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Peer reviewed

IBRAHIM AL-IMAM

## Ayet Innej: The Oasis Folks\*

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In a remote corner of the desert lived a small group of people next to a water spring they named Ghasouf.† There, they made a beautiful home around the oasis and called it 'Ademus, and were, henceforth, known as Ayet 'Ademus or the 'Ademus folks.‡ They lived peacefully in the oasis for a very long time. The oasis folks bore secrets as countless as the grains of the desert sand and so heavy even mountains could not bear them.

In the desert, alongside the oasis folks, lived the underworld folks. Each claimed the land as their own, although neither knew who truly had the right to it. Thus, they vowed to live alongside each other in peace and did so for ages. They even shared the land and its profits. People of the oasis controlled the surface and named themselves Ayet Innej, the oasis folks, while their invisible neighbors made the underground their home and were known as Ayet Adda, the underworld folks.

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ابراهيم الإمام، آيت أنج (دار الكتب الوطنية: بنغازي، 2015) \*

'Crocodile' (غسوف) in the Ghadamsi Berber language, named so †  
because there were many crocodiles in the area in past times.

'Ghadames' (عديمس) in the Ghadamsi language. ‡

But whenever two different, opposing sides live together, trouble is destined to follow. No matter how long their friendship may have grown into a lofty tree, there will come a time when a black crow or an ominous owl alights on the tree's branches, boding gloomy days. This is life, after all.



One sin can lead to calamity. For sin is like a deep hole, beckoning ever more sinners to answer its call, sinking into its depths. It takes but a single sin to spark an eternal conflict between creatures on earth. As for forgiveness, it is like a weed, easy to pull from one's heart once it sprouts, easy to discard, and easy to render lifeless. To fill the void, another plant grows in its place, extends its roots and blossoms. It grows and grows till it fills every corner in one's heart, but it looks nothing like the weed that preceded it. It is much more stubborn, much more difficult to pull out.

It is only a matter of time before one side commits a small sin. The sin leads to a conflict, and the conflict ends in war. A war in which all is fair play, even the forbidden methods. In such circumstances, a sin is a calamity. And a sin was committed.



No one remembers how or even when the conflict started, only that later generations suffered its bitter consequences. In the oasis, stories were told of the underworld folks' fierceness in war. Legend has it that it was conflict over land that ignited the war between the two sides. It is said that the underworld folks failed to conquer the oasis, despite their numerous attempts.

Patience, however, is key.

The underworld folks waited, patiently and quietly, confident that their patience would bear fruit. They knew that one day, one of the oasis folks was bound to make a mistake – to commit a sin. They waited tirelessly as decades passed. Time meant nothing to them; only two things mattered: carelessness and forgetfulness.



Stories varied on how the underworld folks came to occupy the oasis land, yet one of the stories can certainly be true. Some said the under-

world folks took advantage of a deserted house in the oasis to make their move.

The story behind the deserted house, however, was vague. Some said the war was caused by a conflict over inherited property rights, which led family members to desert the premises altogether and avoid further family contention. The house remained empty for years till its walls cracked and their opponent, the underworld folks, eventually possessed it. Yet others said its owners left the oasis to do trade. Some of the owners left, overcame homesickness, and never returned; others passed away. The house was left deserted and uninhabitable for many years. Another story was that the reason behind the underworld folks taking over the deserted house was not dispute or absence, but an omen. The family's firstborn passed away, then the loss of a second son soon followed. The family viewed these deaths as an ominous sign, subsequently forcing them to abandon the place. They moved to a neighboring house and had a third child. This child was healthy and strong, and most importantly, escaped the deadly fate of his brothers. This, no doubt, was proof enough to the family that their previous residence was cursed. And so, they abandoned it for good.

Sellers tried to sell the house, but the rumors surrounding it reached every family in the oasis. Despite its dirt-cheap price, no one would buy such an ominous place. The underworld folks took advantage of the deserted house and, given the oasis folks' inattentiveness, occupied it for many years.



