

THE SHAHRAZAD SOCIETY
(Excerpt)

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CHARACTERS

SHADEE
DUNYA
MALIKA
LEILA
DORRI
TARA

SETTING

Neither here nor there, a long time ago or not so long ago.

The Shahrazad Society meets in a secret location. What that location is for each production is up to the creative team's vision. It could be a secret chamber in an Ottoman palace, a hidden grotto in the jungles of Mughal India, the wine cellar of a Viennese abbey, the attic of an American girls' school, the recreation room of a retirement home, a storage area in a Mexican *maquiladora*, the curtained living room of an Afghan home, or any place that seems plausible to be deemed sacred by the society.

Accordingly, the names above can be changed to suit the setting and character backgrounds determined for each production. Character names in the tales should remain the same.

CASTING

The play is written for six actors, all female, with doubling in the tales as indicated.

(Voices in darkness: SHADEE and her sister DUNYA)

DUNYA

I hope others will come.

SHADEE

What we do takes courage.

(Some handheld light -- from candles? Lanterns?
Flashlights? Cell phones? - as two enter)

DUNYA

I hope they can find this new place.

SHADEE

Sense of direction is important too.

DUNYA

How did you find it?

SHADEE

I went wandering last night. Tell me what you think.

(Illumination. The space is large but cluttered.
If there are windows, they are curtained, bricked up,
boarded up, barred, etc.)

DUNYA

Not much room, no?

SHADEE

Use your imagination. Really see the space.

DUNYA

... With muscle work, it will be perfect.

SHADEE

Let's make it so.

(SHADEE and DUNYA move furniture and items around to
make an open staging area, with places for others to

sit. Throughout play, items will be handled as props
and furniture moved to make sets)

DUNYA

Which tales will you tell this month?

SHADEE

It depends on what we need to hear.

DUNYA

Can I tell one?

SHADEE

Absolutely.

(Lights from new figures: MALIKA and LEILA)

DUNYA

I still want you to go first, but I have been practicing.

SHADEE

Which story?

DUNYA

You'll see.

SHADEE

I hope others follow your lead.

(MALIKA and LEILA enter)

MALIKA

Look who we have here.

SHADEE

Malika! Leila!

(Embraces all around)

MALIKA

It takes more than threats to change our minds. But my dear
cousin is terrified.

LEILA

Terrified, yes. But here with you all now.

(LEILA takes out a small paper -- or parchment?
Cloth? .Gif? -- with the society's emblem on one
side, and a subtle design on the other)

LEILA (cont'd)

Your map-drawing skills are excellent, Shadee.

MALIKA

Subtle, but effective.

SHADEE

That is Dunya's artistry.

LEILA

Apologies, Dunya. We applaud you.

DUNYA

Thank you, Leila. I worry the map is too subtle. We may not
have any more members tonight.

SHADEE

So what do you think?

(MALIKA and LEILA take in the surroundings)

MALIKA

Needs a little work.

DUNYA

Use your imagination.

SHADEE

Has potential, yes?

MALIKA

Is there another option? What else do you have for me?

(She embraces SHADEE)

I love it. Thank you for finding a new place.

LEILA

Is it safe?

SHADEE

Safer than the last space. But no place is truly safe for us.

LEILA

It is good to forget that sometimes.

MALIKA

That is why we come.

(Beat)

SHADEE

Help us?

(The four of them continue arranging the space. Improvised dialogue as they try arrangements, change them, move things back, etc. When the space is about set, SHADEE places a book in the center)

DUNYAZAD

What is the time?

MALIKA

We left just after midnight.

(More lights from new figures: DORRI and TARA)

SHADEE

Then let's get started, shall we? Leila, will you have the honor of commencing our assembly?

LEILA

Thank you, I will.

(DUNYA, MALIKA, and SHADEE sit as LEILA takes stage.

She takes the book that SHADEE put on the floor)
Ladies of the Shahrazad Society, I welcome you.

