

THE SHAHRAZAD SOCIETY

(Full-Length)

by Ramón Esquivel

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CHARACTERS — Ages 14-18 or 18-22 depending on setting

SELENA\* — sister of Dominica (Dominic), a Fourth Year at the school

DOMINICA (or Dominic) — sibling of Selena, a Third Year

MALIKA (or Malik) — cousin of Leila (Lyle), a Fourth Year

LEILA (or Lyle) — cousin of Malika (Malik), a Second Year

REINKO\* — a friend of Tara, a First Year

TARA\* — a friend of Reinko, a First Year

SETTING

A secret location on the campus of a restrictive, religious college —or— boarding school.

CASTING

The play is written for six performers, with doubling in the tales as indicated.

The characters of SELENA\*, REINKO\*, and TARA\* are written to be women.

The characters of DOMINIC/A, MALIK/A, and LEILA/LYLE are written gender neutral.

Adjust all pronouns and other gendered language as needed.

FULL-LENGTH PLAY ESTIMATED RUNNING TIME

110-120 minutes

PRODUCTION HISTORY

*The Shahrazad Society* won the 2014 Aurand Harris Memorial Playwriting Award from the New England Theatre Conference. The play, as *Shahrazad 1001*, has been featured in staged readings at New Plays for Young Audiences at the Provincetown Theatre, New York University, and at the Bechdel Group, New York City.

The play is unproduced as of January, 2020.

Darkness. Handheld light from off-stage, then voices.

SELENA  
(off-stage)

We're almost there.

DOMINICA  
(off-stage)

You said that ten minutes ago.

SELENA and DOMENICA enter.

SELENA

Here it is!

DOMINICA

How did you find this place?

SELENA

I went exploring last week. Tell me what you think.

Illumination of a space. It could be a basement, storage room, attic, or even an abandoned classroom or theatre. Windows, if any, are boarded up or otherwise covered to convey that this space is unused.

DOMINICA

Not much room to move around.

SELENA

Use your imagination. We can shove stuff around. With some muscle work, it can be perfect.

DOMENICA

Let's make it so.

Selena and Dominica move set pieces around to make an open staging area, with places for others to sit. Throughout the play, found items appropriate for the space will become props and pieces to suggest settings for tales.

SELENA

So ... will you tell a story this month?

Lights from off-stage can be seen.

DOMINICA

I think I'm ready. I've been practicing.

SELENA

Good. I hope others will too.

MALIKA and LEILA enter.

MALIKA

Well, well, well ... look who we find here.

SELENA

Malika! Leila! *[Or "Malik! Lyle!" Continue in this vein as needed.]*

ALL embrace.

MALIKA

It takes more than a few threats to change our minds. But Leila's worried.

LEILA

I'm not worried. I'm terrified. There's a difference. But I'm here.

Leila takes out a small paper with the society's emblem on one side, and a subtle drawing on the other.

MALIKA

Your map-drawing skills are excellent, Selena.

SELENA

Thanks. I can't draw but I can do a few squiggly lines. I hope others can figure it out, or else we may not have anyone new this month.

DOMINICA

What do you think of the new space Selena found?

Malika and Leila take in the space.

MALIKA

Needs work.

SELENA

It has potential, yes?

DOMINICA

Use your imagination.

MALIKA

I love it. Thank you for finding it.

LEILA

Is it safe, though? I don't want to get expelled.

DOMENICA

Safe enough for tonight. Help us?

ALL arrange the space. Improvised dialogue as they try configurations, change them, move things back, etc. When everything is set, Selena places a book in the center.

SELENA

What time is it?

MALIKA

Just after midnight. Let's get started?

More lights from off-stage.

SELENA

I think it's only us four again. Leila, will you start us off?

Selena, Dominica, and Malika sit as Leila takes center stage in the playing space. Leila takes a book from floor.

TARA and REINKO enter.

LEILA

(to Tara and Reinko)

Who are you?!

TARA

Oh! Sorry!

LEILA

What do you want?! Get out!

MALIKA

Leila, cool it.

REINKO

(to Tara)

See? I told you. They don't want us here. Let's go.

society's  
Tara and Reinko begin to leave. Selena holds up the  
symbol and map.

SELENA  
No, wait! Are you here for this?

Tara holds up the same symbol and map.

TARA  
We heard voices. But we weren't sure.

SELENA  
Welcome. Please stay.

Selena brings Tara and Reinko into the playing space.

LEILA  
How do we know we can trust them?

MALIKA  
Look at their eyes. See how afraid they are? Even more afraid than you.  
(to Tara and Reinko)  
Yes, please join us. Sit down. Get comfortable. Relax if you can. Take a nap if you need it.

TARA  
Thank you. It is really late.

ALL are seated.

MALIKA  
You are both First Years, right?

Tara and Reinko nod 'yes'.

SELENA  
What are your names, friends?

TARA  
I am Tara. This is my friend.

REINKO  
...

TARA

—Who will tell you her own name ... even though she is shy.

REINKO

Reinko. I'm Reinko. And this is Tara.

TARA

I already told them that.

REINKO

Oh. Sorry.

SELENA

Welcome, Tara. Welcome, Reinko.

TARA

Thank you. And you are?

SELENA

My name is Selena. I'm a Fourth Year. This is my **sister**, Dominica.

DOMINICA

Third Year. Thank you for coming.

TARA

Thank you for inviting us.

REINKO

Yes, thank you.

MALIKA

I'm Malika. Fourth year. And Professor Rude Welcome here is my cousin.

LEILA

Leila. Second year. Sorry I yelled at you. I'm really nervous about all this.

REINKO

I'm scared too. I've never broken any kind of rule before.

LEILA

I hadn't either, before this, if that makes you feel a little better.

MALIKA

See? Breaking the rules brings everyone closer together.

Beat.

TARA

So what happens now? What do you all do?

SELENA

What do we do, you mean? You are part of us now.

TARA

So what do we do?

DOMINICA

We meet each month to share stories. You can share one too, if you wish.

REINKO

What kind of stories?

SELENA

Stories you read, stories you know, stories you make up, stories you change. Stories from banned books. Forbidden stories. Taboo stories. Stories they don't want us to read or share or talk about. Any story we choose, really, so long as we make it ours.

MALIKA

"We make it ours." That's part of our creed. My cousin was about to start off. Weren't you, Leila?

LEILA

No, it's cool. Selena can go. I'm not really very good at all this.

SELENA

Leila, you were all set to go before.

LEILA

No, it's okay. Really.

MALIKA

Do it!

LEILA

Fine! You know, I really hate you sometimes, Malika.

MALIKA

And I love you too, cousin.

Leila takes center stage again, holds up the book.

LEILA

Members of The Shahrazad Society, I welcome you: Selena, Dominica, Malika, and our newest members — I'm so sorry, I've already forgotten your names?

TARA

Tara.

REINKO

Reinko.

LEILA

Tara and Reinko. See, I told you I'm not good at this.

MALIKA

Keep going.

LEILA

This is our creed: "The stories of the world reflect the world as it is. But the stories of this space reflect the world as it can be. The Shahrazad Society: We Make It Ours."

Applause.

MALIKA

See? I knew you could do it.

LEILA

I still hate you. Tonight, the first person to play the role of Shahrazad is Selena.

More applause as Leila hands book to Selena.

SELENA

You are too kind, friends. I was going to begin with animal fables, and maybe I will share those later. But if my sister Dominica will oblige, I would like to go back to the beginning, the first story I told, in honor of our guests. It is about a humble woman facing terrible power.

DOMENICA

I'm on it!

Dominica exits to costume herself. As Selena speaks, she becomes the storyteller "Shahrazad."

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

“The Story of the Fisherwoman and the Djinni.” A fisherwoman watches as a sailor of great repute, Sindibad, unloads his ships at the dock. The cargo? Treasure. The crowd gathered around cheers. Among them is a humble fisherwoman, a widow who took over her late husband’s boat and trade. She stares at Sindibad’s treasure.

(assumes the FISHERWOMAN’s voice)

“All that gold, jewels, and pearls from the sea. But I would be happy with enough fish to feed myself and my dear old mother. Perhaps this time I will be blessed with fish?”

(as Shahrazad)

The fisherwoman rows farther out to sea than ever before. She stops and throws her net overboard. She feels it catch! She pulls and pulls and pulls on her net until it pops out of the water to reveal ... a clay pitcher filled with mud.

(in the Fisherwoman’s voice)

“Thank you for this gift of a mud-filled pitcher. Might you also bless me with fish today?”

MALIKA

A humble and grateful fisherwoman.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

She was raised well. After her prayer, the fisherwoman throws her net back in the water. She feels it catch! She pulls — this feels much heavier! — and pulls — she can feel her catch resisting! — and pulls on her net until it pops out of the water to reveal ... a dead donkey.

MALIKA

Did she give thanks for the dead donkey?

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Wouldn’t you?

(in the Fisherwoman’s voice)

“Water-logged donkey carcass is not my favorite meal, but I cannot deny that the sea has provided a feast on this day. I am thankful. But what a glorious miracle it would be for this fisherwoman to catch actual fish!”

MALIKA

Can she be called a true fisherwoman if she catches no fish?

LEILA

Stop interrupting.

MALIKA

What, it’s part of the experience.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

“Donkeywoman” would be more accurate, it’s true.

LEILA

Does she give up?

MALIKA

Stop interrupting, Leila.

LEILA

But you just said ...

MALIKA

—I'm kidding. Keep going.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

She does not want to return to port empty handed, but the sun is already setting. The fisherwoman throws her net out one last time. She feels nothing. But as he begins to pull her net in, she notices something has caught. Something shiny.

REINKO

Treasure?

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Ahh! Thoughts of Sindibad's treasure do cross the fisherwoman's mind. But her hopes are dashed when she pulls from the water ... an old jar.

(in Fisherwoman's voice)

"It will be a dinner of donkey flesh for my father and me."

(as Shahrazad)

Something on the jar catches the fisherwoman's eye. The cap is sealed in place with wax. By the law of the land, the fisherwoman was never taught to read, but even so she recognizes that the wax seal has a royal emblem.

REINKO

Is it treasure?

MALIKA

Yeah, that's the spirit!

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

A great and terrible treasure. For when the Fisherwoman opens the cap, a gentle mist emerges. Lightly at first, and then spewing. Out of the mist, towering above the Fisherwoman, forms the masculine body and gigantic head of a djinni.

The oral story becomes a play. Selena plays the FISHERWOMAN, and Dominica plays the JAR DJINNI.

JAR DJINNI (DOMINICA)

Ahh, mighty and terrible Suleiman the Great! I beg your forgiveness. Your will is my own.

(The Jar Djinni looks around)

But ... where are your ships? Where are your armies? Where are you, O Suleiman?

FISHERWOMAN (SELENA)

Hello? Hello!

The Jar Djinni squints to see the Fisherwoman below.

JAR DJINNI

You have changed since last I saw you, Suleiman.

FISHERWOMAN

Wrong person. I am not Suleiman the Great. I am a fisherwoman, and hardly a great one.

JAR DJINNI

You are not Suleiman? I swore my loyalty to a fisher- ... a fisher-woman?!

FISHERWOMAN

You did, yes. I didn't ask for it, but you offered, so ...

JAR DJINNI

You fool, you fool, you fool. What you thought would be your destiny will be your doom.

FISHERWOMAN

My doom? But I just freed you.

JAR DJINNI

No mortal man — and certainly no woman! — can capture or free me. I am a djinni. That jar bears the seal of Suleiman the Great, he who surpassed mortal men and entered the realm of legends. I laid waste to Suleiman's lands. I had my reasons, I'm sure, but it was a very long time ago. But Suleiman captured me with his force of will, and kept me in the jar until I accepted his dominion.

FISHERWOMAN

Then what happened?

JAR DJINNI

The first hundred years, I vowed to bestow vast wealth unto whoever freed me. But nobody came.

FISHERWOMAN

You were in that tiny jar for a hundred years?

JAR DJINNI

The next three hundred years after that, I vowed to bestow upon my liberator one wish, and then two wishes, and then finally three wishes. Still nobody came.

FISHERWOMAN

One plus three is ... four hundred years? I see why you're grumpy.

JAR DJINNI

Finally, after a thousand years, I grew so angry that I stopped promising great things to my liberator, and instead vowed revenge: Death to whomever freed me! I would allow my liberator to choose the manner of execution, a small bit of gratitude for freeing me.

FISHERWOMAN

And ... I just freed you.

JAR DJINNI

Yes. You did. So I ask you, my liberator: How would you like to die?

FISHERWOMAN

Hmm. That is a tough question. I suppose as a fisherwoman, I would like to die at sea.

JAR DJINNI

So be it.

FISHERWOMAN

I do have one question before you destroy me.

JAR DJINNI

A question? No questions.

FISHERWOMAN

I am about to be blasted into oblivion, and I stand before an all-powerful djinni. Surely you will allow one question from a humble fisherwoman. Unless ...

JAR DJINNI

—No questions!

(Beat)

Unless what?

FISHERWOMAN

Unless you don't know the answer.

JAR DJINNI

Of course I know the answer. I am an all-powerful djinni.

FISHERWOMAN

Then you must already know my question. What is the answer?

JAR DJINNI

... I said “all-powerful,” not “all-knowing.”

FISHERWOMAN

So there are limits to a djinni’s powers? That makes my question all the more baffling ...

