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I SWEAR on the belly button of my only sister, my precious sister who hangs from my family by a watermelon's stem, and on the Sixty Holy Chapters that the following account is as true as you are sitting there.

May I have my days shortened, die of the big C on a Thursday forenoon, pray toward the northwest, be buried with my face toward the west, lose my firstborn male, be dishonored in front of the imam and the king of Marrakesh, lose my sister and my mother on the same day, slip on discarded dirty water on the southwest corner of my tent, get my hair cut on a Wednesday, visit my dead on a Sunday, be hit by the tazabbout of Sheikh Serigne; may I forget the names of the five holy mountains, those mountains that every believer must know, the mountains unperishable until the end of time, the Sinai, Sham, Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. God forbid, may all that I would wish to befall my enemy befall me if I'm telling you anything but the actual true story of Ahmed and Zarga.

I know you've heard the story. Everybody has. As God has watered our veins in the garden of happiness and dried the veins of all bad people in the place of sorrow and loneliness, so have wise and righteous men through the years related to us the story of Ahmed and Zarga. But what I'm about to tell you is the only true version of the story, the real and complete thing, as my sister told it to me. She heard it from our neighbor, old Aunt Aicha. You know Aicha, who knows everything about our old ways, who knows all the stories of the Bedouins and of the great

Calife Harun al-Rashid and how he built his hanging garden at the shore of the sea at the end of the world. People say, and she doesn't deny, that she is a direct descendant of Shahrazad, the greatest storyteller of all time, who saved her life by telling true stories to her husband for a thousand and one nights. Old Aunt Aicha entrusted to my sister the true story of Ahmed with the bone of her tongue.

And as my sister told it to me, I will tell it exactly that way to you. I am speaking about the dead, those who have already witnessed the truth firsthand, and I do not dare to say anything but the bare truth. The dead could not tell lies, even if they wanted to; that is why everything we see in our dreams, if it comes from the mouth of a dead person, is a hundred percent true. Don't you see? This is why the beyond is called the house of truth: all you need to experience it is to close your eyes for the last time. And everybody knows the curse that befalls those who tell lies about the departed, because they can hear everything we say about them; how else can you explain their awesome power? Ahmed himself, who herded camels on this earth in the tribe of Idamoor and who lives now in the house of truth, would not look down on me and tell me, "You haven't spoken the truth, oh living in the house of lies."

I don't need to tell you about the tribe of Idamoor, whose ancestors can be traced all the way back to the man who brought the first camels from Sham. The tribe has been herding camels ever since. They know everything about camels: how to feed them and water them, how to medicate them and use them to help medicate themselves, and how to drive and track them. Do you think it is easy to herd camels? But it is said that the Idamoor can drive anything. Ahmed's grandfather, the story goes, once drove a mixed herd of his camels and the camels of his neighbor. The night was so dark he couldn't have seen his finger if he held it before his eyes. All night he drove the herd by feel, because the presence of all his camels put his heart and mind at peace.

The problem was the neighbor's camels, especially a particularly feisty one that kept drifting away from the herd. Ahmed's grandfather was the strongest and most agile man who ever lived, a man who could eat a whole goat in one sitting, and so he managed each time to get the strange camel back on track. He arrived at camp, exhausted, just before the break of dawn. At sunrise, the people of the freeg were amazed at the wild ostrich that Ahmed's grandfather had herded and tamed.

For Ahmed, love for the nobility of camels was in his blood. He'd learned the skills of herding from his father, as his father had from his grandfather, and so forth and so on. He lived and breathed herding and couldn't picture himself away from his herd; it was the reason he existed. It was just like goats and chickens, where the one can't live without the other. His father never taught him herding; he just lived it and felt it as he accompanied his father, starting as far back as he could remember. Through his father, he first absorbed the names and attitudes of the individual camels. He loved the names, which are the most important things, because without names we cannot communicate or refer to the simplest of things. Like his father, he learned to tame the camels with love rather than violence; he used the thin stick he carried only for balance when he was riding, never as a weapon to abuse the camels. He could milk with one hand as the other hand held the adriss, the blessed wooden bucket he himself had made. He could brand, tail, and track with his eyes closed. He could predict where his herd would go on any particular day, in any weather. Like all true camel herders, he was smart, intuitive, lighthearted, and funny. Most important of all, he had a beautiful voice and sang the most beautiful hidas to guide and calm his camels.

