

Rabah Kheddouci

# **The passageway of Kheira**

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*In this fourth story, people traveling toward the seaside, must cut through a thick forest. Yet, every time they crossed the bridge over a known river, a masked person would emerge and robbed them, leaving them despaired and without money. The nearby villagers gathered to find a solution to kill the disguised bandit. A knight volunteered to chase the robber. A great surprise struck the people when they saw the knight come back with the masked person. They did not believe their eyes...*



- *Beware of crossing through this way!*

This was how people would recommend and warn each other of the road linking the Plain of Mitidja and the beach. This road also stretched over Mazafran River, which ran through a thick forest inhabited by animals and birds in huge numbers. The crossing of this forest scared a lot the caravans loaded with farming and trading goods, as they went back and forth. *But, what was the cause of this fear?*

In the middle of the forest, there was a small bridge, named *Al Maqta*, people used to cross over Mazafran River. The rumors went that every time one walked through this bridge, a masked bandit wearing a *qeshabiya* emerged from the forest, holding a sword to threaten the travelers to run away and leave their goods and luggage.



On that account, *Al Maqta* became famed for its terror, and people did not cross it unless they were in groups with weapons in their hands.

The dwellers of The Plain of Mitidja remained worried about the disguised thief, who seemed dreading nobody at all. Yet, everybody feared him.

One day, the residents from the cities of The Plain of Mitidja, like Blida and Kolea and Boufarik, gathered at the banquet of the Shrine of Sidi Kebir. They discussed about the unknown bandit who stood in the way of the travelers to rob them of their money, so that the seaside inhabitants refrained from going to Mitidja and its mountains, and people of Mitidja abstained from heading to the sea for swimming.

They exposed their opinions to find a suitable solution to get rid of the masked man.

They asked themselves many questions:

Should they change the route even if it would be longer and more meandering?

Or should they choose strong men to hunt for the thief and arrest him?

Or should they burn the forest wherein he lived to kill him?

The sturdy son of the *al-Meddah* (*chanter of the religious praises*) rose up, curled his moustache, and then said:

- No, no! How you kill a man without a trail? You set the forest on fire because of a single robber?

People asked him:

- Have you got another solution, man?

He replied:

- Yes! I am going alone to search for this beast, and I will not come back until I will have him dead or alive!

The listeners marveled at his speech. Some of them advised him to renounce to this perilous adventure, but he insisted on defying the disguised bandit...



The next morning, the son of *al-Meddah* readied himself well, mounted his horse and trotted toward the sea. People bade him farewell, as though they would not see him back again...

The news spread over the cities and the villages: “*The son of al-Meddah has gone to meet his death!*”

One week had passed by, and people began to wonder about his fate:

- He has been absent for too long! Let's go to remove his corpse before the wolves and the vultures devour it.

However, a surprise occurred before the end of the day!

Just in the afternoon, the knight showed up with a very gorgeous woman seated behind him on his horse. And another empty horse followed them.



The common people rushed to interrogate him:

- Who is this woman? You went to chase down the bandit or to marry a beautiful woman?

The two dismounted the horse in total silence. After a short time of rest, he told them:

- She is my wife now! And listen to the story from the beginning:

When I went to that scary passageway *al-Maqta*, I was so terrified that I decided to come back to you, but I was afraid you would be mocking me for breaking the promise I have made to you.

Therefore, I thought of a trick to rescue me of the trouble. I told myself:

*“I chant religious praises like my father to amuse myself. This way, I forget all my fears, and the bandit will know that I am not dreading him and he will not be approaching me!”*



I remained singing three days nonstop in the forest, looking for the bandit who used to thieving the passersby.

On the fourth day, when I was sauntering in the forest as usual, I ran across a masked man on the back of the horse, holding a sword.

At first, I was frightened and wanted to escape, but I gathered my courage and listened as he loudly spoke to me:

- You are singing though you are dead?

I emboldened more and I asked:

- What is the meaning of life when people like you stripped it to the others every time they wanted?

He interrogated me:

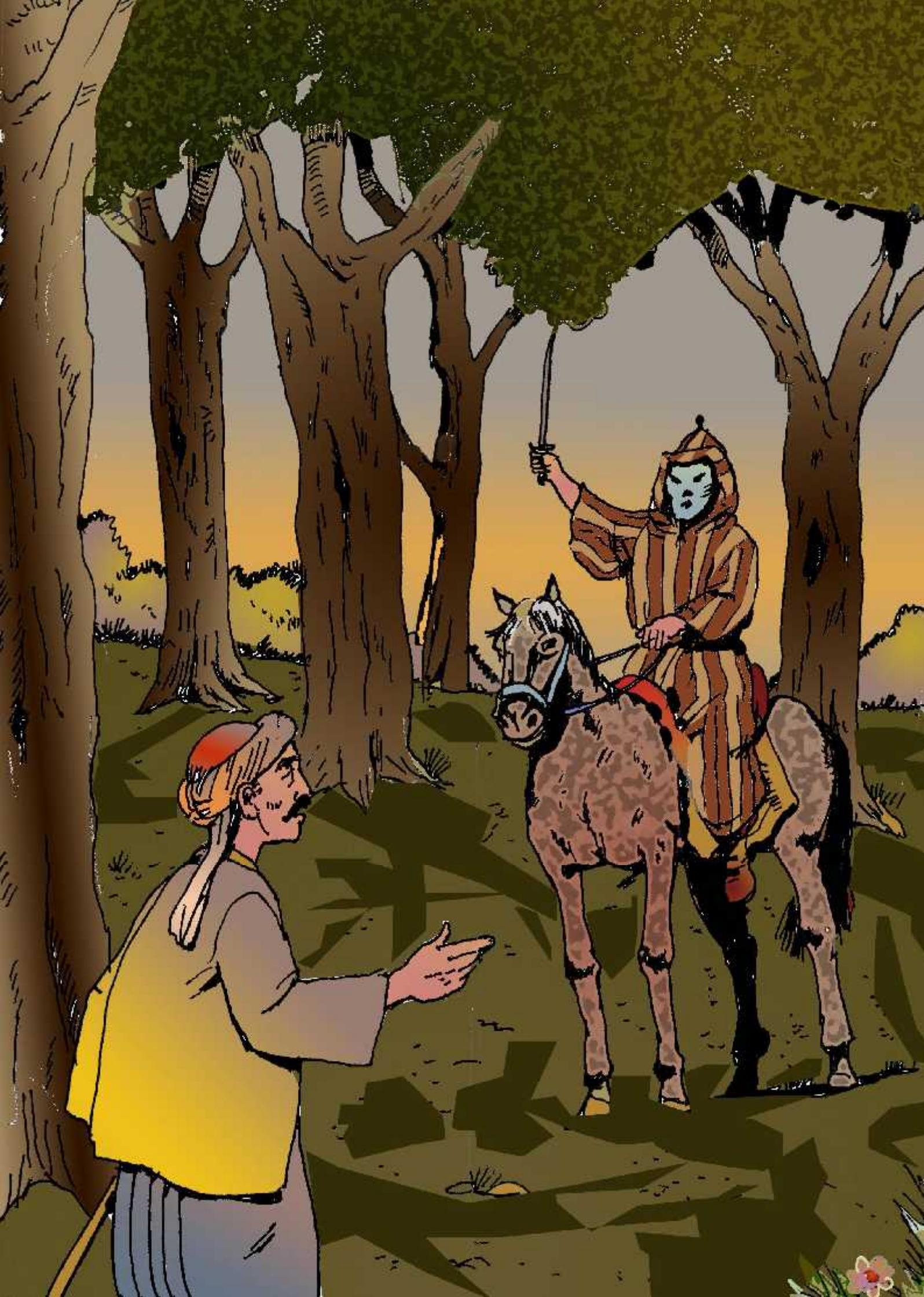
- Who are you?

Then I asked her:

- Did you not like my songs?

The disguised man wondered:

- Are you a poet?



I replied:

- I am a son of a chanter of religious praises.

He said:

- Thus, you are a poet...

And a after a short time of silence, he sneered me, in a menacing tone:

- What did people say about this sword before I slit your throat with it?

I shivered and I recited to her a poem:

*“The sword is truer than the stories written in the books... Its edge separates between seriousness and triviality.”*

- And what do you think of a given woman?

-The woman is the flower of life and the sweet basil of afterlife!

He queried me again:

-You are a poet, aren't you?

I summoned up all my bravery to answer him by saying:

- There is no need to poetry in front of bandits! The only thing I need is...

The masked man interrupted me:

-Stop! Don't say it, otherwise I tear you to pieces and cast you to the wolves...

When the disguised man drew back, I thought he was going to kill me. I prepared myself to fight him...

A few minutes flew by. Then he talked with a soft voice.

- You have to choose between two matters: either you tell me a poem deriding all the males or you die under the hooves of my horse...

I was confused then. Doubts about that stranger man started to overwhelm me. I thought it over for a while and I said:

-I would rather tell a poem flattering all the women.

He smiled and said:

- tell it to me. But if does not please me, I will spill over your blood!

I promised him:

- I will tell it to you tomorrow, right here.

The disguised man accepted my delay, and he said startling words before he went away:

-Your words are sweet, yet you are not going to save your skin from me so easily!

I had spent the night searching in my memory for the poems of my father. I only found poems praising the Prophet and the caliphates. So, I decided to compose a poem of mine to be loyal **to the** promise toward the masked man.

The following day, I went to meet the masked man in the same whereabouts. I found him already waiting for me. I began to tell him a poem depicting the beauty of women.



I was stunned as the camouflaged man removed a bit of his mask from his eyes, and then asked me:

- Did you ever see eyes you have praised more beautiful than mine? And that face?

I almost fell down when I saw that amazing beauty. Actually, he turned out to be a *woman*!

I did not answer her. Even though she made her hair visible, when she got rid completely of her mask.