JAR DJINNI

—What is your cursed question?!

FISHERWOMAN

How could an enormous, all-powerful djinni possibly fit into such a small jar?

JAR DJINNI

That is your question? Your life is about to end, and you want to know how I fit into a jar?

FISHERWOMAN

Look at yourself. You can barely fit into the entire sky. Your head is in the clouds. One of your hands touches the sunrise and the other the sunset. I cannot see your feet so I assume they rest on the bottom of the sea.

JAR DJINNI

You cannot fathom the essence of a djinni.

FISHERWOMAN

I suppose you’re right. I can’t fathom the essence of the sun either, but I know that I can’t fit the sun inside this bottle. I can’t even fit my hand inside it.

JAR DJINNI

Humans grow larger but your minds grow smaller. I am a djinni! I can grow to hold the world in my hand or shrink to sleep on a grain of sand.

FISHERWOMAN

A little, teeny-tiny, itty-bitty djinni? Why would a great and powerful djinni ever want to make himself small?

JAR DJINNI

Well, actually, many secrets of the universe exist in small things.

FISHERWOMAN

I do not understand your intellect, nor your cruelty. It is clear that you would not or cannot shrink yourself to fit into this jar, and yet you insist on joking that you can.

JAR DJINNI

Small minds need proof that only their eyes can provide. Prepare to be amazed, faithless woman.

Jar Djinni disappears into smoke.

FISHERWOMAN

Ooh, smoke! I suppose there are mirrors somewhere too? I am impressed with your disappearing act. But how do I know that you are inside the jar?

(Fisherwoman hears a tiny voice inside the jar)

What? Can it be?

(Into the jar. Tiny Jar Djinni sounds can be heard)

Is that you in there, O mighty Djinni?

(Holds the jar to her ear)

Magnificent. You have proven me wrong. You are truly all-powerful.

(Places Suleiman's seal back on jar)

But not all-knowing.

Selena and Dominica step back into the space.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

The fisherwoman throws the jar deep into the ocean. There it will remain until it is lost to legend.

Selena and Dominica bow. Applause.

MALIKA

Well played by the two sisters.

REINKO

I like that story. Where does it come from?

SELENA

From this book.

Selena hands the book to Reinko.

REINKO

*One Thousand and One Nights?*

TARA

You mean ... *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights?* This book is banned.

Reinko puts the book down quickly.

MALIKA

Yeah, it's banned, like many others. Some parents complained, so they yanked it from the library.

DOMINICA

So stupid.

TARA

If the school finds out what you're reading banned books, they could throw you out.

DOMENICA

They could. And they would.

LEILA

Now you know why we have to meet in secret.

REINKO

So why not just read the banned books secretly, on your own? Why meet like this?

MALIKA

Because what good is learning stories if we can't share them? Talk about them? Play them?

LEILA

These stories didn't come from my own culture, but I still identify with them. They're funny. Beautiful. They're meant to be shared, I think. Breaking the rules frightens me, even if I know the rules are dumb. It helps to have friends like you all. Makes me less frightened to do the right thing.

MALIKA

Well said, Leila.

(to Reinko)

As for me, I just don't like other people telling me what I can or can't read.

DOMENICA

Me neither. We're starting with the *One Thousand and One Nights*, because Shahrazad is so awesome, but we'll read other forbidden stories too.

REINKO

This group is called The Shahrazad Society. I feel stupid, but who is Sharazad?

TARA

I don't know either, to be honest. Who is she?

MALIKA

Ooh! Let me share the story? I'll need Selena's help, though. Will you introduce us, Dominica?

DOMINICA

I shall.

Tara gives the book to Dominica.

DOMINICA (CONT'D)

And now, assuming the role of Shahrazad is Malika.

Applause as Malika becomes Shahrazad, taking center stage.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

“The Story of Shahrazad and the One Thousand and One Nights.” A long time ago, or not so long ago, neither here nor there, lived a king. I prefer not to speak his name. This King named his brother, a prince, as commander of his second army. The King and Prince conquered lands and expanded the family’s empire far beyond what their father and grandfather had done.

The Prince was an animal, full of blood lust. As his army conquered in the King’s name, they pillaged vanquished cities, destroyed sacred sites, and kidnapped the women for their amusement. The Prince threatened to burn any cities that did not submit to his brother’s rule.

REINKO

This is scary.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

The Prince laid siege to a walled city. The emir of the walled city sent tribute: a crown for the king’s collection, three beautiful virgins for the prince’s lust, and three blades for the city’s revenge. The Prince received the women in his tent. Then, just before sunrise, one woman gutted the Prince. Another stabbed his heart. The third slit his throat.

TARA

What did the King do then?

As Shahrazad (Malika) continues the tale, the others render it through dance or other movement.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

When the King heard of his brother’s death, he rode to the walled city himself and ordered the gates barricaded from the outside. He burned the city to ashes. The winds blew away the screams of its citizens.

REINKO

This didn’t really happen, did it?

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Perhaps yes, or perhaps no. Perhaps it is happening right now, somewhere out there. Generals, scholars, and poets declared that day of death as “The Day the King Truly Became King.” They dubbed him, with pride and praise, as “King Merciless.” It was an apt name.

The King had a wife: Atoosi. Queen Atoosi knew of her husband’s grief over his brother’s death. She prepared a feast to welcome him home. She herself created a dance to soothe his pain.

But Atoosi’s fate was cursed. The King returned to the palace at sunrise. He saw his queen in the courtyard with another man, another dancer named. They were rehearsing the dance. The King watched them. The queen began to spin, as delicate as a dervish, then as torrid as a tornado. Her veil flew off. The other man caught it.

Can you see it? Atoosi’s face. The King’s sword. The dancer’s head. Can you hear it? The Queen’s scream. The King’s cry. The blade’s slice. Can you feel it? Atoosi’s blood.

REINKO

... I don't like this story.

TARA

The King thought the Queen had betrayed him? She was learning a dance! For him!

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

One scholar pointed to the law of the land and said the King could do whatever the King wanted, but the King was the King. But the people were angry, for Queen Atoosi was beloved. So the King's advisors told him to take a new wife immediately. Distract the people. Have another royal wedding! The King married again the next night, a woman plucked from the harem.

TARA

—What was her name? The new queen.

REINKO

Shahrazad!

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Her name was ... Yalda.

SELENA

Yalda. From the city of Aleppo. She was a sister and daughter and grand-daughter. Yalda loved to eat dates, and she sang beautiful lullabies at night.

(Beat.)

She was not just a number. She had a name. All of them did. Yalda was known. She was loved.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Yalda. Of Aleppo. That same night of the royal wedding, the King cut Yalda's throat. The mad king vowed to marry a new queen at sunset, and take her life by sunrise, before she could betray him like Atoosi.

TARA

But Atoosi didn't betray him! The King was wrong!

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Are you questioning the word of the King?

REINKO

... I really don't like this story.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

The people wept for two queens then. They cried, "This is not how a King behaves! We have a mad king! Who will save us?" Once again, the King's advisors told him to take another wife.

SELENA

Aisha.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Another wife, another life. Aisha — dead. So the King took another wife.

SELENA

Yasmine.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Yasmine — dead. So the King took another wife.

SELENA

Jamila.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Jamila — dead. So the King took another wife.

Selena continues to speak the queens' names over other dialogue until Malika introduces Shahrazad.

SELENA

Omaid ... Sabine ... Ishtar ... Farrah ... Mahseed ... Mehra ... Shonda ... Parsoon ... Fatima ...  
Umayma ... Balqis ... Deniza ... Gabri ... Raya ... Zarifa ... Amal ... Nasrin ... Berzé ... Ezma ...  
Keyna ... Zende ... Miriam ... Sheba ... Eden ... Mehret ... Hana ... Rachel ... Sabine ... Ana ...

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Omaid — dead.

REINKO

How many queens did the King murder?!

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

One thousand nights. One thousand queens. Everyone in the kingdom knew about the King's madness, but no one stopped it. After all, the kingdom was prospering! Until one day, a woman stepped forward ...

REINKO

—Shahrazad?

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Shahrazad!

Selena stops speaking the names of the queens.

REINKO

Yes! Finally.

TARA

Did she know the danger?

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

She knew the danger. That is what made her courageous. Though terrified, Shahrazad stepped forward to marry the King herself. You see, Shahrazad had a plan. Her family's position allowed her to be educated. She was intelligent, and she believed her learning could save her.

(Beat.)

On the evening of her wedding, Shahrazad planned to start telling her sister, Dunyazad, a story, a story the King would overhear: "The Fisherman and the Djinni."

TARA

I thought it was a fisher-woman.

SELENA

We made the story ours.

TARA

Ahh. Now I'm starting to get it.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Shahrazad, of course, embellished the story, going into details about Sindbad's treasure, the beauty of the sea at sunset, the metaphysical properties of the djinni itself ... And the King was hooked. By the time sunrise arrived, Shahrazad was only halfway through the story. Because the King wanted to hear the end of the story so badly, he decided to let Shahrazad live one more night. But only one more night.

REINKO

But Shahrazad did not end the story the next night, did she?

SELENA

You will make a fine storyteller, Reinko.

SHAHRAZAD (Malika)

"The Fisherwoman and the Djinni" blended right into another story.

DOMINICA

About a brilliant woman, a hapless bookseller, and forty bloody-thirsty thieves!

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Before the King realized it, it was sunrise again. He absolutely had to hear the rest of the story of the forty thieves, who had just hatched an evil plan. So he let Shahrazad live one more night.

SELENA

Then more one more night.

DOMINICA

Then one night more.

SELENA

And so on.

SHAHRAZAD (Malika)

And so on.

REINKO

For another thousand and one nights. But how does Shahrazad's story finally end?

SHAHRAZAD (Malika)

Most say the King fell in love with Shahrazad. Many say Shahrazad returned the King's love. Some say they had children. Nearly all say they lived happily ever after.

REINKO

... Oh.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Want to hear what I say about that?

REINKO

Yes!

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

I have a different ending. I imagine Shahrazad pregnant with the King's first child. For what choice did she have? The King wants a son, of course. He needs a son, he says. A prince! He threatens Shahrazad's life if she does not bear him a son.

TARA

The King is a terrible man.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

But Shahrazad gives birth to a little girl. A princess! When the king hears this, he is furious! He storms into the queen's chamber, his sword drawn, and demands to see the baby. Shahrazad invites the King to sit beside her, and he places the princess in her father's arms for the first time.

REINKO

No, why would she do that?!

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

But in her other hand, Shahrazad holds a knife. She lifts it above the King's head, ready to strike him down if he dares harm the baby. But the King begins weeping. Perhaps it is the innocence of the child's face. Or it could be the guilt of a thousand deaths. The King puts down his sword, never to lift it again.

REINKO

Good, because I was going to leave if the baby died.

SHAHRAZAD (MALIKA)

Only then does Shahrazad lower her blade, sparing the King. I like to think Shahrazad lived on with the king, advising him wisely, and raising their child to become the Queen. But Shahrazad never fully trusted the King. And she never, ever loved him.

Malika bows. Applause.

DOMINICA

Ooh, I like your version, Malika!

SELENA

I do too.

TARA

What was the second story she told the king? About the brilliant woman and the bookseller?

DOMINICA

Would you like to hear it? I planned to tell it tonight.

REINKO

Yes, please!

SELENA

I would too.

DOMINICA

Good. I will need everyone's help to tell it. When I pull you up, join in the story.

TARA

But we don't know it.

DOMINICA

Doesn't matter. We always start with the seed of the original, and then we invent the rest as we go.

SELENA

Do something, say anything, and the others will react.

“We make it ours.”

TARA

Exactly.

SELENA

I’ll be ready.

TARA

I will try.

REINKO

SELENA

That is all we ask. Leila, will you introduce my sister?

LEILA

Now assuming the role of Shahrazad is Dominica.

Applause as Dominica takes book and center stage.

DOMINICA

“The Story of Marjanah and Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves.”

TARA

“Marjanah?”

SELENA

You will see. We love Marjanah.

Story quickly evolves from a narrative into a play.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

We begin our story with a man, an honest man named Ali-Baba. Ali-Baba lived on the outskirts of Damascus. When Ali-Baba was a young man, his father died and left him a modest business trading and selling jars, bowls, baskets, and other hand-made wares.

ALI-BABA, played by LEILA, enters with his wares.

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

Who wants pots? Who wants bowls? I got pots and I got bowls.

Nobody answers, so Ali-Baba smiles and reads a book.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Ali-Baba has no real interest in selling such things. His primary interest is reading books. When he sits at the market, he spends all his time reading. This is not wise behavior for a merchant.

Dominica assumes the role of a customer, KASSIM.

KASSIM (DOMINICA)

Good man, how much for that lamp?

(Ali-Baba remains engrossed in his book)

I asked you a question: how much do you charge for that lamp?

ALI-BABA

(not looking up)

How much would you like to pay?

KASSIM

I would like to pay nothing.

ALI-BABA

Sold. Leave the money on the plate, please. Thank you.

Kassim takes one lamp. Another. Then another.

KASSIM

Sir? Good sir? Ali-Baba!

ALI-BABA

Ahh, Kassim! I did not see you there. Good news: I sold a lamp.

KASSIM

I see. I just acquired three lamps myself.

He shows Ali-Baba the lamps he just stole.

ALI-BABA

Very good quality. Did you get a good price for them?

