

The Arabian Knights

The Safavid Empire in the land of Persia is home to many wondrous things:—beautiful carpets, prosperous silk trade, stunning mosques,—and is guided by a powerful shah. It also harbors the Shiite Muslims, those hypocrites who believe that their ruler must be a descendant of the holy Prophet Muhammad, but who have not been ruled by one such shah since the age of the Abbasids. That great dynasty is now nearly four hundred years past, and few descendants of the revered Prophet survive to this day. Despite my prejudice against such a misguided people, I shall strive to deliver the following account as accurately as it was presented to me four months past.

The year was AH 1006 in the month Rajab, what the People of the Book would call January of 1629 AD. Shah Abbas the First, once a mighty man, had grown paranoid of conspiracy in his final years, finally dying without an heir. Almahdi Lu'ay, the Grand Vizier of the Ali Qapu palace in Isfahan, organized a meeting of all the wise men in the capital. They agreed that the only way to decide on a new shah was to hold a tournament ~~between~~ for all the mighty nobles men of Persia. The tournament would test strength and speed, wit and wisdom. Those who were defeated would leave in honor.

He who prevailed would ascend in glory to the throne of Persia.

—Katip Celebi, Janissary scribe and historian of the Ottoman Empire

Dancing in an unbroken azure sky, the sun cast her pure light across the sands of the arena, producing a kaleidoscope of brilliant hues that nearly blinded Lord Safi Mirza as he entered a wide circle drawn upon the sand. Even though he wore only loose trousers, a padded tunic, and a vest of scale armor, he was sweating profusely in the sunlight; the day was already hot enough to make the horizon waver.

To the side of the arena, past the Imperial Gardens and the housing of the late shah's concubines, stood the mighty Ali Qapu palace. By far the largest structure in the Persian capital of Isfahan, the palace stretched over four stories high and boasted flaunted a magnificent veranda on the front section of the third floor. Graceful columns, gleaming glass windows, and intricate murals adorned its outer shell, and countless breathtaking wonders could be found within. It had been his Lord Safi's home for the past week during the Tournament of the Shah, which was drawing to a close at last.

At the edges of the dueling circle, which was situated at the center of a large sand arena in the back of the palace grounds, were gathered the dozens of high lords gathered from all over the empire who had already competed and lost the previous challenges which included. The final test

Commented [AF1]: Later in the story, Jafar/Nadra says they never said it had to be men. We should keep that consistent here. Change okay?

Commented [AF2]: He's sweating from the heat not from the light. You talk about the heat in the next part of the sentence, though, so you can just end this part with him sweating.

Commented [AF3]: The word boasted seems to be more for when people talk about the palace rather than the palace itself doing the action. Change okay?

Commented [AF4]: This will remind readers who you're talking about so they don't forget and get confused.

Commented [AF5]: We get more description of the palace than the arena even though we spend more time in the arena. Can we get the same kind of description here so readers are immersed into the scene?

was a duel, but the previous challenges had included a game of chess to test strategy and a judicial case to test wisdom, among other things.

The final test was a duel. Safi studied the faces of the men gathered there. He saw Lord Mukarram, who wore his customary scarlet robe and ruby jewelry, and Lord Shadin, a man near his own age with skin slightly darker than his own tawny orange-brown color. Lord Almahdi Lu'ay, the Grand Vizier, was also there, dressed in haughty robes of burnished gold that hung loosely from his bony shoulders. He squinted in the bright sunlight, pinching his thin face more than usual.

Twenty meters away on the opposite side of the dueling ring, his Lord Safi's opponents stepped away from the gathered crowds. The man on the left was Lord Jafar, a slender man who wore his customary robe of deep ebony, and a long hood and a cloth mask obscured all of his face save for his eyes, which were a cold and penetrating green. He held two sabers, slightly curved in the Persian fashion, and wore no visible armor save for the iron gauntlets protecting both of his hands.

In Jafar's previous duels, Safi had seen his mask fall from shift on his face, revealing proud cheekbones and clean-shaven copper skin. Something about his face had been strange, something Safi couldn't place. But something was definitely wrong with him.

The second man, Lord Abisali, was a full head taller than Safi, and his entire body rippled with hard muscles. He brandished a mighty sword and a shield composed of the strongest steel Safi had ever seen. His only body armor was a pair of arm bracers, which revealed his deep pride and arrogance, both of which were well-founded.

Neither of these men were to be easily reckoned with. In Abisali's most recent duel, he had thrown Shadin back six meters and knocked him unconscious when he Abisali caught him with his shield.

Jafar was another matter entirely; he was light on his feet and deadly with those twin scimitars. His first opponent, Lord Ahmad, was a huge man who carried a mighty gold-tipped spear, but he Jafar had reduced him to a crumpled heap on the ground by beating on him with those his solid gauntlets of his.

Safi felt several butterflies awaken in his stomach. Swallowing nervously, he hefted his shield and scimitar and scanned the hundreds of onlookers in search of a particular face. Among all the lords and wealthy citizens who had been invited to the final duel, he finally found that group of servants where Hafiz, who stood with the other servants. Hafiz's brow was creased with worry; when he saw Safi looking at him he smiled, but his Lord Safi had already seen his faeeworry.