(DORRI and TARA enter. LEILA startles)
Who are you? What do you want?

TARA

Sorry! So, so sorry.

DORRI

They do not want us here. I told you. We go.

(They start to leave)

DUNYA

No wait!

SHADEEE

Please wait.

(SHADEEE holds up symbol and map)

Are you here for this?

(TARA holds up the same symbol and map)

TARA

We heard voices. But were not sure.

SHADEEE

Welcome.

DUNYA

Welcome, all.

(MALIKA leads TARA and DORRI to the play space)

MALIKA

Come join us. Sit down. Get comfortable. Take a nap. Relax.

(ALL are seated)

SHADEEE

What are your names, friends?

TARA

I am Tara. This is my best friend.

DORRI

...

TARA

Whose name is ... ?

DORRI

--Dorri. I'm Dorri. And this is Tara.

TARA

I told them already.

SHADEEE

Welcome, Tara. Welcome, Dorri.

TARA

Thank you. You are?

SHADEE

My name is Shadee. This is my sister, Dunya.

DUNYA

Hello. Thank you for coming.

TARA

Thank you.

DORRI

Thank you.

MALIKA

I am Malika. And this is my cousin ...

LEILA

--Leila. I apologize for scaring you. I'm a little nervous.

DORRI

I'm scared.

LEILA

... I'm scared too.

(Beat)

TARA

So what do you do?

SHADEE

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

TARA

So what do we do?

DUNYA

We listen to stories. You can tell one too, if you wish.

SHADEE

Stories we read, stories we know, stories we make up, stories we change. Any story we choose, so long as we make it ours.

MALIKA

Make it ours. Leila was about to start us off. Weren't you, dear?

LEILA

No, Shadee can do it. Or Dunya.

DUNYA

You can do it. You were doing great.

LEILA

Not in front of new people, no. I get so ...

MALIKA

--Do it.

LEILA

I will. But I hate you.

(LEILA takes center stage again, holds up the book)
Ladies of the Shahrazad Society, I welcome you: Shadee, Dunya, Malika, and our newest members, Tara and Dorri.

(She recites the society's creed)
"The stories of the world reflect the world as it is, but the stories of this world reflect the world as we want it can be. The Shahrazad Society: Make It Ours."

(Applause)

This evening, assuming the role of Shahrazad first is Shadee.

(More applause as LEILA hands the book to SHADEE)

SHADEE

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

(DUNYA joins SHADEE on stage)

"The Story of the Fisherwoman and the Djinni."

(DUNYA goes off to costume herself. As SHADEE tells the story, it evolves into a play, with accompanying effects as desired)

A fisherwoman watches as a sailor of great repute, Sindibad, unloaded his ships at the dock. The cargo? Treasure. The crowd

gathered there 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 and sighs.

SHADEE (cont'd)

(In 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?" 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.

(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.

SHADEE

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.

LEILA

Did she give thanks for the dead donkey?

SHADEE

Wouldn't you?

(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!"

TARA

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

SHADEE

"Donkeywoman" would be more accurate, it's true.

DUNYA

Does she give up?

SHADEE

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 is indeed caught inside it. Something shiny.

DORRI

Treasure?

SHADEE

Thoughts of Sindibad's treasure crossed the fisherwoman's mind. Her hopes were dashed when she pulled from the water an old jar.

(Fisherwoman's voice)

"It will be a dinner of donkey flesh for my father and me." But something on the jar catches her eye. The cap is sealed into place with wax. By law, the fisherwoman was never taught to read, but even so she recognized that the wax seal had a royal emblem.

DORRI

It is treasure!

SHADEE

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, formed the masculine body and the gigantic head of a djinni.

(SHADEE and DUNYA enter into story itself. SHADEE plays FISHERWOMAN, and DUNYA plays the JAR DJINNI)

JAR DJINNI (DUNYA)

Ahh! Oh, mighty and terrible Suleiman the Great! I beg your forgiveness for my folly. Your will is mine.