KASSIM

The best price: free.

ALI-BABA

What fool gave you three good lamps for free?

KASSIM

My fool brother, who drives our late father's business into ruin.

ALI-BABA

Ahh, you got me! Got me good. It takes a clever man to fool Ali-Baba, but you do it daily.

Kassim puts the lamps back on the cart. Dominic resumes the role of Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Kassim was Ali-Baba's younger brother. He fancied himself an intelligent businessman, when in truth he had married into his wife's money. Kassim let his wife run the family business, while he took charge of spending the profits.

Dominica resumes the role of Kassim.

ALI-BABA (LEILY)

What brings you by today, brother?

KASSIM (DOMINICA)

My wife is preparing a meal for me later, and she asked me to pick up firewood. So here I am.

ALI-BABA

I don't sell firewood.

KASSIM

But you are the best finder of firewood I know. I propose a deal: I will watch papa's cart while you get firewood for my wife, so she can prepare me a delicious meal.

ALI-BABA

Last time you watched papa's cart, ten items were stolen.

KASSIM

I fell asleep. You know how sneaky these thieves can be. Please, brother. Do not deny my wife the honor of preparing a meal for me.

ALI-BABA

Alright. But don't fall asleep again. I'm running low on jars.

KASSIM

My eyes are sealed open.

ALI-BABA

I am relying on you. And so is papa.

Ali-Baba exits.

KASSIM

Attention, all! My brother, Ali-Baba, has gone mad. He has slashed his prices by half. The finest wares from Cyprus and Peloponnesus, available at half-price for the next hour only.

Dominica resumes the role of Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Meanwhile, outside the gates of Damascus, Ali-Baba gathers wood.

Ali-Baba (Leila) enters with wood.

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

Why doesn't Kassim send a servant to gather wood himself? Isn't that the whole reason for being rich? So you don't have to work?

(Puts the wood down)

If I were rich, I would build a great library. I would read all day, and then give my favorite books away so others could enjoy them too. Maybe I would even write a book.

(Sits)

Kassim doesn't expect me for a while. I've earned a break.

Ali-Baba sits and reads his book.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

At the time, the trade routes of the Arabian Desert, the Sahara Desert, and the Gobi Desert had been terrorized by thieves, thieves who slew everyone they encountered so no survivors could identify them. Nobody knew that these thieves were in league with each other. They called themselves The Forty Shadows of Death.

(Sound of horses)

And The Forty Shadows of Death were heading Ali-Baba's way.

ALI-BABA

Men on horses. Many men. The Caliph's army? Hunting for thieves? Should I hide? Maybe I should hide. I will hide.

Ali-Baba hides as thieves enter: MARID (REINKO),  
NIJAD (TARA), and Rais the THIEF LORD (MALIKA).

THIEF LORD (MALIKA)

Brother thieves, it has been a year since we last met. I hope, for your sakes, that your campaigns were successful. How did we do in the west, Marid?

MARID (REINKO)

Rais, our great Thief Lord, the men are tired from their long ride across the Sahara, and from carrying so much gold from the Ghanan trade!

THIEF LORD

A lucrative contract. We shall see if you made the most of it. How did we do in the east, Nijad?

NIJAD (TARA)

All went smoothly along the Silk Road. Fabrics, perfumes, and spices, mainly.

MARID

A woman's treasure, Nijad.

NIJAD

I forgot to mention the four large chests of clear stones from Indus Valley. What do women call them again? Ah, yes: "diamonds." "Diamonds," the women call them.

MARID

Dirty diamonds, I'm sure.

THIEF LORD

A respectable haul from both of you. We followed traders across Arabia, and hit caravans of pilgrims on the road to Makkah.

Nijad and Marid are uneasy.

NIJAD

... My Thief Lord, is it wise to target pilgrims going to Makkah?

THIEF LORD

When you see our haul, you will see the wisdom in it. This year, the caravans doubled the sizes of their bladed escorts. We spilled more blood than usual. But, as my father always said: "Hard work wins the day." We stole the cargo of twenty caravans!

NIJAD

Twenty! In one season?

THIEF LORD

Gold, silver, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, spices, oils, and perfumes. Even carpets. And, best of all, a harvest of pearls.

NIJAD

You do love your pearls.

MARID

Rais, my Thief Lord, you must share the Arabian trade with us.

THIEF LORD

I must?

The Thief Lord draws his sword.

MARID

I am grateful you granted my band the right to terrorize the west.

NIJAD

And I forever thank you for the honor of pillaging the east.

THIEF LORD

I wonder sometimes.

MARID

I am your loyal servant, my Thief Lord.

NIJAD

As am I.

THIEF LORD

Ha! You two would both stand me in the back if I ever showed it to you. Go! Give the signal to our three bands. Have them bring up the treasures to sort tomorrow. Tonight we celebrate.

NIJAD

By your command, my lord.

Nijad exits. Marid lingers.

THIEF LORD

I gave you a command.

MARID

I wanted a word in private.

THIEF LORD

You challenge me twice in a day?

MARID

This is not a challenge. It is logic. You are the only one who knows the magic words to enter the cave. If you die or are killed — may that never happen! — then the magic words go with you to the grave. Years of treasure lost. Treasure we all earned together.

THIEF LORD

Being the only keeper of the words keeps me safe from backstabbers like you and Nijad. If I told you the magic words, I would be dead by morning.

MARID

Rais, I am hurt that you feel this way. I am not a backstabber.

THIEF LORD

You are not a backstabber, that is true. And your logic is sound. Perhaps it is time to trust you with the secret of the magic words.

Thief Lord whispers into Marid's ear. Marid laughs.

MARID

Really?

THIEF LORD

Go ahead. Speak the words.

Marid addresses a sheer wall of rock.

MARID

“Open sesame!”

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

A wall of solid rock magically opened to reveal the entrance to a cave.

THIEF LORD

Would you like to know the magic words to close the cave, Marid?

MARID

Yes! Yes, please!

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

The Thief Lord leans in to whisper the calming word, and slides a knife into Marid's back.

Stab!

MARID

Ahh! But why?

THIEF LORD

You are not a backstabber. But I am. That is why I am the Thief Lord.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

As Marid dies, Nijad and the other Shadows of Death ride into the cave with their stolen treasure.

NIJAD

What happened to Marid?

THIEF LORD

He resigned his commission.

NIJAD

That fool, thinking he could lead us better than you.

THIEF LORD

Nijad, I admire your cowardice and lack of ambition.

NIJAD

Thank you, my Thief Lord.

THIEF LORD

Chop up Marid's body. You know, just the way I like it done. Hang his remains in the cave. I want all the others to see what happens to anyone who challenges me.

NIJAD

Yes, my lord.

Nijad drags away Marid's body. Chopping sounds.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Nijad hangs Marid's body on a tree to terrify all who see it.

The Thief Lord addresses (unseen) Shadows of Death.

THIEF LORD

Get a good look, my Shadows of Death! Follow me and live like princes. Defy me and die like dogs. Like Marid the Dog.

(Beat.)

Now. We go back to the city in disguise. We must celebrate.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

The other thieves ride toward Damascus. But Nijad lingers.

THIEF LORD

Waiting for something?

NIJAD

You should be escorted to the city, my lord. Marid had friends.

THIEF LORD

I can defend myself. Go on ahead. I will follow you.

NIJAD

By your command.

Nijad exits. The Thief Lord addresses the cave.

THIEF LORD

Close sesame!

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

The rock wall closes. If you walked by, it would appear a tall cliff, and nothing special. The Thief Lord joins his minions.

The Thief Lord exits. Ali-Baba steps back into view.

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

A band of thieves is not something one sees every day.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Ali-Baba examines the pool of blood left behind by Marid.

ALI-BABA

Nor or a pool of spilled blood. Nor a magical cave. I thought magic only happened in books.

(He examines the rock wall)

But this? This is real magic. “Open sesame?”

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

The rock wall opens. The glory of years of stolen treasure is reflected in his eyes.

Ali-Baba enters the cave.

ALI-BABA

Oh ... This is a treasure greater than Sindibad’s. But I’m just having a look. Just a look is all. Magnificent. But I will only look. I don’t want to end up like ...

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

—He sees the bloody bits of Marid’s body.

ALI-BABA

—Like him. Just look. Don’t touch anything. Just look.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Ali-Baba did look, and look, and look, and then he touched. Just one, single, golden coin.

Shahrazad (DOMINICA) holds up a coin. She flips it to Ali-Baba, who catches it and exits.

ALI-BABA

Thank you. They won’t miss one little coin.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Meanwhile, back in Damascus, Kassim is doing well.

Dominica becomes Kassim once more.

KASSIM (DOMINICA)

Only a few items left, my friends! My brother is a mad fool. All prices are slashed three-quarters. Bargain of the century.

Ali-Baba (Leila) enters.

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

Kassim? Kassim, my wares ...

KASSIM (DOMINICA)

Ah, my brother! You will not believe it. A villain gave me a draught of pomegranate juice, but it was tainted. Poisoned! I passed out, and when I woke, the villain had taken your finest wares. I am sorry, brother, but this is all that is left.

ALI-BABA

My livelihood is ruined.

KASSIM

I feel terrible, brother. But you can come work at my business.

ALI-BABA

Your wife's business.

KASSIM

My business! I married her, so it is legally mine.

ALI-BABA

I suppose I could start again. But this time, I would like to sell books!

KASSIM

You could, yes. But where would you get the money to buy a stock of books?

ALI-BABA

Your wife could lend me ... I mean, you could lend me the money, brother.

KASSIM

I could, yes. But you are a bad investment, Ali-Baba. Look here: you lost everything.

ALI-BABA

You lost everything.

KASSIM

I apologized. That frees me from guilt.

ALI-BABA

I suppose I could buy books with this. How much do you think I can get for this gold coin?

Ali-Baba holds up the gold coin. Kassim grabs it.

KASSIM

Give me that! Heavy. Pure gold. The markings here. Looks like the head of a king.

ALI-BABA

Mmm. African gold, maybe? From Ghana?

KASSIM

Ghanian gold is the finest there is. Where did you get this?

ALI-BABA

Is it worth a lot? Am I rich?

KASSIM

Yes, we are rich. Where did you get it? Can you get us some more?

ALI-BABA

Kassim, you are my brother. I trust you with my life. But this secret is dangerous.

KASSIM

Never mind that. Where did you get the gold?

ALI-BABA

You have to swear to me that you will keep this a secret.

KASSIM

Brother, you can trust me.

Kassim embraces Ali-Baba. Money from his sales falls out.

ALI-BABA

Where did all that money come from?

KASSIM

Fortune abounds! Money is falling from the heavens. Now, we take what's left of your wares to my house. Or we just throw it all away—who cares? We are going to be rich!

ALI-BABA

Follow me. But you must promise ...

KASSIM

—Yes-yes-yes, I promise, I promise.

They walk to the cave.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Ali-Baba took Kassim to the cave of the Forty Shadows of Death. He said the magic words.

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

“Open sesame!”

KASSIM (DOMINICA)

“Open sesame?” Is this a prank?

The rock wall opens to reveal the cave.

ALI-BABA

Behold, Kassim. The cave of dreams.

KASSIM

We are rich. We are offensively rich.

ALI-BABA

Take only one gold coin.

KASSIM

One? Look at how many there are, from all over Creation.

ALI-BABA

But they must not know that we are robbing them.

KASSIM

Who are we robbing from?

ALI-BABA

Robbers. The Forty Shadows of Death.

KASSIM

The Forty Shadows! You mean this is their loot?

ALI-BABA

You haven't noticed the dead body guarding the cave?

Ali-Baba points to Marid's body.

KASSIM

Disgusting! I see what you mean. We will only take two coins. Maybe three or four. Or just what I can fit in one pocket.

ALI-BABA

One small pocket.

KASSIM

Right. Two large pockets.

ALI-BABA

And no pearls. The Thief Lord, Reis, loves pearls.

KASSIM

Three pockets, yes, and one pearl necklace. I got it.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

They continue to loot the looters. Ali-Baba takes two more Ghanian coins. Kassim fills four pockets to bursting.

ALI-BABA

We should go now. The thieves could return at any moment.

KASSIM

Okay, okay.

ALI-BABA

“Close sesame!”

The rock wall closes.

KASSIM

What’s that you say? Some magic words?

ALI-BABA

Yes, magic words! Like in books. “Open sesame.”

(Rock wall opens)

“Close sesame.”

(Rock wall closes)

KASSIM

“Says a me?”

ALI-BABA

No, “sesame.” Like sesame seeds.

KASSIM

... What stupid magic words.

ALI-BABA

All the better that you forget them. We are never coming back. It is too dangerous.

KASSIM

Right. Never again. I am satisfied.

ALI-BABA

Let's go.

Ali-Baba begins to exit. Kassim lingers.

KASSIM

No, no. I'm definitely satisfied.

ALI-BABA

Let's go!

KASSIM

I'm coming.

They exit. Dominica becomes Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

A year passes from that fateful day. Ali-Baba uses the three gold coins to purchase a new inventory: books. The owner of his favorite bookshop has a daughter. Her name is Marjanah.

MARJANAH (SELENA) enters.

MARJANAH (SELENA)

A new arrival of books. What a wonderful day.

