

## **SHEHEREZADE by JENI WHITTAKER**

*with thanks to Nicky Ball who introduced me to the Jaydar story*

### **CHARACTERS** in order of appearance

1ST GUARD *m*  
2ND GUARD *m*  
SHEHEREZADE *f*  
DUNYAZADE *f*  
PALACE SERVANTS *as many as you like including:*  
SERVANT 1 *m or f*  
SERVANT 2 *m or f*  
CALIPH SHAHRYAR *m*  
JAYDAR *m*  
SARLIM *m* [*but it would be interesting to have one or*  
SALEEM *m* *both of these played by girls*]  
OMAR *m*  
MOTHER *f*  
JUDGES 1,2,3,4 & 5 *m or f*  
2nd MOOR *m or f*  
MOOR *m or f*  
CAPTAIN *m*  
1ST SAILOR *m*  
2ND SAILOR *m*  
A NUMBER OF GALLEY SLAVES *m or f*  
GENIE, THUNDERING THUNDERER *m or f*  
GRAND CALIPH *m*  
VIZIER *m or f*  
EMIR *m or f*  
ASIYAH *f*  
GUARD *m or f*  
ALI BABA *m*  
YASMEEN *f*  
FADIMA *f*  
KASSIM *m*  
ABDULLAH *m*  
MARJANA *f*  
FAISAL *m*  
1ST,2ND,3RD,4TH,5TH,6TH & 7TH THIEVES [*all the thieves can be played as*  
*male or female*]  
***+ as many other judges, servants and thieves as desired.***

The play therefore has 13 male parts [12 can be doubled], 7 female and a large number of parts which can be played by either sex. Minimum number of cast with doubling between the stories = 20ish [41 speaking parts]

Note that Sheherezade, Dunyazade and Caliph Shahryar cannot be doubled.

Setting requires a section of the stage which is separated by light, if by no other means, for Sheherezade, Dunyazade and the Caliph during the storytelling.

Staging should be of the simplest, using mime or the most basic props, such as canes, representational rather than fully realised, to allow for swift changes of location.

At present about one hour, fifteen minutes long, this play is designed to have other stories added, so that it can be as long or as short as required as you mix and match the stories to your cast requirements. Watch for future news of the additions!

There are many opportunities for cutting this play to make it focus more on the messages about feminism and the role of the artist/writer in society. It is very physical theatre, with often slapstick humour. It has been performed, in abbreviated form, by a much smaller and older cast, focusing on the sisters and the Caliph, with the few additional characters who occur in these scenes doubled. This play was especially commissioned for its first professional performance.

EXTRACT ONE

***The Guards hide. Enter Sheherezade and Dunyazade. The Guards pounce on them from behind and put their hands over their mouths.***

**1ST G** Don't scream and you won't get hurt. Oh Sheherezade, I'm sorry ...What a pity.

**SHEH *fighting partially free*** A pity? What do you mean? What is happening?

**DUNY** Let go! How dare you? We are the daughters of the Vizier. He will put you to death if he hears of this.

**2ND G** And the Caliph will put us to death if we disobey him. You see how it is?

**SHEH** What our father feared has come to pass.

**DUNY** People talk. And father has not prevented the palace guards from seeing us as

we walk in the cool of the evening.

**1ST G *eagerly*** I have seen you both - every evening this last few weeks - and especially you, Sheherezade.

**SHEH** You have been spying.

**2ND G *roughly*** However it has happened doesn't matter now. The fact is, you have come to his Caliphship's attention. You have no choice. One by one you will be His Mightiness's wives and then you will ... [***He pauses delicately.***]

**SHEH** I have heard. Who hasn't? [***Her shoulders slump.***] We will die.

**DUNY** Hold on...No choice? We'll see... There is always choice. Men ... and even women, can step in and steer their own destiny. [***Taking her by the shoulders.***] I believe it, Sheherezade - and you must too. Trust me, dear sister and make sure you ask to have me with you, to prepare you for your wedding night.

