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Delilah was a woman Sultan increasingly desired. Whenever he saw her walking in the street, he saw a gazelle that awakened the hunter's instinct within him. She sensed it too. It was a game between a veteran womaniser and a receptive young coquette.

Unlike Amina, who coiled her hair and covered it up with a scarf, Delilah liked to keep her hair loose, for she looked more voluptuous that way. Though she was, by now, a mother of two daughters, Delilah remained a woman of exemplary charm, and was the dream of many men. She knew how to attract men. "Exquisite woman," Sultan would pronounce whenever he saw her. Without any resistance, he put down his weapons and capitulated to her beauty. He envied Musa over her. In his heart, he wished she were his wife. The days had proved his emotions unpredictable. Marriage and divorce were a kind of inhalation and exhalation to him. For years, a new wife was always at the threshold, waiting for his divorcee to leave in order to take her place. He married a handful of girls but never had more than two wives at a time.

At last, at the age of thirty, Sultan settled down and kept his most recent wife for the next nine years, a record for him. Sultan now had five children from his previous marriages and three from his present wife. His eldest daughter was almost sixteen and would be married in a couple of years. He still appreciated beauty and following it wherever it led him. Delilah sensed that in him from the beginning and knew how, where, and when she would catch her prey. She wasted no chance to seduce him with her beauty. Before long, Sultan swallowed her bait and fell into her net. Before long, Musa knew who would be his new master.

On his first visit to Musa on a Thursday night, Sultan brought two

bottles of wine. Musa's eyes glowed excitedly at this promise of a free spree. The hosts welcomed their visitor warmly and showered him with greetings as they ushered him into their room. Sultan handed two dolls to Delilah's daughters. They screamed with joy and took the dolls out to the hall to play. Nagy was surprised to see Sultan visiting Musa. He just shut the door to his room and minded his own business. Inside their room, Nagy and Salma whispered about that sudden friendship between Sultan and Musa.

'What has brought them together? Why this friendship all of a sudden?' asked Salma.

'There must be something serious bringing them together. A common interest, just as Kamal expected. I wonder what it is.'

Nagy asked Basim to stop shouting and Salma tried to do the same with Iman by lulling her to sleep. They tried to catch a word from the next room to discern the real purpose behind this suspicious visit. They could not hear a word.

'Never mind now,' said Nagy, '*Today's news has a price, but tomorrow it will be given out for free.* We'll soon know everything.'

Musa and Sultan sat on a couch facing the bed, against the wall that separated the two rooms. Delilah was in the kitchen preparing two glasses of red tea.

'It's a great honour to have you visit us,' said Musa with a beaming face.

'You're a good man, Musa,' started Sultan. 'I like you and I want you to be one of my men.'

'Of course, *Ma'alleem* Sultan, I'm your man.'

'You're now at a time when you can have a master to protect your interests. Don't be stupid like Kamal with his rubbish about neutrality. He doesn't realise his real size and imagines himself a true *ma'alleem*.'

'He's nothing. You can wipe him away in no time, if you want.'

'Of course I can. Now he's trying to befriend Aburroos just to defy me. Whom should he befriend, this idiot? Him or me? Who is richer?'

Look at how many shops I have, when he only has one. Aburroos can't lead the district. I can. The future is mine, Musa, and you're smart to choose to follow me,' said Sultan.

'You can count on me, *Ma'alleem* Sultan. You will see that I am your loyal and trusted man.'

'I told him so,' said Delilah, as she entered the room with the tea. 'I'm the one with vision,' she continued, with a coquettish laugh.

'You're a smart lady and Musa is damn lucky to be your husband.'

'Did you hear that, Musa? Kiss your hand front and back, and thank God that I'm your wife.'

She patted his shoulder teasingly and Musa obliged by kissing his own hand. They all laughed and sipped their tea as though announcing a new chapter in their relationship.

When they had finished their tea, Delilah served the two bottles of wine together with two glasses on a tray. She set it down on a table in front of the couch, and then sat on the opposite bed. Of course, there could not be drinking without smoking. For that, Sultan took a piece of hashish out of his pocket and, using a knife, cut it into small pieces. He made holes in a few cigarettes with a thick needle and inserted tiny lumps of hashish into each one, pushing them in with the needle. They also made their own joints, mixing tobacco with hashish, wrapping them in cigarette paper, and, with a lick of the tongue, sealing them. The joints looked as swollen as pregnant women.

The smoke of hashish soon clouded the room and the smell of alcohol penetrated every nook and cranny. Though she did not join them, Delilah felt giddy. By midnight, she was half-reclined on the bed and struggling to ward off her growing sleepiness. When the visit ended an hour later, both Sultan and Musa were excessively drunk.

