

The Angel's Daughter

by Jay Lake

Listen, everyone understands that an angel's merest fingernail paring is more beautiful than the fairest princess. Even the camels know that the hairs caught in an angel's brush are more lovely than all the Queens of Air and Darkness. Imagine then how exquisite the angel's daughter was, born of that holy beauty to live upon this earth. If you can imagine it, so could every prince and satrap from here to Samarkand and back again.

Far away in the Western Desert, hidden among the high crests of the Dune Sea, there lies a city encircled by an alabaster wall. That wall goes down to bedrock, and rises high to the sky, so smooth not even a fly could land upon it. There is only one gate in the wall, so small that a grown man must bend nearly double to pass through it, of ebony wood secured with a great, golden lock. Inside the city there is a palace of crystal towers. In the tallest tower there lives the angel's daughter. Hidden deep inside her heart is the golden key to the lock. The prophets have declared the man who could pass the gate would have her heart, and the man who had her heart could pass the gate.

Suitors both great and powerful came to the alabaster city. They marched with armies and flew on the backs of rocs. Their elephants carried teak battering rams, their soldiers drove gangs of condemned prisoners to build high ramps of sand and stone.

But the prophecies are not so easily cheated. The elephants died of thirst, and the prisoners revolted. Teak split in the heat and the rocs came down with bird mites the size of badgers. Armies wandered under the brassy sun until the sands swallowed them up.

Clever men brought thieves, but the walls were too smooth to climb. Determined men brought miners, but the walls were too deep to delve. Wise men brought kites, but the walls were too high to overfly. One crafty prince even brought bundles of reeds on the back of a thousand porters, intending to join them with linen rags infused with gum arabic. It was his plan to pipe in water from the distant sea and make the desert around the City of the Angel's Daughter a sparkling lake, and sail onward to capture her heart. Sadly, he drowned in a rain barrel upon the back of one of his camels — the only man to die so in a desert — and his porters were eaten by lions.

One lad alone from that caravan righteously observed the daily prayers of *Fajr*, *Maghrib* and *Isha*, even while being stalked. The great cats of the desert spared the lad because of his piety, and he finally reached the alabaster city with a bundle of reeds on his back and goatskin of wine at his belt. He had seven figs and a date in his wallet, and some of his wits about him. He was small, so the gate seemed of a size to him. He was poor, and thus was used to making do. His only ambitions were to live another day and be free of foolish, prideful princes. He had achieved the latter ambition, apparently at the expense of the former.

The resourceful lad knelt at the little gate and peered through the keyhole in the golden lock. Inside the city he saw the crystal towers, small djinns of dust dancing before them. As he stared, the angel's daughter chanced to pass higher up in the towers, casting her shadow within his sight. The lad was struck dumb with the beauty of her mere silhouette on the sand. With the practicality of the poor, he also reasoned that such an exquisite creature living here in the desert must have food and water and shelter, which he might share after making a guest-offering of his mite of food and wine. Many men had tried to

pass the gate, but had any man first touched her heart?

The lad took the narrow reeds from his bundle, and fitted them together with some of the late prince's gum-infused linen rags. He built a long, thin pipe of the reeds, which he carefully pushed through the golden keyhole until the first reed came to rest against the crystal tower.

Now the keyhole was shaped like a harem door, with a rounded head that the reed slipped through and a narrow slot beneath. The lad bent the reed upward, met it with his lips, and tilted his head so that with one eye he might peer through the little slot below.

He thought for a while, then began to sing. It was a simple song, beloved by his people on their stony hilltops overlooking a shallow sea. He and his sisters had sung it to their goats of the mornings. The song had no words, just sweet syllables that recalled the rising of the sun and the waking of the birds and the day's first sip of cool water. The tower began to hum in time with his song, as fine bowls will chime together on the shelf when the earth shakes. Keeping the reed pipe pressed against the crystal tower, the lad sang his song until the glass palace was filled with it, and the song multiplied a thousand-fold to echo across the Dune Sea.

And the beloved shadow again passed before his eye, which he kept trained on the keyhole slot below his reed pipe. The lad then changed his tune, singing instead a love song of his people, of assignations among the olive groves and gods like bulls chasing swan maidens, and the sweet dew of a lover's kiss. The beloved shadow withdrew at the new music, but soon came back, and seemed closer, stronger, waiting, hanging on his words.

The lad changed his tune yet again, a funeral hymn that recalled the joy of living, the honeyed wine of marriage, children growing like barley in the field and a life of sunsets shared hand-in-hand. The reed pressed hard against the crystal tower, and the Dune Sea echoed with memories of a life not yet lived, until the angel's daughter came to the ebon gate, reached inside her heart and withdrew the key.

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I would like to say they lived happily forever, but whom I am to know such things? Truth be told, blinding beauty can be a curse, and a clever lad might grow to be a frustrated man. But if angels can shed their feathers, perhaps an angel's daughter can step out of her beauty's shadow like a dropped cloak and walk hand-in-hand through life with her lover. With her heavenly advice, a clever lad might prosper in the shipping trade, selecting only the purest spices and the finest silks.

Sometimes, if you walk south from our little port city into the first shifting sands of the Western Desert and listen on a quiet evening, those crystal towers still echo with music. And if the wind were to blow you a bundle of reeds, or a mangy roc feather, what could you do but smile and wish the lovers well? And that is the truth.

If you don't believe me, go ask your mother why she has no shadow.

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