**SHEH** I don't see what good it will do.

**DUNY** We'll see. There is nothing to beat the quick wit of a woman. And remember - even Caliph's may change their mind....

***A long fanfare, ridiculously over the top. Servants enter, laying cushions in front of the Caliph Shahryar's feet. As he progresses, they run back and pick up those cushions he has already stepped on, piling them up in the storytelling area of the stage, as a throne on which to lounge. One servant carries a huge hookah, another a lavish feather fan, yet another sprays the air with scent from a huge bottle. If possible, add tumblers, dancers, carriers of grapes etc. The Caliph pauses still a good distance away from the girls in exaggerated astonishment. With him, at the same time, all his retinue freeze. Soon, he moves towards the girls and the whole retinue unfreezes. He flaps them into silence, irritated. They freeze again - poses of suspicion and gossip surprise . In this silence, the two girls kneel, and touch their fingers to their foreheads and then chests in obeisance. The guards drop to one side.***

**1ST G** The young ladies you asked for, Your Worshipfulness.

**2ND G** Just as you asked, Your Highness - without a hair of their heads harmed.

**CALIPH** There had better not be. Rise up, my dears. Let me see you. [***He walks round them, looking them up and down and nodding approvingly.***] Very nice.

[***To the Guards.***] Very good. You have done well. And to think they were in our palace all the time. Under our very noses, as it were. Well, well. [***To the followers.***] It seems our search is over. We have found our next two wives. [***All unfreeze and make exaggerated sounds and gestures of approval.***]

But don't tell the Vizier, mind! [***They all shake their heads and titter.***] Somehow, I don't think he'll be quite as pleased as we are! [***Titter again - louder.***] [***Aggressively and suddenly.***]

SO WHAT ARE WE NOT GOING TO DO? ... [***There is a shocked silence.***] WELL??

[***Heads turn to each other in query.***] [***Even louder.***] WELL??!!

**SERVANT 1 *in a tiny shaky voice*** We're not going to ... [***He clears his throat nervously.***] ... umm ... t-t-tell...

**CAL** The Vizier ... their father ... no ... we're not, are we?

**ALL *rather shakily*** No. We're not.

**CAL** So now leave me. Go on ... Get out. [*The retinue exit. As the two girls turn to leave as well, with the guards.*] Not you, my dears. Stay. Dunyazade, you are indeed as fair as they say. Tomorrow, you shall be my wife.

**DUNY** You are too kind.

**CAL** But for now - leave me alone with your sister. Guards - take her out and keep a good watch on her. [*Pause. Left alone with Sheherezade, the Caliph is lost in contemplation.*] So you are Sheherezade. The rumours did not lie. You are indeed beautiful. From this moment, [*He puts a ring on her finger.*] - you are my latest wife.

**SHEH gasping a little** Your Highness does me too much honour.

**CAL** Yes, tonight you are my bride, but in the morning, when the sun lightens the sky, you will die like all my other brides before you.

**SHEH** My father ...

**CAL** What of him? He cannot save you. That is why I had you picked up when and where you - and your father - would have least expected it. Now you are married there is little he can do. He must accept his Lord's will since it is so clearly the will of Allah also.

**SHEH** Allah is indeed merciful. His will be done.

**CAL** I am glad you are pious. It is obvious you are well brought up. Mind you, I'd expect nothing else from a fine man like your father. It's a shame, really, but - no ...sadly I fear you would not be faithful.

**SHEH** How could you know that, my lord?

**CAL** It is a fact. A woman has a thousand excellent qualities - but fidelity is not one of them. My first wife betrayed me. I vowed after her death that none would be given the chance to do so again. Thus, every girl I have married has died the following morning.

**SHEH** But, my Lord...

**CAL** Hush girl. Would you question my judgement? I count myself the most fortunate of men for I have learned the secret of a happy marriage: brevity and variety. You will be my one hundredth wife and tomorrow, your sister will be the one hundred and first.

