drove her on. Now she thought she'd collapse under the heat. Samirah called one of the servants, whispered something in his ear and ten minutes later all the Crates were assembled there. This Malika couldn't let go. She came up to Naima, but Naima had put up her hand as if to stop her.

"Don't mind these Malika. They will be opened and made use of after we leave. And you'll see them in action."

"Will I?"

"Of course, since...oh, I'm sorry, I completely forgot to tell you! We're setting up a slight trap. I've told the company and the Sisters, but not you...I'm sorry!" she added seeing Malika's protruding lower lip. "When I give the signal, we retreat *no matter what*. Thus we'll have the Fighting Sisters and us (at least 3,000) being chased by the horde. Which can and will turn into tens of thousands: these folk are quite eager to give chase."

"I know, I know!" said Malika rubbing her bruises from the aforementioned sprint down the mountain (as well as from a crossing of a stream that she had to do in about 12 seconds -- lucky the horde couldn't swim).

Naima nodded. "Yes, you've got quite the--"

--they were interrupted by Hajib who strutted across the front of the battalion lines. He waved his hands and in three seconds, 45,000 stepped into formation. Rasha mumbled something about these being truly desperate times if a man's addressing the *entire* army.

"We are about to go. I've been extremely impressed with you throughout the campaign thus far. Now is the deciding moment. I trust you've all...adequately prepared yourselves..." He looked right at the Sisters, like he addressed his comment to them specifically. "I wish I had some plan for this battle. But I won't. Since it's impossible to plan this I shan't try. We will just go forward and meet them and whatever happens happens."

There was almost a gasp of relief from the body of warriors. They were being trusted in their spontaneity. But the crunch came after, when Hajib started shouting, from the top of his lungs. "I'd also love to tell you something inspirational, some words that would echo in your minds throughout the battle, that would make you exceed your limits. Something about 'freedom', 'our way of life', the Khalifate's

Golden Age and the barbarians' Dark Age. But that's bullshit. None you have any idealism left now. If you do you, haven't been fighting hard enough. All the things that mean so much at home where there's a warm fire, mean *nothing* out here. Even if I could say something that would affect your hearts and minds, what difference would it make to the battle -- when both heart and mind are turned upside down? So these are my words: go forth, kill as many of your enemy as possible and as few of your own as possible. Intisar be with us!"

He turned and led the charge.

Naima walked shoulder to shoulder with Samirah on her left and Malika on her right. Something made her feel light and easygoing. Several times she wondered if it was the cruel bloodlust of the Assassin resurfacing. In most likelihood it was Hajib's speech. It wasn't at all what she expected. She even admitted to her marching neighbours that she probably misjudged him. Before they came, after they left, there'd be room for examining the Higher Purpose. There had to be, for Naima made the conscious decision to attend the conflict -- it certainly wasn't to please the Khalifa! But now, the immediate was *all* there was.

Her real joy was the baby. She would make her or him proud, protect it from the weaponry hordes, then from the tyranny of the Khalifa, then from her own inadequacies as a mother, then from the universal law of gravitation that states that most people will descend to mediocrity if left alone. Her left arm linked with Samirah's and then back to her precious belly, her palm stroking it, giving it warmth and energy. Her right arm had her staff. This was Naima. It was like all the times before, but now she was fighting arm-in-arm with *two*. It was to make for an interesting day, one that would teach her a lot about herself. She thought back to the shit she used to pull in the good old days when things were bad. If she could do *those* things defending Samirah, how much more would she do defending her womb too?

Naima's musings were interrupted by the start of the battle. The Khalifa's army walked over the crest of the hill in the shape of a bullet. The Hordes were in the shape of a horseshoe that engulfed the bullet. Immediately they were attacked on all sides. This was what they wanted -- the battle should start immediately. Otherwise thousands die before they even reach a point where they can engage the enemy, stampeded by two armies colliding along one front only.

The chaos was immediate. There must have been 20,000 little battles going on at the same time. Straight away Malika copped an arrow through her right palm. She dropped her scimitar and spear and fell off her horse but was caught and laid out on the ground by Naima. Five minutes later she was standing (albeit shakily) and holding her blade in her left. There was an arrow-stump coming out of her hand. That would come out later. If there was a later. The bleeding already slowed due to Samirah's bandage. But Malika being shot was not the most memorable part of first 5 minutes of battle. It was Rasha's reaction. When she saw the woman who launched the arrow, something in her snapped. She got off her horse, raised her sword over her head with both hands and emitted an earth-shattering yell. Everyone stopped and looked at her. The barbarians stopped too, such was the shock -- fortunately this allowed Samirah and Naima to kill a few each by swinging their staffs even as they faced Rasha. Rasha's eyes changed colour. She was going on a suicidal charge. "Rasha don't!" someone screamed -- nobody remembered who. "You have lots..." The gushing wind Rasha made as she broke ranks drowned out the sentence. She continued running and screaming all the way to the group of barbarians from which the arrow had come. Arrow after arrow were fired at her and about 12 separate people tried to take her head off, but she was invincible: everyone missed. Until the moment she reached the enemy. There were 8 of them, which was uneven enough, but they saw her coming so they opened up ranks and then encircled her. This time the scream came from Malika, Naima and the rest. She was gone. Their view was immediately obscured by a few hundred people rushing across the line of sight but the last thing they saw was the 8 surrounding Rasha. She was dead.

"She's dead," Naima said with a shaking voice, as she decapitated two more people.

"*She* is dead," said Amina and everyone nodded, understanding. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) the eunuchs' battalions were on the other side of the battlefield. They didn't see their Great One fall, or things might have turned out very differently that day.

Much as they all would have loved to take out some grief time, there was much killing to do.

Malika adopted the tactic of walking up to a stray enemy looking at the arrow shaft sticking out of her hand in disbelief. Her left hand held the sword behind her back. When she got close enough out it came and out came the opponent's bowels. Naima nodded in approval. *I knew she'd put to use my words against gallantry in war. Sure, later she'll have nightmares about this. At least she'll be around to have them.*

Malika's hand had gone numb which took almost all the pain with it. She didn't visualise the future, when she might pull out the arrow. Imagination on this forsaken hill was a waste of energy.

Each Pair of Sisters were a flock of birds that just *know* when to change their flight direction, except there were two instead of a flock. And their co-ordination was not on some animal level. It was the result of an incredible physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual, spiritual and djinnological closeness between each Pair. In fact, when these multifaceted relationships fell into disfavour (about a century and a half after this battle) the Fighting Sisters dissolved into oblivion. There was just no value in having two warriors who merely *trained* together fight side by side.

Naima stood 3 steps in front of Samirah<sup>23</sup>. They'd approach a group of 4 or 5 soldiers in that formation. Always two of the people would be stupid enough to slash at them, one at each. The Pair would step aside but in opposite directions so that they effectively surrounded the group from two sides. None of the group would see it that way, they'd just try to attack again. The gals would step to the side again, always keeping the enemy between the two of them. They didn't break eye contact. When this continued for a few minutes and the enemies were catching on to the fact that they were captive, the Pair would go for the kill. They started at the same time, without any signal. Each staff made three continuous circles, that's 2160 degrees of revolution. They struck at the legs, then the midsection, then the head. The other one reversed the order. Sometimes one would start with the legs, sometimes another. They didn't alternate, it was completely unpredictable yet they always started in complement. The result: 4 or 5 barbarians peeled into fine shreds.

There was a period of time where they fought linking hands. Samirah had her staff in her right and Naima in her left. They swung at each side, and in front and behind and below and above as a single double-weapon-wielding monster. They could certainly have managed without this "attachment" but it was for mental strength. Plus each contributed to the other's momentum. They spun letting the centripetal force do the damage. They fought back-to-back, using a belt to tie themselves together. This allowed one of them to bend lifting the other in the air where she could avoid low blows and deliver some devastating ones of her own. When someone drew blood from Samirah, Naima's reaction was fast enough to be associated with the reflex of someone whose *own* body is hurt. When Naima stumbled and lost her footing, Samirah would dive onto the ground, roll in front of her and strike upwards at the perpetrators. There was no end to the things they did. And every movement was total togetherness.

In the heat of battle (aided by the heat of the sun) they turned and saw women from the Horde, all on horses, galloping towards them. Samirah grabbed Naima and pulled both of them to a clearing. They were going to take them on themselves. An observer would have thought this incredibly foolish, but they just stood absolutely still as the distance between them and the lead horses decreased. When it was three metres, Naima jumped onto Samirah's shoulders in one swift motion. She took the two staffs and attached them at the ends (the staffs had hooks for just such an occasion) effectively doubling the length. Now that she was at their height, two whirls later the horses were riderless. Three more slammed into the disoriented first horses, which allowed Naima to strike again. Then she took one of the horses, as did Samirah, and the two of them charged each of the remaining riders in turn. Each rider was skewered from two angles, the staffs making a V in the victim's chest before they were pulled out for the next one. This was to minimise the chance of a rider avoiding the staff. The most amazing thing was how long this took. From Naima's first jump to the moment all riders were down, it was a gap of about 50 seconds.

The most uplifting thing for Naima was the baby. Her stomach hadn't bulged yet, true, but she could feel the start of a start in there. The uplifting wasn't just emotional, there was an immediate physical aspect. Thoughts of the foetus brought down her centre of gravity, made her more grounded. She paid more attention to breathing. Her strikes were stronger as she was using her belly more. The fact the belly was now connected to Intisar by an invisible cord had a lot to do with it.

The time had finally come. The hill had been tasting of blood for enough time to wear the Barbarians down. The sun was thirty degrees from the horizon. Naima beat the retreat. Only a few thousand responded but only a few thousand needed to. As soon as they ran back to camp, a hundred soldiers from the enemy followed, roaring, screaming and chanting most obscene couplets about the sureness of victory and what they were going to do to the enemy. This was natural: when they saw someone retreating they stopped looking around. They forgot they weren't winning. It was also lucky most Khalific soldiers did not speak Aragonese, Genoan, Venetian or Parisian. Ordinary soldiers, if they knew what the enemy was screaming would have found it hard to follow their plan. They'd probably have charged instead, so insulting were the

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<sup>23</sup> Though no longer Fighting Sisters their tactics were very typical of any fighting Pair

epithets.

First a thousand chased them, then four, then ten, then twenty. Malika felt her whole body was ripped up, exploded from within. It wasn't that she was out of breath, she forgot what breathing *was*. Everything was anaerobic. Nobody stopped, the only people who did were those who fell from arrows fired by the chasing foe. But those were few, for few archers bothered to fire into the retreat, and those that did had crap aim. Malika just needed to convince herself to take just one more step and repeat the process ad infinitum. The sun was now behind them, baking their necks and frying the backs of their feet.

'Twas simple, effective, beautiful. When Malika crossed the ridge of the last hill before the camp, she saw a giant structure, the height of at least ten people. It was some kind of screen but there was cloth all over, one of Naima's servants on each side. Around them was a scattering of wooden boxes, the ones Naima brought. Malika laughed in spite of herself, in spite of everything. The whole thing had the notion of a Sculpture about it, and it reminded her of Jamilah's great sculpture in wood, dung, bottles and Basim. There was something about both that combined calculation, symbolism and utility.

She was the last of their army to reach the screen. Behind her were thousands of enemy soldiers at a distance of a few hundred metres. As soon as Malika reached it, Naima pulled the cloth away to reveal a mirror. But what a mirror! It was greatly curved inward, pointing right at the enemy. Malika was unsure what this meant. She scratched her forehead in thought, which was however interrupted by screams behind her. Turning around revealed what had happened.

The sun was setting straight ahead, the mirror facing it at an angle. It was also facing the onslaught of barbarians. The front line of these was severely handicapped. 100 people were unconscious from a severe concentrated sunstroke. Even better, a few were actually on fire. The oncoming army gasped and began scattering. It wasn't that many were hit, but to go from being so sure of victory to this was too much. The process then was simple: whenever the sun was focussed on a spot containing 500 people, 200 would be smart enough to scatter immediately. The others would panic, but in the three seconds it would take them to realise they needed to run, it was too late. They were unconscious from heatstroke. Then, if the beam stayed on the same place for another 30 seconds, the centre would catch fire, and after a minute the entire mass would be on fire. Naima worked out that the optimum strategy was to make the beam stay in one place for seconds, enough to put everyone under and set maybe 10 alight. When she made this decision Naima knew she was breaking her own rule about gallantry in war. But this was different, with the mirror you actually got to choose between incapacitation and death. And moving it around faster resulted in more incapacitated people.

30 minutes later there were tens of thousands of bodies on the ground. Thousands captured, thousands killed before they could wake up. It was just impractical to surround and take the whole lot prisoner. The mirror lay shattered, a few of the barbarians did reach and destroy it (at the cost of their lives). It was over.