In the old days, when the southern part of the country was a lush green carpet during the rainy season, Ahmed's great-grandfather had a huge herd that numbered several hundred head. This was even after he gave away one hundred pregnant she-camels

as blood money to a poor family whose seven-year-old son was killed when he was trampled by another young mother in his herd. The boy naively tried to mess with her newborn baby; threatened, she lashed out, smashing his legs and tripping over his head. The local hajjab tried to save his life, but the child's head injury allowed the demons to suck the life out of his body, and he soon succumbed to his wounds.

That evening, the wise man was sitting under a big tree, watching his herd water. He was filling his pipe and brewing his tea when the heartbroken lady came to him. It is said he never changed his manner or put his pipe down. That evening, his mouth filled with the pipe, he merely gestured to his oldest son. The son immediately led the woman to the huge sea of camels that surrounded the water source, waiting for the branding of the younger members. The son told the woman to pick and choose. Despite the pain of losing her child, a pain that cut her heart that much worse because he had just earned the henna tattoo that commemorates the accomplishment of memorizing a quarter of the Holy Quran, she immediately stopped crying and wailing, perhaps in her shock over becoming rich in the time it takes to milk a tame she-camel. Money and camels do not necessarily make you happy, but they can put a sense of security in your heart, making it harder for the demons to put doubt in it.

Ahmed was not as rich as his great-grandfather, or his grandfather, or even his father, because the successive years of droughts had eaten away at the family's herd. Ahmed knew too well that the day would come when the camels would disappear, because old times were better than his times, and the times after him would be still worse. That sad and dark day would come when all of the family's camels were gone, and that day would be the end of time. He knew the end of time was very near: the signs manifested themselves everywhere. So many people dreamt about it, and the more they dreamt it, the more the ruthless drought was accelerating the process. People can only live when camels live,

and the disappearing camels were a clear sign that humans would soon follow.

It is bad luck to speak about the exact number of your camels, because evil eyes are everywhere and they are hungry, and as the number of camels in the freeg has dwindled, the evil eyes have become that much more effective and evil. What we know for sure was that the previous Ramadan, Ahmed gave a three-year-old camel in zakat for the poor, which would put his herd somewhere between forty-six and sixty-one camels. He donated the camel discreetly, of course, steering clear of the taboo. The only time Ahmed discussed the number of his herd was when he paid taxes to the French, who would count the animals to the very last one. Dues to Allah and to his tribesman, dues to the French colonizer: like all Bedouins of his time, Ahmed found himself subject to two traditions and two systems; he accepted both as they presented themselves, as he knew to do in order to live and die a happy man. And the number of his camels, fortunately, never went beyond Ahmed, the governors, and the translator.

Animals, too, have their systems, and in the kingdom of camels a single bull rules, a patriarch that leads the whole herd. Nothing is tolerated within the herd but total loyalty and subjugation to this all-wise, all-knowing, all-powerful leader. With the group's interests at heart, the bull decides which direction his herd takes and what ground it will graze, watching over it to make sure none slip away and chasing away unwanted intruders, both camel and human. Though he answers to a human owner, every decent herder knows he can make no decision regarding his herd without the tacit understanding of the bull. This mutual respect and cooperation between bull and herder is the secret to the peace and harmony that has reigned over Bedouin life since the day the sweet singing of an Egyptian farmer caused the first camel to emerge from the Nile.

This relationship between bull and herder was nowhere closer than in the matter of the perpetuation of the breed. Like

every decent man of his time, Ahmed trusted the wisdom of the head of his herd, which meant not just letting the bull lead the herd as he chose, but letting him mate when and how he saw fit. The bull, in turn, knew to trust the judgment of the herder when human-assisted husbandry was necessary. As a boy, Ahmed had watched a thousand times as his father and other herders helped bulls mount young she-camels in the field of the well, the whole camp gathered around him to witness the beauty of the conception of a camel. Ahmed learned the herders' moves this way, as he learned so many skills, and when the time came he performed them so automatically that he couldn't understand how anyone else would find them difficult or unnatural.

Husbandry of this kind served a particular purpose: to increase the chances of a female offspring. Ahmed, like his father and his father's father, knew it was a sin to pretend he could determine the sex of a new addition to the herd; all decent herders understand they are merely instruments who can provide the right conditions for a baby she-camel to be produced. They know which she-camels are likely to produce female offspring. They know that the time of the year, the month, the day, what direction the she-camel faces during copulation, even how the bull penetrates, all play a role in determining the sex of the baby camel.