**SHEH** I am not afraid of death but please, my lord, let me say goodbye to my sister first. We have always been close.

**CAL** Very well. You can have that as your last wish. [*He calls out.*] Guards! Bring Dunyazade back in! [*Dunyazade returns, escorted by the two guards, and kneels to the Caliph.*] Dunyazade, your sister has made a last request and, since I wish to be known as a merciful Caliph, I have granted it. She wishes to say goodbye. So - hurry up now and get it over with. Kiss each other, or whatever it is girls do.

**Sheherezade and Dunyazade embrace and break apart.**

**DUNY** Oh wise and merciful Caliph, since I am to die the day after tomorrow, may I also have a last request. Only I would like it now please.

**CAL** Listen to her! The cheek of the girl! Now indeed! Guards! Take her away!

**[Sheherezade runs and embraces the Caliph's legs. He tries to kick out to loosen her grip, but she hangs on determinedly.]** Get away from me! Guards!

What do you think you're doing? Your Caliph is being assaulted!

**The Guards start forward but Sheherezade lets go and moves away from the Caliph. She holds up her hand and the Guards stop suddenly.**

**SHEH** See! I am no threat. I would not hurt you, my lord, for I am your wife, so I would offer you nothing but love and kindness, just as I expect from you.

**CAL** So long as our marriage lasts.

**SHEH** Indeed, lord, so long as our marriage lasts. But, dear majesty, my sister and I have both heard how kind you are...

**DUNY** And generous...

**SHEH** Yes, and so patient ...

**DUNY** Everyone knows you're the nicest Caliph we've ever had.

**CAL disarmed** Aw - shucks ... Am I really? The nicest you say? That's very kind of you. Everyone says so, do they? [*Suddenly, to the Guards.*] Is that true? [*1st Guard nods vigorously, elbows the 2nd, who was dozing on his feet.*]

**2ND G** It's true, my lord. Everyone comments on it.

**CAL suspicious, dangerously quiet, standing over him** Oh, they do, do they? And what exactly is it they say, hmm?

**2ND G spluttering** They say ... that you're the ... c-c-...

**1ST G** *coming in fast* Kindest....

**2ND G** Kindest and na-na-na...

**1ST G** Nicest...

**2ND G** *triumphantly* Nicest. The kindest and nicest Caliph we've ever had.

**CAL** Hmph! However, it is so obviously true that I'll forgive your slowness this once.

**DUNY** Oh, how merciful. Didn't I say, Sheherezade, how merciful the Caliph is? Didn't I?

**SHEH** You did, sister. Only this morning. And now we've seen his mercy for ourselves.

***The Caliph preens under this praise.***

**DUNY** *going in for the 'kill'* So, since the mercy overflows from your kind and patient heart, forgive me my presumption - and grant me my last wish. Now.

**CAL** I will judge when I've heard it. But it's most irregular - I'm not making any promises.

**DUNY** You'll find it's not so very much, this request. Just a tiny little favour.

**CAL** Ask away then. You'll see how kind and ...

**SHEH** *helpfully* Patient ...

**CAL** You took the words from my mouth, my dear. Kind, patient and ...

**DUNY** Merciful, my lord.... This is my request. It happens that my sister is the most wonderful storyteller in the whole world. On our way here tonight, she was telling me a new tale and we had got a little way into it when we were jumped by your guards here. [***The Caliph glares at the Guards, who step back.***] Then because of one thing and another and the excitement that followed I never heard the end of the story. Really, I think not knowing that was worse than the rough treatment we received...

**CAL** Rough treatment, eh? What's this I hear? [***The Guards slink quickly off.***]

**DUNY** *quickly, to keep attention on her; sighing* Such a story it was! The best one yet - but then, I say that every time I hear a new one.

**CAL** *looking curiously at Sheherezade* A storyteller, eh? Was it a love story?

**SHEH** It has something of love in it.

**CAL** They're all right in small doses - but I can't stand sentimental slop.

**SHEH** *hastily* Though there is some love in it - in the end - there's much intrigue and adventure, magic and betrayal on the way.