(JAR DJINNI looks around)

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

FISHERWOMAN (SHADEE)

Hello? Hello!

(JAR DJINNI squints to see her)

JAR DJINNI

You are much changed since last I saw you, Suleiman.

FISHERWOMAN

You must have the 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

Yup.

JAR DJINNI

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

FISHERWOMAN

My doom? But I 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 into the time of legends. I laid waste to Suleiman's lands. He captured me with his force of will, and kept me in the jar until I learned to accept his dominion.

FISHERWOMAN

Then what happened?

JAR DJINNI

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

FISHERWOMAN

You were in that tiny jar for a hundred years?

JAR DJINNI

For another three hundred years after that, I vowed to bestow upon my liberator one wish, and then two wishes, and then finally three wishes. And still nobody came.

FISHERWOMAN

One plus three is ... four hundred years? I see why you are edgy.

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! But to show my gratitude, I would allow my liberator to choose the manner of execution.

FISHERWOMAN

And I just freed you.

JAR DJINNI

Yes. How would you like to die, woman?

FISHERWOMAN

... I suppose as a fisherwoman, I would like to die at sea.

JAR DJINNI

So be it.

FISHERWOMAN

But I have one question before I go.

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 begrudge a humble woman one question. Unless ...

JAR DJINNI

--No questions!

(beat)

Unless what?

FISHERWOMAN

Unless you do not 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 damned question?

FISHERWOMAN

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

JAR DJINNI

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

FISHERWOMAN

Yes. Look at yourself. You can barely fit into the entire sky. Your head is in the clouds, one hand 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.

FISHERMAN

I suppose you are right. I cannot fathom the essence of the sun either, but I know that I cannot fit the sun inside this bottle. I am but a woman, but I cannot even fit my hand in this bottle.

JAR DJINNI

Humans grow larger but their minds grow smaller. The taller you stand the lower your expectations. 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

Many secrets of the universe exist in the small things.

FISHERMAN

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

I am impressed with your disappearing act. But do I know that you are inside the jar?

(FISHERWOMAN hears a tiny voice from the jar)

What? Can it be?

FISHERWOMAN (cont'd)

(into the jar)

Is that you in there, O mighty Djinni?

(Holds the jar to her ear)

Magnificent. You prove me wrong. You are truly all-powerful.

(Places Suleiman's seal back on jar)

But not all-knowing.

(Transition back into the present)

SHADEE

And so the fisherwoman threw the jar deep into the ocean, where it has been lost to legend.

(At her conclusion, the others applaud)

MALIKA

Well played by the two sisters.

DORRI

Why was that the first story you told?

DUNYA

It comes from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

(She takes the book from SHADEE and gives it to TARA:
One Thousand and One Nights)

SHADEE

"The Fisherman and the Djinni" is the first story that Shahrazad tells King Shahryar to save her own life.

DUNYA

And the lives of others.

TARA

The Shahrazad Society takes its name from the *One Thousand and One Nights*?

SHADEE

Shahrazad is one of the first heroines in literature. Yet there are those who feel that we should not be allowed to read about her.

DORRI

Why?

SHADEE

For a thousand and one reasons. None worthwhile. Do you know her story?

TARA

I have only heard her name.

DORRI

Shahrazad is new to me. Who was she?

MALIKA

Allow me? I will need your help, though.

SHADEE

Please do. Leila, you again have the honors.

(LEILA takes the book back from TARA)

LEILA

And now, assuming the role of Shahrazad is my cousin, Malika.

(Applause as MALIKA takes center stage. LEILA gives her the book, and she begins)

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: Shahryar of Baghray. When he ascended to the throne after his father's death, he appointed his brother, Prince Shahzaman, commander of his armies. Together, they conquered other lands and expanded the empire far beyond what their father and grandfather had done.

