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Mai

by

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Most names vanish from history like footprints in the windswept sand. Others are passed into legend where they forever live in the hearts and minds of men; Mai's was such a name. Though her given name has been lost to time, her life and deeds will be remembered forever. My body had perished long before I became mentor to the child that would become Mai. Time passed with the desert as her classroom and I as her teacher. Her mind and body grew until her powers easily surpassed mine. In the end it was clear, the child died in the desert and only Mai emerged.

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"Willful creature!" the mother said as her hand reflexively flew out and struck the cheek of the prepubescent girl. The blow sent the child reeling as she flew against the table, upending it and sending its content crashing to the floor.

"Mother, I am ... " the girl began as her hand went to the small cut that had opened on her cheek.

The mother grabbed the child's thin arm and pulled her up from the floor. "I am, I will; I, I, I; do you think of no one but yourself? You are your father's youngest daughter, the last to wed! You should be grateful your father has procured for you such a fine husband!"

The girl's dark eyes blazed anger at her mother and she jerked her arm out of the woman's grasp.

"Grateful? Salim Mustafa is a fat old man who reeks of sweat and stale mead! To feel his rough, meaty hands pawing at me turns my stomach; I will never marry him!"

Her mother's face contorted in rage as she grabbed a handful of her daughter's long black hair and pulled her to where their faces were barely an inch apart.

"This is not about what you want, this is about your family, your father, our clan. It is not for you to say who you will or will not marry, that is for your father to decide!"

She dragged the girl by her hair to a chair near another table and sat her roughly down.

"Salim Mustafa is a guest in our house!" she said as she shook the girl's head roughly and squeezed her hair tight in her balled fist. "He is a great and wealthy man whose tribe borders on royalty. Your father," she said with another vicious shake of her daughter's head, "Your father has invested much time and effort in order to get Salim Mustafa to agree to take such a disrespectful, spiteful and willful creature as you for his bride! Now, make yourself presentable; use a veil to cover your cheek and bring another bottle of wine and mead!"

Her mother released the girl's hair, beamed a stern chastising stare at her then moved toward the kitchen exit. She stopped at the colorful draping cloth that covered the opening

and adjusted her layers of silk wrappings. Once she had composed herself, she parted the drapes and entered the next room.

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"Sister, why must you constantly defy mother and father?" a voice said from the opposite side of the room.

The girl turned to see an older version of herself standing in another draped-covered doorway.

"Don't you know that every tantrum you throw, especially in front of someone as important as Salim Mustafa, brings shame on our family?"

The elder sister pulled up a chair and sat down beside the child. She then took the girl's young face in her hand and brushed away a tear with her thumb. She adjusted her sister's hair, caressing it as she draped it over her shoulder.

"You are such a beautiful child," she said as she kissed the girl's forehead. "Salim Mustafa is very lucky to have you as his bride."

"Why should I have to marry him? What have I done to be treated this way?"

"You are not alone in carrying the honor of the family through marriage," her sister said with a hint of irritation. "Our eldest sister and I were both wed to powerful, wealthy men in order to increase the honor of our family, you will be no

different. This has been the way of clans for generations; why should that tradition be cast aside because of you?"

The girl knew the issue was settled and any further discussion with her family members was pointless. She stared angrily into the flames of the oven as her sister patted her shoulder.

"Do as mother says, make yourself presentable then go and serve your future husband."

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The lavish wedding ceremony was festive and joyful but you could not tell it by the bride's face. Even behind the veil you could see that her dark eyes were sad and distraught. Night fell and the newly wed child was brought into the bridal chamber. Salim Mustafa's meaty form was nude and reclining on the bed amidst a sea of satin sheets and pillows.

"Come child," he said as he adjusted the pillows beside him and laid his flabby arm on them. A lecherous smile crossed his face as his hand went to his crotch. "Show yourself," he said huskily but she refused to move and continued staring at the floor. "Ah, you are shy," he said as he hefted his bulk over the edge of the bed, stood and walked over to her.

She was shivering from cold, fright and embarrassment, as the thin fabric offered no protection from the cold or his stare. At thirteen years of age, the only ones to have ever seen

her naked were her mother and sisters. Now, the man she most detested, the man she found the most disgusting leered at her as he touched himself openly.

"Get on the bed," Mustafa said with a forced attempt at gentility.

When she shook her head and backed away, he angrily tore the veil from her body.