**DUNY** The ingredients of all the best stories, my lord.

**CAL** Betrayal? From a woman, no doubt. Magic? Intrigue? Well ... perhaps I'll hear this story too. You won't mind, Dunyazade, if we both listen, even though it is *your* last request? After all, your sister is my wife - and a husband has some rights

**DUNY** Listen away, my lord. You won't regret it.

***All three settle down on the cushions that were brought in earlier .***

**SHEH** This is the story of Jaydar and his brothers.... Long ago, in the city of Cairo, there lived three brothers. The two eldest, Sarlim and Saleem, were lazy, good-for-nothings, but the youngest brother, whose name was Jaydar, was good as well as hard-working...

EXTRACT TWO

***Jaydar is left alone. He casts his net out over the front of the stage and pulls it in. Whilst he is pulling it in, the figure of a Moor appears, as if by magic, beside him. Jaydar starts.***

**JAY** You gave me a fright. Who are you?

**2ND MOOR** Never you mind. You don't need to know that. Cast your net again.

**JAY** There doesn't seem much point. The net was empty last time.

**2ND M** It is written that you, Jaydar, shall be the one.

**JAY** *startled* Me? The one ... who?... what?

**2ND M** The one who will find the magic fish. Cast your net a third time. This will be it.

**JAY** *casting and pulling in the net* See. I told you this place was no good. It's empty again.

**2ND M** But is it? Look again... What do you see?

**Jaydar peers into the net. Quickly, 2nd Moor pounces and wraps him up in it.**

**JAY** Hey! Help! What is it you want from me? Is it money? Because I have none.

**2ND M** I'm thinking maybe I read the magic wrong. Perhaps I need to throw you in the sea to find the fish. [**He stands, scratching his head. Another Moor enters.**]

**MOOR** Did I hear someone calling 'Help?' What's going on here? [**Seeing 2nd Moor.**] Oh, it's you!

**2ND M** Hello, brother. Keep your nose out of my business, if you'll be so kind.

**MOOR** Your business is my business, as you very well know. Why have you got Jaydar wrapped in his net? [**He starts to free Jaydar.**]

**JAY** And how is it that everyone knows my name?

**MOOR** In books of magic, Jaydar, your name has been written for thousands of years.

**JAY** Gosh! That's exciting. Can I see?

**2ND M** I doubt there'd be much point. You can't read.

**JAY** That's true. Still ...

**MOOR** Let's get on with what we're here to do. Brother, you get into the net.

**2ND M** Me? Why's that?

**MOOR** *excessively patient* Because I say so and I've read the book more recently than you. It says that Jaydar must lower someone in the net to find the magic fish.

**2ND M** *very suspicious* OKa-a-ay. So.... Why does that have to be me? Why not you? I might die down there and then...

**MOOR** *still excessively patient* He who catches the fish gets to keep it. That's what the book says. I'm just playing fair with you, brother. You were here first, after all. First after Simbah, that is, Allah receive him.

**JAY** What happened to Simbah?

**MOOR** Simbah was our eldest brother. He came here about a week ago to look for the fish and never returned.

**2ND M** Serves him right, I say. He hadn't read the book properly - too impatient. So he snuck off in the night to give us the slip. You won't see me shedding tears over him.

**MOOR** Yes, he was greedy. But to drown all alone away from his family was sad. We found his body days later.

**JAY** *who has started to edge away* That man was your brother?

**2ND M** Yes. Why? Do you know something about this?

**JAY** You won't be angry? It wasn't really my fault. Only the man - your brother - paid me to throw him into the water as far as I could. He insisted that it had to be me who did it. He asked me my name several times ... I watched the water for a long time and he never came up. When he hadn't shown up by the end of the day, I'm afraid I took the money home. It came in very handy; you see, my brothers were desperate for cash so I gave it all to them. I felt better once it was out of my hands, to be honest. A dead man's money... [**He shudders.**] ... well, it felt wrong, if you know what I mean.

**MOOR** You're a good man, Jaydar. Of course we don't blame you.

**2ND M** He was trying to cheat us. He deserved what he got. Anyone who tries to cheat his own brothers deserves to die.

