

## A Good Deed

By John McCabe

Sani stood just outside the large tent under the protection of the awning as the midday sun beat down mercilessly. Even in the shade of the tent the heat was stifling even for one such as Sani who had spent many years crossing the Great Waste with his small but valuable cargo of silks, dates and perfumes. He uncorked his waterskin and drank deeply, replenishing the water his body needed, while at the same time beads of sweat collected on his brow and began their journey south into his bushy eyebrows or down along the side of his fleshy nose. He wiped the moisture away almost without thought as he looked out across the vast expanse of desert, rippling with bands of heat.

One of his six camels brayed coarsely and he ignored it as he saw, or thought he saw, something just out of range to be sure. It disappeared amongst the rugged landscape and the ripples of heat waves and he thought to himself, mirage, a natural occurrence that gave the impression that water lay just ahead. Something that had lured many a thirsty traveler with empty promises. He knew it was not water, there were very few sources of water and he knew for certain that none lay in that direction, where he had seen, or thought he had seen...something. He squinted against the glare of the almost white sand reflecting the overbearing sun that was high above. He wiped another bead of sweat from his face as it tickled his nose and then raised his hands above his brow in a vain effort to help him see something he was quite sure was not there.

The camel brayed again. Irritated by the distraction he muttered under his breath before calling out. "Tomiz, see what Bertle wants!"

The young man rose with a groan, the three caravan guards sitting close by, gave him a sympathetic look. Only fools walked around in a midday sun. He put down the large waterskin he had been hugging tightly.

Sani could hear Tomiz talking soothingly to Bertle. There was no other way, she was a cantankerous animal at the best of times. She complained once more before falling quiet. Sani looked again through the blistering heat, spotting something. Certainly not water, not trees or a rock formation. Something that seemed to be moving. He wiped his eyes and sighed. A caravan perhaps? Who would be crazy or stupid enough to go there? That way led to the center of The Plain of Fire. As hot as the Sind desert was, the northern expanse of the Great Waste was a burning cauldron. It was a rugged, inhospitable land, full of canyons and dry river beds that had not seen water in decades, if not centuries, Sani was not sure. He thought of the terrifying storm that had ripped through the place only days before. Known as the 'Marut Sanat' it was a devastating, blisteringly hot wind that whipped up stones and gravel flaying everything in its

path all the way to the Asanda Valley far to the east. Thankfully it was a rare occurrence and only hit the region once every twenty or thirty years.

Nothing lived on the Plain of Fire, only stories of great worms, nomadic manscorpion tribes, gnolls, feral elves and of course his personal favourite, The Whitespire. He grinned at that one. The Whitespire was supposed to be a legendary city that had been consumed by the desert until only one of its highest towers was still visible. The fabled Whitespire had been sought by treasure hunters and foolhardy adventurers but if any had succeeded in finding it, Sani had never heard of it and he liked to remind those around him that if he had never heard of it, then it probably did not happen. He was about to walk back in to the tent satisfied that what he was seeing or thought he was seeing, was a trick of the heat as it played out across the parched landscape.

Something niggled him at the edge of his consciousness though and he looked again for movement wondering if some insane fool had tried to find a short cut across the desert, a more efficient trade route.

There it was again. Sani stepped forward, out from under the protection of the tent's awning, straining his eyes as the heat from the sun beat down on his turban covered head. The sand was hot here, dotted with more pebbles and rocks the further north you travelled. Small grains of rock and sand flowed over the edge of his sandals burning his toes. There was something there he thought, trying to convince himself of something he thought highly unlikely. The manscorpions rarely came anywhere near this part of the caravan route, especially not at this time of the year when they were rumored to be more occupied with finding a mate.