Malika sat and watched the aftermath in a mix of horror and fascination. Except Rasha, all her beloveds survived! Rasha's body was certainly beginning to rot by now. There was no hope of even identifying it in the organic mush that covered the ground.

Malika's hand was bleeding again. She bandaged it and the pain receded to the absolute background. What was important was the parabola! To pull this off took nothing short of genius. The sun's rays came in parallel and reflected to the focus of the parabola. Because the mirror was very large, representing the cusp of the Noble Curve, the focus was far away, resulting in a sort of death-ray gun. This was Samirah and Naima's little secret they were talking about relating to Daud's treatise. It took Naima's resourcefulness to manufacture and test the mirror, to bring it in boxes and assemble it here. Coupled with Samira's astronomical skills (which Jamil helped with) to time the best moment to retreat. *There'd be time to think about this later*. For now Malika wasn't fond of thinking. She just liked the fact that people were alive, that their Khalifate had won. The idealism was creeping in again now that the campaign was over. She stared at the hill. The bodies were being scavenged by animals and inspected by survivors. There were few wounded by now.

Only Naima was missing from the company. She walked the land alone. She was barefoot. The blood bubbled up, congealed, with every step she took. There were constant squishing and crunching sounds. The air stank like...like nothing on earth. It was hell. The smell of several thousand bodies dismembered and charred to ash is not something to be taken lightly.

Naima wept.

She was afraid the spirit of the Assassins had bubbled up congealed through her soul, that she had djinnologically damaged her womb, that what she had done might influence the child's psyche. From a rational perspective Naima knew this was bullshit. She did not go into someone else's land. She did not kill

anyone defenseless but only people wanting to kill her. People who would have loved to march all the way to Baghdad. Odds were ninety-nine out of a hundred she'd go back to Baghdad and live a normal life. Assassin'ry would be gone once more. But she wasn't rational at this moment. She didn't want to be rational. Naima wept.

## Chapter 43 in which much time travel occurs

"That's the problem with people these days - they have no time. Nobody would sit down and 'waste' half an hour staring at a plant. But without such things, we're lost..." said Alia.

Rasha walked to the stone table, took a glass of water and brought it to her.

"Thank you," she said taking the glass, drinking with eagerness. Rasha sat down on the futon virtually at Alia's feet.

Rasha got comfortable, as comfortable as she could get in front of Alia. In just two hours she'd be whisked away to administer the expenses of the Minister of Djinnology. Fun.

"Did I tell you what started our dynasty?"

"The Abbasids? No. But I suspect it has something to do with djinnology. It always does."

"You have a real knack for the obvious."

What kind of compliment was that? Or was it some flaw she found "cute"? Nobody dared find *Rasha* cute.

"Relax," she said seeing the redness of Rasha's face. "It's the most sincere of compliments. Not everyone has a knack for the obvious. An overwhelming majority don't. They're either too stupid or usually too unfocussed to notice. It takes genius to tell it like it is. The Khalifate in Damascus had this position: Yusuf is the epitome of evil. Ergo anything from the traditional stories that he did should be illegal."

"And the one who became First Khalifa disagreed?"

"She was like you, she stated the obvious. Many of the stories have Yusuf do good. Once when a fishing village loyal to him was experiencing difficulties he blew all until the fish were pulled to the shore."

"They were apostates for giving favour to Yusuf though, no?"

"They certainly were. But (as Damascus would have us believe), rewarding loyalty is bad because Yusuf did it."

"You could argue that it is contemptible to reward apostasy."

Alia smiled again. *She had never given me cause to regret taking her under my wing.* "Those are the kinds of debates that raged in Damascus for years before the shift of power."

"Why does it always end in bloodshed?"

"These people have never truly felt the breath of Intisar. They only know something of Her big toe, not Her. This makes them angry. That anger has to go somewhere. If someone is a thief and she is not sophisticated she will go out of her way to deny she's a thief. So too when someone is not close to Intisar. Or at least so says this old fart!"

"That's not like you, so...self-deprecating. Come on, we still have two hours until I have to go. Let's focus. The equivalent of staring at a plant for half an hour."

"When I stare at a gazelle I like her to stare back. If the gazelle has *no eyes*, how much calm will it bring her to be stared at?"

"More than you can possibly imagine."

Malika walked to the ivory table, took a glass of lime sherbet and brought it to Nadia.

"Thank you," she said taking the glass and sipping stylishly. Malika sat on the divan next to Nadia.

"Your father is not dealing with it too well... Although I suppose neither of us are in a position to dictate how he should deal with the death of his wife."

"You suppose rightly."

"I did lose a most revered commander. My time under her wing was some of my most treasured."



"Really?" Malika smiled.

"She taught me so much about life, leadership and management."

"You mean for a recently promoted bureaucrat possibly on her way to becoming Khalifa?" Malika said slapping her on the arm.

"She says I've improved 100%."

"And you mention nothing?"

"I like to keep a certain...mystique."

To an extent Malika was still a child. But the child in her was more free than anyone Nadia had known. Malika would go to the markets in the most ludicrous outfits, oblivious to stares she was getting, and tell loud jokes at boring public functions that would make everyone's job of standing around looking dignified all that much harder.

"So does this mean I'm already speaking to the next Khalifa? You and not your sister?" Silence. "Yields of rams, goats, grain and apricots. Won't make for good reading will they?"

"What do you mean?"

"When they write the history of the Khalifate and people read it, they could fall asleep. Our concerns and achievements will either excite them -- or not. I reckon that's a good test of whether we're doing right."

"But what does it matter? Maybe the readers in 1,100 years will be degenerates from the West. They may have even turned the world upside down, swapped servant and master. Do we really give a shit what they think?"

"We should. If the same things that excited us excite them, it makes it more probable that our values aren't just random. If it resonates through the ages it's more likely to be true. And things like the sciences will do that more than how many bushels of wheat we grew." She was a sagely child.

"I think I've discovered your calling," said Nadia after a long pause. "It's *not* that of a bureaucrat. It's something else, something I see in your eyes."

"Is that all you see?"

Nadia blushed, at first from what Malika said but then from the sheer pleasure that here was someone who could actually make her blush. Malika had no inhibition about authority or convention whatsoever. *Of course*, Nadia noted, *while this is a refreshing change it might be dangerous to the Khalifate*.

Habuba walked to the window sill, took a glass of Sisters' Tea and brought it to Rasha. Rasha became completely hooked on it since being first introduced to it, 3 months before the Campaign. There was something about it, the strength and almost-masochism required to drink it. Not to mention the most-welcome side-effects.

"Thank you," she said drinking it, but not before giving Habuba 6 sips. "Now, tell me, how many eunuchs are there in the Khalifate? Also if you were to line up all our uteruses on the ground, how far would the line reach?"

"I get the feeling you already know the answer."

"Of course I do. Go do it. When is your...Liberation scheduled for?"

"Two days from now," she answered with no lack of pride.

"Well, you better get me the answer before then because you're not going through with it until you work it out... Don't pout, it doesn't work! Liberate your mind before your body. And if you're like any other eunuch I know (including myself long ago) you're underestimating the magnitude of the problem."

"I know. But still, the idea of uteruses lined up on the ground. Isn't it rather graphic and...literal?"

"There's nothing wrong with graphic. As for the image being literal, that's because it *is*."

"You mean there *is* an actual collection of all these uteruses somewhere out there?"

"Not all of them," Rasha said cryptically. "But some... Do you know that when they took yours they also took a part of your mind?"

"I always thought the mind was Intisar's domain."

"Everything is affected by physical change. Every part of your body affects the range of perceptions that you have access to. These are the fertiliser from which complex thoughts grow."

"Does this mean eunuchs are retards? I've always thought the opposite. At least from watching you."

"No, retards we ain't. Because we are so restricted in what we do, we find ways to beat the incredible odds and develop minds of our own. Minds that aren't like regular people's. In fact, this might account for our disproportionate influence in every sphere of public life."

"That and we don't have distractions like families to slow us down."

"True," Rasha said smiling. "But it comes at a cost. Some things are missing from our mind. Emotional

aspects that have to be...reclaimed.”

There was a silence after which Habuba pronounced “it's not fair!” in a voice muchly resembling a child's tantrum.

“No it's not. But you'll do a lot in your life to remedy the injustice.”

“Is Rasha now amongst the holy women?”

“She did learn from the best.”

“So will things be very different Afterwards?”

“No. Most of the journey is up here,” she said pointing to the shaved top of Habuba's head. “And you've progressed quite a lot there. In fact, I now proclaim you as a full female.”

“What?!”

“Yesterday I finally thought of a name for you. To the world you will be Habuba the eunuch. But to me, behind these closed doors, and to anyone else you choose to reveal this to, at your sole discretion, you will be W-----.”

W----- quivered in anticipation of redemption, and relaxed from the knowledge that redemption had already come.

## Chapter 44 in which a corpse is defiled for the third time in our short history

Upon learning of Rasha's death, the Khalifa declared a week of mourning. This despite the scowls of some members of Court (“there were so many *people* killed in the campaign, why don't they get a mourning period?”). Many saw it as a sign the eunuchs were becoming too recognised: first the Khalifa lifts the curfew and now this. There was hushed talk in Baghdad's suburbs about giving the eunuchs what they deserved. Few eunuchs walked the streets. However, as often happens in a cosmopolitan city like Baghdad, there were so many issues that this was quickly forgotten. When the next item of the week came along everyone pretended like nothing had happened.

### AN OPEN EPISTLE TO THE PEOPLE OF BAGHDAD FROM MALIKA AL-BASIMI

Esteemed populace of Baghdad! I cordially invite you all to the public disputation and Inquiry that I have been called to answer by the Natural Philosophers of the Human Body. It will take place on the 11th of this holy month, at sunset in the main school of djinnology.

To give some background: as many know, I was exiled earlier in the year by the Khalifa (peace be upon her! may Intisar extend her life and reign! may she be inscribed as one of the righteous ones, gathered close to Intisar's sacred bosom!) in her Infinite Wisdom. The Khalifa aimed to protect both Court and public from my subversive ideas and disgraceful actions regarding issues like the status of males and eunuchs, the nature of our government and the respect due to our Brights.

It was a fruitful exile. Where haughty I learnt humility, where misled in my philosophical conclusions I saw a Path. As a result, the Khalifa, in her Even More Infinite Wisdom agreed to have pity on me, Malika al-Basimi, a wretch in the eyes of Intisar and her creations. I have been recalled to Baghdad, have re-entered mainstream society and have even been given the grace to participate in the conflict in the north.

However, during my exile I had been unable to be idle. Although the purpose of exile is to allow the Fallen to examine her actions, her conscience and her attitude and to weep in silence and solitude over what she has done (or in my case, what she was *prevented* from doing by Wisdom of Decree), I could not. In my vanity and restlessness I pursued the paths of further knowledge, which yielded two distinct fruits. The first Fruit was taken to the Observatory where it was well-received and found useful, to the surprise of my undeserving mind. The second caused more commotion, for the Natural Philosophers of the Human Body had found it to be rotten, full of the Worms of Insubordination, full of the Maggots of Heresy. As a result, I have been called to answer charges of treason. The topic is a favourite: whether aphrodisiacs are harmful to the body. This isn't sophistry, the future of our glorious Khalifate, indeed of the world, may just depend on

this disputation. And for those who like live entertainment, they will get to see my disembowelment if I am found guilty of Heresy or Treason.

"This? This is your problem?" Jamil asked Malika.

"Essentially."

"Well, then you're essentially an idiot...My Lady," he added with a mock curtsy, the same kind eunuchs did before their ladies.

"Oh my! This level of insubordination -- nay, mutiny -- warrants a reporting to the proper authorities."

"You mean the Khalifa? The city guard is missing a chief-of-staff."

"No, I mean Intisar. It was she who created thee in all thy male inferiority. Naturally, it's to her I must complain you're using your mind almost as if it were an autonomous unit."

"Are you done?"

"Yes. So what is your solution?"

Jamil walked to the divan and sat down, but not before stretching his spine, cracking his knuckles and a myriad other forms of coquetry. He loved to be a drama king when he had an answer nobody else had. Which couldn't have been that often based on the laws of probability and human nature.

"You say Jamilah committed this murder openly, without bothering to hide. You say there's no direct evidence establishing a connexion betwixt her and th'afforementioned murder."

"Darling, can you please stop speaking like a manuscript?"

"I'll be as bland as you like. If she made no efforts to hide it, there will be some trace of her on the body of this...this man."

"His name is Basim thank you very much. Basim the First."

"There's a second?"

"--that's right, I forgot to tell you his name! Yes, the man whose hands have allowed me to cause controversy. I named him Basim."