Ali-Baba enters with books, scrolls, and other reading materials. He joins Marjanah.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Marjanah knows every book in her father's shop. Knowing Ali-Baba is a bad salesman, she offers to help him with his enterprise. They happily sell books in the market together. Ali-Baba mostly reads the books he is supposed to be selling. So Marjanah, who can read people as well as she can read books, does most of the talking to customers. Ali-Baba is not quite as rich as he had hoped, but he is happy.

MARJANAH (SELENA)

It is time to close up shop. You have to be at your brother's mansion for dinner soon, yes?

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

Another feast at his mansion at the top of the hill. My brother is a genius with money. He makes a little go a long way.

MARJANAH

He is good with money because he loves money more than anything. But you love knowledge most of all, and you do well with books.

ALI-BABA

I only sell good books because you and your father will only let me buy good books to sell.

MARJANAH

We serve our customers as best we can. Enjoy your brother's feast.

ALI-BABA

Thank you, Marjanah.

Beat.

MARJANAH

I will be going now.

ALI-BABA

Oh, uhh ... Do you have dinner plans?

MARJANAH

No, I don't. Besides dining with my father.

ALI-BABA

Ah. Ah, I see. Your father is good company, I'm sure.

MARJANAH

He spends the entire meal reading. Why do you ask?

ALI-BABA

I just want to make sure my one employee has enough to eat.

MARJANAH

... Yes. I have enough to eat. Thank you for thinking of me.

ALI-BABA

Good. Good. I should go before the food's all gone at the feast. My brother's appetite is worse than ever. See you tomorrow?

MARJANAH

Tomorrow. I will put away the books. Go join your brother.

ALI-BABA

Thank you again. I couldn't do this without you.

Ali-Baba exits. Marjanah watches him, then exits.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

When Ali-Baba got to Kassim's mansion at the top of the hill, the feast was in full swing. But his brother was nowhere to be seen. For Kassim had continued to make secret visits to the thieves' cave for the past year.

Dominica becomes Kassim once again. He approaches the cave with a cart or other means of hauling items.

KASSIM (DOMINICA)

"We can afford another party," I told her. "There is plenty of money left in the house account." There will be plenty of money after another haul. "Open sesame!"

The rock wall opens. Kassim enters.

KASSIM (CONT'D)

"Close sesame!"

The rock wall closes as we hear horses off-stage. Rais the Thief Lord (Malika) and Nijad (Tara) enter.

THIEF LORD (MALIKA)

We meet again, Nijad.

NIJAD (TARA)

Rais, my Thief Lord. We did well. Silk, rubies, and diamonds. And this magic black powder from beyond the Great Wall.

THIEF LORD

"Magic black powder." Someone traded a fortune for bags of dirt?

An off-stage boom!

NIJAD

It has potential. We are experimenting with it. How did you do in Arabia this year?

THIEF LORD

A prosperous kingdom is a safe kingdom, and there were more pilgrims heading to Makkah than ever before.

NIJAD

More pilgrim caravans? I warned you about that.

THIEF LORD

That is why you will never have the Arabia contract. Too weak. Too merciful. Now go summon the men to bring up their haul.

Nijad exits. As Thief Lord turns to Rock Wall ...

KASSIM (DOMINICA)  
(from inside the cave)

“Open sesame!”

The rock wall opens. Kassim enters with more treasure.

THIEF LORD

Who are you?!

KASSIM

Who am I? Who are you? Did you follow me? Who sent you? My wife?

The Thief Lord draws his sword.

THIEF LORD

My name is Rais, but most call me The Thief Lord. You have maybe heard of my friends, the Forty Shadows of Death?

KASSIM

... Ah. No. No, I pay no attention to gossip.

THIEF LORD

Tell me: what are you doing with my treasure?

KASSIM

I was taking it to be cleaned. Polished. For your return.

THIEF LORD

How did you learn the magic words?

Beat.

KASSIM

I followed you here. Alone! A year ago. I was hiding in those bushes over there. Alone. I heard you speak the words. I entered your cave alone, and I took your treasure. Alone. Whatever you are missing was taken by me, and me alone.

THIEF LORD

I see. And did you share the magic words with anyone else?

KASSIM

... No. Only my Creator, to thank Him for this fortune.

THIEF LORD

This misfortune.

KASSIM

You do not have to kill me. Do you want riches?

(offers the stolen treasure)

Here! You can have all this, and more.

THIEF LORD

What is your name?

KASSIM

Does it matter? I am Nobody. I saw what you did to your partner in there. Know that your secret, your magic words, will die with me.

Najid (Tara) enters.

NAJID (TARA)

Who is this?

KASSIM

Nobody.

NAJID

What's he doing with our treasure?

THIEF LORD

"Cleaning it," he said.

NAJID

Nobody, do you learn the magic words?

KASSIM

The magic words? You mean, "Open ..."

Stab! The Thief Lord cuts Kassim down before he can finish.

THIEF LORD

Quarter his body and hang the pieces inside the cave.

NIJAD

Your wish is my command, my lord.

Nijad drags Kassim's body off-stage.

NIJAD

“Open ... ?” Open what?

Nijad exits. Chopping sounds off-stage.

THIEF LORD

We must find out if this “Nobody” had family. But first, we see how much he stole from us.

The Thief Lord enters the cave (exits). He shrieks.

Dominica enters as Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

The next morning, Ali-Baba was worried because Kassim never made it to his own feast. Fearing the worst, he went looking for his brother at the thieves' cave. Marjanah followed him.

At the cave, Ali-Baba enters.

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

“Open sesame?”

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

The rock wall opens. As it opens, Ali-Baba sees his brother's body.

ALI-BABA

Oh, Kassim! What have they done to you? This is my fault. I should have never told you about this cave. Your death is upon my head. Forgive me, brother.

Ali-Baba enters the cave (exits). Marjanah enters.

MARJANAH (SELENA)

Ali-Baba? Where are you?

Ali-Baba enters carrying a wrapped bundle.

ALI-BABA

Marjanah, what are you doing here? You must leave now. These men are dangerous. Look what they did to Kassim.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

He reveals what is in his bundle: Kassim's severed head.

MARJANAH

What cruelty is this?

(Beat)

The treasure in that cave. That is how you two came into money?

ALI-BABA

How we came to ruin.

MARJANAH

I know this valley, but I have never seen this cave.

ALI-BABA

You need the magic words to open the rock wall.

MARJANAH

Magic words?

ALI-BABA

“Open ... “ No. No, I won’t tell you. This treasure destroyed Kassim and it will destroy me. I will not let it destroy you.

MARJANAH

No need to tell me the words. I do not care about treasure. I want to keep us safe. You hold your brother’s head in your arms. If you take Kassim’s body from the cave, they will know someone came and found him. They will know that someone ... that you know the magic words.

ALI-BABA

You are right.

(Cradles Kassim’s head)

But he’s my brother. I must bury him.

MARJANAH

It’s too dangerous.

ALI-BABA

I will not leave him here to rot. Alone. Help me, Marjanah. Please.

MARJANAH

... I will get a shroud. Use the magic words when I cannot hear them. Go now, recover Kassim.  
(she touches Ali-Baba)

I am sorry for your loss.

ALI-BABA

Thank you. Please, hurry.

Marjanah exits.

ALI-BABA (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry, brother. I should have protected you. From the thieves. From yourself.

Ali-Baba exits.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Ali-Baba and Marjanah wrapped Kassim's remains in the shroud and returned to Damascus. He told Kassim's wife, Yalda, that he had been attacked on the road by the Forty Shadows of Death.

YALDA (REINKO), Kassim's widow, enters with Ali-Baba.

YALDA (REINKO)

How can I live? When your brother was my very reason for living?

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

He would want you to carry on, Yalda.

YALDA

Why was he on the road? We were having a feast. It was his idea.

ALI-BABA

I'm sure he ... he wanted to get a beautiful gift for you. He loved you very much.

YALDA

This house. This enormous house that he bought for me. He said I deserve the grandest house in Damascus, and that we should fill the walls with laughter and celebration. But today, I buried my husband. From today until forever, all this house will know is the sound of my crying, and the stench of my decaying body.

Beat.

ALI-BABA

Hmm. What if you went a different way?

YALDA

What kind of wife would I be if I did not mourn for all eternity?

ALI-BABA

You go through the proper mourning period, of course. You are an honorable person, after all. But if we really want to honor Kassim, we should celebrate his life.

YALDA

Celebrate? You mean throw a party?

ALI-BABA

Yes. What would Kassim prefer? A funeral or a party?

YALDA

You are right. We will throw the biggest party Damascus has ever seen. And everyone will remember it. They will call that night Kassim's Night.

Marjanah (Selena) enters.

ALI-BABA

A party would make my brother so happy.

MARJANAH (SELENA)

A party, you say?

ALI-BABA

Marjanah and I will help you plan it, Yalda.

MARJANAH

Is a party wise?

YALDA

Yes, a party. Kassim's Night! We need to hire musicians. We need entertainment. We need ...

Yalda exits rattling off tasks for the party.

ALI-BABA

I volunteered you to help, Marjanah.

MARJANAH

The Forty Shadows of Death roam the city searching for anyone tied to the man who stole from them, and you plan to throw a party at his house?

ALI-BABA

I was inspired. Yalda has been crying for days. A party will make her feel better.

MARJANAH

You should worry about keeping her alive. And yourself too. We don't know what Kassim told the Shadows.

ALI-BABA

He would not have put us in danger.

YALDA

(off-stage)

Marjanah! Do you know any snake-charmers?

ALI-BABA

See? She feels better already.

MARJANAH

We must be vigilant, Ali. Death hides in every shadow.

Marjanah and Ali-Baba exit.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Marjanah was right. The Forty Shadows of Death searched Damascus, shaking down merchants, threatening beggars, and paying officials for information on the true identity of the man who robbed them. A butcher told Nijad of all the lavish parties thrown in the last year at a house at the top of the hill. The house belonged to a man named Kassim and his wife. Nijad followed the lead.

Nijad (Tara) visits Kassim's house. Ali-Baba is there.

ALI-BABA (LEILY)

Good morning.

NIJAD (TARA)

Maybe so, maybe not. Is Kassim home?

ALI-BABA

No, no. Sadly, no. Kassim died recently. We are very sad.

NIJAD

Tragic. How did he die?

ALI-BABA

The vile Shadows of Death got him. Tore him in four. Very ugly.

NIJAD

How do you know they did this?

ALI-BABA

I buried him myself. There are few things sadder than burying your own brother.

NIJAD

Ahh, you are Kassim's brother?

ALI-BABA

His one and only brother. Were you a friend of Kassim's? We are throwing a party tomorrow to celebrate his life. Will you join us?

NIJAD

I will! May I bring friends? We would all like to pay our respects to Kassim and his loved ones.

ALI-BABA

Yes! Please bring everyone. Kassim's widow wants to make sure this is a night that the city will never forget.

NIJAD

We wouldn't want to miss a night like that. So we shall see you tomorrow. What is your name?

ALI-BABA

Ali-Baba. And yours?

NIJAD

I am Nobody.

Ali-Baba and Nijad both laugh.

ALI-BABA

Then I will be expecting Nobody and Nobody's Friends to show up tomorrow night.

Ali-Baba exits. Nijad meets with the Thief Lord (Malika).

THIEF LORD (MALIKA)

Then this fool Ali-Baba must also know the magic words.

NIJAD (TARA)

He must indeed. Hmm.

(The Thief Lord pulls out his sword.)

I did not ask him. That secret is yours alone. But I have not told you the best part: Kassim's widow is throwing a party tomorrow night.

THIEF LORD

A party for his death? Kassim must have been a bad husband.

NIJAD

Ali-Baba invited me to join the party. He even told me to bring my friends.

THIEF LORD

It is sickening that this is going to be so easy. No sport at all. How many people will attend?

NIJAD

Hundreds, I imagine. It is a big house. The widow wants this party to be historic.

THIEF LORD

And it will be. Nijad, I have been experimenting with that black powder you stole in the east.

NIJAD

And?

THIEF LORD

When set aflame, the black powder unleashes a powerful blast.

NIJAD

You mean to bring the black powder as a gift?

They laugh.

THIEF LORD

“Lovely house, Mrs. Kassim. You decorated so beautifully.” BOOM!

NIJAD

“These dishes are so fine and delicate. Fit for a sultan. I will be careful with them.” BOOM!

They laugh again.

THIEF LORD

Here is what we do. We all attend the party as Ali-Baba’s invited guests. Our men are good at celebration, so they will play their parts well. We bring our gift for Kassim’s widow. When the party is at its peak, we bring out our gift, slip away, and ...

BOTH

BOOM!

The Thief Lord and Nijad exit.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

The next night, the party is a rousing affair.

Ali-Baba, Marjanah, and Yalda enter.

YALDA (REINKO)

Do you think it’s going well? I think it’s going well. It’s going well, don’t you think?

MARJANAH (SELENA)

It is the most enjoyable celebration of someone’s death that I ever attended.

YALDA

Good, good. There are so many people here. I knew Kassim had many friends, but this is even more than I expected.

ALI-BABA (LEILA)  
Free food wins many friends.

The Thief Lord (Malika) and Nijad (Tara) enter.

NAJID  
Ah, Ali-Baba! My friend.

ALI-BABA  
I see Nobody.

They embrace.

NAJID  
(about the Thief Lord)  
Allow me to introduce my friend. This is No One.

The men all laugh.

YALDA  
(to Marjanah)  
The men find that funny? How is that funny?