The object was not moving like a camel or a horse. A person? Out here, how? Maybe they had become separated and were on foot now. He walked back under the protection of the awning, exhaling in relief and drinking some more water. He wiped his brow again and walked back inside the tent as Tomiz returned from settling Bertle. Of the six camels in his possession, she was the matriarch and also the one that complained the most. Tomiz was talking but Sani was not listening. He popped one of the dates into his mouth and it erupted in moisture as the sweet flesh of the fruit was crushed between his teeth. With a sigh that signified he was not happy with the decision he had just made, he spoke. "Get Bertle ready. I want to take a look at something".

Tomiz looked at him dumbly, not understanding. "Look at what?"

"Never you mind. Get her ready I said, damn you".

Sani walked back outside the tent. He was a cautious man by nature. He always stuck to the caravan routes, always had more than enough water in case he was stranded by a storm and

always hired an extra guard more than he needed to protect his goods on such ventures. This all inevitably ate into his profits, but if he was dead then all the gold and gems would be of little worth, he reasoned.

Tomiz brought Bertle to the front of the tent where he stood. She had stopped complaining and looked at him with her large brown eyes. She sat down at his bidding, her long legs folding underneath her. Once he was on board she lurched to her feet with a grunt and they began walking forwards towards something that seemed to be drawing closer.

They walked for about half an hour, Sani had wrapped the folds of his loose-fitting robe around his face, as small sand particles blew around his head, stinging his eyes momentarily. He raised his waterskin to his mouth again and rinsed his dry mouth with the warm liquid before swallowing it. He never let the object leave his sight except when the terrain blocked it from view before it was revealed again when they crested the brow of a small hill. It was definitely a person.

“Tomiz, go ahead there now and take a look”.

Tomiz reluctantly moved out from the limited shade provided by the camel, walking carefully over the hot sand and rocks. Sani urged Bertle forward about forty paces behind Tomiz as the figure came closer. Whoever or whatever it was, seemed to be staggering forward, beyond all limits of endurance, head down, blind to anything, not caring. The body was simply moving forward like a runaway cart with no driver. Twice he saw the person fall to their knees but each time they got back to their feet and placing one foot in front of the other began struggling on again.

Tomiz waited, he had drawn a long, curved knife and looked back at Sani who was closing the distance, his body undulating from side to side as Bertle strode forward. The person had strips of white cloth wrapped around their head, the arms exposed were lean but strong. They stopped as if sensing the presence of someone for the first time. Taking two more wavering steps forward the figure fell to its knees amongst the sharp rocks. Bertle was alongside Tomiz now and Sani feeling more confident slid from the camel's back. He landed off balance and had to grab the reins to stop himself from falling.

Tomiz had moved forward and knelt by the side of the fallen figure who was still in a kneeling position. Long slim arms hung down by their side, the head hung facing the ground. Sani had a waterskin at the ready and wondered if he was about to waste water on someone who was going to die. He approached what looked like a woman, judging by the build of the person. Sani called out to her gently but received no response. He knelt down beside Tomiz in front of her and gently touched her chin and raised her head. The face was swollen and badly burned; the

skin was peeling from her face. The eyelids were closed and her face grimaced in pain as he let some drops of water fall on her parched, broken lips.

They got her onto Bertle and Sani steered the camel around and began walking back to the camp, the woman cradled in his arms. Tomiz trudged through the desert sand following his master.

Once they were back at the camp, Sani carried her inside and lay her on some cushions. She was unconscious but her face was contorted in agony. She was still breathing but only just. He wondered if he should expend some of the healing ointment on a woman who seemed about to die anyway. He thought of this as Tomiz arrived at the entry to the tent.

“Give her some water but just a little”, said Sani, as he walked to the small chest that held his personal items, including the ointment. He instructed Tomiz to begin peeling away her outer garments while he applied the concoction to her body. Wherever it was exposed to the sun it was badly blistered and an angry red. Her knees and hands were covered in scores of cuts from the sharp rocks. Where the skin had been protected by her clothing it was a flawless white, as was her hair, which was matted and tangled. “That’s enough now”, said Sani, raising a hand to stop Tomiz, as the eager young man was about to begin removing her under garments. Sani sighed with displeasure and began applying more of the ointment.