I suppose he has good reason to be worried. He's worried, Safi realized, then grimaced. I suppose he has good reason to be.

Commented [AF6]: You briefly mention Lord Shadin again later in the story, but Lord Mukarram never comes up again. Are these men important to the story? If so, consider giving a brief background on each of them. Otherwise, consider just talking about the people who are important and giving a general idea that there are other people like them in attendance.

Commented [AF7]: Change okay? Readers may confuse the word his, thinking these are Lord Almahdi's opponents.

Commented [AF8]: Breaking this sentence up gives the paragraph variety and helps the reader feel more comfortable reading it.

Commented [AF9]: If the mask had fallen, wouldn't Safi have seen that he was a woman? I changed the wording so that it's more clear that the mask didn't fall off completely and only revealed some of Jafar's face. Change okay?

Commented [AF10]: This name is very similar to Lord Almahdi's name which may confuse readers later in the story. Consider changing the name to something less similar.

Commented [AF11]: A shield is armor too, right?

Commented [AF12]: There are a lot of he's and him's in this sentence which will confuse readers. This helps the reader regain their footing and understand who's doing what in the action.

Commented [AF13]: Since you already mention that Hafiz is worried in the previous sentence, it's a bit repetitive to have it here as well without the first part. Change okay?

Commented [AF14]: Since you already mention that Hafiz is worried in the previous sentence, it's a bit repetitive to have it here as well. Change okay?

Commented [AF15]: Since you already mention that Hafiz is worried in the previous sentence, it's a bit repetitive to have it here as well. Change okay?

Safi would not let him down. When he was younger, Hafiz—five years his senior—had helped him through his rigorous studies. Three months before, when the ~~the~~ Tournament of the Shah had been announced, Hafiz had volunteered to travel with Safi all the way from Shiraz, their home city, to Isfahan, and had guided him, unerring, through the desert. Once at Ali Qapu, Hafiz had helped prepare him for the challenges ~~and helped him through them~~. A man could not ask for a better friend to stand by him than Hafiz.

Now Safi had to stand on his own.

The Grand Vizier Almahdi strode into the center of the circle as the three duelists reached him and bowed in deference, each still about five meters apart. Raising his arms, he waited until the onlookers were silent before launching into his speech. "I, Grand Vizier Almahdi Lu'ay, welcome you all to the final battle in our tournament. These three warriors who stand before you represent the finalists of this tournament: Lord Safi Mirza of Shiraz, Lord Jafar al-Shihab of Herat, and Lord Abisali al-Badawi of Maragha." After each of their names were announced, the selected-named lord raised his arms to greet the crowd's deafening cheers.

Once the sounds-cheers died down, Almahdi continued, "These three lords will fight against each other, and are disqualified only after their blood has been drawn. The overall victor will be crowned the shah of the Safavid Empire in a ceremony one week from today." The resultant cheering took several long moments to die down. "At the signal of the horn, let the battle commence!"

Smiling encouragingly, Almahdi exited the circle and took his place beneath the shady protection of a lofty ironwood. He nodded to a servant boy, who brought an adorned horn to his lips.

Safi glanced at Jafar, whose sharp gaze was difficult to hold for longer than a few seconds. He wondered if the man would honor their agreement from the night before.

Jafar nodded, a nearly imperceptible gesture.

The horn sounded, its deep call reverberating through the arena. The duel had begun.

Abisali charged at Safi, his mighty sword already swinging. Safi dodged to the side, but the giant turned quickly and charged again, ignoring Jafar: a dangerous strategy. Screaming wordlessly, Safi raced toward Abisali and caught the giant's sword on his shield. The blade bit into the wood—not it didn't go through all the way through, but it went far enough to stick. Safi sidestepped around their locked weapons-battle gear and swung his sword at Abisali's bare chest. The larger warrior blocked his attack with the armor covering his forearms—Griming with the wild-euphoria-of-battle, Abisali and ripped his sword from Safi's shield, sending him-Safi tumbling away into the sand. His-Safi's shield was nearly broken in half, so Safi-he tossed it aside. With just his sword in hand, he struggled to his feet.

Commented [AF16]: He wouldn't have been able to actually help Safi during the actual challenges would he? If these challenges are supposed to prove individual people's worthiness, readers are more likely to believe that Hafiz just helped him prepare.

Commented [AF17]: This makes the contrast of standing by himself greater in the next sentence.

Commented [AF18]: I like that this sentence is by itself. That gives it more power than if it was in a paragraph.

Commented [AF19]: In most of the other instances of this name, you use the full title. We should keep it consistent. This happens throughout the story. I would recommend going through and making sure you address him the same way every time you talk about him.

Commented [AF20]: This makes it clear that there's a difference between Grand Vizier Almahdi's speech and the cheering that comes after.

Commented [AF21]: You talk about some kind of agreement here which is intriguing, but it's never mentioned again. Readers will be interested in learning more about what the agreement was at some point in the story.