THIEF LORD  
(to Marjanah)  
I can tell by your beauty that you must be Kassim's widow.

YALDA  
I am Kassim's widow.

THIEF LORD  
But ... how can it be? I assumed you were Kassim's daughter.

YALDA  
Good save, young man. But sadly, my husband and I have no children.

THIEF LORD  
I am very sorry to hear that.

YALDA  
All I have left are memories.

NIJAD  
And this house. This glorious house.

YALDA

This house brings nothing but sorrow. I wish I could burn it down.

NIJAD

Burn it all down!

The Thief Lord and Najid laugh. Ali-Baba laughs too because why not?

YALDA  
(to Marjanah)

Again, how is that funny?

THIEF LORD

We brought you a gift.

Nijad wheels in a powder keg.

ALI-BABA

Thank you, but we do not drink.

NIJAD

This is not what you think it is.

The Thief Lord takes out a pinch of black powder.

THIEF LORD

If you will allow us to entertain your guests.

He lights the powder and throws the bright flame.

YALDA

Sorcery! Not in this house!

THIEF LORD

Not sorcery. Only invention. See? Only a bit of black powder.

ALI-BABA

I read about this. Marjanah, you showed me that book.

MARJANAH

Yes. The powder comes from the Tang Empire, yes? Beyond the Great Wall? Very far away.

THIEF LORD

Indeed. A land of enchantment and mystery.

MARJANAH

They produce many books. I have read all about them.

THIEF LORD

Who are you, woman? You bother me.

ALI-BABA

She buys and sells books for me. Do you read?

THIEF LORD

I prefer to live. I learn through living. I have picked up many stories in my travels. May I entertain your guests with one?

YALDA

Yes, please. That will allow me to sit down.

ALI-BABA

A story would be lovely.

THIEF LORD

Give us a moment to prepare.

The Thief Lord and Nijad exit to set up.

ALI-BABA

Fun people.

YALDA

They even brought gifts. I can't accept them, of course. Or I shouldn't accept them. Or should I?

MARJANAH

I don't trust them. I read deception in their faces.

ALI-BABA

Can you see into men's souls, Marjanah?

MARJANAH

I have read that a man's face gives away falsehood. It may be a twitch of the eye, a pursing of the lips, or a stutter in speech. I can see it. These men are lying.

YALDA

If you wait to marry an honest man, you will remain unmarried for the rest of your life. Settle for relatively honest. Excuse me. I want a good seat.

Yalda exits.

ALI-BABA

She is wrong. Not all men are liars, Marjanah. I am honest.

MARJANAH

Yes, you are. Maybe too honest for your own good. But I trust you, Ali-Baba. Do you trust me?

ALI-BABA

With my life.

MARJANAH

Then tell me the magic words to the cave. It may save our lives.

ALI-BABA

Why do you ... ?

MARJANAH

—Do you trust me?

Beat.

ALI-BABA

I trust you. The magic words are, “Open sesame.”

MARJANAH

“Open sesame.” Really?

ALI-BABA

I didn’t choose them. I would have chosen something classic: “Chrysanthemum,” perhaps.

MARJANAH

Thank you for trusting me.

The Thief Lord and Nijad enter with another keg.

THIEF LORD (MALIKA)

Are we all met? Ali-Baba, Kassim’s widow, and the Woman-Who-Bothers-Me, please sit down in the seats of honor.

MARJANAH

You sit, Ali-Baba. I will return shortly.

Marjanah exits. Yalda joins Ali-Baba in a place of honor.

THIEF LORD

Gather around, everyone. Tonight we honor the life of Kassim. As good a man as we never knew.

HECKLER (DOMINICA)

You talking about a different Kassim?

Laughter and shushing at all the heckling..

THIEF LORD

He loved his friends.

HECKLER (DOMINICA)

He loved his friends' money!

THIEF LORD

He loved his family.

HECKLER (DOMINICA)

He cheated his brother all the time!

THIEF LORD

But most of all, he loved magic.

HECKLER (DOMINICA)

Who are you talking about?

The Thief Lord and Nijad begin a trickery and fire show as elaborate as safety and fire codes allow. When the show finishes, ALL applaud.

THIEF LORD

Thank you, everyone. It is all we could do to honor the man, Kassim. Without him and his death, how many of us would be here tonight, toasting his life? My friends and I certainly would not.

(Nijad brings in one more powder keg)

And while we have your attention ...

Marjanah (Selena) enters. She has been running.

MARJANAH (SELENA)

Thank you, magicians, for that lovely show. Now please, have a seat among the honored guests.

THIEF LORD

Woman, I am not done speaking.

MARJANAH

When is a man ever done speaking?

YALDA

Ha! Now that is funny.

MARJANAH

You, No One, reminded me of a fable I read. Please sit, for the show continues. I want you to have a good seat.

The Thief Lord and Nijad sit.

THIEF LORD

I do not like that woman at all. I will teach her a lesson.

Marjanah pantomimes as she narrates.

MARJANAH

Our magician reminds me of “The Story of the Fox and the Wolf.” A Wolf and a Fox shared the same cave, deep in the rock valley, with a secret entrance that only Wolf and Fox knew about.

These details stir the thieves.

MARJANAH (CONT'D)

Wolf cruelly and relentlessly dominated Fox, hiding in the shadows and pouncing on him when he was most vulnerable. And Fox feared Wolf. But what could he do? Wolf was stronger than Fox.

The Thief Lord and Nijad take turns heckling Marjanah.

NIJAD

Fox better do what Wolf tells him.

MARJANAH

Wolf told Fox to find food, and bring it back to the cave. Wolf survived on the hard work of Fox. Fox explored a nearby vineyard, and nearly fell into a trap set by Human hunters.

THIEF LORD

Fox was a fool.

MARJANAH

This gave Fox an idea. To teach Wolf a lesson, Fox tricked him into falling into the Humans’ pit.

NIJAD

Who’s the fool now?

MARJANAH

Wolf cried for help. But Fox refused, citing Wolf’s cruelty in the cave. “You picked me apart and tormented me in that cave,” Fox said. Wolf pleaded again, promising to be kinder. But Fox compared Wolf’s pleading to the story of “The Falcon and the Partridge.”

NIJAD

Oh, I know that one.

MARJANAH

A falcon was terrorizing a partridge.

THIEF LORD

All the animal kingdom is cruel.

MARJANAH

Partridge escapes Falcon's talons, but Falcon lures Partridge back with seeds. Sesame seeds.

The Thief Lord falls off his chair. Nijad laughs.

NIJAD

What's wrong? Are you scared of sesame seeds?

The Thief Lord punches Nijad.

ALI-BABA

Gentlemen, please. This is a funeral celebration.

(to Marjanah)

Please continue.

MARJANAH

"Oh, sesame seeds!" Partridge cried. "How I love sesame seeds! I will always open my beak wide for sesame seeds!" As Partridge approached Falcon's open talons to take the sesame seeds, Falcon attacked her.

(Marjanah swings a dagger sharply. ALL gasp)

Partridge cursed Falcon with her dying words, praying that her own meat would become poison to Falcon for his betrayal. Falcon tore into Partridge and killed her, hanging her head on the tree as a warning to others.

(More stirring among the Thieves)

But sure enough, when Falcon had eaten all of Partridge's flesh, Falcon's feathers fell off. He grew weaker, and he died.

NIJAD

Depressing story for a party.

THIEF LORD

Even a party for a dead man.

MARJANAH

Wolf didn't like this story either. He argued that it was Fox's deception that got him into the Humans' trap. But Wolf could see the error of his ways, and he confessed to all that he had done to torment Fox for years. He vowed to change his ways, to leave the cave forever, and to devote his life to prayer and quiet study.

The Thieves burst out laughing.

THIEF LORD

Does Wolf become a pilgrim?

YALDA

You two are rude. Shut your mouths.

The Thief Lord reaches for his sword.

MARJANAH

Fox takes pity on Wolf. She lowers her tail to lift him out.

(She extends a hand to the Thief Lord. She stands him up)

But Wolf instead pulls her down into the Humans' trap, so he can eat her.

(The Thief Lord pulls Marjanah down to the floor)

THIEF LORD

This is better.

NIJAD

Can I be a wolf?

THIEF LORD

I'm the Wolf and you know it.

MARJANAH

Yes, you are.

ALI-BABA

Do you have to be so close?

MARJANAH

If Wolf eats Fox, he will be stranded. Only Fox knows the way out.

THIEF LORD

Wolf is listening.

MARJANAH

“Let me stand upon your shoulder, Wolf,” Fox said. “Together, we will be tall enough to reach the top of the hole.”

NIJAD

Why can't Wolf stand on Fox's shoulders?

THIEF LORD

Foxes are not nearly as strong as Wolves. Surely you know that.

NIJAD

Of course.

The Thief Lord stands up with Marjanah.

MARJANAH

When Fox is out of the hole, she tells Wolf that she will not be betrayed again.

THIEF LORD

Betrayal. Typical of a Fox.

MARJANAH

Fox learned the lesson in “The Story of the Man and the Serpent.”

NIJAD

This is more like three stories! But I want in on this action. I'll be the snake.

Nijad joins Marjanah and the Thief Lord.

THIEF LORD

And I will be the Man.

MARJANAH

A Man sees a Snake slithering quickly through the forest.

(Nijad pantomimes this. The Thief Lord laughs)

Man asks Serpent, “Why are you running so far?” Snake answers, “I am running from a snake charmer not far behind. If you help me, Man, I will give you a reward.” Man hides the snake in his bag, and the snake charmer runs by.

NIJAD

Charming.

MARJANAH

Man pulls Snake out and asks for his reward. Now that Snake was safe, he bit the man on the arm.  
(Nijad bites Thief Lord's arm. The Thief Lord punches him)

It killed the Man instantly.

(The Thief Lord "dies" dramatically)

Snake slithers away.

(Nijad back to his seat)

THIEF LORD

That story rings true. I never trusted anyone in my life. For every person is a Snake.

MARJANAH

You are a Wolf. You are the Wolf. Fox ran to the top of the hill, and she howled to summon the hunter who laid the trap. Guard!

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

A city guard enters with his spear!

Dominica plays the GUARD.

MARJANAH

The hunter sees Wolf trapped, and he throws a spear down to kill him. Fox returns to the cave, which she now has all to herself.

THIEF LORD

I hope you summoned more than one guard, woman.

MARJANAH

Arrest these men. They are the leaders of the Forty Shadows of Death.

Beat of commotion from ALL. The Thief Lord laughs.

YALDA

You! You killed Kassim!

ALI-BABA

You will burn for killing my brother, and all the others.

GUARD (DOMINICA)

Everybody out. Everybody, clear out. I have this under control.

ALL freeze. Dominica steps out of freeze as Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Some people leave, but many stay. Those that remain pull out blades. They are the rest of the Forty Shadows of Death.

ALL unfreeze, and react to the unseen Shadows of Death around them.

THIEF LORD

See all those blades? They are our blades. I believe we have this under control.

Guard, Yalda, Ali-Baba, Marjanah stand together.

ALI-BABA

You brought everyone?

THIEF LORD

Everyone. And so the Fox returns to the cave and finds Wolf's thirty-nine brothers waiting for her.

MARJANAH

But the other Wolves do not know the secret entrance to the cave. They do not know the magic words. But Fox does.

This makes Nijad stop. The Thief Lord reaches for sword.

NAJID

What are the magic words?

MARJANAH / ALI-BABA

“Open sesame!”

NIJAD

“Open sesame!”

The Thief Lord attacks Nijad. They sword fight each other, while also fighting other (unseen) thieves as they attack.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

As the Forty Thieves continue to fight and kill each other, Marjanah lights the fuse to the barrels of black powder.

(Marjanah does this)

Then Marjanah, Ali-Baba, Yalda, and the Guard all flee the house.

(They exit)

Soon, only the Thief Lord and Nijad are the only ones alive.

Final moves. Nijad stabs the Thief Lord.

THIEF LORD

Snakes. All people are snakes.

The Thief Lord dies.

NIJAD

Listen to me, Shadows. The treasure is ours!

(surveys the carnage)

Everyone is dead? Then the treasure is mine. All mine! “Open sesame!”

(Nijad laughs until he sees the lit fuse)

Uh-oh. I forgot about the ...

ALL

—BOOM!

ALL exit. Dominica enters as Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Yalda got what she wanted. Nobody ever forgot “Kassim’s Night.” She no longer had to live in a house that made her sad. Ali-Baba finally had a good idea of his own: he proposed to Marjanah, and they married. They revealed the secret cave containing the Forty Shadows of Death treasure. The treasure was sold off, and the money used to build a great library that rivaled Alexandria’s.

Marjanah and Ali-Baba enter.

MARJANAH (SELENA)

A new arrival of books.

ALI-BABA (LEILA)

What a wonderful day.

SHAHRAZAD (DOMINICA)

Marjanah became the head of the new library. Ali-Baba was content to manage the books on the shelves. But Marjanah knew that he spent most of his time reading them.

Dominica bows. ALL applaud.

MALIKA

Well done! I can’t believe that was your first time storytelling, Dominica.

DOMINICA

Thank you all for helping me tell it.

SELENA

And applause for our newest members for joining in.

ALL applaud Tara and Reinko.

TARA

I enjoyed that, thank you.

REINKO

It was fun. Are all these stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*?