"Enough of your defiance!" he shouted as he grabbed her by her hair and dragged her to the bed.

She screamed as he tossed her tiny, nude body effortlessly onto the bed and climbed on top of her. He pinned her wrist and, as his bulk settled on her petite frame, she felt as though she was being crushed. With his knees, he forced her legs apart as she continued to struggle and stare at the ceiling. Suddenly there was a sharp, stabbing pain between her legs and she screamed again as his hand covered her mouth. She felt the stabbing pain again and it mixed with the agony of suffocation. The crushing weight against her body and the unbearable pain between her legs made her feel as though she was about to die. Panicked, she bit his hand and began screaming hysterically as she fought for all she was worth.

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"Is she alive?" she heard the tearful voice of her sister ask as she struggled to open her eyes. As she did, her entire face seemed to explode in pain.

"Yes she is alive," her mother answered as she fought to contain her emotion, "But she will need much rest and care."

"I have been allowed to stay with you and care for her as long as necessary," her sister said as she wiped at her tears.

"Compose yourself," her mother said as she gently caressed her daughter's cheek, "Then go speak with your father about a gift of thanks for your husband. Once you have done that, go and sit with your sister."

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Despite the pain, she was able to open one eye and set her gaze on her sister. As she did, her sister burst into tears and rushed from the room.

"Oh child, you have dishonored your husband and caused him to damage a beautiful vessel," her mother said as she gently touched the girl's broken nose then caressed her swollen, purple cheeks. "What would cause you to attack him that way; and on your wedding night?"

A tear rolled out of her red, swollen eye as she tried to speak. Her jaw hurt but the accusation from her mother hurt more as she turned her face to the wall and remained silent.

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It seemed as though an eternity passed and, though time had healed her body, her heart and spirit were still badly broken. Her mother told her she should be strong enough to go back to her husband in a very short time and she burst into tears. Though she pleaded not to go, her mother remained deaf to her cries. She was lying in bed with her face to the wall when her sister entered the room carrying food and drink.

"How do you feel?" she asked as she placed the food on the table beside the bed and sat.

The girl didn't answer so she caressed her shoulder and noticed she was crying.

"Oh, don't cry, you are still as beautiful as ever. I'm sure he will take you back," she said as she rolled her sister onto her back. She took the girl's hand and, for long moments, stared at it as she caressed her slender fingers. "Priya," she began using a rarely spoken endearment as she chose her words carefully.

"Why did you ... attack your husband? What would possess you to dishonor him so?"

The girl pulled back her hand as she finally answered. "Why did you or mother not tell me it would be so awful? Why didn't you warn me how horrible it would be?"

"Sister that is his right and your duty; is that why you attacked him?"

"I thought I was going to die!" she screamed as tears rolled down her face. "I felt I was being crushed beneath his weight and when, ... and when he ... there was so much pain! I screamed for him to stop; begged him but he would not listen. He put his hand over my mouth to quiet me but I could not breath."

Her sister's eyes welled up as she stared into the tormented face of her so-much-younger sister. "You're no more than a baby," she thought as she caressed the girl's hair and wiped a tear from her own watering eyes.

"Is that why you bit him?" she asked and her sister nodded and whimpered. "And is that why he hit you?"

"Yes," she replied through her sobs, "And I hit him back but he was so angry and so strong."

"Well, that is all behind you now," she said as she bent down and kissed her soft, round cheek. "You understand your duty and know what to expect. Next time just lie there; find a spot in the room and stare at it no matter what. You will find that it passes more quickly than you think and it will get better with time."

"Was it the same with you and your husband?" she asked but her sister refused to look at her. She simply gave her hand a squeeze, rose and left the room.

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Though she was back in the palace, he treated her as a pariah because her flow had begun. Her husband now, more often than not, was brooding, mean and drunk. Much of the time he only spoke to her to give her orders. She was also commanded to sleep in a separate room until her discharge had passed. The passage of time had not dulled her anger and defiance. He could see it in her eyes and set his mind to breaking her. The smallest displeasure was met with a brutal slap as he barked orders at her constantly. Later, he added the use of a whip, telling her he was using it out of respect for her father. During a particularly brutal drunken beating he confessed her father had begged him not to mar her beauty any further. He added, whether he could maintain that promise was in her hands. To avoid his rage she tried to keep herself hidden as often as possible but it was becoming increasingly difficult to do.