"But you're right about the body. What do you expect to find?"

"I don't expect. There's no point, let's just go at night and see what we find. We have nothing to lose: the disputation is in 3 days. Who knows what will happen? Things may get ugly. There may be even further conflict. Civil war. Anything I can bring back will be worth our effort."

They left the house at the second hour. Of course, it wasn't Malika and Jamil, it was Malika and some dude in a Separator.

"This is the second Basim whose corpse I'll be desecrating in the space of just a few months."

There were 6 cemeteries in Baghdad and only one was within city walls. This arrangement had made it onto the list of top 12,000 reasons why Baghdad was most civilised. Rumour had it (for the aristocracy relied on rumour to feed their arrogance) that cities in the West were much worse off. Paris, it was said, had over 200,000 bodies that died less than 5 years ago buried within not only its city walls but its central quarters. Same for Toledo, Hamburg, Florence. And in Venice the populace dumped over 10,000 into the canals every year, for only the wealthy could afford a Venetian death and burial. A huge number of social problems, pollution, disease, vermin and general unrest were blamed on this misdistribution of the dead. In Baghdad, each cemetery was at least a kilometre from the walls.

As was always the case, proponents of the Golden Age were half right and half wrong. The cemeteries' locations were the result of chance as much as good planning. When the first Abbasid Khalifa brought the Court to Baghdad, the city was a backwater. Everything had to be done from scratch. There was only ever need for one cemetery which was within the city walls -- the one that remained until Malika's day. However, the establishment of the new Khalifate was a very turbulent time. There were many attacks by the various remnants and factions of the Umayyads. In the fourth year there was a major battle outside the walls, whereby 100,000 Umayyad factionists<sup>24</sup> descended on Baghdad. They didn't live long enough to describe their movement with a more sympathetic verb either. Although the Khalifa's supporters were victorious, it was a bloody event for all. Time was of the essence and the Khalifa was about to order the removal of at least *her* dead to the Baghdad cemetery. And then, like so many cases of genius through history, the obvious occurred to her. What about leaving the bodies, burying them right here? In a few days the stench of rotting human flesh marinated in a sauce of blood was suppressed by the more-bearable stench of fresh earth. Only after *that* cemetery was established did the Khalifa think it was perhaps a great idea to make this a permanent thing. Perhaps cemeteries *should* be outside the city. So luck (if a few

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<sup>24</sup> ie. people who were not victorious enough to give themselves a more sympathetic historical title

hundred thousand dead can be called luck) came first, but she was astute enough to ride the brainwave.

Malika had a key to a door in the Wall. All members of Court had access -- because all had dirty laundry to sneak in and out at some point in their lives. "If this is your dirtiest laundry," Jamil said, "then you have a clear conscience."

"Well, you do know all my most 'shameful' secrets, so I guess this is it."

Half an hour later, they were standing over the casket. Malika hesitated for a second, being almost ceremonial about it. It was up to her husband to pull the top off. So biting their teeth (and noses) they drew closer...and erupted in a fit of laughter. Minutes passed and they kept laughing and laughing, the inappropriate morbid nature of the situation adding to the humour until they fell over in a struggle to contain themselves, landed on top of each other, shook and convulsed beside each other.

The coffin contained a naked man's body. What was left of it. The legs were already decomposed. Basim was naked because he was found naked and because nobody could locate his clothes. It was against custom to bury someone in clothes that weren't her own. He was on his back. His body had the holes Jamilah made. The hilarious thing was what first jumped out to even the most casual observer -- he was clutching a piece of cloth in his rigor mortised hand. A piece of cloth with Jamilah's insignia neatly embroidered on the corner.

Yes, during the murder Basim made a last-ditch attempt at a struggle. A desperate gasp for sweet air to fill his now-useless lungs. He reached out and ripped a bit of Jamilah's shawl. It was the most obvious evidence, it screamed who the murderer was like a thousand flashes of lightning *might* indicate thunder. Because it screamed this so loudly, it was missed by everyone who had anything to do with examining and burying the corpse. Because Jamilah screamed so loudly she was ignored by a society of ostriches. Jamil and Malika laughed and laughed and laughed. It wasn't a disrespectful laughter, in fact they were extremely proud that they did laugh at that moment. The obvious was funny, even if cruel. At least they weren't completely blind. They had one seeing eye between them. Which was more than the world at large could say for itself.

"I think this Intisar of yours just gave me the ammunition for my talk," Malika said. "See, it couldn't be more symbolic than this. We just need to...preserve this symbolism."

They walked home arm in arm. A small box they brought had the evidence whilst Basim was buried, to nevermore be disturbed. This walk reminded Malika of the walk she had with Ayyub when they were coming home from the Observatory. There was something about the two of them and the morose, gloomy solitude of the streets. Things are always put into perspective on the street at 4 in the morning. There are no people or events to form distractions, just you, your thoughts and your companion.

## **Chapter 45 in which Malika prepares and we prepare, having become one with Malika**

Malika's epistle was distributed throughout Baghdad. It was handed out at the Spice and General markets, teahouses, baths, eateries, inside and outside the Observatory (tens of thousands passed its walls daily), the city gates, headquarters of the schools of natural philosophy, and even the schools of djinnology. As a symbolic gesture, Naima repeated her climb to the Tower and posted one where she was with Elizabeth, where she sent Daud during his training.

By the afternoon of the debate, Malika was on everyone's lips, hearts and minds. Opinion was divided about what would happen, as well as whether she was a heretic or saint. Of course, popular opinion polarised around these two straw women because most people didn't know Malika. They didn't need to know her either, a myth was more exciting. All the rumours came back with a vengeance. On the one side she was Alia's daughter, or Alia herself, she ran an orphanage, she married 300 men to save them from poverty and persecution, she repelled an army of several hundred single-handed at the Conflict. When Jamil told her about this last one, Malika laughed especially hard, remembering an army of several hundred repelling *her* down a mountain, across a stream and under a bush. The other side of the rumours was

equally ludicrous. Malika desecrated graves due to heterodox djinnology and sexual perversion. She secretly went back to the West with Elizabeth, revealing all about the Khalifate's fortifications. She used her arcane arts to create evil creatures, or to -- even worse! -- change their gender. There were rumours about the disputation. Some said she invented the most powerful aphrodisiac imaginable, the mere whiff of which was strong enough to kill a woman -- but what a way to go! Another had her create an aphrodisiac exclusively for men (or eunuchs!).

Malika took one final glance at her house. She stepped out into the street two hours before the disputation. This was it. She was in the greatest danger of her life. The conflict was nothing, in fact a safehaven, compared to this. Her previous machinations to avoid being scrutinised at the literacy study -- she now giggled at those. Such naivety! It was almost cute. And yet she never had this much opportunity. She said goodbye to her family (they'd make their own way there). She put her chin up, clenched her teeth, sucked in a good dose of oxygen and went on her way.

Jamil remained to watch her. He was her first husband. Not that there was a primacy in being first. Tradition did not allocate different statuses to the different husbands. The difference was merely one of chronology. Even here, tradition had become obsolete. Malika, like most in Baghdad, met, dated and married the whole harem in one step, as a whole unit. Nowadays the numbers reflected the rather arbitrary order in which they approached Malika at the wedding ceremony. But there's tradition and then there's a person's inner world. In his heart of hearts, Jamil Believed he was the truest of the three. The most loyal, the one who cared about her the most. Not that he saw a fault in the others, he just thought that when the Ultimate Day of Need would come, it would be him that would be there to support her. It *should* be him. For now he merely practiced: instead of going back into the house like the others, he watched her majestic figure with trepidation, until it was a dot.

Malika passed the teahouses and lingered in one. "Welcome, Malika!" said the teahouse owner, giving her a free cup of the finest, strongest tea she had. "Rot in hell," and "I'll be there to see you disemboweled," were some other greetings she heard. There were hundreds stuffed into this small teahouse and yet they all had an opinion on her, even as they puffed their neglahs and engaged in their own affairs.

She passed the baths and decided to have one. There was something leisure-like about doing this now. Also something ceremonial, like a person having her last meal and immersion before execution. She wouldn't go quietly though. *I'd like to think of it more as a duel. I might die, but I also might live.*

30-40 women were in the actual washroom area, soaping themselves and discussing current events. And what current event *was* there except the disputation? Another 20 were in the steamroom whilst others were anointing themselves with fragrant oils, herbal concoctions or aphrodisiacs. There were three giving massages and a djinnologist giving a lesson to a small group right in the comfortable warmth of the water. As soon as Malika walked in activity ceased. They all stared at her -- no words said. They parted slightly as she entered the water. Malika wasn't sure if it was out of respect or disdain. She suspected it was an even split. The water was refreshing, lukewarm, just the way she liked it. Just as someone finally gathered the momentum to step towards her, she heard footsteps behind her, then some soft splashes. The splashes crescendoed corresponding to toes, feet, thighs and body entering the water. Malika turned around to find Hanan.

"So," Malika started, "we finally see each other in our nakedness."

"If you're referring to the upcoming disputation, I wholeheartedly agree."

"Does this mean I will have the displeasure of your attendance?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything!"

"It *is* a most sweet image. My flesh being penetrated by a sharp wooden plank."

Hanan drew back, surprised and pouting. "Surely you don't think me as cruel as that, to actually revel in the torture of another? No, I follow the Philosopheress. She says this is what sets us apart from savages, to be pained in the suffering of another even when justice might warrant the action. This is a truer form of justice."

"So what would you have?"

"You must enjoy a crueller fate. In death you'll gain importance. The just fate for you is the fate of anyone ridiculously misguided: indifference, oblivion. To be buried under the ocean of history."

"Perhaps. But then why attend?"

"For that very reason. I want to defeat you in the war of words. It is irrational for one who has facts on her side to resort to violence. I'd like the chance to hear your arguments, feeble as they may be, so I can personally refute them."



"Personally? But you won't be speaking, will you?"

"I meant to my personal satisfaction. Which is all that matters."

"...you supported my exile. And opposed my return, right?"

"Yes and yes. I tried to convince the Khalifa that keeping you here was a mistake, then that bringing you back was another. I guess if I gained her ear 50% of the time that's not too bad a record?"

"No. What will happen if I gain her ear?"

"No chance. She's not stupid enough to be persuaded by tripe. That's the trouble with you radicals, you think everyone simply *must* come over to your side if they hear with an open mind. You just think the best of yourselves. And the worst of your enemies. Like your suspicion of me as--"

"--for that I am sorry. But you have to admit it was logical."

"Not at all. I deplore violence of any sort. Almost."

"Even that of an inferior being?"

"As long as they are human. As She says: 'doesn't matter if the victim is a 3 year old' or...an overbearing sculptors' model who doesn't know his place."

"Then you'll be pleasantly surprised when I announce the murderess."

"You mean you--?"

Instead of answering Malika got out. She stood over Hanan for a few seconds as the water dripped, as if to say *this is the real me*. She then backed out.

Malika did have her "last meal" at an eatery that she came across immediately after the baths. It consisted of extremely simple fare -- cinnamon buns, saffron rice, mint and gourds. There was something refreshing about the blandness of the meal. *It is the right thing to have before the disputation. As Samiyyah always said, meat, poultry and fried foods should not be consumed before mental exercise. They just sit in the stomach drawing the blood and other humours towards themselves and away from the brain. Or am I just having these so I'll be a little hungry, so I can pretend to feel confident that I'll eat again? Perhaps.*

She had one last stop.

Her mother's grave. It was in the one cemetery inside city walls, where about 50,000 were buried. Raidah was amongst the last to be buried inside the walls, before the cemetery became full. It was appropriate -- she was amongst the last of the Noble Dying Breed. Her grave was one of the more prominent ones. She was given state recognition by the Khalifa. Malika visited every two or three months, until her exile. She hadn't been back since.

This time, things were different. She needed to see her one last time. The darkness had already begun to spread through the sky. Time was of the essence. Malika did not wish to remain in the cemetery after dark under any circumstances. Not because of superstition but because if things became dark and hence close-knit she would not bare it. Malika sat on her knees before the grave and tucked her feet under her pelvis.

"I've come to say goodbye, before I go and do this. Mum... Raidah. This is the last time I'll mention any of these names. From now on I will not refer to you at all. I don't even know why I came. To release my anger, to stomp on your remains? No...I guess from just the fact that I'm your daughter, if only for a few more seconds. Raidah the hero. My idyllic memories were lies. The greatest lie of all was every night that I slept peacefully under that roof as a child. The Roof of the Uteruses. Part of me wants to find some complex, contradictory argument that would allow me to have feelings left for you. Some type of sophistry, something like *you've provided me with an impetus to work harder than ever before...* but I can't, I won't. As a human being I can't. If I *did* forgive, if the fire within me *wasn't* strong enough to consume and subsume all my other feelings about you then...then I'd be truly lost.