DOMINICA

Yes, but we tell our own versions of the stories.

SELENA

We feel Shahrazad herself would encourage that.

TARA

What will happen when you tell all the stories?

SELENA

We have only begun, but at some point we will move on to other books. But *One Thousand and One Nights* is so rich.

REINKO

You really admire Shahrazad.

SELENA

Her story is not unlike ours. She was threatened for so long, yet she still found a way to be compassionate. She wanted to protect women from the King, so she took action.

LEILA

She was courageous.

SELENA

Courageous, but not stupid. What I love most about her is that she used her intelligence. Her mind was her shield, her wit her blade.

REINKO

That is why I love Marjanah. She was the one who outsmarted the Thief Lord, not Ali-Baba.

SELENA

You understand, don't you? We don't like what we see out there in the world. In here, in this society, we practice how we can change it.

DOMINICA

By reading books.

MALIKA

Especially forbidden books.

SELENA

And we will write our own story. Will you join us?

TARA

Absolutely.

REINKO

I already have.

SELENA

Now ... Would you like to hear my favorite story?

Optional: Break here for an intermission.

MALIKA

Okay, okay, okay. We're gonna need everyone for this story. So be ready.

DOMINICA

Leila? One more introduction?

Leila once again takes the book.

LEILA

Assuming the role of Shahrazad once again is Selena.

Applause as Selena becomes Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

"The Story of Badroulbador, Ala ad-Din, and the Magic Lamp." This happened, or maybe it did not. The time is long past, and much is forgotten. Neither here nor there lived a wily but hopelessly honest thief named ... Ala ad-Din.

ALA AD-DIN (MALIKA) enters.

ALA AD-DIN (MALIKA)

Mom? Hey, Mom!

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

He lived with his mother, Key Tan.

KEY TAN (LEILA) enters.

KEY TAN (LEILA)

Yes, my son?

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Together they cobbled a life for themselves by scavenging for food, or stealing it if they had to.

KEY TAN

What's for dinner?

Ala ad-Din pulls various foods from her pockets.

ALA AD-DIN

Rotted prunes, a pair of rats, and to add something sweet, a half-eaten kumquat.

KEY TAN

A feast. You are good to your mother, dear boy.

ALA AD-DIN

One day, I will provide a true feast for you, Mom.

Knocking. They hide.

ALA AD-DIN

Who's there?

KEY TAN

We have nothing to steal. Go away!

MUSTAFA (DOMINICA), a magician, enters.

MUSTAFA (DOMINICA)

My name is Mustafa. A prayer brought me to you.

ALA AD-DIN

You need to pray better.

MUSTAFA

Not my prayer. Yours.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Mustafa pours out a pouch of gold coins.

Mustafa does this. Ala ad-Din and Key Tan emerge.

KEY TAN

An answered prayer, indeed.

Key Tan bites coins to see if they're real. They are.

ALA AD-DIN

What do you want from us?

MUSTAFA

I followed you in the market today. I saw you swipe a kumquat from a busy fruit stand.

KEY TAN

Are you the fruit police?

MUSTAFA

Shopkeepers said that you were a nimble thief. I need such skills. And I will pay.

ALA AD-DIN

I'm listening.

MUSTAFA

Do you know history? I do. Some call it false, but I call it true ... That there was a band of thieves who called themselves the Forty Shadows of Death, hiding their treasure in many caves along the Silk Road, their entrances guarded by magic. One such cave is outside this city. And I have a map.

Mustafa hands them a faded map.

ALA AD-DIN

I cannot read the words.

KEY TAN

For all we know, this could be a map to your favorite brothel.

Mustafa takes the map back.

MUSTAFA

Look at your fingers. Fine gold dust, embedded in the parchment. Curious?

ALA AD-DIN

Curious enough. When do we start?

MUSTAFA

Meet me tomorrow at the South Gate of the city. At sunrise.

Mustafa exits.

KEY TAN

That is a world class liar.

ALA AD-DIN

But his gold is real. I will help him, but I won't trust him.

KEY TAN

Make me proud, my son.

Key Tan and Al ad-Din exit.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

The next morning, Ala ad-Din meets Mustafa, who leads him to the entrance of a cave.

Mustafa and Ala ad-Din enter at the cave.

MUSTAFA (DOMINICA)

Here we are.

ALA AD-DIN (MALIKA)

Are you sure the treasure is in there?

MUSTAFA

In the cave you will find a silver door. The map says, “Touch ring to open.” This ring.

Mustafa hands Ala ad-Din a ring.

ALA AD-DIN

The ring is the key?

MUSTAFA

These thieves used enchanting spells and objects. Listen carefully: When the silver door opens, you will see treasure. You can have it all, for I want only one thing: a lamp.

ALA AD-DIN

A lamp?

MUSTAFA

An old lamp resting on a stone altar.

ALA AD-DIN

What is so special about that old lamp?

MUSTAFA

I value old, precious things. Get the lamp, bring it to me, and the rest of the treasure is yours.

ALA AD-DIN

If something happens to me, will you tell my mother?

MUSTAFA

Yes-yes, go! Remember: the lamp comes to me first.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Ala ad-Din squeezes through the entrance of the cave.

ALA AD-DIN

All those hungry nights have been good for something.

Ala ad-Din crawls through the cave.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Ala ad-Din crawls through tiny tunnels and wiggles through skinny gaps until he comes to ...

ALA AD-DIN

—The silver door!

MUSTAFA  
(outside the cave)

Good, boy! The ring is the key.

ALA AD-DIN

Magic ring, do your thing.

Ala ad-Din touches the ring to the door. Nothing happens.

ALA AD-DIN  
(to Mustafa)

Still closed! I think the ring is broken.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Ala ad-Din hits the ring a few times, breathes on it, and then rubs it. A gentle mist appears, and from it emerges the feminine body of ... the Ring Djinni!

RING DJINNI (REINKO) appears.

RING DJINNI (REINKO)

Rise, rise, rise ... Summoned once more to do my master's bidding.

(sees Ala ad-Din)

You are not my master. Where is my master?

ALA AD-DIN

I am Ala ad-Din. Who are you?

RING DJINNI

I am the Ring Djinni. You summoned me, Master, so I must grant you any wish within my power.

ALA AD-DIN

A djinni! Can you open that silver door?

RING DJINNI

Open that silver door? Yes. I can open that silver door. I can close it too. All I have done for centuries is open and close that silver door.

ALA AD-DIN

So ... can you open it?

RING DJINNI

Ask me and I will answer. Command me, and I must do.

ALA AD-DIN

Ah, I see. Sorry, you're my first djinni. Open that silver door!

RING DJINNI

Your wish is my command.

(Beat)

But before I do, I want you to know that I can do many other things besides open and close that silver door.

Ring Djinni claps her hands. Silver door opens.

ALA AD-DIN

Thank you, Ring Djinni.

RING DJINNI

I have served my one and only purpose. I will crawl back into my ring.

The Ring Djinni disappears.

ALA AD-DIN

Oh. Goodbye! Thanks again.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Ala ad-Din walks through the door. Behold: treasure! Any kind of valuable object you can imagine is there.

(overlapping Mustafa and Ala ad-Din's lines)

Gold, silver, diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, amethysts, pearls, jade, onyx, obsidian ...

ALA AD-DIN

Unbelievable.

MUSTAFA

(outside)

What are you doing in there?

ALA AD-DIN

I got the door open. The treasure is greater than the Emperor's!

MUSTAFA

(outside)

Excellent, boy. Find the lamp and bring it to me. The rest of the treasure is yours.

ALA AD-DIN

Be there soon.

MUSTAFA  
(outside)

The lamp to me first!

ALA AD-DIN

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ala ad-Din spots the lamp on its stone altar.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

—And one old lamp.

ALA AD-DIN

That old thing? People have strange tastes. Is it a trap? It has to be a trap. Oh well, here we go.  
(Swipes the lamp. Nothing happens)

I got the lamp!

ALL

BOOM!

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

An earthquake rocks the cave of treasures.

MUSTAFA  
(outside)

Hurry, boy!

Ala ad-Din barely makes it out of the cave.

ALA AD-DIN

What was that?

MUSTAFA

An earthquake. The map said something about a mysterious “Curse of the Shadows.” Huh. Mystery solved. But you are alive, and the lamp is safe. Give it here.

ALA AD-DIN

What about my treasure? It’s buried now.

MUSTAFA

Dig it out. You’re young. Give me the lamp.

Mustafa draws his knife.

ALA AD-DIN

I have had knives pulled on me before.

Mustafa swings and misses.

MUSTAFA

You crossed the wrong person, boy. I am Mustafa the Sorcerer! *Execrus!*

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

The spell enchants Ala ad-Din's arm.

Ala ad-Din wrestles his own arm.

ALA AD-DIN

My arm!

Ala ad-Din's enchanted arm throws lamp to Mustafa.

MUSTAFA

The lamp is mine!

ALA AD-DIN

Fight magic with magic.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

He summons the Ring Djinni.

The Ring Djinni (Malika) appears.

RING DJINNI (Malika)

Rise, rise, rise ... Summoned once more ...

MUSTAFA

—A djinni? In the ring?!

ALA AD-DIN

Ring Djinni, show me what you got. Get the lamp from Mustafa!

RING DJINNI

Your wish is my command.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

The Ring Djinni enchants Mustafa with a spell.

The Ring Djinni claps her hands. An enchanted Mustafa dances the lamp over to Ala ad-Din.

ALA AD-DIN

Thank you, Mustafa. And thank you, Ring Djinni. Release him.

The Ring Djinni releases Mustafa from spell.

MUSTAFA

... There was a djinni in that ring this whole time?!

ALA AD-DIN

Now, Ring Djinni, send Mustafa deep into the Western Desert.

RING DJINNI

Your wish is my command.

MUSTAFA

I will have my revenge, Ala ad-Din!

The Ring Djinni claps her hands. Mustafa vanishes.

ALA AD-DIN

Thank you.

RING DJINNI

You are welcome, Master. I told you I could do more than open and close a door.

ALA AD-DIN

I hope so. There is a treasure buried in this cave. Can you ... ? I mean, I command you to transport the treasure, and us, back to my home.

RING DJINNI

You learn quickly. Your wish is my command.

The Ring Djinni claps her hands.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Ala ad-Din and the Ring Djinni crash land back at home.

RING DJINNI

Rough landing, sorry. I have not teleported in a long time.

ALA AD-DIN

No worries. Nothing broken.

The Ring Djinni surveys the squalor.

RING DJINNI

Did I get the right location?

ALA AD-DIN

Yes, this is our home. In all its leaky, creaky glory. But where is the treasure?

Key Tan (Leila) enters covered in gold and jewelry.

KEY TAN (LEILA)

We're rich!

ALL transition to a fine feast.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

As they eat a fabulous feast, graciously and instantly prepared by the Ring Djinni, Ala ad-Din explained to his mother what transpired at the cave with Mustafa. But then they began to argue.

ALA AD-DIN (MALIKA)

They say the princess is the most beautiful woman in the world, mother.

KEY TAN (LEILA)

How does anyone know? Who has seen the princess? They keep her locked away.

ALA AD-DIN

I know it is true in my heart.

KEY TAN

The heart is a terrible judge of character. My heart chose your father, even though he was in and out of prisons most of his life. Then he died and left me penniless with a boy to raise.

(Beat)

If he was here now, he would tell you not to waste time on love.

RING DJINNI (REINKO)

Master, I am of a delicate disposition. Arguing rattles me. May I leave while you two yell?

ALA AD-DIN

You may. Thank you, Ring Djinni.

KEY TAN

My son promised me a fine feast one day, and you delivered, Ring Djinni. Thank you.

RING DJINNI

You are welcome. If you need me, I will be in my ring.

The Ring Djinni vanishes.

KEY TAN

I like having a djinni around. Makes things easier. But what are we going to do with all this treasure? You can't sell an emir's crown at the great bazaar.

ALA AD-DIN

We'll start by selling the small stuff.

(he picks up the lamp)

Mustafa really wanted this piece of junk. What do you think we can get for it?

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Ala ad-Din polishes the lamp. Smoke fills the air. Stepping out of the mist? Another djinni!

The LAMP DJINNI (TARA) appears.

LAMP DJINNI (TARA)

My master calls me, and I am here. Bid me unleash thy kindness, thy fury, thy pleasure, thy greed.

KEY TAN

Sweet Glory, we got another one!

ALA AD-DIN

A Lamp Djinni? Welcome!

LAMP DJINNI

You are a different master. Your palace is far, far, far more humble.

KEY TAN

We are looking to move.

ALA AD-DIN

I am Ala ad-Din. This is my mother, Key Tan.

KEY TAN

Charmed.

LAMP DJINNI

Whoever wields my lamp, to which I am bound, has dominion over me. Your wish is my mission.

ALA AD-DIN

Hmm. Could you build us a palace?

LAMP DJINNI

Ask and I will answer. Command and I will do.

ALA AD-DIN

Right, I need to remember that. Oh, before building the palace, I want you to settle an argument. Mother, I hope you're ready for this.

KEY TAN

Why, what are you doing?

ALA AD-DIN

Lamp Djinni, I want to speak to my father, Ali. Bring him back from the dead.

KEY TAN

No! Let him rest.

The Lamp Djinni snaps three times.

LAMP DJINNI

By your command.

ALI (DOMINICA), Ala ad-Din's father, appears.

