

The Story of the Lantern and the Wind

By William Hiles

Long ago, when stars still wandered close to the earth and stones remembered the names of those who touched them, there lived a girl named Layla in a village that rose and fell with the breathing dunes.

Layla was quiet, like the hush between the muezzin's last call and night's first sigh. She carried water from the well, gathered kindling from the salt-blown tamarisks, and watched the horizon as if it were an old friend returning. Her mother said she was born during a sandstorm, and that the first thing she reached for wasn't her swaddling cloth—but the dim light of a lantern left swinging in the wind.

The village elders called her *Sabiyah al-Samt*—the Silent Girl—not in scorn, but with uneasy reverence. She heard music in the wind, spoke to shadows in the garden, and once laid her hand on a dying goat only for it to rise, bleating, its eyes full of sky.

Some feared her. Some prayed for her. The old sheikh, whose gaze had grown cloudy with time, only said: "There are those who walk with the jinn not behind them, but beside."

Then, one winter evening, when the moon hung like a clipped silver prayer, a northern caravan arrived. Among the incense and silks and salt-crusted dates was an old brass lantern, dented and warm as breath. The merchant claimed it came from a city lost beneath the sands, a place with no name and no map—only silence.

Layla touched it and stilled.

That night, she dreamed of a garden wrapped in mist, where names bloomed on flowers and gates led into realms of fire and memory.

By dawn, both Layla and the lantern were gone.

They found her footprints leading away—bare, slender, and certain. Some said the desert had claimed her. Others whispered she had gone in search of the city that speaks only to dreamers.

Years passed. The rains faltered. The wind bit like an old hunger. The well cracked.

Then, during the ash-and-prayer festival, as the villagers gathered in the cold hush before dawn, a young girl no one knew came running from the dunes. In her hands she carried a lantern that glowed with no fire.

She said only this before vanishing among them:

"She said the city remembers. She said the light never left. She said we are not forgotten."

No one ever learned her name. But the old sheikh, wrapped in wool and waiting for death, smiled and whispered:

"Layla."