"This is the last time I see you in my mind. I know with absolute conviction that my memory of your face, your voice, your laugh, will go as soon as I turn away from your grave. I must be silent. I've already expunged your name, it's time to do so for your face."

She got up, eager for the blood to rush back to her feet. This brought relief. Malika stood there for a few more minutes. It would have been a poignant time for the rain to start pouring but no such thing happened. Finally she gave a quick nod and went off into the almost-darkness.

She saw Alia in front of the entrance to the Great School. Everyone was already inside, Alia's figure was a lone tree. The tree on the mountain on the way to Rasha's burialplace...

"I've been waiting for you," said Alia.

"And I you. I haven't seen you since..."

"No matter. I have things to tell."

"I know."

"I see you've recovered. I'm sorry for my overreaction when I saw what would happen from your eyes that time we met on the street. But I did see you'd be in great pain."

"I was."

"I underestimated your strength."

Malika blushed. Then she realised that she was like a child eager to please a parent and blushed even more.

"The other thing you should know by now. When you came to that shafra and I said it was a momentous day for you, it wasn't because of the shafra."

"No, it was because I met J--"

"--your friend, and began to realise she was the murderess."

Malika nodded. "Even though the truth took a while to germinate."

"It generally does."

"Tell me what you see now."

"I thought you don't believe in 'that shit'."

"That's why I want you to tell me, so that I can--see how you do it."

"Two figures.

One plump, adorned and oiled

The other a skeleton.

One concerned with worldly pleasures

The other striving for the divine

One loves drunkenness

The other the drunkenness of spirituality

Look closely, for indeed there is

One to cherish and one to beware."

"And what do they represent, if you may be so kind as to tell me?"

"Nothing. They're literal. When you see them, think of me. Ready?"

Malika gave a vigorous nod, anyone looking through her eyes would have seen the mind peeking through them, a mind ready to slice through heaven and earth. Alia went in first to take a seat, then Malika entered.

## **Chapter 46 in which Malika is dragged through the mud for her saucy libertarianism**

The hall was more abundant than any public event Baghdad had seen in decades. The Khalifa's descent into power did not receive such a turnout. And why should it? It was nothing special.

Malika slowly made her way through the crowd. There was no aisle or gap to walk through, the people stood shoulder to shoulder. There must have been 14,000 in the main room alone, and another 18,000 in the outer corridors of the school. Silence reigned supreme, Malika could hear people scratching their hair. The front of the hall had a stage. Ordinarily the djinnologist would stand there and give her lesson; today -- 9 stern-faced women in robes. The Body Philosophers. The Khalifa sat before the stage, surrounded by her closest viziers, ministers and eunuchs. Malika came out of nowhere and stepped up, giving a nod of acknowledgement to the panel.

"So you have come," said the chief Doctor quietly.

"Yes, did you think I'd be deterred by----" Malika looked around for the inevitable stake and pointed to it with her chin.

The stake was always present at a public inquiry, to put the fear of Yusuf into th'accused.

"Very well. Beloved citizens. We are gathered here for a public inquiry that I, as the head of the august Natural Philosophers of the Human Body, have brought against Malika al-Basimi. It is my claim Malika

commits heresy and treason by holding unacceptable beliefs about the sacred order of human beings. This is an extremely important debate in this day and age. We are in a Golden Age.” Malika looked at Nadia and saw her exchange a wink with the Doctor. “We progress in arts, natural philosophy and human thought as never before. This investigation should remind us that nobody works in a vacuum. The task of the scholar or artist is not mindless creation. She has a broader ethical responsibility that must always be balanced with the freedom she requires to work. Breach of this is damaging to our society's progress. We will examine whether such a breach occurred here.”

Another member of the panel got up and almost interrupted the Doctor, apparently having become bored with her meanderings. “Let us begin. Please note this is an independent inquiry. We are not influenced by the Khalifa. And the law makes our decision binding.” She nodded toward Samiyyah who was uncomfortably sitting in the front row. *So this is their first witness....* Samiyyah took the seat and the oath uncomfortably.

“You've known al-Basimi for quite some time, haven't you?”

“Yes. I've been friends with her.”

“You've been a lot more than that. You've also been teacher to her husband Jamil in the human body. Is that correct?”

“Well, I wouldn't call it teaching. As a member of your Body myself, I'm aware that the concept of teaching this discipline refers to a specific instructional method and a specific audience. The audience is other members of the Body, the method being a combination of formal lessons, dissections and treatments of patients, of increasing complexity. My interaction with Jamil does not qualify as teaching based on those criteria.”

“Samiyyah, I meant did you instruct him in our discipline in *some* manner?”

“Yes, an extremely informal and haphazard manner.”

“And did this involve talks on the structure and function of various parts of the human body--”

“--b--”

“--even if not presented as a formal lecture?”

“Yes...”

“How 'bout guided dissections of increasing difficulty? Some form of crude treatment practice? For instance, entrusting Jamil with Malika's children when they were sick...”

“Yes.”

“Surely Malika was unaware of such a blatant breach of our Body's quality guidelines?”

“She knew.”

“She *asked* you to do this didn't she?”

“That's right. Also sh--”

“--moving onto another topic, how long have you been a member of our Body?”

“11 years.”

“In this time you've formed opinions about male physiology. Please share your opinion on the Pleasure Controversy.”

“Men do not experience sexual pleasure because in all my years of observation I have come to the conclusion that nature does not assign two different purposes to the same body part. Since each part of the male flesh used during intercourse is assigned a purpose not related to pleasure, this hypothetical 'pleasure organ' cannot exist.”

“And your take on the Aphrodisiacs Controversy?”

“That is simple. I believe in the principle of moderation, as taught by the Philosopheress. It is not a good idea to overindulge nor is it harmful if taken as intended by Intisar, that is by a female at the appointed time.”

“Is that right?” The questioner's raised eyebrows betrayed some emotion. “As *intended*? So you don't think Malika's reasoning was sound?”

“It was certainly sound in establishing something. It's established that men should not be taking aphrodisiacs!” The crowd laughed. “I certainly don't think it proves what Malika thinks it proves.”

“Because you (as an experienced natural philosopher) believe men can't have sexual pleasure in the first place, isn't Malika's test about as relevant as putting a piece of cheese into an aphrodisiac and seeing if it dissolves?”

“Yes, but I don't think Malika was acting in a manner unbec--”

“--how long have you been teaching -- sorry, *interacting* -- with Jamil?”

“8 months.”

"That will be all."

Samiyyah walked off dejected. Malika gave her a reassuring look. She could not expect Samiyyah to lie -- and it was helpful that everyone saw that a respected member of the Body does not consider her out of line.

Naima was next. She walked up with a totally different air. There was of course no recognition of the examiner as one of her own. The oath was taken with the same grim determination she had on the battlefield. Naima's left hand was on her belly, although none in the crowd were aware of the significance. Her right hand had its palm facing the ground, its index finger extended slightly upward. The gesture of Intisar bestowing life.

"Before we get to al-Basimi, tell us who you are, in case some members of the public have been under a rock for the last decade?" More laughs. Evidently the examiner did not want to appear completely cold.

"I was an Assassin. Once I left that *organisation* I became a Fighting Sister, after which I retired from the military to pursue calligraphy in Baghdad."

"You forgot your outstanding reappearance at the Conflict."

Naima smiled. "I made a temporary comeback."

"What were your chief tasks with the Assassins?"

"Organising raids against the Khalifa's forces. Assassinating key members of Court and other officials. Supplying the stronghold with weaponry, food, hashish, horses. Teaching Contrarian Djinnology. Training new Assassins. Visiting villages, speaking, carrying out a campaign of propaganda against the Khalifa. Rallying--"

"--thank you very much, we get the idea. Onto al-Basimi. You feel strongly about this one don't you?"

"Like you would not believe."

"Right. So you'd know Malika's opinions on a lot of things."

"On a lot of things."

"Did she at any point advocate equality for men and eunuchs?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand the question."

"What part is problematic?"

"What do you mean by 'equality'? What kind?"

"I was under the impression there was only one kind of equality."

"Only because you spent your life studying the intricacies of the female -- I mean human -- body, and not philology." A murmur of approval from the crowd. "Equality is a polymorphous word, perhaps even a homonym. Like many words in our great language, it is a whole array of words that happen to coincide in pronunciation and have some similarity in meaning. In some cases it is advantageous to consider them as completely different words. There is mathematical equality, which means equal in amount or number. Philosophical equality (or equality of identity), which occurs when two different expressions refer to the same entity both in kind and instance. Another type refers to the same kind but *not* the same instance. Another to an equal amount of a specific attribute. Of course, the Philosopheress wrote *much* on a fifth kind--- I apologise for getting sidetracked. To answer the question properly I would of course need to know which kind. If you mean referring both to type and instance, the answer is no. Malika has never advocated that the set of 'men' or 'eunuchs' is equal in type and instance to the set of 'women'."

"What I mean is whereby they have the same status and potential within our society as women."

Naima smiled a most wicked smile. "Well, this I can surely answer! Just after you tell me some more information. Do you mean she wanted the *average* social status of women, men and eunuchs to be equal? Or a *weighted average*, as dictated by the population distribution across the ages and the geographical spectrum? Or maybe a median status? Ooh, ooh, I know! The absolute sum of all statuses over each gender should be mathematically equal. Right?" Naima bent forward slightly and furrowed her brow.

"...umm...no...I'm afraid I don't remember Malika al-Basimi ever saying women, men and eunuchs should have equality in terms of an equal amount of a specific attribute, that attribute being the absolute sum of all statuses for a given gender. But then again I could be wrong."

"Co-operative, aren't we?"

"Your decision is only binding for Malika. You have no jurisdiction over me."

"Fine then. One more thing. Or would you prefer to stop?"

"I'm fine, knock yourself out."

"Did you have contact with any of her husbands without her knowledge or supervision?"

"Yes, I taught her Daud while she was in exile."

"This concept of teaching some husband of Malika's is catching on. Perhaps *I* should sign up to teach the third one something! You were alone with him?"

"For many, many an hour."

"And she was fine with it?"

"She bowed before me," said Naima, got up (as if bored with the procedure), and took her seat. Malika nodded at her. It was nice to know Naima did exactly what Malika knew she'd do.

The final person was, surprisingly, Hanan. The examiner chatted with her for 15 minutes about her latest work, and other things completely unrelated. It was a way of showing her deference over the other two witnesses. Still, Malika scanned the crowd and saw that even the most traditional thought this over the top. Finally she was asked to explain why she thought Malika's stance was dangerous from a philosophical point of view. The question was asked very quietly, in an embarrassed manner. The examiner wanted to show she was reluctant to waste the great Hanan's time over such a trivial and clear-cut question.

"The problem stems from the fact that Malika conducted her experiment without any consideration to its wider context. It is not up to a scholar to simply conduct blind investigations. Think about it. Not every project is worthy of attention. We could, for instance, devote our time to examining how we might *increase* the rodent population of Baghdad. But this goes against our interests and anyone doing this can be presumed to be acting against the Khalifate. So too with Malika. There was absolutely no need to look at how aphrodisiacs affect men. We know men are not the kinds of creatures targeted by these substances. The only reason is what's been on our mouths since the start of this inquiry. We've just been reluctant to say it. Al-Basimi thinks men are alike *in substance* to women. That's the only way this test has a bearing on what we *really* intend to find out, which is the effect of an aphrodisiac on *women*. The entire experiment is therefore motivated politically, not scientifically. And it's certainly an heretical political Basimi is playing at. For long have we established the inferiority of men and eunuchs in intellect, richness of emotions and the rest. By substituting one substance for a completely different one, Malika intends on bringing about some kind of moral...*equivalence*, between the genders. If we follow this path our most prized institutions are in jeopardy. For instance, marriage. One might well ask: why is it fine for a woman to marry several men but not vice versa? Because these are the kinds of questions that will be raised if we grant Malika her finger."

Hanan took her leave. The examiner took a jar out of a box on the floor, holding it up for everyone to see.

"What is it?" whispered hundreds of people from the back stretching their necks in vain. The answers came back in a rush.

"It's the Finger in the Liquid!"

"It's grey, and hideous."

"What do you expect from of a corpse left in a jar for months?"

"It looks like a whole hand. I can't believe she cut that off! A whole hand!"

"It looks kind of like the corpse of my unit commander from the battle."

"What? She was a woman!"

"So?"

"Women's corpses don't turn that colour! It's a very different shade."

"This is an outrageous waste of aphrodisiacs. This jar could be worth a week's wages."