ALI (DOMINICA)

Oh, no. I'm back.

ALA AD-DIN

Dad!

KEY TAN

Ali!

ALL embrace.

ALI

Key Tan? Allie? Why am I here?

KEY TAN

Your son asked this djinni to raise you from the dead. Show a little gratitude.

Ali is not impressed by the djinni.

ALI

Djinni, why? Why, djinni?

The Lamp Djinni shrugs, points to Ala ad-Din.

ALA AD-DIN

Well, we were, uh ... just talking here, and ...

ALI

—Send me back. My time on this earth is over.

ALA AD-DIN

I want to ask you a question.

ALI

One question. Make it quick. Make it good.

ALA AD-DIN

What is greatest good: Power, Wealth, or Love?

ALI

None of the above. It is Life.

ALA AD-DIN

But what good is Life without Love?

ALI

That's another question, by the way. Life without Love is still Life. You think the most fragrant, beautiful, blossoming flower needs love poetry written about her? The flower is a love poem.

ALA AD-DIN

Then what good is Love?

ALI

And that's three questions, but you're my son, so I forgive you. Love is the greatest reminder that we have Life. When we love, we feel most alive.

KEY TAN

Your son wants to marry the emperor's daughter.

ALI

Is she a good person?

ALA AD-DIN

They say she is the most beautiful woman in the world.

ALI

Is she a good person? Kind, thoughtful, helps others. I married your mother because she is good.

KEY TAN

Is that all?

ALI

Your beauty was a bonus, Key Tan. Your goodness mattered to me most.

KEY TAN

You have grown sweeter in death, Ali.

ALI

Maybe a little wiser, I hope.

(to Ala ad-Din)

So you need to find out if this princess — what is her name?

ALA AD-DIN

Badroulbador.

ALI

Find out if Princess Badroulbador is a good person. If she is, then she will be good for you.

ALA AD-DIN

I understand.

ALI

Just as importantly, son, you have to be a good person too. Be good to each other, for each other.

ALA AD-DIN

Thank you, Dad.

ALI

Now if you don't mind, please? I would like to go back to paradise.

Father, mother, and son embrace again.

ALA AD-DIN

Goodbye, Dad.

KEY TAN

Goodbye, dear.

ALI

Goodbye, my loves. I'll see you when I see you.

ALA AD-DIN

Lamp Djinni, send my father back to paradise.

LAMP DJINNI

By your command.

The Lamp Djinni snaps and Ali vanishes.

KEY TAN

When you marry your princess, do you promise not to forget your mother?

ALA AD-DIN

I could never forget you. Lamp Djinni, make me into a prince. Prince Ali.

KEY TAN

Aww, after your father. That's sweet.

LAMP DJINNI

By your command.

Lamp Djinni snaps her fingers. ALL exit.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

The next evening at the Imperial Palace, Princess Badroulbador is reading letters from suitors.

Selena steps into role as Princess BADROULBADOUR.  
She reads from a number of letters scattered about.

BADROULBADOUR (SELENA)

"To Princess Badroulbador" ... At least this one spelled my name right. "The legend of your beauty ... " Yeah-yeah-yeah ... "Your eyes must be ... " Blah-blah-blah ... "Promise to triple the dowry of any other suitor" ... I bet Father loves that part ... "I wish to hear your dreams" ... That is different.

(Beat. Back to reading)

"My palace in Key Tan." Key Tan? Where in the world is Key Tan? I know of no Key Tan. It either is too small to be on a map, in which case a triple dowry is unlikely, or "Prince Ali" is lying.

PRINCE ALI (MALIKA), Ala ad-Din transformed, stands  
outside audience chamber.

PRINCE ALI (MALIKA)

Princess?

BADROULBADOUR

Yes?

She stands up and knocks a glass of water over.

PRINCE ALI

I am Prince Ali. Your father gave me permission to speak to you.

BADROULBADOUR

Oh. My *father* gave you permission.

PRINCE ALI

Do I have your permission too?

BADROULBADOUR

My ... ? One moment.

The princess clumsily puts on shoes, some jewelry,  
and finally a veil.

BADROULBADOUR (CONT'D)

Yes. You may enter my audience chamber.

Prince Ali enters the princess's audience chamber.

PRINCE ALI

Thank you for seeing me, Princess Badroulbador. I brought a gift.

He gives her a bracelet.

BADROULBADOUR

Thank you. This is a beautiful bracelet. Where was it made?

PRINCE ALI

I don't know. I stole it.

BADROULBADOUR

A thief prince?

PRINCE ALI

A prince with surprising skills. One who has known hunger.

BADROULBADOUR

How can a prince go hungry?

PRINCE ALI

I was not born into royalty. I was given an extraordinary opportunity.

BADROULBADOUR

And I suppose you think marrying the Emperor's daughter would be another opportunity?

PRINCE ALI

I have not yet asked you to marry me.

BADROULBADOUR

Are you deciding between me and another princess?

PRINCE ALI

Is that all you are?

BADROULBADOUR

You would not be here were I not a princess.

PRINCE ALI

I would not be here were I not a prince.

BADROULBADOUR

A thief prince.

PRINCE ALI

A thief prince with dreams.

BADROULBADOUR

You wrote in your letter ...

PRINCE ALI

—That I wish to hear your dreams. What better way to know someone? Tell me your dreams.

BADROULBADOUR

What does a princess dream of? For she lacks nothing. I will never go hungry, or be without shelter. I know how many of our people live. Compared to them, I have too much.

PRINCE ALI

Yet you still dream. Everyone yearns for what is beyond their reach. Princesses and princes and beggars alike.

BADROULBADOUR

I have had one dream since I was a child. It is foolish.

PRINCE ALI

Tell me your foolish dream.

BADROULBADOUR

I am kept behind these palace walls. I try to disguise myself and walk through the gate, but the guards stop me.

PRINCE ALI

You dream of freedom?

BADROULBADOUR

Freedom, yes. Even for a short time. I dream of flying over those walls and seeing the world that I only know in books and scrolls and maps.

PRINCE ALI

Strange to think of a princess imprisoned in her own palace.

BADROULBADOUR

How can I complain? I am ashamed that I want more than I have.

PRINCE ALI

What if I made your dream come true? Help you fly right over these palace walls, into the world.

BADROULBADOUR

If you did that, then I would consider marrying you.

PRINCE ALI

Go put on something warm, for the night is chilly. Go on.

BADROULBADOUR

You are a charming madman, Prince Ali.

Badroulbador exits. Prince Ali rubs the magic ring to summon the Ring Djinni (Reinko).

RING DJINNI (REINKO)

Rise, rise, rise ... Summoned once more to do my master's bidding.

(sees Prince Ali)

You are not my master. What happened to my old master?

PRINCE ALI

It's me, Ring Djinni. Ala ad-Din transformed: Call me Prince Ali.

RING DJINNI

What a change. But I don't recall turning you into a prince.

PRINCE ALI

The Lamp Djinni did it

RING DJINNI

The Lamp ... ?! The Lamp Djinni?! I knew you were going to rub that lamp. Did I not save your life? You wanted two djinnis? Greedy master. I am insulted. Insulted and hurt. The Lamp Djinni!

PRINCE ALI

Are you and the Lamp Djinni enemies or something?

RING DJINNI

We're sisters. My power is good, but her power is limitless. And she knows it, know what I mean?

PRINCE ALI

Right now, I need your help.

RING DJINNI

Why don't you summon your Lamp Djinni? Now that you have her, you can trade my ring at the bazaar for a few goats.

PRINCE ALI

You will always be my first djinni. I chose you because I wanted you at my side, my friend. You are more pleasant company.

RING DJINNI

Where is the Lamp Djinni really?

PRINCE ALI

With my mother. Building a great palace for us.

RING DJINNI

I make fabulous palaces! It takes me longer than Lamp Djinni, but that is because I take more time picking out the colors and fabrics, making everything flow just right ...

BADROULBADOUR

(offstage)

—Ali? Who are you talking to?

PRINCE ALI

A djinni.

BADROULBADOUR

(offstage)

... A charming madman indeed. I am coming.

PRINCE ALI

Can you delay the princess?

RING DJINNI

Ask me and I will answer. Command me, and I must do.

PRINCE ALI

(to Ring Djinni)

Ugh! Ring Djinni, delay the princess!

Something shatters off stage.

BADROULBADOUR  
(offstage)

... I need another moment.

PRINCE ALI

What did you do?

RING DJINNI

Oh, that was all her. I never clapped my hands.

PRINCE ALI

Ring Djinni, I command you to make me and the princess fly.

RING DJINNI

Do you want to be birds, bats, or bugs? I recommend the birds.

PRINCE ALI

I need to stay like this. I am charming Princess Badroulbador.

RING DJINNI

Ah, charm. Romance. Now we're talking. I love to do this.

(looks around and spots a rolled up carpet)

That carpet will work. Roll it out.

Prince Ali rolls out the carpet. Ring Djinni claps hands.

PRINCE ALI

... Now what?

RING DJINNI

When the princess returns, invite her to sit on the carpet. Say the magic words, "By the silver light of the moon at night, may this carpet take swift flight." Then tell it where to go.

PRINCE ALI

That's all?

RING DJINNI

That's all. Say the words again when you want a new destination. Very simple, very easy.

PRINCE ALI

I'm bringing you with us. For emergencies.

RING DJINNI

One condition: as you can tell by the spell, you need to be back at moonset and before sunrise.

PRINCE ALI

Conditions? The Lamp Djinni does not have conditions ...

RING DJINNI

—Don't you dare!

(Beat)

Just get the princess back by sunrise, and all will be well.

PRINCE ALI

Thank you.

RING DJINNI

One last warning. It is very important, so listen carefully: Do. Not. Talk about yourself all night. Seriously, ask the princess some questions. If she asks you three questions in a row and you don't ask one back, you are failing at this.

PRINCE ALI

Thank you. Ring Djinni, back in the ring.

The Ring Djinni disappears as Badroulbador enters.

BADROULBADOUR (SELENA)

Don't be embarrassed. I talk to myself too.

PRINCE ALI

Are you ready? We will take a journey to anywhere you have read about in your books and maps.

He leads Badroulbador on to the carpet.

BADROULBADOUR

“A journey with our minds.” I will play along. My father told me stories of the sea. I want to see the sea.

PRINCE ALI

“By the silver light of the moon at night, may this carpet take swift flight. Take us to the Salt Sea.”

They're off! The carpet ride is an extended sequence with Prince Ali and Badroulbador. The carpet ride incorporates dances, acrobatics, trapeze work, ribbons and/or other performance elements from different lands. Sequence evolves at each destination. Below are suggestions only.

BADROULBADOUR

The Great Wall! Angkor Wat! The Ganges River! The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus! The Great Lighthouse of Alexandria!

PRINCE ALI

Enjoying your freedom, princess?

BADROULBADOUR

This has been the most wonderful night of my life. Look at the colors on the horizon there. We are going to see a beautiful sunrise.

PRINCE ALI

Sunrise? Carpet, back to the royal palace --- now!

The carpet flies back into the audience chamber. Carpet collapses into a heap.

BADROULBADOUR

Prince Ali?

PRINCE ALI

Yes, Princess Badroulbador?

BADROULBADOUR

Will you marry me?

The embrace and kiss. Applause from ALL. Prince Ali exits. Selena becomes Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

So Prince Ali and Princess Badroulbador were married. They went to live with Key Tan in the great palace named after her, built by the awesome powers of the Lamp Djinni. And Prince Ali and Princess Badroulbador ruled side by side, hand in hand.

(Beat)

One year later, a man knocks at the gates of Key Tan palace.

MUSTAFA (DOMINICA) approaches the gates.

MUSTAFA (DOMINICA)

Not bad, Ala ad-Din. You must have unleashed the Lamp Djinni.

(Calls over the wall)

Hello? I am trading new lamps for old lamps! New for old!

SUBHA (LEILA), a servant, answers his call.

SUBHA (LEILA)

Are you mad, sir? You trade new lamps for old lamps?

MUSTAFA

I am of sound mind, I promise you. Do you have any old lamps for trade?

SUBHA

My prince carries an old lamp. He never lights it, so I doubt it works. It's an eyesore, to be honest. I like things clean. Shiny.

MUSTAFA

Like this solid gold lamp?

Mustafa takes out a fine specimen of a lamp. Subha laughs.

SUBHA

You are mad, indeed. But that is your problem, not mine. I will return.

Subha exits.

MUSTAFA

You do that.

(Beat)

I was told of a ruler who is good to his people, generous with his time, wise in his judgment, and always in good humor. He loves his princess, and his princess loves him. I heard this, and I knew this prince was an imposter. But how could an imposter rise to such power?

Subha returns with the magic lamp.

SUBHA

Here's the prince's lamp. I'm glad to be rid of it.

Subha and Mustafa exchange lamps.

MUSTAFA

Thank you.

Mustafa rubs the lamp. Lamp Djinni (Tara) materializes.

SUBHA

Do you have a silver lamp? Gold is too garish.

LAMP DJINNI (TARA)

My master calls me, and I am here ...

Subha sees the Lamp Djinni.

SUBHA

Ohhhh .... Hey, can we trade back?

LAMP DJINNI

—Bid me unleash thy kindness, thy fury, thy pleasure, thy greed.

MUSTAFA

Lamp Djinni, blast this fool into oblivion.