**MOOR** *delicately* And of course you were going to share with me, were you - when you caught the fish?

**2ND M** Er - naturally. We're family, aren't we? [**He smiles a broad false smile.**]

**MOOR** What a family! Is your family like this, Jaydar?

**JAY** Well, a bit. That is, my brothers and I do argue sometimes but ... [**Staunchly loyal.**] ... I love them dearly, and my mother too. I'd do anything for them.

**MOOR** Good Jaydar. Do this for them then and you'll be richly rewarded. Lower my brother in the net. [**2nd Moor gets in the net without further protest.**]

**2ND MOOR** And you promise the fish and all its magic will be mine?

**MOOR** Finder's keepers, brother.

**2ND M** Good. Lower away then. [**Jaydar 'lowers' the 2nd Moor in the net.**

**When down, he flounders and glug-glugs, obviously drowning, until he is still.]**

**JAY** Isn't it too long now? Shouldn't we pull him up?

**MOOR** The book said ten minutes, so ten minutes it must be.

**JAY** But no one can survive that long under water.

**MOOR** He's been practising for weeks in the bath. He'll be all right. OK, I think the time is up. Pull him up Jaydar.

**JAY** I may need your help. He'll be waterlogged.

***They pull him up and immediately the Moor pounces on the net, pulls it apart and rummages around the 2nd Moor. He stands up triumphantly holding a small red fish. Jaydar stays down trying to resuscitate the body.***

**MOOR** I've got it! The magic fish! At last! Now, Jaydar, you must come with me. We have a long journey to make.

**JAY** What about your brother? Have you no heart?

**MOOR** Never mind him. He would have killed you when you'd done what he asked. But I read further in the book - I know your task isn't finished. And besides, I like you, Jaydar. You're a good sort... a bit on the innocent side, maybe, but honest. ***[Jaydar gets up reluctantly, anxiously glancing at the body.]*** Now, fetch your net to give to your brothers. ***[Jaydar does so, rolling the body away.]*** They'll need to work while you are away. This fish... ***[He waves it in the air, before pocketing it.]***... is really the son of a powerful magician. The owner of the fish has control of all of the father's magic - which means that now I have access to the magician's vast treasure-house.

**JAY** Right. So how does that concern me?

**MOOR** My magic book reveals that only you can enter the treasure house, whilst only I have the no-how to open its door. Together we'll be a team. A partnership to unimaginable riches. How does that strike you? You'll be rich for life - beyond your wildest dreams. Your family will be able to live in luxury. Your troubles will be over.

**JAY** And what's in it for you? If I am to have the treasure?

**MOOR with reverence** A book. A wonderful book...that gives me power over every genie in the world...

### EXTRACT THREE

**CAL** ... So did the good son, Jaydar, come back to his family? Did he make his fortune?

**SHEH** It would take too long, Sire. I really must sleep now. And I need time to pray, for after all this is my last night on earth. Dunyazade?

**DUNY** Yes, sister?

**SHEH beginning to leave** Please help me prepare for the night. I want to please my new husband. Will you do my hair for me? And help make me beautiful? ***[She exits.]***

**DUNY** Of course I will.

**CAL calling after her** You are already beautiful, Sheherezade. And your story has pleased me mightily. But you can't leave it there! I need to know the end.

**DUNY** My sister needs sleep. Creativity is demanding and the imagination cannot run on exhaustion. It needs to be replenished by food and drink and rest.

**CAL** What are you saying? That I will never know the end of the story? For after this night, as you know, she must die.

**DUNY** Well then, that's clear. You will never know the end.

**CAL cunning** You can carry it on tomorrow. You have heard all your sister's stories.

**DUNY** Alas. I don't have my sister's way with words. And she has such a fund of tales that they all become jumbled in my head. I might muddle it up with Sinbad, or Aladdin.

No, I'm sorry. Only Sheherezade can finish the story. ***[A pause. She waits.]***

**CAL dismisses her irritably** Go. Go, go, go, go, go. Leave me. ***[Dunyazade exits]*** ***[He calls.]*** Servants. Bring me food, wine, sherbets and my hookah. I need to think.