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She refused to look at him as she entered the room carrying a tray heavy with food and drink. She was aware that his red, glassy eyes followed her every move so she tried to serve him quickly as she fought the urge to run.

"Are you now clean?" he asked in a slightly slurred voice as she set down the tray.

"I, I don't understand what you mean," she replied quietly as she stared at the polished marble floor.

"Is it over?" he asked angrily as he jerked his head toward her crotch.

"Yes," she said and turned to leave but he grabbed her slender wrist, nearly breaking it.

"Good," he grunted, pulling her toward him as he opened his robes to show that he was nude beneath.

"I, I have many chores to do," she said as she tried to pull away.

"They can wait," he said huskily as he twisted her wrist, making her cry out.

"Please, please I ..." she began as he threw her into the mound of pillows and slapped her hard across the face.

He struggled to roll on top of her as he puffed his fetid breath in her face.

"Please don't," she pleaded as she put a hand on his chest. "It hurts so ..."

She never finished the sentence as he quickly grabbed her around the throat and squeezed.

"Enough! You will no longer deny me!" he said as he brought her face close to his and shook her throat. "Now, touch me; caress me," he commanded as he maintained his grip on her throat but forced her hand to his genitals.

She struggled as the pressure on her throat tightened. Finally, she appeared to comply as she furtively cupped his

scrotum. He was breathing heavily as he pushed himself against her and she nearly gagged. As she started to let go, he squeezed tighter and she drew tight, ragged little breaths. She finally looked into his red eyes, which were half closed with lust. Her glare then traveled down to a line of drool that oozed out of the corner of his mouth. It traveled slowly through the thick black stubble and settled in the flabby groove beneath his chin.

"No!" she said, squeezed his scrotum as hard as she could and pushed him away.

"Kutiyā!" he shouted, but she ignored the insult. He gripped her arm as she struggled to extricate herself from the mass of pillows and tried to pull her back.

She grabbed the large pitcher of wine from the tray, swung around and smashed it against his head. Blood gushed from the large gash in his temple as he slumped lifelessly into the cushions. For long moments she stared down at him and smiled, the jagged remnants of the pitcher still in her hand.

"No more," she said as she let the fragment drop to the floor, "No more."

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She turned from the blinding sun and looked back at the faint outline of the city on the horizon. The sand was warm on her bare feet and the hot arid wind whipped through her hair and thin clothing.

"At least I am free," she said hoarsely and licked her dry lips, "At least I will die free."

She turned from the city and stared out at the golden dunes that stretched as far as she could see. Brushing her hair from her face she began to walk and never looked back.

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Through sheer force of will she continued walking. Blazing heat sapped her strength by day while bone-rattling cold racked her body at night. Through it all she continued walking until her body finally succumbed to the environment.

She wasn't sure how long she had laid in the sand, licking her dry, cracked lips as she sucked hot, arid air into her starving lungs. Her large, brown eyes tracked the punishing disc across the sky until it settled behind a large sand dune. The moon replaced the sun as she watched the cloudless sky dissolve into inky night. Her breathing slowed and she closed her eyes as she was overtaken with a feeling of fatigue and floating. As she rose into the sky, she turned and spotted her tiny form half buried in the sand.

"Child," a voice said softly from somewhere behind her.

She tried to turn but it was difficult to control her near weightless form. When she eventually righted herself in the proper direction, she saw a form floating a few feet from her. The figure was shiny and ethereal; glittering like a diamond in

the sky. She reached out to touch it and noticed her hand had the same quality only not nearly as bright.

"Are you a spirit?" she asked apprehensively and the figured smiled.

"That is an archaic term that belies the greater truth. I am Naukara No Ko and I was once the same as you only greater; I came from the same place as you only I have risen higher."

"Can I go there, become you?" the girl asked hopefully, expectantly.

"Perhaps in time but not now," Naukara replied with a hint of sadness.

"When can I get there; how?" she asked, almost pleading.

"No infant is born into adulthood; neither can you hope to rise to that level without the experience of growth. In order to grow, you must return from whence you came," the figure said as it gestured toward her body which was nearly buried in the sand.

"I fear there is no more growth to be found there," she said, looking at her body. "The desert has taken me but I am at peace."

"The barest of life remains in that body; return and I shall lead you to a new path, a new beginning."