**Blood on the Sand**

The moment Shialah saw Vanir’s lustful grin, dripping pouch and wet, four-fingered hand, doom whispered into her heart.

“Tonight,” was all he said, then for once he left her alone, striding off to the brick-pits. He would stomp the mud and snicker with the other bucks from all the tribes, about what woman loved them or how many they would have in their hareem when they rose to lead a clan. He would become sweaty from the sun and the constant churning around his feet and within his loins.

All day Vanir would think about that moment she came to drop new straw into the pit, when he could invent an excuse to put his now-bloody hand on her thigh or rear, and promise again to see her after sunset. The young bucks would laugh and spit and doubt him, but Shialah knew he would take her tonight, as surely as there would be stars above.

With the efrit to help him, she had no chance.

Barely able to stay still in the basket line, Shialah flinched when her turn came. She grabbed the thick wicker handles and ran beyond the ragged rows of gleaners to the furthest reaches of the harvest fields. She turned back and saw the people like children at this distance, and wished she could still be a child.

When she was ten years old, her brother Faqud seemed an adult, all of fifteen back then. Even without their parents alive, he protected her like a father, said they were a clan of two and made her laugh. Vanir or the other boys her age would perhaps knock her down as they ran past or say something insulting when Faqud could not hear, but those bruises healed quickly and the rest was just talk.

But now, at fifteen, Shialah was growing in new places before and behind. Even the nice old men by the collector’s bin would remark on her gem-eyes or long hair as they never did before. Faqud was more often away now, studying with men who could read the scrolls and design the great buildings the kingdom needed to protect itself. He came home seldom, and often late, so Shialah worked and ate alone.

Now, Vanir noticed her and desired her; tonight he would summon the efrit and feed it with his chopped finger. Shialah cried out and fell to the ground at the thought of its fire-hot hands holding her shoulders, or yanking back her hair until it smoldered, while the boy had his way with the softer parts of her body. Shialah did not know all the things a man could do with a woman, but she heard enough. The flame and rage of denial, and the arrogance of these boys jostling to boast of manhood.

None of them were a tenth of Faqud. He would kill Vanir when he knew. The feud would be brief, their clan had only two.

Shialah clutched her corn-silk doll, the one her mother gave her as a baby before the Evil Ones attacked and killed her. No matter her distress the doll brought back such memories, and comfort and warmth that Shialah carried it always and did not care who saw.

“The gem-eyes are sad now.” It was the husky voice of one of the elder men, who had walked quietly out to her as she crouched and wept. Shialah jumped up and frantically began to gather straw, but a wizened hand on her arm calmed her. “Our quota will fill without your help today, little one. What troubles you? A boy you love has been sent away to fight the Evil Ones, perhaps?”

At the ridiculous missed guess, Shialah burst out with a laugh, the plug before which all the tears could now flow. She sobbed into his arms, telling the elder all her terror before she could breathe four more times.

He let her tell, and then let her sob and waited until she looked up into his eyes. What she saw there was a kind of grim anger, sharing her horror but not her sense of helplessness.

“He knows the name of a fire-spirit, surely,” the old man agreed, “and you say he will come for you tonight, I doubt not that either.” He took in a deep breath before continuing. “I am not a clan leader, little gem-eyes, and we are not of the same tribe. But the great Pharisoos, this new king, he is bringing together the Bedou-uu into a single people now, to fight the Evil Ones of the north.”

He turned her to look at the great city in process, the king’s fortress, the outer walls, the solid unmoving homes going up near trails of smoke from those who burned their old tents as they settled down. The whole of it was far enough off to fit in the palm of her raised hand, yet larger than anything the people had done before.

The old man looked to her again. “I know not the name of an efrit, to enlist and fight on your side. This foul bargain is just the kind they would enjoy.” He took a deep breath, and for a moment Shialah thought he would urge her to run. He decided with a nod, and said, “But I do have a name that may help you. We are one people now, and I would give my foot to save you, if I could only see you smile on the morrow.” He whispered into her ear and then stood back. “Speak to it carefully, gem-eyes. I don’t know if it will be enough.”

He picked up her basket and meandered back toward the others, as if he had all day.

But time for Shialah was short. She had to find high ground, and a breeze.

Out beyond the rising gates of the new city stood the Obdurate Mound, a landmark used by the tribes for centuries to orient and at times to view the stars. Shialah hiked steadily up and beyond sight of the laborers and soldiers and scribes, to the broad summit closest to the sunlit heavens. Up here she found it hard, for a moment, to believe such a horrid fate awaited her below.