***[Enter very sleepy servants, rubbing eyes etc.]*** Look sharp! What's all this? Readiness at all times. That's the palace motto. AT ALL TIMES! D'you hear me?

**ALL SERVANTS** Yes, my lord.

**CAL** Well? Where's my food? My wine? My hookah? I need to think.

**SERVANT 1** Beg pardon, sire, we thought - since it was your wedding night ...

**CAL bellowing** Every night is my wedding night!

**SERVANT 1** Yes, sire, and normally ... you're ... well ... too busy ...

**SERVANT 2** You're otherwise engaged, Sire. You don't normally need sustenance. And won't your hookah ... cause ... um ... you to ... sleep? Rather than ... ?

**CAL** My hookah helps me to think, you cretin. It brings calm rationality to my thought processes. That's all it does. Now fetch it. And sherbet. And wine.

**SERVANT 1** Yes, sire. At once. [**He gestures and servants scurry off and return with a plate of sherbet, a large hookah and a glass and carafe of wine while Servants 1 & 2 re-arrange the Caliph's cushions.**] There, sire. That should be more comfortable. May I ask where your bride is? Would she not like some wine too?

**CAL** My wife is sleeping.

**ALL SERVANTS *astonished*** Sleeping?

**CAL** She is quite worn out.

**ALL SERVANTS *exchanging knowing and satisfied looks*** Aaaah!

**SERVANT 2** That is all to the good then, Sire. We won't disturb her. Should we come at the usual time to take her to her execution?

**CAL *who is comfortably drawing on his hookah, sitting crosslegged on his pile of cushions, starts visibly*** What's that? Execution? Dammit! Darn the woman! See what she's done to me already. **He casts the hookah aside and, thrusting aside the hands of the servants who all run forward to help him, starts to pace back and forth.** See what has happened! My peace is shattered! My life is torn apart! And all because of one woman! Dammit! What happened the last time ?

**SERVANT 1 *cautiously*** The last time - what, sire?

**CAL** The last time my peace was shattered by a woman, idiot!

**SERVANT 2** That was your first wife, Sire. The one who ... [**He gulps. No one likes to remind him of this. All servants hastily retreat a little.**] ... who ... was seen ... er...

**CAL *impatiently*** Kissing that twit in the Royal Guard. Yes, I know, I know. It broke my heart. [**Pause. His anger suddenly flags. Sadly.**] She did. She broke my heart.

**All the servants move in to him, murmuring comforting nothings.**

**SERVANT 2** There, there, Sire. No woman will be allowed to hurt you like that again.

**All hastily step back again as the Caliph suddenly explodes.**

**CAL** I can't let a woman come close to me again - I must be in control. D'you hear? Control! And now, this woman is controlling me. I won't have it, I tell you. She shall die in the morning like the others. That'll teach her! [**The servants all nod approvingly.**] **DUNY *entering*** My lord?

**CALIPH *whirling round*** What? Who is it? Oh, it's you. What do you want?

**DUNY** It's my sister, lord. She is sleeping - but it is fitful. Every now and again she sits up and says 'Aha!' or 'I have it' and sometimes 'That will truly amaze him.'

**CAL *suspiciously*** And to what, exactly is she referring?

**DUNY** Why, to her stories of course. She thinks of new ideas, characters, endings - all the time. Her mind seethes with invention. Her imagination keeps her tossing on her bed, for she so wants to please you with her tales.

**CAL** It's too late. I have resolved that she shall die in the morning like the others.

**DUNY *secretly horrified, but covering it*** Oh, my lord ... and just as she's thought of a way of making Jaydar a Caliph just like you - wise and good and honest.