From then on, Sultan made it a habit to visit them every Thursday night at ten and stay until two or three in the morning. Boasting about his fighting skills to impress Delilah, Sultan narrated stories of his old good days.

‘One day I was at a wedding ceremony of a friend of mine in Upper Egypt. You know how people there have hot tempers; they will start a fight with or without a reason. All of a sudden, we heard shouting between two men from hostile families. Apparently, one of them had stepped on the other’s foot. Within a second, a big fight erupted, with men going at each other with sticks and knives. Everything went dark and only the light of the moon lit the place. You couldn’t tell who was hitting whom in that crowd. I just used my fists to knock out anyone standing in my way. A whack here and a whack there, until I cleared the place and the fight was over. On my honour, no one in that fight escaped my punches.’

Sultan acted out each word in his story to impress his audience. On other nights, when he ran out of stock, he repeated old stories he had narrated before. They always seemed brand new to his inebriated mind. He was keen to engage Delilah in their chat as a pretext to keep looking at her seductive face. He addressed Delilah as *‘my sister’* to ward off any suspicions Musa might have. Although the suspicion was already there, Musa tried to conceive the notion that Sultan had nothing but innocent intentions. He did not dare ask him to stop his visits or to leave earlier. After all, Sultan was his new protector, and he could help him and Delilah to achieve their dream.

Wont to sleep early, Delilah’s eyelids grew heavy at eleven-thirty. Midnight was the limit beyond which she could not stay awake. When it got that late, she lay prone on the bed and in no time, fell asleep. Sultan stole glances at her erotic figure, stretched on the bed as in a painting, a perfect symbol of female beauty. She faced the wall, as she always did when she lay down. Noticing her slender waist and round, high hips, Sultan’s blood stirred in his veins. His drunken mind saw her as a nymph, as Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty he had heard about. When she turned over in her sleep, the bending and stretching of her legs rucked up her nightgown above her knees. This inflamed Sultan’s senses. He poured more drinks and rolled another joint for Musa, who seemed oblivious of the scene.

When Musa did notice his wife’s pose after a while, his sight was

foggy and his mind deemed it a hallucination. When reality forced itself onto his mind, fleetingly, he did not bother to get off the couch to cover her. After all, Delilah enjoyed the status of Sultan's sister, thought Musa. He himself, in his intoxicated state, took pleasure in gazing at the beautiful legs of his sleeping wife. Sultan's visits strengthened the bond between the three of them. It was not ironic, then, that Sultan became fervent in wanting to fulfil Delilah's dream of taking over the whole flat on the ground floor.

Delilah developed into a mature and daring woman. At home, she mostly dressed in sheer, sleeveless nightgowns that showed her cleavage and barely covered her knees. She did not bother to change into something more decent during Sultan's visits. This enraged Musa while he was sober, but when he asked her to put on a dressing gown, she shut him up by claiming it was too hot. And it was always too hot for her. She became even bolder and started opening the front door in her nightgown whenever the bell rang. Musa could not afford to anger her. Remembering the thirteen-year age gap between them always made him comply with her wishes. He knew he was ageing and his best days were behind him, while she had yet to reach her prime. In a constant bid to quench her sensual desires, he bought natural herb roots, boiled them, and drank their juice. But his heroic endeavour to please her affected his health negatively. He grew thinner, and creases started to appear around his mouth and eyes.

Sultan's visits tired him and deepened his suspicions. Musa decided not to cross the bridge before reaching it. *Don't trouble the troubles until the troubles trouble you*, he would tell himself. Until, one day, he quarrelled with a customer about a TV set he had repaired, and for which he had overcharged him. A word here and a word there, and it quickly turned into a heated quarrel in which they called each other names.

'Don't act like a man here, when your wife doesn't treat you like one!'

'Shut up, you piece of scum!' shouted Musa, enraged, his facial

muscles contracted.

‘Don’t say that, Abdel-Aziz,’ someone who witnessed the quarrel said. ‘It is not proper to interfere in family business.’

‘It’s just that his show of manhood infuriates me when he can’t even set rules for his own woman.’

‘You bloody bastard!’ cursed Musa and charged at Abdel-Aziz with an upturned stool. The other man held Musa before he did any harm, while another took Abdel-Aziz away.

‘The whole street knows more about your wife than you do!’ Abdel-Aziz had struck the right chord and did not want to leave before hurting Musa deeper with his words.

When it was all over, Musa sat alone, with sweat drenching his body. He washed his face at a small sink in the back of his shop, but the sweat kept trickling and wrath gnawed his heart. He closed his shop early and wandered the streets. He let his feet drag him from one street to another aimlessly, until they led him to another district where nobody knew him. He wanted to be invisible.

