

CALIPHATE NIGHTS



The stories come from Arabia, Persia, India, even China. They tell not only of fearsome djinni and fantastical palaces, but also of profound spiritual insight and transformation. They reflect the enormous Islamic civilization during the ninth to thirteenth centuries, which stretched from Spain across North Africa to Cairo, across the Arabian peninsula, up to Damascus and Baghdad, further north to Samarkand, across what is now Afghanistan, down into India, and beyond. A traveler could wander across this vast region speaking Arabic, studying and praying in mosques, and trading with fellow Moslems. The stories are erotic, prejudiced, and fantastical, and at the same time redeeming, illuminating, and grounded. The stories are best known as the *Thousand and One Nights*.

THE ARABIAN ADVENTURE

If you are unfamiliar with the *Nights*, the term “Arabian Adventure” should bring to mind devious genies twisting the wording of wishes, cunning damsels quick with sword and spell, mistaken identity in the harem, mad sultans, flying carpet chases, outrageously lucky escapes, assassin plots, heretical cults, nobles hiding among the populace, death-defying horse races, haggling in the bazaar, bluffing with Bedouin, getting cursed, shapeshifting duels, enchanting storytellers, and scimitar-wielding princes swapping witty repartee. Mythic Arabia is a world based on a time that never quite was, during the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid, the pious tyrant. While it resembles the Golden Age of Islam circa 800 CE, it mixes fact and fantasy into a unique new landscape. Though it is a land of plentiful sex and violence, it is also filled with mystical quests, redemption, and forgiveness.

The Arabian Adventure is similar to the Oriental Romance of Hollywood, but more true to history and to the *Nights* themselves. Oriental Romance has a long history ever since Western colonialists became fascinated with the Near East. It was introduced into American cinema in 1940 with *The Thief of Baghdad*, and through such films as *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves*, *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*, and more recently, Disney’s animated *Aladdin* and *Sinbad the Sailor*. While these movies are loosely based on the *Nights*, they have reduced it to fairy-tale status. Ultimately they have more in common with Hollywood stereotypes, and always have common plot elements: an evil vizier named Jafar or Kassim, prophecies of a liberating hero who begins as an orphaned prince named Ahmed, and bedazzling princesses named Jasmine. The most undeniable addition to

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the genre by Hollywood was its fusion with the swashbuckler—the wandering adventurer, the knight errant, the gallant rogue. Ultimately, it may be that the true theme of the *Nights*—the absolute mercy and sovereignty of God—was not attractive to screenwriters and producers. Sadly, their renditions have left us with a colored view of the *Nights*.

Caliphate Nights does not deny the swashbuckling Hollywood tradition, but refines it by staying true to the historical setting and the source material, which includes not only *Alf Layla wa Layla* (the Arabian name for *One Thousand Nights and a Night*) and the body of Arabian folktales, but also stories like the Persian *Shahnameh*, the Epic of Kings, and the Indian *Baital-Pachisi* (also known as *Vikram and the Vampire*). These adventures focus on the art of the narrative, using frame stories in which the storyteller relates to a listener a tale in order to cause a change of heart in the listener. In the *Nights*, the vizier’s daughter Shahrazad intercedes with the mad Caliph Shahrayar who, after being betrayed by his wife, marries a new bride each day only to kill her the next morning, insuring he is never cheated on again. Shahrazad begins spinning story after story, each night leaving her murderous husband a cliffhanger; thus he stays his

hand for three years, at the end of which Shahrazad has cured his madness and the Caliph has learned to love again. This frame story is beautifully depicted in Hallmark Entertainment’s movie *The Arabian Nights* (2000). Stories have the power to heal, to transform, and to redeem—this is the message of the *Nights*.

The heroes of the *Nights* are imperfect but lucky, aided by fate throughout their quests, often certain they will arrive on the other side safe and sound. However, it is up to their cunning and faith to avoid immense suffering along the way, and to do so with style! They engage in *jihad* in the truest sense of the word: an inner struggle to transform themselves and the society they live in for the better. Mohammed, peace be upon him, said: “*The best jihad [struggle] is by the one who strives against his own self for God, the Mighty and Majestic.*” Though they may be called to do this with swords, just as often they will require the sharp edge of cunning wit and poetry, the parry of unshakeable faith, and the riposte of temperance and mercy.

While the heroes and heroines may be flawed, they are ultimately a force of good that fights for the emergence of the Golden Age of Islam.

Caliphate Nights seeks to capture the feel of the *Arabian Nights*, and the detailed historical backdrop is intended to emphasize this feel. Where historical realities limit the playability of the setting, they have been overlooked or modified to create a more entertaining and thought-provoking game.