**CAL** And all -powerful, remember that.

**DUNY** Of course - all powerful and all-merciful, as is Allah himself.

**CAL *steely; labouring the point*** With the power of life and death in his hands.

**DUNY** Indeed, Sire. All who know you speak of little else than this power you have. Over us poor women in particular.

**CAL *with satisfaction*** Richly deserved. [**To the servants.**] Isn't it?

**SERVANT 1** Indeed, Sire.

**SERVANT 2** Shall we remove this woman from your presence, lord?

**CAL** Yes... no ... I don't know. [**With a sudden flash of temper.**] Oh, why can't I make my mind up? I want to hear the rest of the story, that's the truth of it.

**SERVANT 1** Story, sire? [**The servants exchange looks.**]

**CAL** You heard me. Yes... story. I want to hear the end of it.

**SERVANT 1** Then if that is all, hear the end - and then cut her head off. What does a

day more or less matter?

**SERVANT 2** It is nearly dawn, Sire. Normally the time when we would ready your bride for her death.

**CAL** And though I have not slept yet, I have to hear the end. Dunyazade?

**DUNY** Yes, my lord?

**CAL** Has your sister slept long enough, do you think?...

[The adventures of Jaydar continue, interrupted like this by the impatient Caliph. Jaydar's brothers, entranced by his riches and his position - he does become Caliph - and desirous of his beautiful wife, betray Jaydar numerous times. But Jaydar's wife, Asiyah, tricks the competing brothers finally and remains faithful to her husband.]

#### EXTRACT FOUR

**SHEH** And that's the end of the story of Jaydar and his brothers.

**CAL** Did you see the wiles she used to trick Saleem? Typical woman.

**DUNY** What else could she have done, if she wanted to remain faithful?

**CAL** Your message is not lost on me, clever Sheherezade. You are such a one as Asiyah, are you? Faithful and loving?

**SHEH** It's up to you to decide, my lord.

**DUNY** And you can't make a judgement so important in the short time that you will have.

**CAL** Don't push it! You've made your point. Now, how about another story?

**DUNY** She must be allowed to rest before telling another.

**CAL** The dawn is near. If I allow her to rest, it may be too late for another story before the guards come to take her away. [**Hopefully.**] But perhaps you remember some of the tales, Dunyazade, and you can tell me one tonight.

**DUNY** I lack my sister's way with words, lord. And the stories are always so complex - I'd never remember the details. Only Sheherezade can do her own stories justice.

**A strangled fanfare, loud whisperings, a squeak, all cut short. Enter servants, stuck together in a many-armed and headed, twittering group. They form and reform, producing goodies from out of their centre, like conjurors.**

**CAL** What's going on?

**SERVANT 1** Your grandioseness..

**SERVANT 2** Most High and Mightiestness...

**SERVANT 1** You haven't eaten for twenty-four hours.

**CAL** What do you mean?

**SERVANT 2** It is nearly dawn on the second day

**SERVANT 1** And so we thought - a little light refreshment...

**ALL SERVANTS** Some food.... [**They display food.**]

**SERVANT 2** You must be hungry, sire.

**SERVANT 1** And thirsty too.

**ALL SERVANTS** Some drink perhaps? [**Drink is revealed.**]

**SERVANT 2** Or perhaps some sweetmeats...

**ALL SERVANTS** *invitingly* Mmmm? [**Display chocs or Turkish Delight.**]

**CAL** *pushing the servants aside - they reform into a new, frightened, shape*

What do you mean? I've lost a whole day? How can that be?

**DUNY** That's why Sheherezade is so tired, my lord. She's been entertaining you for two nights and a day.

**CAL** Good heavens! A story so good that I forgot to eat, drink and sleep! That's some story! [**Turning to the Servants abruptly.**] Isn't it, buffoons?

**ALL SERVANTS** *quailing and taking a step back* Yes, your majesty.

**CAL** And she knows more of these stories, you said?

**DUNY** Many, lord.

**CAL** I've never been so entertained in my life. [**To servants, nastily.**] Why couldn't you manage that, eh? [**Servants take another step backwards, still in a cluster.**] All right. I've decided to change the rules. I'll decide when Sheherezade will die - and it



will be when I'm tired of her stories. All right? [**To Servants.**] All right? So get out. And I'll call when I want you. GET OUT. [**The Servants scuttle to the edge of the stage, turn and look over their shoulders, between legs, and so on - group suspicion shape, pause and exit.**] [**cosily**] Now... Where were we?  
**SHEH** I think you might enjoy the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves...

