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## The Tale of Sinbad and the Shadow Men

by Gary Tillery, SFSPE

From Baghdad south on gales of laughter,  
eastward from the shores of Madagascar,  
in search of the Isles of Delight  
went Sinbad the Sailor.

Twenty seamen young and old  
sailed with him to where legend told  
of treasure massed by ancient deed,  
riches far beyond men's greed.

"A boundless heart is ever free!" he said,  
and passing through the borders of antiquity  
he laughed and tossed his head,  
and dared the seas where never even pirate fled.

He pointed to a faint, faint star.  
"Steer for it, Benji, straight and true,  
till an unknown land comes into view  
stranger still than Zanzibar."

Past jagged reefs and rocks they sailed,  
past shattered ships on briny shores,  
past serpents spawned on dim sea floors  
...and still they sailed.

Oh, what a brave and hearty crew!  
For days dark storm clouds raged and blew.  
But not one man did ever doubt that  
Sinbad's skill would see them through.

Then came a calm. Cold darkness fell  
as a mist wrapped 'round them like a curtain-wall.  
From dusk till dawn they felt the swell,  
but couldn't see the sea at all.

Unholy darkness reigned that night,  
so strange a fog as none had known.  
Lanterns would not hold a light.  
They roved by touch and touch alone.

The timeless black numbed everyone.  
Sapped of spirit, prey to fears,  
each man pondered why he'd come  
—to die adrift on an unseen tide?

Then rose the sun to the sound of cheers.  
"Land ho!" the lofty lookout cried,  
and through the mist there loomed a shore  
like none had ever spied before.

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Crystalline castles, towers of chrome,  
spires that sparkled and shimmered and shone,  
and amid all the glitter, gigantic and lone,  
the marvel of marvels—a great golden dome.

“By the Prophet’s beard!” Sinbad said,  
“these surely are the isles we’re searching for.  
Haul in all sails! Drop anchor here!  
Our fortune waits upon that shore!”

They rushed to landing boats and rowed  
like demons all the way to land.  
Their hearts afire, they never slowed,  
and Sinbad’s boot was first upon the sand.

Through glittering streets he led them on,  
with scimitars and crises drawn.  
But not one person did they meet.  
Not one soul did see them come.

Jamal called out, with uneasy mind,  
“Is no one here? Are they all blind?”  
Then they reached the golden dome,  
and stared in wonder at this sign:

IN THE LAND OF SHADOW MEN  
DESPAIR  
YOUR OWN WORST ENEMY  
IS NEAR

AND HE WHO FIGHTS ALONE  
WILL FARE THE WORST  
**BEWARE!**

At this their fiery hearts went chill,  
and only Sinbad’s words and will  
could stir them back to life again.

“Did I bring harem girls—or men!?”

“You saw the trove we just passed through.  
Fill your arms, and turbans, too.  
Just take this sign as fair alarm  
—keep a trusted friend in view.”

His prodding caused their hearts to shun  
the fear that pierced them to the bone.  
Brave Sinbad grouped them ten of two,  
and left himself to search alone.

They raced away, with shouts of pleasure  
echoing off the walls of gold.  
Sinbad searched for other treasure  
—the wealth of secrets yet untold.

In place of baubles they might find,  
his restless ever-seeking mind  
was tempted by the great unknown  
—the mystery of the golden dome.

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What truth inspired its haunting call?  
Why did he yearn to make reply?  
Did wisdom wait beyond its wall?  
If so, how came it there, and why?

He circled 'round the marvel thrice.  
There was no entrance to be found.  
He tried to scale its slippery sides,  
but always ended sliding down.

He rapped the wall both hard and light  
in hopes a passageway might hint.  
He heaved a stone with all his might  
whose impact never made a dent.

He hungered for the prize within.  
Brawn nor wit no use at all,  
he kicked the dirt beside the wall,  
then smiled...and did it once again.

While the noon sun passed behind  
he worked to tunnel underground  
...and paid his shadow little mind  
as it climbed the wall without a sound.

His weary arms grew stiff and sore  
from hours focused on the chore.  
As the sun sank low the shadow grew,  
and grew, and grew, and grew some more.

Certain he was near success,  
Sinbad failed to stay aware.  
Blind through single-mindedness,  
he let the shadow man prepare.

When at last he paused to rest,  
he blinked in wonder at the sight.  
The shadow man—still strong and fresh—  
was reaching out as though to fight.

The shadow pounced on Sinbad's neck  
and wrapped him in a soft attack.  
“Who are *you*?” brave Sinbad asked.  
But only echoes answered back.

The shadow wrestler's strength was great.  
He equaled Sinbad's skill and more.  
His shadow-grip was cold as fate  
—a path that led to nevermore.

They struggled, panted, grappled, heaved,  
rolled and tumbled on the ground.  
Sinbad soon could no more breathe.  
A numbing silence gathered 'round.

He felt as in a darkling cave  
where no one saw his outstretched hand.  
Instead of free he felt a slave,  
and joy had fled to a far-off land.

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Pleasant memories slipped away  
and left him dark regrets to keep.  
Sunflowers bloomed in shades of gray,  
and grim thoughts made him long for sleep.

Just then, by chance, his heart near still,  
a welcome voice came through the chill.  
Sinbad drew one shallow last breath  
and clung to life with only his will.

Then Jamal was with him, first mate and friend.  
And Benji the helmsman ran up to him then.  
Together they struggled to lift him erect,  
and pry his fingers from his own neck.

At last he called the name of each,  
and gave them leave to free their grip.  
They steered and helped him to the beach.  
Jamal called out, "Prepare the ship!"

One final wonder came that day.  
As they turned asea with anchor aweigh,  
the treasures brought on board began  
to melt into shadows and ripple away.

And while they gazed back at the shore,  
where walls and spires had glimmered before,  
by itself, gigantic and lone, stood  
the golden, glistening, ominous dome.

"There's one thing sure," wise Sinbad said.  
"Delightful isles these never were,  
but only nightmare lands instead,  
where shadow people prowl and lurk  
and leave the wayward sailor dead.

"So steer a course around this land,"  
he said to Benji, close at hand.  
"Away from islands to be feared,  
and straight for Harun al-Rashid's beard.  
We've new adventures to be planned!"