When he was finished, he checked her meagre belongings, a small satchel she had worn over one shoulder, for clues about who she was or where she came from. She carried no weapons or coins; the satchel only contained several black rocks that were warm to the touch and in the dimness of the tent gave off a weak but eerie red glow.

It took two days before the mysterious woman regained consciousness. Her eyelashes fluttered and opened like slits, the skin around them was still stiff but no longer as sore. Sani held a goblet and brought it to her lips encouraging her to drink. She seemed understandably confused and she still looked tired but gave no indication of how she was feeling beyond that. She accepted the water, some of it spilled and ran down her chin onto the clean cotton vest she now wore. He placed the empty cup on a small nearby table and picked up the small bowl of dates and offered her some. She eyed him warily, but was much too tired to do much more than scowl. The ointment had done its job and her skin had regained some of its moisture, though there were still patches of dry, damaged skin that would eventually heal. She was young, perhaps twenty-two years old. Even in her condition he could see that she was attractive, but there was a hardness there, a haughtiness perhaps. She had pure white hair that fell to her shoulders but she was not an albino, having pale blue eyes.

“What’s your name?”

She looked at him, her brow wrinkled as she tried to swallow, her throat was still raw. He offered her some more water. After taking a sip, she looked like she was trying to speak. A rasping gasp. She tried again, “Jo...”. She swallowed again, her eyes closing in pain, a teardrop gathered in the corner of her eye and when full, it rolled down her damaged face. She gathered herself, while he waited, and tried again. “Johanna”.



It took two more days before Johanna was ready to move. Sani prayed to whatever Immortals might be watching, calculating how much more of his profits were dwindling away. Thankfully, the weather stayed relatively good, which in this part of the world meant no sandstorms. They made reasonably good time, arriving at his home in the village of Baratpur.

Sani stood now in his home counting the coins that consisted of his profits, after the guards had been paid and Tomiz had secured their cargo. Johanna was close by, looking at the clothes that hung on hangers around the room. Sani had a popular stall in the local market and usually kept the unsold items in his home over night and brought them down to the market again each morning. He hoped someday to be able to afford a good size mud and stone building closer to the market. Johanna seemed to like the clothing he had here and stood in front of a tall narrow mirror, holding a dress against her body to see how it might look on her.

He noticed her scowling. “Something wrong?”

She grabbed some of her hair and looked at it, expecting him to understand.

His head throbbed and he raised his hand to his temple. “We can get your hair done tomorrow. There are some women in the market who can give you any style you want. Won’t that be nice”.

“It’s not the style I don’t like”.

He did not understand what the issue was. He had noticed that despite having the appearance of a fully mature woman, she seemed to act much younger. He was not sure what the reason for this was, perhaps she had had a sheltered upbringing. He had asked her where she had come from, how she had got lost, had she been part of a caravan? She could not remember anything. He assured her that her memories would return in time but he had no way of knowing if this were true. Understanding came to him. "The colour, you don't like the colour".

"White isn't a colour. It's the absence of colour" she grumbled.

"Well, I have plenty of dyes for you to choose from. More colours than you knew existed".

He walked over to a wide tray like box, with a four-inch rim and no lid. It contained an assortment of glass vials and jars of varying shapes and sizes; each one contained a different colour. He brought the tray over to her. "Take your pick".

She looked happy again, choosing a glass bottle to see what colour it contained and returning it to its place if it was not what she wanted. Her fingers played across the top of each container, finally coming to rest on one, which she withdrew with a smile.

He regarded her choice and smiled. "My wife's favourite colour. Interesting choice. Are you sure?"

Johanna nodded, still smiling.