LAMP DJINNI

By your command.

The Lamp Djinni snaps and Subha vanishes.

MUSTAFA

Now, Lamp Djinni: make me into a Grand Khan. Build me a Pleasure Dome, ten times the size of this palace. Imprison Princess Badroulbador inside it. Give me a Golden Horde of horsemen to wage war on the Emperor, and to bring catastrophe to his empire.

(Beat)

As for Prince Ali: turn him back into Ala ad-Din. Send him and his mother back to their rat hole.

LAMP DJINNI

By your command.

The Lamp Djinni snaps. Fade.

Lights up on Ala ad-Din asleep. Off-stage, Key Tan screams. This startles Ala ad-Din awake. He looks around and sees he is once again living in squalor. Tan Key enters.

ALA AD-DIN (MALIKA)

Mom! What happened?

KEY TAN (LEILA)

What do you see? The palace? Our stuff? All gone.

ALA AD-DIN

Badroulbador? The lamp?

KEY TAN

The lamp!

They scramble and search, but no lamp is found.

ALA AD-DIN

The lamp is gone.

KEY TAN

The lamp is gone. We have lost everything.

ALA AD-DIN

Not everything. We still have the ring on my finger.

KEY TAN

The Ring Djinni? I like her, but she does not pack the power of her sister.

Ala ad-Din summons the Ring Djinni.

RING DJINNI (REINKO)

Rise, rise, rise ... Summoned once more to do my master's bidding.

(sees Ala ad-Din)

But you are not my master. What happened to my prince?

ALA AD-DIN

It's me! Look around. The princess, the palace, the lamp? All gone. I command you to find out what happened.

Ring Djinni takes a letter that is pinned to Ala ad-Din's back.

RING DJINNI

Here. Your wish is my command.

The Ring Djinni begins reading. We hear Mustafa's voice.

MUSTAFA

(in the letter)

"Ala ad-Din, without you, I would not now have the magic lamp. For that, and that alone, I let you live. You can even keep the ring. But the princess is mine, and soon the empire will be destroyed. Go away. Find your riches in a far off place. If I see you again, I will not have mercy. Mustafa."

RING DJINNI

I am sorry, master. I know how much you loved Badroulbador.

KEY TAN

I'm sorry too. She was a nice princess.

(Beat)

But, there are other princesses too. Let's get out of here before Mustafa changes his mind.

ALA AD-DIN

You go, mother. I am going to rescue Badroulbador.

KEY TAN

Mustafa will kill you. The Lamp Djinni is all-powerful, and so is Mustafa now.

RING DJINNI

I want to help, Master, but my power is no match for my sister's.

ALA AD-DIN

Djinni, transport my mother somewhere safe.

KEY TAN

Hold on ... !

RING DJINNI

—Your wish is my command.

The Ring Djinni claps hands and Key Tan vanishes.

ALA AD-DIN

I need you, my friend.

RING DJINNI

You are doomed, master.

ALA AD-DIN

Ring Djinni, transport me to Badroulbador.

RING DJINNI

Your wish is my command.

The Ring Djinni claps her hands.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

The Ring Djinni transports Ala ad-Din and herself to Mustafa's Pleasure Dome, many miles away.

Selena steps into role as Badroulbador.

ALA AD-DIN (MALIKA)

Princess!

BADROULBADOUR (SELENA)

Who are you?

ALA AD-DIN

It's me: Ali. Are you alright?

You look so different.

BADROULBADOUR

Who is this?

(sees the Ring Djinni)

RING DJINNI

Princess Badroulbador, it is shameful that my master has not let me see you before.

BADROULBADOUR

You are a djinni? Like in the stories?

ALA AD-DIN

We can read all about them later. Djinni, get us out of here.

The Ring Djinni claps her hands. Nothing happens. She tries again, but nothing.

BADROULBADOUR

What is wrong?

RING DJINNI

We are not alone.

Mustafa appears with the Lamp Djinni.

MUSTAFA

Ala ad-Din.

ALA AD-DIN

Mustafa.

BADROULBADOUR

Ala ad-Din?

RING DJINNI

(to Lamp Djinni)

Frida.

MUSTAFA

Frida?

LAMP DJINNI

(to Ring Djinni)

Gladys.

ALA AD-DIN  
Gladys?

RING DJINNI  
Old family names.

BADROULBADOUR  
They are both djinnis?

ALA AD-DIN  
We are leaving, Mustafa. Lamp Djinni, let us go.

LAMP DJINNI  
You are not my master.

MUSTAFA  
Ala ad-Din, you fool. I gave you a way out. You even had a decent djinni.

BADROULBADOUR  
(to Ala ad-Din)  
You seized an opportunity, you said. Djinnis?

ALA AD-DIN  
I never lied to you. I just never told you the whole truth.

MUSTAFA  
You defy me, and try to kidnap my princess. How ungrateful.

BADROULBADOUR  
I am not your princess.  
(to Ala ad-Din)  
I'm not yours either, Ala-ad-Din. Djinnis, I don't care which one, transport me back to the Emperor's Palace.

The Lamp Djinni laughs. The Ring Djinni shrugs.

ALA AD-DIN  
Doesn't work that way, my love. You have to be holding ...

MUSTAFA  
— Wielding.

ALA AD-DIN  
You have to be wielding the objects. This ring, or that lamp.

BADROULBADOUR

That old lamp? And these all-powerful djinnis can only do what their “wielders” say?

MUSTAFA

Wonderful, isn’t it?

BADROULBADOUR

Djinnis are powerful, yet powerless.

MUSTAFA

The Lamp Djinni has unmatched power, princess. Power to raise up great empires, or tear them down. Your father, the Emperor, burned my city to the ground. Now I will burn his entire empire, and raise up my own in its ashes.

BADROULBADOUR

...

ALA AD-DIN

Mustafa. We challenge you to a duel.

RING DJINNI

We?

MUSTAFA

A magic duel? Me and the Lamp Djinni against you and the Ring Djinni?

LAMP DJINNI

Insulting and unbalanced.

MUSTAFA

I ought to let you live after all, Ala ad-Din. As my court fool.

ALA AD-DIN

So you refuse?

RING DJINNI

Master, this is unwise. My sister’s power ...

ALA AD-DIN

—Not now, Gladys. Mustafa, are you a great sorcerer or a great fraud?

MUSTAFA

I accept. Have you been in a magic duel?

ALA AD-DIN

No.

MUSTAFA

They are glorious. And terrible. It ends when one master traps the other. You should know that I have never lost a magic duel.

ALA AD-DIN

I've never lost one either, so we're evenly matched.

MUSTAFA

We begin.

ALA AD-DIN

We are ready.

Masters command djinnis, who turn their masters into various animals who stalk each other. This section is open to improvisation and extension until the "rhinos". Sequence below is a suggestion.

MUSTAFA

I will start easy on you. Lamp Djinni, make me into a humble mouse.

Mustafa becomes a mouse.

ALA AD-DIN

Djinni, turn me into a hostile cat.

The cat chases the mouse.

MUSTAFA

A hungry dog!

The dog chases the cat.

ALA AD-DIN

A fierce tiger!

The tiger pounces on the dog.

MUSTAFA

Killer cobra!

The cobra strikes at the tiger.

ALA AD-DIN

Strong rhino!

The rhino ignores the cobra's bites.

MUSTAFA

Aggressive rhino!

The two rhinos circle each other, then butt heads. Both rhinos fall down. A stalemate. Ala ad-Din and Mustafa consult with their djinnis.

ALA AD-DIN

I'm not losing, but I'm not winning either.

BADROULBADOUR

Listen to me: Mustafa only sees me as a trophy. You see me as more.

ALA AD-DIN

A partner! Two against one? What do you suggest?

BADROULBADOUR

Do you trust me?

ALA AD-DIN

With my life.

BADROULBADOUR

Slip me the ring. Make sure Mustafa does not see.

Ala ad-Din gives Badroulbadour the ring.

ALA AD-DIN

What do you want to do?

BADROULBADOUR

As the poet says, "Fight like a butterfly. Sting like bees." Ring Djinni, transform my husband into a butterfly.

Ala ad-Din becomes a delicate butterfly.

MUSTAFA

A fearsome butterfly? Lamp Djinni, transform me into a beautiful spider.

Mustafa becomes a horrifying spider. Badroulbadour wields the ring.

BADROULBADOUR

Ring Djinni, transform my veil into a swarm of bees.

The Ring Djinni does so. The swarm of bees sting the spider again and again and again. The onslaught of stings forces the spider to drop the lamp.

MUSTAFA

My lamp! No!

Badroulbador picks up the lamp. She wields both the lamp and the ring.

BADROULBADOUR

Ring Djinni, Lamp Djinni: transform these creatures back into men.

RING DJINNI

Your wish is my command.

LAMP DJINNI

By your command.

With a clap and a snap, Ala ad-Din and Mustafa turn back into men. Mustafa falls to his knees before Badroulbador.

ALA AD-DIN

You did it!

MUSTAFA

Please, your highness. Forgive me?

BADROULBADOUR

Mustafa, you tried to kill my husband, you kidnapped me and destroyed our home, and you threatened my father's empire. Why should I not command these djinnis to rip you inside out?

MUSTAFA

Because you are merciful.

BADROULBADOUR

Am I? Or am I my father's child? Merciless.

ALA AD-DIN

Princess, you are who you are. You do have mercy.

BADROULBADOUR

You, "Prince Ali." Why should I listen to a liar?

ALA AD-DIN

Because you have forgiveness in your heart? Kindness?

BADROULBADOUR

Mercy? Forgiveness? Kindness? What use are they when I have absolute power?

(Beat.)

But I know what it is like to be powerful, yet powerless. To feel trapped. To yearn for freedom.

(to the Djinnis)

Ring Djinni, Lamp Djinni: as your master, I grant you freedom.

ALA AD-DIN

Whoa, whoa, wait!

MUSTAFA

No!

The Djinnis are freed. Their emancipation is glorious.

LAMP DJINNI

Thank you, Princess Badroulbador, The Liberator. Blessings rain on you, your house, your children, and your children's houses.

RING DJINNI

Thank you, Princess Badroulbador, The Compassionate. May your wisdom enlighten the lives of all those you lead, and all those your children lead.

The Lamp Djinni and Ring Djinni exit.

MUSTAFA

Gone. All gone.

BADROULBADOUR

Mustafa, here is your lamp. Polish it up and place it on a shelf, for its beauty is the only power it has now. May you find peace in another city.

Mustafa rubs the lamp desperately, then throws it away when nothing happens.

MUSTAFA

Thank you, Princess Badroulbador. For your mercy.

Mustafa exits.

ALA AD-DIN

So ... farewell to Prince Ali. I do love you, Badroulbador. But you deserve a true prince. Back to a beggar's life for me.

Badroulbador gives Ala ad-Din the ring. He rubs it to double-check. Nothing happens.

BADROULBADOUR

Your ring. Prince Ali is no more. But you are still married to a princess, so that makes you Prince Ala ad-Din.

They kiss. The Ring Djinni returns.

RING DJINNI

Sorry to disturb you, your highnesses. Looks like you are having a romantic moment.

ALA AD-DIN

You are back, Ring Djinni?

RING DJINNI

Please, call me Gladys. May I stay with you? I do not have my powers anymore, but I have acquired quite a bit of knowledge over the years. Perhaps you could use my advice as you rule?

BADROULBADOUR

Your knowledge is appreciated. To begin, find out where we are. And how we can get home.

ALA AD-DIN

One question: Djinni — I mean, Gladys, bring back my mother from wherever you sent her.

ALL exit except Selena, who becomes Shahrazad.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Far away in a desert oasis, Key Tan relaxes in luxury.

KEY TAN (LEILA)

Has anyone heard from my son? He promised never to forget me.

Key Tan becomes Leila once again. ALL return to the playing space as before.

SHAHRAZAD (SELENA)

Badroulbador and Ala ad-Din lived many happy years together. They had a daughter, a princess named Aliya. When the Emperor died, the law gave Ala ad-Din the throne over his wife. But as emperor, Ala ad-Din changed the law to make his daughter his heir. He then abdicated in favor of Princess Aliya. With her father, her mother, grandmother Key Tan, and her tutor Gladys to counsel her, Empress Aliya led the empire into a long and peaceful Golden Age.

Selena bows. Applause from ALL.

REINKO

That was so fun.

TARA

What story is next?

MALIKA

It is nearly morning, sisters.

LEILA

We need to get back before they discover us gone.

DOMINICA

I wish we could stay here. I like it better here.

REINKO

Let's stay forever.

MALIKA

May this night keep us strong for another month. May it inspire us to seek out new stories to share. So we can make what we have in here our truth out there.

Selena gives Reinko the book.

SELENA

Until next month? Maybe you will tell us a story?

REINKO

I will. Thank you.

TARA

Thank you for welcoming us. We will return.

Reinko and Tara embrace the others, then exit.

DOMINICA

Leila, thank you for leading us tonight.

LEILA

You are too kind. I will tell a story next time.

SELENA

Malika, you have the gift too, you know.

MALIKA

Wait until next month. I'm already thinking of the story I'm gonna tell.

ALL embrace. Leila and Malika exit. Selena and Dominica  
turn out the lights.

DOMINICA

You changed the ending to that last tale.

SELENA

There are no endings. Only infinite beginnings.

Selena and Dominica exit. End of play.