"Look how shrivelled it is? What if she's right? What if our insides are starting to look like this right now?"

"Nonsense, haven't you ever studied chemistry? And basic reasoning? Al-Basimi's wrong in--"

"--friends!" the Doctor spoke. "Indeed this is the jar that was brought to my office. No reason to get excited. I'll just place it on the table, anyone who wishes can come up for a look afterwards. Now if we quieten down I can begin the main examination."

Malika got up, barely aware of her movements because her heartbeat was all she could concentrate on. She felt the crowd peer at her almost lewdly, at least lewdly in judgement, and suddenly her feet became weak. She blinked and was being sworn in.

The Doctor brought out a very elaborate amulet for Malika to swear on. Which she did, albeit through clenched teeth. No point being staked for heresy from the outset. No, even if she was going to die, she was at least going to open her mouth first.

"Please state your full name."

"Malika."



“Your clan name?”

“It's just Malika.”

“Aren't you commonly known as Malika al-Basimi?”

“I was. Or rather, I still am, by many. However, I no longer identify with this clan. As no other clan has accepted me I must be satisfied by being simply Malika, with no clan name.”

“Are you to tell me your father, husbands and children are named al-Basimi but you're not?”

“They can choose to affiliate with the clan, it's up to them. Just because I've opted o- but surely we are not here to discuss my family genealogy?”

“Too right. Now, what is your occupation?”

“I've been called an idler by many. I'm still in the process of selecting one.”

“Assuming this whole thing blows over.”

“Right.”

“So you're not a scholar?”

“No.”

“Member of any body of natural philosophers?”

“No I'm not.”

“So the two discoveries you made from the exile, they were clever thoughts of an amateur. Would that be an accurate assessment?”

“I am an amateur. I wouldn't say they're particularly clever though. Anyone in my place could have made them.”

“Congratulations on the success of your star charting discovery by the way.”

“Thankyou, Doctor.”

“What *were* you exiled for?”

“You'll have to ask the Khalifa. It was in her infinite wisdom. Just like women can't penetrate the depths of Intisar's Master Plan, so too with the Khalifa.”

“You don't have any suspicions as to the reason? For instance, rumours of your unorthodoxy, literariness of your husbands, your ridiculous accusations that the Eminent Hanan is guilty of murder, your-”

“--it would be extremely disrespectful to the Khalifa if I was so presumptuous as to venture an explanation of my own. Especially in a public arena.”

“Fine.” The questioner looked impressed. “Now, please describe your discovery in your own words.”

“Absolutely. I was passing through the fields enjoying the outdoors, when I was disturbed by an overwhelming feeling of faintness. I noticed there was a tree with some berries. Picking up a few I found a resemblance to some aphrodisiacs. I decided to make my own batch from the berry and test its effects. The reason was that my faintness worried me. The ones sold in Baghdad are less potent than the pure berry juice. However, the dilution may actually mask reality. I did tests on rats but it was silly to infer from effects on rats to humans. For that I needed a human subject. Luckily, I stumbled on an abandoned corpse on the road. This was what I needed; I buried the man but took two hands and placed one in the solution. The results were staggering: the tissue was almost rotten after a few days. I wrote about this and sent my opinions, along with the specimen, to you.”

“What are your opinions?”

“This substance is harmful, especially if taken in large quantities. Its use as an aphrodisiac is undeniable but a substance that can excite can also over-excite and destroy.”

“Do you object to a woman's right to sexual pleasure? You're not one of these ascetics?”

“Certainly not.”

“Good. Just wanted to dispel the notion that you have some agenda against aphrodisiacs. By the way, how often have you used aphrodisiacs prior to your discovery?”

“Once a month.”

“And after it?”

“Once. A different kind though. I shan't be using the berry-based one again.”

“Which kind?”

“Tears of Johara.”

“That does dispel that notion. Not to mention showing you have good taste,” said the Doctor with a smile. “What about male pleasure? You think this is a man's right?”

“Absolutely.”

“Are you then affirming the existence of the phenomenon?”

"I *am*. But it's only a 'phenomenon' for those to whom the idea is foreign. It's an ordinary idea for me."  
The Doctor looked at her incredulously, as if to say 'why are you making my case for me?' "You don't object to males using aphrodisiacs?"

"Not really. Of course, a lot aren't likely to work. For instance, when I got one of my husbands to drink the Tears -- years ago mind you -- not much of anything happened."

"Y-y-you got your...husband...? Moving right along. Malika, I don't think your examination will continue for much longer. It's obvious you are quite scandalously liberal in your views. Next you'll be saying that you believe sexual pleasure to be a right possessed by eunuchs! You don't need to answer that. But you seem to be a believer in elevating the unelevatable. Am I right?"

"I can see how one might have come to th--"

"--and yet you'd have us believe your scandalous personality and political opinions had no bearing on your experiment? Aren't you just an ideologue driven by fanaticism? This has nothing to do with science, does it?"

"It does...the reason is--"

"--we've heard all we need. Step down and leave us to our deliberations."

Malika smiled. She was expecting this. Now that she was at the lowest point it was time to strike.

"I'm not stepping down. I'm making a statement."

"No you're not, I'm finished with you al-Basimi!"

"That ain't my name. And furthermore, you have no right to deprive me of my final statement."

"This procedure follows a protocol."

"Indeed it does. My Lady," she said looking at the Khalifa. "I believe I am allowed a statement under the protocol and the good Doctor seeks to deprive me of that right."

The Khalifa got up and walked to the Doctor whilst much murmuring started. The Doctor knew nothing of this liberty but Malika insisted it was correct. The entire disputation stopped whilst a eunuch was sent to the Palace for a copy of the protocol. The Doctor stared uncomfortably at Malika. Nadia stared at the floor, trying to hide -- in vain! -- her embarrassment. Malika stared at the crowd changing her look from Defiant to Sublime to Innocent. The scroll was brought. It was a treatise entitled "On the Debate Methods of Scholars" by al-Tarasi. A weighty work outlining the theory, practice, history and philosophy of rhetoric and disputation. As such it formed the protocol of all societies of Natural Philosophers. And what do you know, Malika ran her finger over an obscure paragraph nobody remembered. "If an accusation were made against a scholar or even an ordinary person about the nature of her methodology, the civilised protocol will always allow the defendant to make a free statement after questioning and thus defend her thesis. For if it were only up to the examiner's questions, the bias would be against the defendant since one can always frame questions to make someone seem flawed. It is up to a free statement to redress that, so the defendant can give alternate explanations of her methodologies that might not have come to light during questioning. Furthermore, the Philosopheress states that..." Nadia's voice trailed off, she'd read what she needed to. The Khalifa sat down as did the Doctor (quite dejected) leaving only Malika to deliver her statement before a completely breathless panel, Court, Public.

## **Chapter 47 in which Malika delivers her statement, with the dead giving her TWO hands**

"Thank you all for coming and listening. I'm going to lay out my cards at the outset. I do have political opinions many of you will not be comfortable with. I wish some of the differences in the way society treats women, men and eunuchs would be drastically reduced or even obliterated. However, this is beyond the scope of our discussion, I won't try to convince anyone. It is up to an entire society to progress. I don't want to force change, I'm not such a fanatic.

"There are obviously some political connotations to this experiment. The Doctor is wrong that I cut off a dead man's finger solely for the purpose of bringing us here today. If I found a woman on the street I'd

have done the same. *However*, when placing those fingers in the jar I knew a storm would brew. My confession is that I didn't mind at all. This is a personal aside -- it has nothing to do with the experiment. So let's stick to the science, because this we're supposed to be discussing.

"It has traditionally been argued -- nay, taken as a *premise* -- that the nature of each gender is different, and therefore we must treat these as different classes of beings. This allows for things like the Pleasure Controversy. The error is this -- we are arbitrarily assuming a difference in attributes where no reason for the difference exists. If we considered the substance to be the same there would be no Pleasure Controversy. There would be no controversy here either.

"Allow me to explain what I mean by a difference in attributes. Let us compare any two people. For instance, myself and my daughter Azizah. We could start drawing up a list of similarities and differences. Some similarities might be that we're both female, we both live in the same city. We both saw the sun rise today and yesterday and the day before. This is obvious but my point is I can extend the list indefinitely. For between today and yesterday the sun went through an infinite number of positions and we were both under it for each of those. As silly as this is, it's still a similarity. Same for differences. I am quite fluent in reading and writing, she's only learning. I've had children and she hasn't. But also: I was alive 20 years ago and she wasn't, and 19, and 19.5, and 19.25, and so on. An infinite set of similarities and differences.

"And this is just between two people. There's also an infinite list of similarities and differences between genders. You might say the infinite ones I listed are trivial. Who cares that I saw the same sun at the third hour as my daughter? True, but note that we filter these out based on *our* preference of what is trivial. We also make a value judgement when we say the male and female body are two separate substances. A judgement about which of the infinite differences we don't consider trivial. It is our own bias that makes us classify as important differences that have nothing to do with human flesh as substance.

"Some similarities. Both genders have the same essential body parts, give or take a small handful. Of the internal and external organs that have a name an overwhelming proportion are present in both, and function in exactly the same manner. Both have similar arrangements of skin, heart, muscle. In terms of diseases we usually resort to the same treatment for both genders. The only exception is a disease specifically related to one of the organs-with-a-difference. Now, you might say that my experiment was just that -- drawing a conclusion from something that's related to an organ difference. But all I wanted to do was measure the overall effect on living tissue. The Pleasure Controversy is not a closed book. But it's perfectly legitimate to compare the effects of a substance on the general body of one gender and infer the other. As for substance, we know that for animals where the female and male look different, the meat often tastes different. When they are similar in size, shape and appearance, the meat tastes the same. This is an example of the substance being the same.

"What then are the differences? We claim physical differences, reproductive, cognitive and emotional differences. And there might be some truth there, but probably some falsehoods. The current theories are too self-congratulatory to admit the possibility of being wrong. So much have we become used to the idea of male inferiority that our bias precedes any observation we make, and thus makes it harder to make a counter-observation. We assume men don't feel sexual pleasure because we haven't taken the chance to even consider it. We even think the fact that we haven't considered it as *proof* thereof! 'It's inconceivable'... Same for this: we take our failure to consider that the hand *might* be relevant to mean that it isn't. Same for even more serious things. Like murder.

"Months ago, a man called Basim was brutally murdered, his body mutilated. We were in shock, as we should have been. However, it isn't hard to imagine how someone who has the ideas that we do might commit such an act. We have all ignored the murderess whose ideology was the driving factor behind the murder. I've already made one false accusation in my life. Or rather a semi-accusation. I shan't make another. This time there will be no accusations. I will simply inform everyone that Jamilah, the Khalifa's finest musician, was the one who slaughtered Basim."

Dead silence in the hall. Imagine the uncomfortable feeling that sets on when someone says something stupid or inflammatory or extremely embarrassing at a dinner, and she happens to utter those words just as the other conversations lapse. The utterance is impressed into everyone's mind, and everyone's realisation that everyone else has heard the very words increases the shock exponentially. Well, this was no dinner party. This was a gathering of over 30,000 people. Everyone was uncomfortable, frozen, not daring to look away from the disaster-about-to-transpire. Jamilah was unmoving.

"When I came back from the exile I attended a feast. We were discussing the murder when Jamilah announced to everyone that she killed him. She gave her motivation (her belief he was committing a great wrong by becoming a level 3 clerk) and method (instructing him to walk her home and skewering him in a

dark alley).”

“Now, wait just a minute,” said the Doctor. “I must stop you because I feel a great injustice coming on in the form of heinous slander. I was at the feast. I don't remember any such thing.”

Malika smiled. “I know you don't. Nobody did. Because nobody paid attention. Or rather, they all heard her loud and clear, and it registered, but nobody made the connexion that this person was *actually* admitting to this crime. The whole matter was 'trivial'. It was *only* Basim. Hearing Jamilah would have meant admitting to ourselves that this murder was a logical extension of our beliefs. So everyone's mind did something else -- it refused to listen. I remember the chatter resuming and scattering in a thousand directions seconds later. And--”

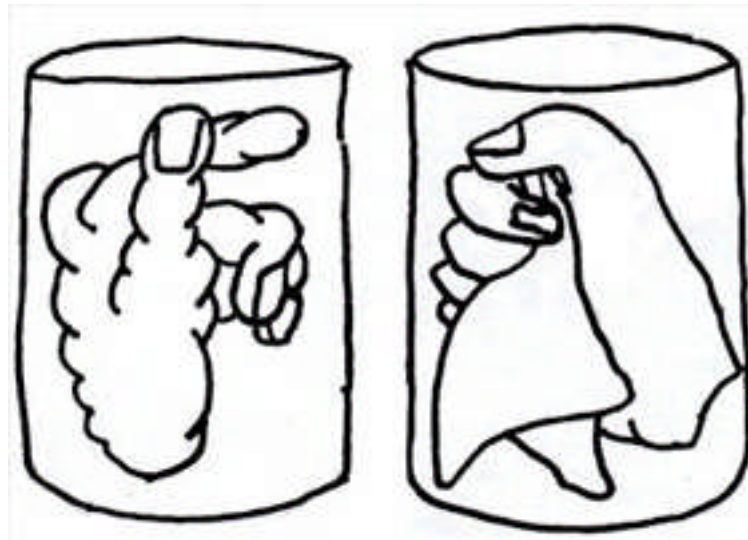
“--suppose this were true.” Malika blinked, it was the Khalifa herself. “Let's say we were all there. Although it sounds crazy. Do you think we can just accept your word for it? Shall we arrest Jamilah now?”