Tomiz returned the next day ready to bring the cart full of items to market for sale. Sani was sitting at a table, sorting through sheafs of paper and making notes or changing figures with a quill. He was trying to recoup some of his losses by increasing the price of an item ever so slightly. Not too much to scare off any potential buyers, but enough to ease his financial pains somewhat. Tomiz saw Johanna, she was dressed in loose fitting clothes like a man and had a towel around her head as if she had just recently bathed. Sani had offered her one of the dresses but she had declined and had settled for trousers and a sleeveless shirt with a sash tied around her waist. He felt his excitement rise. She was a beautiful woman no matter what she wore and moved with incredible grace. He imagined that she had been poured into a mold, so perfect was her form. He was momentarily struck speechless when she removed the towel from her head. The white hair that he thought was one of her best features was now purple. She smiled at him in greeting but read his dumbstruck look as disapproval and scowled.

Over the next few days business was good and Sani was feeling generous. He took down several boxes that contained an assortment of colourful ribbons and small pieces of jewelry. Johanna had a childlike fascination with sparkling, shiny objects so he knew she would find something of interest. She spent some time looking through the boxes and took out a girdle that had caught her eye. The wide leather belt was a dark purple and rimmed in a dark green. The buckle was

the silhouette of the head and shoulders of a man and woman standing back-to-back. Sani reached out and gently took it from her, as if he was afraid she would damage it.

“How did that get in there,” he said and then looked at her apologetically. “Not this my child. Anything else you may have but not this”.

She watched as he put it into another box and placed it on the highest shelf. Sani could see that she was disappointed so he took out several nice pieces of jewelry to try and mollify her.

He awoke that night detecting movement and could just about make out Johanna in the dimly lit room. She paused as she detected a change in his breathing. He kept his eyes open by the barest of slits and returned his breathing to what he judged, sounded like someone who was asleep. He watched her move towards the shelf where he had placed the girdle. He was disappointed. True, he did not know who the girl was or where she had come from but he had saved her life, given her food, shelter and clothing and she was about to steal from him. He watched as she moved the footstool into place and stepped to the top. Sani sat up and reached for the lantern which was burning at its lowest. He never liked sleeping in complete darkness and wanted to be able to light the room up quickly if he needed to. He did so now as Johanna stood on top of the footstool, the long box containing the girdle in her hands. Her smile of success melted away as she saw Sani sitting up in his bed, the lantern illuminating her and her misdeed.

“Johanna, you disappoint me. I thought I made myself clear. Anything but that”.

She clutched the box tight to her body and her bottom lip stuck out petulantly. Then her shame burned away as her anger came to the fore.

Tomiz scratched his lower back as he stood outside Sani’s home. The door was still locked so he knocked and waited. The sounds of the street were beginning, as merchants prepared to start a new day, the heat already beginning to rise. Tomiz knocked on the door again. This was very strange. Sani was always ready and eager to start the day and make some money. Tomiz had hoped that someday he would learn to be as enthusiastic and not waste his time in idle chatter and activities. He was about to knock on the door again when he heard movement from within.

“Sani, it’s me Tomiz”.

He heard the door being unlocked, the bolt sliding back and the door opened. He took a step back in surprise. A tall lean man with stern features, who he did not recognise, stood in the

doorway. He touched the handle of his curved knife. "Who are you?" he asked, barging past the tall man, noting that he had long purple hair tied back from his face.

He was still thinking how odd it was, when he saw Sani still lying on his bed. It was clear straight away that he was dead, a trail of dried blood led from his nostrils to his chest. The stain had spread out on his chest, turning his night shirt crimson. Sani's face was contorted in pain, one hand rested on his chest, the other hung over the side of the bed, his fingers touching the floor.

"What did you do?", shouted Tomiz, turning to challenge the man, the curved dagger was in his hand now. He felt something drip on to his upper lip, instinctively he stuck his tongue out and lapped at the liquid. He raised his hand to his nose, confirming what he suspected. Blood.

Tap, tap, tap. The sound each drop of blood made as it hit the wooden floor. Tomiz crumpled in a heap, dead before the fourth.