[Though entranced by the famous story of Ali Baba, the Caliph is reluctant to kill Sheherezade, but is afraid of being called weak for going against his own decree. Clever Dunyazade has the answer...]

#### EXTRACT FIVE

**SERVANT 1** Your Highness?

**CAL** It is time. [**The servants seize Sheherezade and drag her to her feet. Others seize Dunyazade, who is too shocked to speak.**]

**SERVANT 1** You had us worried, Sire. It's all been a bit ... unusual. Three days, you know, Sire - and you've taken no rest and hardly anything to eat or drink. It's not natural.

**CAL** I know. I don't know what came over me. That woman really got under my skin. She is an enchantress - the most dangerous kind of woman.

**DUNY shrieks and struggles forward, pulling her escorts with her.** My lord, is this really what you want?

**CAL** A ruler must be strong. I can't break my rule for two chattering women. You have missed your turn as my wife; you will both die together. GUARDS! [**Guards 1 & 2 enter immediately.**] Prepare the prisoners for execution. Cut off their hair. And if they try to sweet-talk you, cut out their tongues.

**GUARDS** Yes, my lord. At once.

**DUNY** But what about Sinbad? What about Aladdin? You are killing them too!

**CAL to the Guards** See what I mean? These women have no shame.

**DUNY as she is being pulled away** Sinbad the sailor has voyages all over the world. His adventure with the giant bird, the roc, is my favourite.

**CAL halting the guards with a gesture** A roc, eh? No women in that story? No fast-talking, clever women who make themselves indispensable, like Marjana? Don't think I don't know what your sister was up to with that tale. And Jaydar's faithful wife. Humph!

**DUNY** Sinbad is a man's tale - adventure, danger - dare-devil escapes. You'd love it.

**CAL** Bring Sheherezade to me....How many nights to tell the story of Sinbad?

**SHEH** There are many tales and I think of new ones all the time. A month maybe.

**CAL shaking himself visibly** You see? It nearly happened again. I must abide by my rules. [**The servants, who have held their breath and relaxed according to the Caliph's changes of heart, cheer and nod to each other.**] I must be strong.

**DUNY** A strong ruler and a wise and a just one...

**CAL** As you told me I was...

**DUNY** ... recognises when rules should be changed. Be strong enough to change your mind. Let my sister live. Let her stories live, to delight you and the world.

**CAL** The world? What do I want with sharing her stories? They are mine alone. [**Stops and looks at her.**] I notice you don't plead for your own life. You're a brave girl.

**DUNY** I'm not important, lord. Art is. My sister's stories deserve life. A really great ruler...

**CAL** What?

**DUNY** ...would see that these stories could spread your fame far and wide. Everyone would honour the ruler who had such a clever wife.

**CAL looking around him at his court** Is that true?

**SERVANT 1** The stories must be good...

**SERVANT 2** You forgot to eat and drink...

**GUARD 1** We have had no work to do for three days...

**GUARD 2** Anything that has kept you so occupied for so long must be wonderful...

**SERVANT 1** I wish I could hear one of the tales... I love a good yarn.

**ALL** So do we all.

**DUNY** I could write them down, Sire. That would give them permanence.

**CAL** Hmm. Sometimes I forget how educated you are. Both of you are unusual girls. Come forward, Sheherezade. This is my decree. A new rule - only temporary, mind. You may continue to entertain me with your tales. And Dunyazade - you shall write them down. And the stories will be copied by my scribes and decorated by the finest artists and sent throughout the world, so that I may be honoured.

**DUNY** You will be honoured for ever, Sire.

**CAL** Eh?

**DUNY** The written word lasts longer than our poor mortal bodies.

**CAL** That's true too.

**SHEH** And I shall be honoured to be married to such a wise and merciful ruler.

**ALL SERVANTS AND GUARDS** *as the Caliph preens and poses* Aaaah.