“Certainly not. I have further evidence. Since I used *one* dead man's hand to discover a truth, why not another? Dear citizens, here is my other exhibit. The other Basim's hand.”

She reached under her seat and fished out a jar and when she placed it on the table for all to see there was a Universal Gasp. There it was, Basim the First's hand, clutching what was clearly Jamilah's shawl. This then was Malika's evidence-taking method. Rather than just take the shawl she took the hand with it. When she sawed off the hand she thought it would have some dramatic effect, near the other hand.

Girl, was she underestimating the effect. First thing that happened was a million trillion voices erupting in excited chatter. It was obvious now, undeniable. It all fell into place. Jamilah was taken to the front of the room by a pair of eunuch guards. She wasn't struggling or surprised.

A few seconds later, everyone settled down, as Malika indicated her intention to finish speaking. In the silence, they stared at the awe-ful image before them. A table with two jars. One had the decomposed hand of Basim the First clutching the shawl of his murderess. The other had the decomposed hand of Basim the Second being clutched by aphrodisiac berries. Truly a unique sight; for a whole disputation, in fact a whole critique of society, was concisely summarised by two hands unceremoniously cut off from two corpses...



“Yes, it's quite something, isn't it?” Malika spoke, her voice quivering with gratitude for the universe for having such intertwined meanings that had shards of humour in the most hopeless situation. “Two hands... One showing our selective and arbitrary distinctions that place us in scientific and social hot water. The other showing the results of this hot water, and our indifference to it. But I digress. This murder is not directly relevant to the science. I am guilty of using a platform rather shamelessly. I could have told the Khalifa. But I agree with Hanan: a philosopher must always be aware of the moral effects of her theories. Our theories about the one hand contributed to the making of the other. So I guess it *is* relevant. To conclude, I do believe I was scientifically justified. Disagree with my views but judge the science on the merits. If my hand was compared to this one, their flesh would taste very similar. It is more advantageous for us to change our judgements and consider them as one substance. At least from a physiological perspective. It's silly and dangerous to split them into two. If members of the panel would like to compare

tastes, I'd happily give up my hand for the Khalifate's progress."

The City of Light was a city of darkness. A total lack of woman-made light, even in the Palace. The city was deserted. Everyone was at the Djinnology School. Which was lit up to the max, to the highest tower. And this was about two hours after Malika finished speaking. Nobody left. Nobody moved. They were all waiting whilst the Great Minds deliberated.

Finally the Doctor stood up and read the decision.

"Dear citizens! We whole-heartedly thank you for your attendance and interest in the intellectual development of our civilisation. We have reached several conclusions and would like to share them."

"Conclusion the First: We interpret Malika's offer of her hand to have been made in jest. In any case we thank her for her dedication. We believe in her sincerity, and kindly decline her offer."

"Conclusion the Second: We find in Malika's mind many contrarian opinions. She is passionate about things that would make some of our hairs stand. But there is no evidence proving heresy or treason in the *social* arena. Furthermore, since our jurisdiction is over the scientific methodology alone, we find absolutely no evidence of heresy or treason."

"Conclusion the Third: We find Malika's arguments for a One-Substance theory provocative and interesting. There has in fact been some heated discussion about this in the panel. However, considering that the Three-Substance Theory is clearly stated in the works of the Philosopheress, and we still accept it, we conclude Malika should not have attempted this experiment *before-the-fact*. We therefore mildly censure her for this. Her methodology was not unsound enough to warrant a stronger action on our behalf."

"Conclusion the Fourth: Nevertheless, looking at the experiment *after-the-fact*, we have decided it warrants a closer investigation. We must see the effects on female tissue. Here we found Malika's arguments on physiological similarity to be of help."

"Thank you for joining us this evening. This concludes our disputation and remember, the real winner tonight has been the Khalifate's Golden Age that we are so privileged to live in!"

## Chapter 48 in which...

Malika's friends were disappointed with the verdict. "What are you talking about?" Malika would say to them repeatedly over the next days. "What did you expect to happen? Would the good Doctor concede I was right all along? Restructure physiology, then move on to the other disciplines? No, this was the best result I could have expected. They actually conceded something. They slapped me on the wrist. That was it. The stake could have been mine, but now even the *panel* got to thinking about some things I said. Not to mention 30,000 listeners who weren't entirely unreceptive."

Baghdad spoke of nothing but the disputation. Nadia fulfilled her promise and reviewed Malika's permanent status -- apparently she was not to be exiled again. Malika was the woman of the moment.

Debate centred around what was to be done to Jamilah, who was incarcerated in the Palace dungeon. Should she simply be killed? Or exiled? Those in favour of exile did not think of themselves as being any less harsh. On the contrary it was seen to as the ultimate punishment. In the Khalifate people were expected to pick relocation to Intisar's bosom over permanent removal from the Golden Age. The heinous nature of the crime was no longer up for debate. Everyone agreed Jamilah deserved the full punishment. The alternative (that this was *not* an extraordinary act) was too horrible to contemplate. As a result of overwhelming public sentiment Jamilah was subjected to a trial.

It lasted just two hours, with only 2 witnesses: Samirah and Malika. Samirah was present at the gathering of artists from which Jamilah followed Basim to th'ill-fated alley. And of course Malika was the star. There were in fact four other people: a man who saw Jamilah minutes after the murder and 3 eunuchs who were at the gathering. Since men and eunuchs could not make witnesses we will never find out what they had to contribute. The judges took 10 minutes to decide on Jamilah's guilt (the minimum length of time for deliberations). The decision -- put her to the stake. The Khalifa did make one concession. Jamilah



was allowed a last public performance.

Hamidah was amongst the first to enter the Palace. The event -- cheekily dubbed Jamilah's Last Bow by the more irreverent members of the Court -- was only due to begin in an hour. However, she knew Malika would be here and desperately wanted to talk to her. Ever since Malika's rebuke Hamidah felt uneasy. True, she *did* become a loyal follower of Hanan. She was always inclined to traditionalism. But she did not wish to lose contact with her cousins (the word being plural because Amina obviously aligned herself with Malika and began to avoid her as well). Furthermore, it was simply wrong that she would fade from the lives of her niece and nephew: wrong wrong wrong.

The palace door was opened by none other than Habuba. After Rasha's demise it was she that took her place as the Khalifa's assistant, Grand Eunuch, chief meddler. It would be the understatement of the Golden Age to say that this caused resentment amongst the eunuchs. Habuba was a girl (or a 'child' to the non-eunuch world) and many in their thirties and older were brushed aside in her favour. The main reason was probably that Nadia wanted someone taught by Rasha. That and Habuba showed a frightening competence. *Better to keep this one close.* So far she survived: she had not had her throat slit in the night by either eunuchs or Court members.

"Greetings Hamidah. You're here early!"

"Yes, I wanted to----to get a good seat."

Habuba paused and then started, as if she just had an idle thought "--oh, you know what? I just saw Malika go in five minutes ago. You're her cousin, aren't you?"

"I am."

"Should I show you to her? I'm sure you'd want to talk."

"Thankyou, my good eunuch. And your name would be?"

"Habuba. I'm the Khalifa's new--"

"--yes, terrible what happened wasn't it? Well, Habuba, lead away."

Hamidah was conflicted. Part of her was grateful Habuba kept up a pretence of not knowing *exactly* what was going on. Part of her was on red alert because this eunuch was like Rasha (if not more): all-seeing and therefore necessary to always keep in mind. *Habuba*. Hamidah made a note of the name.

Malika was sitting at one of the tables in the Performance Room. There was an empty space in the centre for Jamilah and 40 tables around it. There were even snacks at the tables: lime water, fruits, layered pastries. Not exactly a somber atmosphere.

It was just the two of them in a giant room.

"Malika."

"Hi cousin."

"You still consider me your cousin?"

"Unfortunately yes. And you're only unpalatable to a small extent."

"I'm here just in time to talk to you. Anyway... Oh, if I may ask: why did you reject our clan?"

"The *name* I rejected because I associate it with a single person."

"Your mother? What about her?"

Malika decided to take at least a shuffle in reconciliation's direction. She leaned forward, dropped her voice three notches and told all. She did manage to avoid mentioning even once the words "Raidah", "al-Basimi" or even "mother".

"Can you now understand?"

"Yes. Not that I agree but...listen, can't we just put it all behind us? I apologise for making you feel I thought you deserved exile, or worse. Who knows what I thought then? But listening to you during the disputation made a lot clear. I think we must remain as family. You were...are, very--"

"I don't know Hamidah -- are you comfortable with a false peace? I don't want peace for the sake of peace. Despite having blood ties we reside in two different worlds. Who knows what will happen in the future?"

"Do you think I'll be part of a side that aims to massacre yours?"

"I don't really have a side. I'm not calling the 6 or so people who agree with me a 'side'. But yes, yes you will. I can't expect you to compromise your deepest beliefs. I don't want you to either. I know neither of us will compromise."

"Well, you know what? This is our point in common. *We* never compromise. Because we are al-Basimis. And yes the name is odious to you because of what your mother did. But you shouldn't let her besmirch the al-Basimis. We are more than her. Al-Basimi is also the name of our grandmother. I mean,

she was the original hardass. She helped stop the Indian turmoil, and penned the definitive history of the 4 Khalifas she lived through. The world will remember them through her eyes. And what colourful eyes they were -- they never compromised! She followed ideals no matter where they led. She was a fanatic but unafraid. This is what being an al-Basimi is about. Being impassioned, informed and very dedicated to whatever cause the al-Basimi mind finds important. And then following through, for better or worse. This is what our grandmother did, your mother, you, me. And definitely Amina..."

Malika knew she was right. This is why she cried all through what her cousin said, and towards the end put her head on her shoulder. Hamidah stroked her hair as Malika rambled for a bit about how she wasn't going to let a single person take over the entire al-Basimi heritage (a name she now repeated over and over).

"You did state the obvious, which I needed. This doesn't mean I may accept personal animosity or attacks. We will disagree but if you question my right to exist this will be it."

"Deal."

"Not a word about any of these issues to Abbas or Azizah. I don't want you indoctrinating. Not a word."

"Deal."

"Also don't mention her again. Mention the clan, but she's as dead as dead can be."

They sat together as the guests drifted. Time moved strangely for Malika at the table. She was overwhelmed with everything that happened in the last year. So she stared as the tables filled up, oblivious to friends joining her table.

This event was one that only women could attend. An execution of a member of the Court was too harsh for the consumption of the less stable minds of eunuchs and men. It was said in the West everyone was allowed to attend. In some parts, like Toledo, it was even mandatory, so the masses would be shocked into not doing ill, and so the people would always have the government at the top of their mind. Such practices were considered barbaric here. Here an execution was for the criminal's own good. Let her go to Intisar's bosom now, before she could do more harm and therefore bring herself to more shame in the afterlife. There was supposed to be a sense of dignity and absolution, the act of being executed meaning you were square with the Khalifate. It was seen as reconciliation, whereby neither party had anything bad to think after the fact. However, these subtleties were often lost in the necessary brutality of the act, hence women only. Of course, ordinary folk were executed on public property in the eyes of all who wished to see (as seen from Rasha's near-execution).

Malika snapped out of her trance when Jamilah came on stage with her favourite samnah. She bowed and decided to say a few words before she began. "My dears! I thank you all for allowing me this last moment of expression. May 1000 djinns take each of you and carry you through the myriad worlds of myth and wonder from my playing. May Johara guide my bow and samnah to the loftiest of heights. I don't agree with this, but I hope the merit of enduring this most final of tests will cause the djinns of understanding to enter my heart and make me see what I am blinded to."

Thus began her doleful melody, which continued for an hour. It would be sacrilege to describe the emotions her playing evoked in the audience. They were taken to the highest peaks and deepest crags of mindscape. They were pushed to the brink of serenity, fear, desire, the entire spectrum. They looked at her and shuddered at the horror of such a momentous personality about to be destroyed. They identified with her, laughed with her. This was not to be an easy execution to watch.