She teased me again:

- Did you ever tell a poem in the praise of this hair?

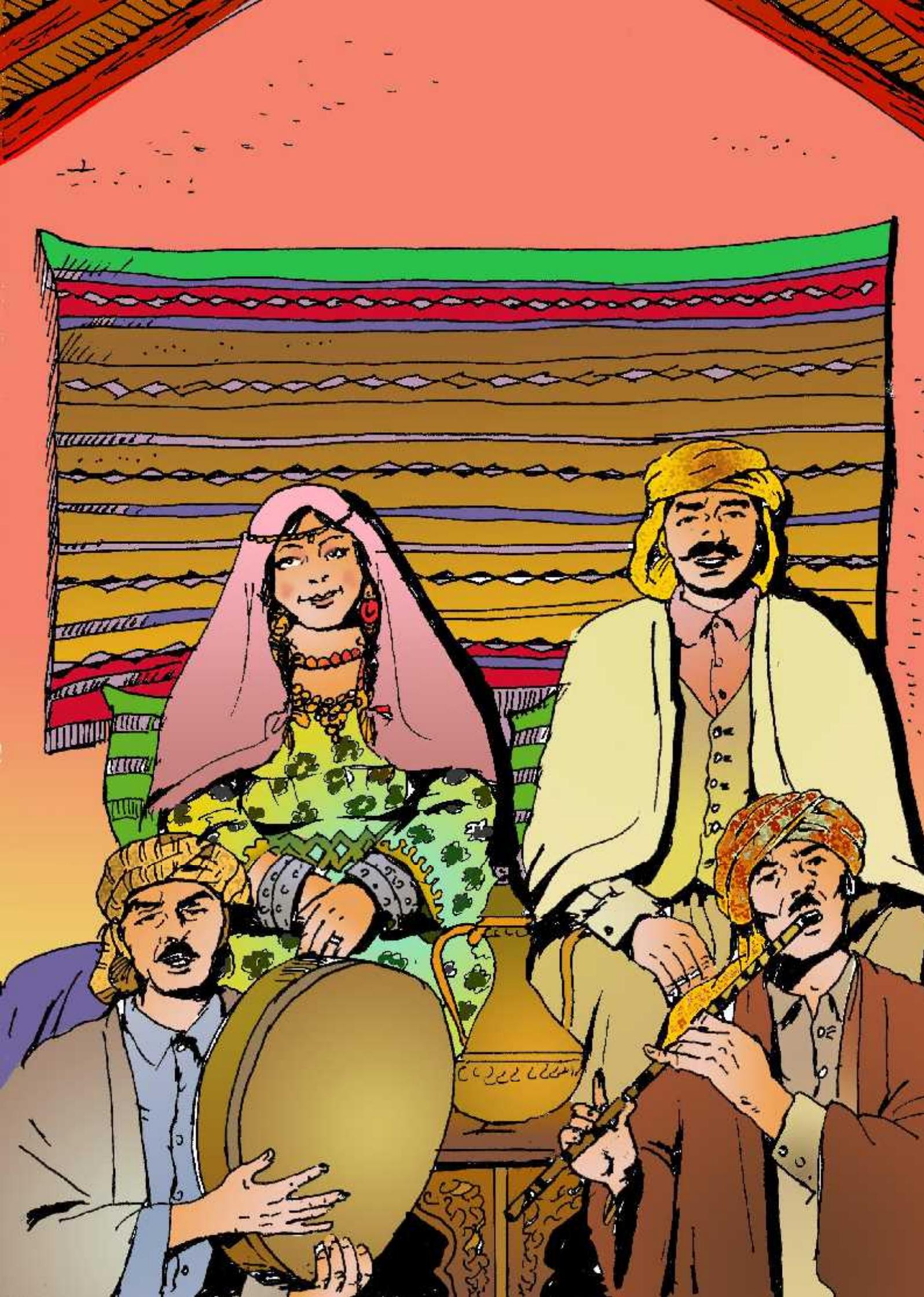
When she took off her *qeshabiya*, I was sure about her gender.

In front of my bewilderment and tremor, she smiled and said:

-My name is Kheira. The men are so blind!

After a while, she added:

-You pleased me as you fought me with poetry and cordiality. Now, I repent thanks to you.



I did not believe my eyes and I was confused. How I could not detect her feminine voice since the first meeting.

No sooner had I woken up from my day dreaming than I stretched my hand to help her get on the back of the horse. And there she is now amongst you!

When people heard the entire story about the woman disguised as a man, they were amazed and paced closer to contemplate her with great precaution. She only beamed at them, and she begged them pardon for all what she had done before around the bridge and in the forest.

People congratulated the knight, the son of the *al-Meddah*, for this merry happening. A few days later, the wedding had been celebrated between the man and the beautiful Kheira. Every person took part in the feast.

Finally, people lived in peace and reassurance, traveling by day and night without any fears. For this reason, the place had since been named: *The Passageway of Kheira*.