Commented [AF22]: This is almost repetitive with the description after this introduction.

Commented [AF23]: This almost makes it sound like Safi tried to get Abisali's sword in the shield rather than using the shield to block an attack. Is that what he was trying to do? If not, let's reword this sentence to show that Abisali attacked.

Commented [AF24]: The shield isn't a weapon is it?

Commented [AF25]: Shields aren't weapons are they?

Commented [AF26]: The beginning of this sentence starts making Abisali the point-of-view character and makes the rest of the paragraph hard to understand who's doing what action. Change okay?

Jafar, who had watched the exchange silently, rushed forward and kicked the back of one of Abisali's knees as the man closed on Safi, knocking him over. Abisali knocked one of Jafar's swords out of his hand with a wild swing of his blade as he fell, but the smaller man drove his remaining sword into his right shoulder, eliciting a roar of pain from the giant and a swift cascade of blood from the wound.

The spotter cried, "Lord Abisali is disqualified for losing blood. Lords Safi and Jafar continue!"

-Jafar retreated as Abisali stumbled to his feet, the wounded man's eyes wild and deadly. "You will leave this arena if you value your honor," Jafar instructed softly, backing away slowly from his hulking enemy. "You have lost. You can change nothing."

"I can kill you," snarled Abisali, his feet slipping slightly on the sand as he transferred his sword to his left hand. Safi watched the pair, ready to act in the unlikely event that Jafar needed aid.

"No, you cannot." Jafar's calm certainty sent icy shivers of fear down Safi's spine.

As Abisali swung his mighty sword, Jafar dropped his own sword, ducked under the attack, and viciously punched Abisali's exposed stomach three times in rapid succession. Dropping his sword, Abisali fell to his knees and cradled his wounded stomach; ~~three strikes from a gauntleted opponent had to hurt ferociously.~~ Jafar proceeded to kick him in the groin, making him collapse entirely, and the head, knocking him unconscious.

Safi grinned at the fall of the honorless man. Then he noticed that Jafar was stalking towards him and had regained both of his swords. Safi grimaced, hefting his sword. He gazed longingly glanced at his broken shield. *Nothing can help that now. Taking a quick Breathing-breathdeeply,* he convinced himself, *I can defeat Jafar. I can win the day!*

Safi had to focus. From what he'd collected from Jafar's previous battles, ~~he Jafar was~~ very protective of his face covering. That was a weakness he could exploit. -

Jafar broke into a run, his swords singing as they arched through the air. Safi managed to block the first strike, but the other sword sliced into his armor; thankfully, the blow was at an awkward angle, so the scales held the sword. No blood was drawn. *Yet.* He sighed in relief as Jafar stepped backward, readjusting his grips on his swords before attacking again. This time, Safi managed to catch both of Jafar's swords on his blade; however, before he could dislodge the blades or strike, Jafar kicked him in the stomach, sending him sprawling on his back.

Jafar dropped his swords and leaped on top of Safi, keeping him from rising, and rammed a gauntleted fist toward his face. Safi caught Jafar's fist, and, though his opponent drove his fist with unbridled fury, Safi was stronger. Screaming in frustration, Jafar attempted to punched Safi

Commented [AF27]: This seems uncharacteristic. Knowing who Jafar is and how long she's waited for this opportunity, wouldn't she be right there in the battle trying to win her place?

Commented [AF28]: Kicking the back of someone's knees sounds kind of out of place for someone that's supposed to be super good at battle. It sounds like something I do to people to be annoying. Is there another way he could knock Abisali down? Or is there another way of describing this action that it doesn't seem like something a child would do?

Commented [AF29]: This is the second time one of the competitors seems to just sit by and watch. Readers might be confused why only two people are fighting at a time if they're all fighting for the position. Can we show any more action from all three of them at the same time?

Commented [AF30]: I'm not sure readers will believe this. Abisali seemed a lot tougher than being downed just from three punches to the stomach. It might hurt, but wouldn't it just slow him down? Connecting it closer with the next actions will make more sense to readers.

Commented [AF31]: This part seems really slow for the action that should be taking place. If someone is really coming toward him about to fight, does he really have time to heft his sword, gaze longingly at a shield, breath deeply, and think all these things? Changes to wording to make it quicker okay?

Commented [AF32]: There are several places throughout the story where the word he is used multiple times in the same sentence or around the same area, but "he" refers to different people. I strongly recommend going through the rest of the story and making sure each time you use "he" makes it clear who it's referring to.

Commented [AF33]: Why would he drop his swords in favor of punching Safi? Wouldn't using the swords make the fight easier for Jafar? Consider reconstructing this part to resolve this issue. Maybe when Jafar kicks Safi, Safi manages to knock the swords out of his hands somehow.

Commented [AF34]: Wouldn't this still hurt with the iron gauntlets?

Commented [AF35]: This seems uncharacteristic for this character. Up to this point, Jafar has seemed very cool and collected. Readers may have difficulty believing he would scream in frustration just because this attack has been blocked.