Two eunuch guards took Jamilah by each of her hands and escorted her outside, to the internal courtyard of the Palace. The crowd followed. There was a platform of wood, Jamilah already standing on it. One of the guards (Habuba) read out the charges to which Jamilah responded in the affirmative, thus confessing and testifying to the just nature of the charges. Another read out the pre-death amulet that outlined that the condemned will still be received in Intisar's bosom. Again, this was in stark contrast to the way commoners were executed. The amulet was put around her neck. A third eunuch gave her a concoction to drink, the strongest aphrodisiac available, to totally relax and weaken the muscles. This was essentially a painkiller. Plus it gave the condemned one last moment of pleasure (this part of the ritual was performed for all condemned people, but not men or eunuchs for clear reasons). When Jamilah's eyes glazed, meaning the effects began, a fourth guard took her and got her to step off the platform onto the stake. There was a slight crunch as she fell on it and it entered the rectum, then chipping the pelvic bone. Finally a fifth guard walked up to her from below, from ground level, and delivered the final act of kindness reserved for Court members. Whereas a regular person would be left to die slowly, getting more impaled as gravity sunk the body deeper into the stake, the guard took Jamilah by the legs and pulled her down with all her might. In a second the top of the stake came out the top of her head. She convulsed and went limp. A quick death. And

painless too, thanks to a combination of Johara's Tears and the berries. The guards lifted her off the stake and put her body into a coffin and into a cart that took her immediately away to one of the cemeteries outside the walls. In the streets the public knew. The cart was chased by dogs, goats and children and followed on foot by a few hundred people paying their respects to the condemned and the justice system. The Court members slowly went back inside to partake in the post-execution meal, which consisted of plain rice.

At the meal, some recalled previous Khalifas where such executions were a weekly occasion. And there'd be at least 10 at a time, too. Nadia was mild in comparison. Samiyyah told this to her, complimenting her on her compassion. Nadia smiled and excused herself to go to the toilet. At this point Malika also left to go to the toilet.

Toilets in Baghdad were outhouses. There was a stone building and a wooden seat with a hole. In this section of the Palace there were two side by side in the back courtyard. Malika went in one, Nadia in the other. Malika sat and heard the sound of Nadia's excretion. This was a little awkward, it's not often one got to be in the next toilet to the autocrat of the entire Khalifate, not to mention Malika being next to Nadia. They both finished at the same time and Malika got off her seat in preparation for going out. Suddenly, there was a cracking sound followed by the slightest of groans. It had to be Nadia, the cracking must have been the sound of her skin breaking. Her heart going berserk, Malika hopped out of her side and opened the door to reveal quite the scene. Nadia was slumped on the floor, her back leaning against the seat. There was an enormous dagger sticking out of her stomach, she was practically pinned to the wood. A lone figure half-kneeled on the floor next to her, her back facing Malika, her face away from her. Malika gasped which made the figure jump and turn around. The woman's face was completely covered with cloth, but Malika went catatonic because she knew who it was. She had once made the mistake of not recognising her when her face was covered. Never again.

The figure put her finger across the cloth outside her mouth. Malika nodded and the woman grabbed her by the arm, gently pulling her out of the outhouse and behind some bushes 50 metres into the inner courtyard. The woman's hand was full of life, which seared Malika's and increased her shock.

"Z-----," Malika whispered. "You're alive!"

"I knew you'd recognise me despite my 'Separator'. Indeed I am. We don't have much time... I remember picking plums off these bushes just a few months ago. It was when I first saw Faiz. Or rather, saw him the way I saw him."

"Bet that feels like ages ago. But tell me what h--." Malika hugged her friend so hard she almost collapsed dragging both of them down.

"I planned this all along. Going into battle and making people believe I'm dead. Which I'm really, really sorry about, but it was necessary. It was the only way to carry it out."

"But we saw you charging and getting surrounded."

"Right. But I had no intention of dying, in fact I trained especially for this situation for months. After I defeated the people around me, you were out of the line of sight. All I had to do was to go deeper into enemy lines. Oh, you missed quite a fight!" she said laughing almost maniacally. "Wherever I looked barbarians died. Then they charged all of a sudden. What happened?"

"No time to explain."

"I see, I see," she sighed. "Though I didn't know of Naima's plan, I saw they were finished: only fools charge like that. Anyway since the battle fled from me I made my way to a river bank where I stayed the night. I then went to the desert. And now I have returned to Baghdad to complete one last errand."

"Habuba--"

"--knows nothing. She'll be fine without me. I hear she's going great."

"Sure is! But why? I mean there's the obvious, but still you went out of your way to kill her."

"My dear dear Malika. Do you still not get it?"

"I guess I'm obtuse today. Then again I just saw two people I was close to killed."

"That excuses it. Now, Naima told me of a manuscript you found in the Caspian? About the expedition?"

"Y-yes..."

"Do you remember participants?"

"Well, of course my mother led the expedition, and..."

"What was the crowning moment of Raidah's expedition to the Hindu Kush?"

Already they could see someone had walked in and saw the Khalifa's body -- a commotion was

brewing. Malika was uneasy but Z----- whispered: "Don't mind me, I'll slip away. So the crowning moment?"

"Oh, right. Finding the daughter of the Prophetess. Which was carried out by -- wait a minute, wait a fucking minute!" In her excitement Malika raised her voice so much that Z----- had to cover her mouth. "Your mother was the Prophetess?" Malika almost stepped back, so much was she taken aback by the very idea. "And the assistant was -- Nadia?"

"Yes and yes. In her younger years Nadia served under your mother. Hasn't she told you how much she learnt from her?"

"Yes but I thought...o-o-o-oh!" Malika let out a groan and sunk to the ground, which wasn't easy considering they were already crouching. "This is how Nadia cut her teeth? She found and delivered you after your mother the Prophetess was slaughtered and--"

"--and mutilated me with her own two hands -- may they be forever accursed!" she said spitting contemptuously.

"So my mother is the reason why you've had your freedom, humanity and life taken?"

"Indeed. I know how horrified you were. How ashamed. From the day you announced you shan't be marching under the al-Basimi banner, I knew. You have no reason to be ashamed though, you've done far more good than she harm. Not to mention me owing you my existence."

"Yes, that. So that's it, you're gone?"

"I'm gone. I'll never see Baghdad again," said Z-----. Seeing Malika's face contort with pain she added "but I'll see you. I'll be elsewhere. If you ever go to Byzantium you'll find me. And...by the way, what does it feel like to have your former Life slaughtered like a lamb?"

"I'm still in shock. I'll have to see how I feel tomorrow. Mixed feelings, my dear, mixed feelings. Much as I loved to hate Nadia over virtually the last decade, I can't deny that... But I obviously can never blame you or judge you. Now flee my beloved gazelle, flee to the mountains. Live, and be free." Malika pulled down the cloth covering Z-----'s face and gave her a kiss and rubbed her cheek against Z-----'s for a second. The next second Z----- was off, vanished without a trace through a hole in the fence behind where they were sitting.

Malika sighed, got out from behind the bush and started walking to the crowd outside the outhouse, which now consisted of every person from the Palace, and then some. *Her fleeing is most gazelle-like... Wait another minute -- the poem!* Something else clicked in Malika's mind, something sitting in her subconscious for months dormant and waiting to connect itself to something else. Now that the connexion was made, Malika smiled in spite of herself. Her former love was dead and she smiled. The future Khalifa, and the future of the Khalifate itself was most uncertain and she smiled. There was a possibility that all her struggles were redundant or pointless, depending on who the new Khalifa will be. And yet she smiled.

## Chapter 49 in which we witness a Sign

The streets buzzed with excitement every day for a month. Several days of an utterly vain search for the murderess followed. The eunuch guards, as led by Habuba swept the city for evidence. Nothing. Naturally, for there was nothing that could have turned up. Z----- came into the city at dusk and left after nightfall. At no point was she in the open street. During her years as the head of Nadia's guards she learnt everything there was to know about Baghdad, every house, garden and gutter. Her way in started from the side door of the Walls after which she entered the back of the house of one of the eunuchs she knew. She continued through entire blocks, going from cellar to cellar, to interior courtyard etc etc. Sometimes she climbed up and walked roof to roof, where the houses were almost touching each other. Other times she made use of the internal network of canals and underground pipes, but not before diverting the water to a different part of the canal network. She left the same way. W----- would never have found a trace of her mentor, not a footprint.

Rumours abounded. The general consensus was that this was the return of the bad old days, when the

Assassins pulled the puppet-strings and overturned Khalifas with a nod in one dark place and a dagger in another. Except the Assassins were supposed to have been rooted out by Naima 13 years ago. Naima even went to the mountains for three days seeing what she could find, at the request of the community. Nothing. There were no Assassins operating there, or anywhere else for that matter. The Khalifa was buried and muchly lamented by all who didn't know her. And even by those who did. Malika herself shed tears at the funeral; death puts things in a different perspective. There was the finality of it all. Deep down in all long-buried-hurts it is natural to seek a resolution – but now their issues would forevermore be unresolved.

After much deliberation (since Nadia had no successor), the Court chose... Samiyyah to become the next Khalifa. An odd choice, yet it made sense. Samiyyah was universally popular and respected. Her accomplishments in medicine meant a Khalifa who actually knows something about something (as opposed to only knowing power and manipulation). Samiyyah had all her life been removed from the political arena, which made her a successful compromise to all. “Still, it could have been almost anyone of hundreds,” Samirah told Malika, “shows how they're all the same, really.”

The coronation was bland. Not that it didn't have the pomp and splendour required, it's just that the citizens were tired of public ceremony. In one month they had:

1. Malika's disputation
2. Jamilah's trial
3. Jamilah's performance and execution
4. Nadia's burial
5. Samiyyah's coronation

People attended but their hearts weren't in it. A hundred vials of the most expensive fragrances, the finest food and deserts, jugglers and fire-breathers, feats of strength and amazement, elephants and...for what?

“So who're you marrying?” Malika asked Amina who announced she found her fake husband just days after the disputation.

“Faiz,” Amina said, answering Malika's stare.

“What?! You're fake-marrying a servant? Cute!”

“Well, I do need to marry someone who will be socially *advantaged* by this union. Hence a servant.”

“Interesting. So do you like him at all?”

“I tolerate him,” said Amina, “which is really all I need.”

Malika was still the woman of the moment. People flocked to her door, largely men and eunuchs, begging for her to be president of this or that society that they were forming. She always said no, it wasn't for her. All in all she was still unfulfilled. Sure, she did accomplish something, but where to from here? Still without a calling. She also knew she had yet to succeed in her original plan. She had not convinced anyone her husbands had something to contribute to Progress. Most of that plan was yet to be fulfilled. And its fulfillment seemed infinitely far. So Malika moped for the entire month. That is, until its last day.

Jamil, Malika, Ayyub and Daud sat in the courtyard of their house, talking and drinking tea. It felt like a year since the last time they had this luxury. Amina had just fessed up to finding a potential husband.

“I mean we don't even know what Samiyyah will be like as Khalifa do we?” Jamil said.

“She'll be Khalifa. Which means you'll have to learn to stop saying her personal name,” said Daud.

“What I meant was she's always been fairly liberal towards...”

“Yeah Jamil, what about your lessons with her?” asked Malika. “I seriously doubt the Khalifa is going to...instruct you in physiology, is she?”

“No no,” Jamil said laughing. “We ended lessons two weeks ago.”

“What happened?” asked Malika.

“She said I had enough knowledge to continue self-learning.”

“What?” the four of them said in unison, the fourth being Salman who had just walked in.

“Hey! I didn't think it would be that hard to believe!”

“It's not, it's only that---does this mean that that awful smell coming from the basement is from dissections you made of your own volition?” said Salman.

“Guilty,” said Jamil.

“At least before I had Sam-- the Khalifa to blame!” said Malika. “Anyway you do what you do. But I don't want to talk about the Khalifa now. Father, perhaps tell a story?”



"I'm no storyteller, it was your m--what would you like?"

Ayyub stopped for a moment and then eureka-ed. "Remember the day the kids went out for their wander?"

"Yes! Salman you were in the middle of a story."

"Alia's encounter with the Assassin."

"What? Who on earth remembers things that happened over 6 months ago?"

"I do," Malika said firmly. "And I'd like to hear the rest of it. If I recall, Rukan was about to pounce on Alia in the snows."

"Fine, but there's not much left."

"All the better!"