He entered a coffeehouse and ordered a glass of *sablak*. The shock he sustained had blocked his mind, but consciousness began creeping back slowly. His mind started to function again and asked questions that he could not answer. He mulled over the implications of what Abdel-Aziz had said, until he grew exhausted.

As soon as Musa pushed Sultan’s image out of his mind, he would jump back to haunt him. Does Sultan visit Delilah during my absence? thought Musa. That was almost impossible; he could not sneak into the room in the middle of the day without attracting the neighbours’ attention. But maybe he had, and people like Abdel-Aziz did see him and started to talk. Musa had noticed the lust in Sultan’s eyes, but all the men in the district had that lustful look when his wife was around. Could Delilah have put a sleeping pill in his tea one night and opened the door for her lover? Musa did not rule out that possibility. His blood boiled and pain squeezed his ribs. His breathing became laboured and he looked miserable even to those who did not know him. Within the last hour, he seemed to double in age. Doubts tortured him and he was

uncertain of any conclusion. He was worn out, defeated.

When Musa returned home at midnight, Delilah was stunned to see him in such a state. He was still unsure about whether he should question her. His biggest fear was that he would become the topic of discussion in every household. He sat at the edge of the bed with his head tilted downward and an absent look fastened on his sleeping daughters. Delilah sat next to him and surveyed him with worry. She wondered what might have happened. Had he gone bankrupt? She knew how thrifty he was; losing money was the one thing that could sadden him so deeply. She asked him what had happened and waited patiently for his reply. With a broken voice, he divulged to her what he had heard.

Mixed expressions swept over Delilah's face. She seemed at once terrified, shocked, baffled, indignant, and apprehensive. One moment, her face turned yellow as blood drained from it; the next, it turned red as though she were about to explode. Her breasts heaved up and down repeatedly. He could see in her eyes what he did not want to believe. A moment of silence and a deep breath restored her composure. She managed to shape her face into an expression of ire.

'Whoever told you that is a son of a bitch. How dare you question my honour? What do you mean? Are you calling me a slut?' Delilah turned the tide against him and sounded outraged as she chided him for thinking ill of her.

Then she changed her tack. 'Obviously, you don't feel well. You had better take a rest tomorrow,' she advised him, her voice tender and caring. 'I'll make you a cold glass of lemonade to calm you down,' she said, in a way that implied he was never to broach this subject again.

The words of Abdel-Aziz remained like thorns in Musa's throat. He looked exhausted, he slept fitfully every night, and lost his appetite. Doubt and suspicion ate at him from inside. When Sultan came to visit on Thursday night, he was startled by Musa's appearance. Delilah told him that her husband had not been feeling well in the last few days.

'You're working too hard, man. Take it easy,' advised Sultan. 'You

don't have to save a million pounds! Besides, who could have a flower like Delilah at home and go out to work the whole day!

A tedious laugh escaped Sultan's lips. Musa was alarmed by his remark and glanced at him with suspicion. Delilah nervously offered to make tea.

'What tea?' said Sultan. 'I have two bottles of good wine here. Who is going to drink them? Me? Alone?'

'He's sick. I don't think he can drink tonight,' she protested gently, wanting to sound as if she cared for her husband's health.

'Then *you* will drink with me,' joked Sultan, even though he was being serious in his request.

'Me? I'd drop dead after the first glass.' She smacked her lips and smirked.

'No way! You'll drink with me tonight, since Musa is sick and can't drink much. I brought two bottles of the finest wine and we must finish them tonight. Or do you need permission from Musa?'

Sultan gazed at Musa with a sly smile.

'I'll drink with you, *Ma'alleem* Sultan. Delilah isn't accustomed to wine,' said Musa quietly in an apologetic tone.

'Come on now, teach her how to drink. If one of us didn't drink, the other would have a partner. Besides, with Delilah, drinking is certainly merrier. Don't you think?'

Sultan spoke as though he were a member of the family and had a natural right to set the rules.

It was March and though it was warm during the day, a chilly breeze teased them at night. That prevented Delilah from lounging around in her sexy nightgown and forced her to put on her dressing gown. Sultan, however, used it as the perfect excuse to invite Delilah to drink with them, to help warm her up.

Relenting, Delilah filled three glasses. Sultan was overjoyed that Delilah sat with them at the table to drink. Musa, however, was edgy and Delilah was cautious not to offend him. As she predicted, after finishing her first glass, she was slightly drunk. Two more glasses took her out of this world. Sultan laughed as she put her head on the table,