Then she felt a freshening breeze, and she intoned the sacred words all the Bedou-uu know along with a single name. *Zzeelelolahh…*

The breeze seemed to stretch on and even grow in strength, until all her hair moved nearly straight to one side. Shialah never felt she could fully see the djinn, but she did mark, with a tingle inside, that the world behind a tall womanly form was somewhat harder to see.

The almost-form made a slow, windy circle about her and came to rest by sections. Shialah bowed to show respect and remembered to choose her words.

“Great djinn, I appeal to you for help. A man, boy of my people wants to take my body and he has severed his finger for an efrit whose name he knows. Tonight, they will come for me.”

The wind never quieted but it did seem to shape itself into the suggestion of words.

*“Great I am indeed, mortal girl, but no match for an efrit. Take yourself away from here.”*

“I have no tribe! My brother is all, just we two.”

*“And the efrit would roast him, were he to attempt it. What, then, little one?”*

“Is there nothing you can do?”

*“Who speaks of nothing? Yours was the summoning, little one, and yours the risk.”*

Shialah sensed impatience, and knew she had but one chance. Yet she could think of nothing. Vanir could not be killed, and she wanted no part of murder anyway. But that lustful grin, mark of an arrogant assumption that his strength gave him the right. Her frustration rose like the wind around her until she exclaimed.

“If only he could see himself as I do!”

The rustle of the wind changed its language, until Shialah realized that even immortal spirits can laugh.

*“This, little one, I can do. But you must pay the price.”*

Shialah had no idea what solution lay behind her outburst, but desperation drove her onward. The djinn had no taste for blood, but craved instead a different treasure.

“You wish a memory. Some feeling or experience I had. Something dear to me.”

*“You will remember nothing, beautiful mortal. Be sure what you do, for once gone the thoughts never return.”*

Shialah did not hesitate. With just a last loving hug and a tear, she held out the corn-silk doll, and nodded. “I have no memory more precious to me.”

*“It is well bargained. And it is done.”* The wind rose and Shialah could not separate the power from the joy in what swirled around and through her.

It was full night when the wind calmed. Shialah had barely started down the Mound toward the quiet gates when the spirit of fire seized her. Crimson thick-plated skin, looming to eight feet—a young efrit, she thought as the shock descended—and horns on its head and arms just a bit less sharp than the hand-sized teeth in its grinning maw. The monster took a single stride and seized her in its steaming grip, turning her to face the leering Vanir as he sauntered up already loosening his tunic.

Shialah realized she had no idea what the djinn might have done. She felt no different and panic seized her. A betrayal?

Vanir came close enough for her to recognize his features, and Shialah gave over her spirit. He would have her, and then Faqud would revenge and soon they would both die. But to her astonishment, the lustful grin at this close range curdled.

Shialah could not struggle in the vice-grip of the efrit behind her. Vanir was an arm’s reach away, his tunic open to either side. He had only to rip down her shift and begin to have his way. Yet his face fell as he scanned her and Shialah could see, that was not the only part of him to wilt.

“Witch!” he exclaimed, “what did you do?”

Shialah felt the lightest breeze by one ear then and understood: Vanir saw himself now, whenever he looked at her.

The efrit batted with one hand at the breeze, then hissed in impatience.

*“Well, mortal?”* the spirit’s voice came like crackling embers, *“Will you be all night at your sport?”*

“She is, she has become ugly, repulsive to me.”

*“Fool! You thought yourself the only summoner among all the Bedou-uu, but it is of no moment to me.”* The efrit licked his lips and spat a bit of blood onto the sandy turf, Vanir’s blood she knew.

“Change her back! Let me see her truly again, efrit.”

*“Certainly,”* the monster spoke with sparks, and Shialah plunged back into horror for a moment.

Until he added, *“For a foot.”*

“Unfair! You lying dog!” Vanir’s rage needed an outlet, but even Shialah knew he was making a poor choice.

The hot hands released her and she dared not turn to look.

*“You challenge me, mortal?”*

Now another fluid spackled the ground between Vanir’s legs and he stumbled backwards, shrieking, “Nay! The deal is well done, begone!” before turning to flee.

The heat on her back suddenly cooled and Shialah knew that she was free again. The thick-studded blanket of stars overhead seemed further away than ever, yet the young woman wondered if perhaps they too were larger than they appeared.

Walking back to the tent she shared with her tiny clan, Shialah noticed for the first time that one hand clutched a tiny corn-silk doll. Wondering how she came to have it, she stared and stared but could not recall the first detail. She resolved to give it to some young child tomorrow. Perhaps it would bring her happy memories.