Salman got up and sat on the table, his legs resting on the chair. Despite his natural male timidity he was quite the storyteller. Before he got the chance to start he walked Samirah and a gloriously pregnant Naima. Hugs and greetings. Naima put a manuscript down on the table. A servant came and brought some Sisters' tea. All sat and sipped and things went a little topsy-turvy. Samirah, playfully tugged on Salman's hair for him to finish

#### THE TALE OF ALIA'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE ASSASSIN

"So Rukan has the dagger in her mouth and it's drawing some blood from her tongue. But she doesn't care because she has no hashish about and she needs to have some kind of trigger to go into berserker mode. In these cases she is accustomed to blood as the trigger. So she's crawling up on Alia from behind when Alia stretches her hand back pointing at her and says 'Rukan, don't kill me'. 'Why the hell not?' 'Two simple reasons. You need me as much as I need you. I need someone to test my powers of djinnology against, you need an enemy. Sure you have the Khalifa and that's great, but to really motivate your team you need someone who's close, who's a threat. That girl I just liberated, I bet your story of her treachery will cause 100 others to join'. 'And the second?' 'As soon as you strike me it is you who will fall over dead. Trust me on that one'"

"Rukan was perturbed but her dagger fell, leaving a tiny splotch of blood on the snow. Alia sat Rukan down and spoke to her. She said she did not wish to convert her back to orthodoxy because Rukan was not worthy. She deserved damnation because of the things she did. Rukan was surprised -- the popular mythology surrounding Alia was she preached forgiveness for heresy throughout the mountains. Rukan always thought this was part of the 'hook' she had used on her Assassin novices. When asked what was different about her she replied: 'The others kill because they think it's the right thing. They are misguided but with much sacred potential. You're treacherous. You manipulate your novices. You keep them in the dark, in a constant state of intoxication so as to maximise their striking power. You turn members of your own unit against each other just to stay at the top. You're not interested in striking at the Khalifa, just in yourself.' She then proceeded to give Rukan dozens of examples of the treachery she committed, events no living person could possibly have known. So disturbed she made Rukan that she immediately leaped off the cliff they were on and plunged to her death, straight into Yusuf's belly where she belonged. They say it was not the words that Alia said, but how she said them. She made the most hardened criminal look at herself from the outside and realise who she was. Naturally, Rukan didn't like what she saw. From then on, Alia was no longer an apprentice but a holy woman and top djinnologist in the land."

"Here's to Alia!" someone said. Naima stared unmovingly for a second, then nodded.

"And Rukan," added Malika gulping her tea down in one sweep. So it *wasn't* true that Alia simply wanted to kill Rukan. She wanted her to see herself for who she really was. And *then* kill her. Great difference.

"Naima, why don't you tell me about the baby?"

"Two months to go."

"Was it worth it?"

"Battle-wise? Oh yeah."

"Are you saying you actually felt a difference in the way you fought in this campaign?" asked Jamil.

"Absolutely. Of course, every time I've fought, I've fought differently."

"The true mark of a fighter," added Samirah.

"By the way Naima, thank you for pointing out the records hall in the Caspian."

"I knew you couldn't wish for blissful ignorance."

There was a lapse in conversation (as they continued to sip the intoxicating tea) that Malika suddenly

broke. "How's the poem coming along? Do you have an ending? May I hear what happened?"

They flinched slightly. "No, it's not finished just yet."

"In that case I would like, as your dear friend, to contribute an ending of my own."

Naima and Samirah smiled but took closer notice as soon as she started

#### THE TALE OF THE GAZELLE AND THE POACHER QUEEN (CONCLUDED BY MALIKA)

"Our wonderful active gazelle  
Just before being skewered through  
Was snatched forth by a certain one  
Who lived in ignorance of her  
But thankfully 'twas not for long  
For the gazelle was duly named  
A name that's reminiscent of  
Her magikal time in the steppes  
And so, thanks to this very name  
It was arranged that she should be  
Both<sup>25</sup> pardonéd, forgiv'n and raised  
Before our very poacher queen  
And so the queen she entertained  
(Whilst giving aid to all of those  
Lucky enough to be her friends)  
But -- she was never pacified  
But lay in wait for time to strike  
Until the moment she could step  
Onto her youth's beloved steppes  
There did she vanish from our view  
To come back when the time was right  
Putting her horns of Righteous Vengeance  
Through the bravado of the queen.  
And though we may be squamish of  
The sight of blood of one we knew  
Who be we, so to even dare  
To judge or question our gazelle  
As to the steppes she swiftly flees?"

There was an enormous silence. Naima and Samirah looked at Malika with eyes the size of dinner plates. "You mean you know everything?"

"I do. For I bumped into the aforementioned gazelle right after the fact. And shit did I feel like an idiot for not working it out before."

Samirah could barely suppress an enormous grin. If even someone as astute as Malika did not understand the original poem straight away, then it was fit for publication!

"The important thing is that the powers that be don't make the connexion," cautioned Naima.

"The powers that be are no more," said Samirah. The new powers that be have no idea. We'll spread it. Whoever understands will understand."

"But how did you know?" demanded Malika. "Did she tell you?" Her bottom lip protruded; she was upset Z----- told them and not her. What made them so special? Malika knew this was the wrong question to ask, but hey, she wasn't perfect. She found herself asking it anyway.

"Actually, she told us to tell you," said Samirah. "That's why we're here. We've already told Amina. Habuba's not to know for 5 years. That was Z-----'s wish, and though I have no idea what for, I'll gladly respect it."

"Do you mean to say that if I didn't broach the subject those would have been the next words out of your mouths?" Malika asked.

"Yes they would have. Z----- couldn't have known you'd find out anyway by bumping into her!"

"Neat!"

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<sup>25</sup> See footnote 21

They were interrupted again by Habuba bursting in. Before anyone could extend their greeting she bowed to Malika and winked at everyone else, whispering “official capacity”. “Malika al-Basimi, you have the eternal privilege of being visited by none other than the great Twelfth Khalifa (peace be upon her! may Intisar extend her life and reign! may she be inscribed as one of the righteous ones, gathered close to Intisar's sacred bosom!). She is standing outside the house and requests a brief moment of your time,” she blurted out like a machine gun.

“Well then you'd better send her in.”

Samiyyah entered, came up to Malika and extended her hand which was promptly kissed. “I was passing through and I thought I'd pop in for five minutes, rather than summoning you to the Palace to talk.”

“Absolutely My Lad--”

“--please Malika. This is pretty much the last time I'll get to talk to you informally. Just call me Samiyyah? I hope you'll continue to do so, but I'm realistic protocol-wise. So, one last time.”

“Sure thing, my good leech,” said Malika.

“You made an impact on me directly when you talked at the disputation. I will take your opinions to heart. And I expect to hear from you soon. That's it, just wanted you to know I expect much of you in this department. Your work has barely begun.”

Malika beamed. She cared not a shit for a Khalifa's pretty words, but basked in the sincere words of her friend Samiyyah.

The Khalifa departed, as did Naima and Samirah. The chaos had finally come to an end, she was amongst her husbands again. Abbas, Azizah and Salman were asleep upstairs and the four of them could finally draw close.

“Can we get back to something you don't want to talk about?” asked Daud.

“Something I don't want to talk about? Sure, let's talk about that!” joked Malika.

“We've all got our callings. I have maths and warfare, Jamil medicine, djinnology, calligraphy, Ayyub astronomy. You're the only one left,” said Daud.

“Yeah, you put yourself to shame -- even your husbands all have things when they're not supposed to.”

“Will you report me to the thought police?”

“Absolutely!” said Jamil coming up to her and grabbing her by the arm.

“You must be dealt with,” said Daud putting his hand on her shoulder.

“Otherwise your subversive nature will undermine society as we know it,” finished Ayyub putting his chin on her neck.

“What ever will we do?” said Malika, feeling she's about to be hauled off indoors for more tea.

“Not to mention this one knows Z----- murdered Nadia in cold blood and refuses to report this to the authorities!”

Malika went cold for a second. “Does everyone in the universe know?”

“We didn't,” said Ayyub, “not before Naima and Samirah waltzed in.”

“But we worked it out.”

“How stupid do you think we are?”

“Well, you three married me! If that wasn't--”

Malika's utterance was cut off by a kiss from one of them, who knows which one? It didn't matter, this was a polygamous moment.

“Hey Malika, you know people in the West are only allowed one husband?”

“Yes, if you were born there you'd have to choose one of us!”

“Not just there,” said Malika. “Even in Byzantium.”

“In any case, how fortunate for you to be a Baghdadian!”

“Wait a minute! I think I got it...”

“Can we just go inside?”

“No no, I need a wooden plank, paintbrush and paint.”

With a shrug, Ayyub went off and came back three moments later. Malika painted something on the plank. It was a sign. “See? I do have a calling. Now. Impressed?”

There was a silence as they stood and looked at what she had written.

“I knew you'd come through in the end. Or rather, in the beginning,” said Daud.

“I wasn't so sure. You could have been idling around for another ten years. Which would have been a lot of fun.”

“Thanks!” said Malika giving Jamil a mock slap. “Do you think this won't be fun?”

“Who knows?” said Ayyub. “Now go put it up. We eagerly await inside.”

“Yes, we have 2 more litres of the Sisters' concoction to finish.”

Malika ran outside with the sign, barefooted. She did not put on sandals because she was so eager to get back in there and Start life. It was a sunny afternoon with few people on the streets. Good. Nobody to greet. Not that she cared usually but there was just no patience right now. She fastened the sign to the front of her house. It said “The Society of Natural Philosophers of the One-Substance”. There was a bit of wind which rocked the sign and even made it creak a little. But Malika paid no heed, there were more important things to do! She turned around and ran inside and life finally Began and---

**The End**

## Glossary

*Contrarian Djinnology* - djinnological heresy that attempts to make itself as complex and formalised as orthodox djinnology. The prime example was the Contrarian Djinnology of the Assassins.

*Djinn* - chief creature in Khalific folklore, supernatural power, theme or idea manifested by certain traits. There are millions of djinns around. Every object, concept or action is the result of the interaction of the djinns.

*Djinnologist* - an expert in djinnology, usually attached to one of the djinnological schools (although people with more folksy approaches like Alia are also counted as djinnologists)

*Djinnology* - the systematic study of the djinns and their interactions with the world.

*Divan* - soft couch usually made of only two very large attached cushions (representing the union of Johara and Intisar as rulers of the Khalifate).

*Effendah* - landowner, collector of taxes from the Fellahot in her region.

*Fellahot* - workers on the land, formerly serfs but by the Abbasid dynasty agricultural workers. Taxed by the effendah but have freedom of movement.

*Farizah* - musical instrument.

*Negilah* - long pipe with a tube used for smoking tobacco or other substances.

*Plov* - classic Abbasid fare of yellow rice, mutton, garlic, herbs and vegetables lovingly and subtly fried in an extremely large pan.

*Samnah* - Stringed instrument played with a bow. The most versatile and difficult to play instrument in the Khalifate.

*Shafra* - communion with Johara. Alternately, refers to The Original communion where Johara herself descended to the Baghdad matriarchs.

*Urapa* - musical instrument.

*Waliat* - teaching story told in parable form.



## Magic Square

Attached is an attempt at a translation of a most basic magic square. This one contains simple moral maxims taught to schoolchildren. However, in the true spirit of djinnology, it also contains a paradox. When reading down, the squares in the second row have the optional “s” put in, when reading across, the squares in the first and third rows have it. This grammatical cheating gives a flavour of how they worked in Baghdadian. Also note that many concepts that require several English words can be expressed in Baghdadian using only one, due to its morphological richness.

an honest one	evil	hate(s)
trust(s)	has no	equal(s)
(her/a) fellow	escape(s)	trouble

## Fighting Sisters' Tea Recipe

Not intended for those with no military training or constitution. The key to the strength comes in brewing the tea three times, adding different spices in between.

1. Put 100g black tea leaves in a metal net.
2. Bring 1L water to boil.
3. Lower net with tea into boiling water for 30 secs, remove.
4. Add 10g each of cinnamon, cloves and ginger
5. Lower net with tea into boiling water for 2 mins, remove.
6. Add 1 clove crushed garlic, 15g chilli and 10mL distilled hornets' poison. Stir
7. Lower net with tea into boiling water for 3.5 mins, remove.
8. Remove water from boil, leave it to cool in the sun (for minor fermentation).
9. Reheat before serving.

Serves two. Unbeatable for killing barbarians, advancing djinnology or secular learning, or just fantasizing.

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Version 3, 29 June 2007

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This program comes with ABSOLUTELY NO WARRANTY; for details type `show w'.  
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## MAGGOTS OF HERESY

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Baghdad

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A novel about murder, science, religion, gender, genocide, autocracy, history, mutilation, warfare, calligraphy, storytelling, fanaticism, scheming, djinns, amputation, magic squares, sociology and spiced tea.