And as with breeding, so with the prevention of breeding. There can be only one uncastrated bull in the herd. Two bulls will fight to the end; one will end up exiled or dead, dishonored and unsung. If one of them is killed, people will not even eat the meat, because it stinks and tastes bad. And so just as he learned by watching as a child how to assist in the propagation of the herd, so Ahmed learned to castrate the male offspring, not for the happiness of the bull, because there can be no happy life for one who must court many females at the same time, but for the safety and the good of the herd. Not knowing any better, he started by practicing on the small pets his father brought him; he castrated

his small cat, just as he'd seen his father castrating the camels. The cat suffered, but all the kids who were gathered around were laughing, having sinful fun. At first Ahmed felt the cat's pain, but when he looked around and everyone was laughing, he started laughing nervously, too, and enjoying the scene. And the others joined in the work, handing Ahmed the hot rod to burn the wound and make it heal faster.

Afterward his grandmother was angry with him. She scolded him and explained to him that "Allah tortures those who torture animals and people." He saw immediately that this was true: the image of the cat's suffering rushed in and haunted him, as it haunted his friends, until they made amends and promised not to do it again.

If only Ahmed's cousin had learned that lesson! Everyone knows the story: Ahmed's cousin, who grew up with Ahmed and who should have known better, one day grew so angry with his bull that he beat the animal before the herd, dishonoring and humiliating him in front of the she-camels who trusted and admired him and lived under his protection. The she-camels lost all sense of security in that moment, seeing that a skinny Bedouin would dare to abuse their huge and powerful protector.

It was a reprehensible act, his cousin knew, and he immediately regretted the rage that Satan had whispered into his head. He knew the sin of abuse made him eligible for both the punishment of God and the retaliation of the bull. And he knew too well that if God is all-forgiving, there is no such forgiveness from a dishonored bull. Sure that retaliation was imminent, Ahmed's cousin decided to get rid of the bull by selling it to another tribe, compounding the bull's pain by sending it into exile.

Ten years passed, but a bull never forgets. One day, on one of his journeys, the cousin invited himself into a Bedouin camp to take a lunch break and a nap before resuming his trip. The camp, of course, turned out to belong to the same tribe to whom he'd sold the bull. When he caught sight of the old animal he froze in

terror; the fear lay in his legs, as they say in the desert. The inner weakness he had manifested in his violence against the animal was obvious now to everyone, including the bull. And yet the bull made no move toward him, leading the foolish man to believe he had forgotten the beating. Feeling safe and tired, and swayed by a host who swore by Allah he would divorce his wife three times if he refused the hospitality, the cousin decided to spend the night in the camp.

In the dead of the night, when the cousin was sound asleep, the bull followed the smell of his nemesis and snuck into the tent. He could have crushed the sleeping man, but out of respect for the host he didn't make a mess. Instead he wrapped his front legs around his tormentor's head and squeezed him to death. No one else was harmed; no one even woke. In the morning they found the guest resting in peace, looking normal in every way but with a head the size of a small Turkish meatball.

Ahmed no more judged the bull for this than he would question and condemn the chief of his clan. As there is only one bull in the herd to lead and protect, so there is just one elder who leads and protects the freeg; like the bull, the chief is caring but harsh, decisive, and uncompromising. Life in the vast ocean of desert is brutal and unsparing: resources are scarce, water is precious, and grazing ground is the great zero-sum game. A Bedouin spends his entire life in survival mode, the stakes are high for every decision, and hesitation can easily be fatal. And so the motto is One Chieftain, One Leader, One Single Option to be followed.

Like many in his clan, Ahmed did not love his tribal leader, for he could be heartless and vengeful and brutal, but he respected him, and tried never to disturb the peace of his clan. He was a practical man, and given the choice of facing the desert alone, hungry and exposed, or sticking with the group and seeking its protection and warmth, he happily chose the latter. Ahmed had spent days on end without food. He had been beaten and abused by strangers, and suffered even more horrible things that he

would never speak of, ever. He knew the key to being a successful camel herder is total cooperation with the bull, and living in complete harmony with the herd, as a member of its family. The way to be one with the herd was through fusion and surrender.