MALIKA (cont'd)

Prince Shahzaman's blood lust was animalistic. As his armies conquered in the king's name, they pillaged vanquished cities. Shahzaman himself raped many virgins. He was called "The Ravager of Baghray."

TARA

This is a little scary.

LEILA

It gets worse. Listen.

MALIKA

Watered by absolute power, Shahzaman's heart grew wicked. He laid siege to the walled city of Rankhar. The Emir of Rankhar 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. Shahzaman ravaged the virgins that night. Then, just before sunrise, one woman unsexed Shahzaman. Another gutted him. The third slit his throat.

DORRI

Disgusting.

TARA

But deserved, if you ask me.

DORRI

What did King Shahryar do?

MALIKA

When Shahryar heard of Shahzaman's death, he rode to the city of Rankhar himself and ordered the gates of Rankhar barricaded

from the outside. He burned the city to the ground. The winds blew away the screams of its citizens.

DORRI

This didn't really happen, did it?

MALIKA

Perhaps yes, or perhaps no. They say that Shahryar's general slapped him on the back and praised him as "King Shahryar the Merciless." The name was an apt one.

King Shahryar had a wife: Atoosi. Atoosi knew of her husband's terrible grief over his brother's death. She prepared a welcoming feast for the king. She created a dance for the occasion.

But Atoosi was cursed. Shahryar returned to the palace at sunrise. The king saw his queen in the courtyard with another man, a dancer named Bagoas. They had rehearsed all night. Shahryar watched them. The queen began to spin, as delicate as a dervish, then as torrid as a tornado. Her veil flew off. Bagoas caught it.

Close your eyes. Can you can see? Atoosi's face. Shahryar's sword. Bagoas' head. Can you hear it? The queen's scream. The king's cry. The blade's slice. Can you feel it? Atoosi's blood.

DORRI

I don't like this story so much.

TARA

He killed her because her veil fell off?

MALIKA

When kings despair, they wield power in awful ways. Shahryar was embittered by his brother's murder and his wife's betrayal. His vizier counseled him to take a new wife immediately. So he did.

And that same night, Shahryar cut her throat. The mad king vowed to marry a new queen at sunset, and take her life by sunrise, before she could betray him.

TARA

A veil fell off!

DORRI

How many died?

MALIKA

One thousand nights. One thousand queens.

TARA

How did the cruelty end?

SHADEE

Shahrazad stopped it.

MALIKA

Shahrazad learned what was happening in the kingdom. Though terrified, she stepped forward to marry the king herself.

DORRI

Suicide ...

MALIKA

--You would think that, yes. But Shahrazad had a plan.

SHADEE

You see, Shahrazad's father was an important person. Her family's station gave her unusual access to education. She was intelligent, and she knew stories could save her.

MALIKA

On the evening of her wedding, Shahrazad planned to start telling her sister, Dunyazad, a story, a story the king would overhear.

DUNYA

"The Fisherman and the Djinni."

TARA

I thought it was a fisherwoman in the story.

SHADEE

We made the story ours.

TARA

Ahh. I like that.

MALIKA

Shahrazad, of course, embellished the story, going into details about Sindbad's treasure, the beauty of the sea at sunset, astounding detail of the djinni itself ...

LEILA

--And the king is hooked. By the time sunrise arrives, the story is only halfway through.

MALIKA

Because the king wants to hear the end of the story so badly, he decides to let Shahrazad live one more night. But only one more.

DORRI

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

SHADEE

You will make a fine storyteller, Dorri.

MALIKA

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

DUNYA

"Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves."

MALIKA

Before the king realized it, it was sunrise again. He absolutely had to hear the rest of Ali Baba, so he let Shahrazad live one more night.

LEILA

Then more one more night.

DUNYA

Then one night more.

SHADEE

And so on.

MALIKA

And so on.

DORRI

For one thousand and one nights.

MALIKA

A long time, yes?

TARA

What is the story of Ali-Baba and the Forty-Thieves?

DUNYA

Would you like to hear it?

(END OF EXCERPT)