One day a man walked into the deserted house. He was never the same. At first, the oasis folks thought he was sick with some disease. They took him to the doctor to be examined but were told there was nothing wrong with him physically. The family was relieved at first, but their concerns grew as they watched their loved one turn into anything but normal. He was never again his old self. All the skilled doctors in the oasis failed to diagnose his illness, let alone heal him. The family tried everything, including traditional medicine. They even sought help from caravans that traveled through the oasis. All their attempts failed. They approached an old black man from the caravan. Though he was a stranger, they asked for his help out of desperation. The man muttered a few spells and made the sick man a drink of mixed potions. The ill man vomited strange things but still did not heal. His folks lost faith and abandoned him.

The poor fellow walked the streets and alleys of the oasis – bare-foot, clothes tattered. No one knew how he ate or where he slept. Children at first feared him and ran away but soon scoffed at him for fun.



It was by coincidence that they finally realized he was possessed.

He had disappeared for a few days. No one knew anything of his whereabouts. Then he suddenly reappeared at a wedding party. He stood there completely still, like a rock. The dancers at the wedding cleared the dance floor for him, but he continued to stand there – frozen. The guests moved their bodies to the rhythm of the music, sang, and clapped their hands, encouraging him to dance along, but they failed to make him move a muscle. The instrument players played another tune, the drummers joined in with their beats, and the guests clapped along. They all played and clapped to exhaustion. The man didn't move until one of his close friends whispered something to one of the players. The friend asked the player to play a tune the possessed used to love. The player complied and played the music.

The guests started singing the lyrics and shaking their heads to the beat. All eyes were on the still rock standing in the middle. Finally, they saw him move his head first. They kept repeating the song over and over, even though traditions of the oasis forbade repeating the same tune at one party. But rules can be broken. Their excitement grew, and their palms became sore from clapping so hard. The man then opened his arms wide at the tenth round of the song, moved his feet to the beat, and started dancing with the music. The players kept playing their instruments even though they were growing short of breath, and their faces were turning red. New players had to join to allow the others a respite. The music played as he danced and danced like they had never seen him dance before. They all stood there, amazed by him as he danced, drowned in his sweat, till he passed out at dawn. That night was the talk of the oasis. When he woke up the next morning, they said he regained his senses, but only for a few minutes. He then fell into a deep coma that finally took his life.

The oasis folks started whispering and rumors turned into accusations. The deceased's close friend was furious for losing him twice – once when he lost his mind and spirit and then when he lost his body. He was the first to point a finger at the underworld folks. Others supported him and condemned the violation of the peace truce between

the two nations. It was a blatant assault. The death of their friend marked the start of an unavoidable war.



The war began.

Starting a war is easy, ending one never is. War destroys everything.

Breaking the truce and ending the peace was a great concern to the oasis folks. Their revenge was severe. The underworld folks struck back just as hard. The war between them stretched through time. It was passed down from one generation to the next, leaving behind broken men. It was a dirty war that went on for centuries. Unconventional methods were used – the oasis folks used shrouds of spells to protect themselves from their enemy. While they usually succeeded in blocking them, there were times when the underworld folks managed to break through using their most advantageous weapon – invisibility.

At first, it was a war between men and battles of cavalry and heroes. And the oasis folks won most of the battles.

Fearing extinction, the underworld folks were forced to re-strategize. It was an unorthodox decision, but all necessary measures had to be taken. They recruited their women to the war, not only by consulting them and using their wit in trickery, but also by arming them as soldiers to fight in battle.

The scales turned.

The women of the oasis were kept away from the war. They cheered for their men in poems and songs they sang at weddings. They did not need to fight in a war their men were easily winning. But desperation urged the defeated to take any measures to win the war.

Messengers went back and forth between the two sides – the oasis folks demanded an explanation while the underworld folks replied in their defense, “How can we exclude from the fight the ones who are most affected by it! Women suffer the greatest damage in war by losing a father, a son, a brother, and worst of all, a husband. Not only will they participate in battle, but they will also take the lead.”

The underworld folks were advancing.

The oasis folks needed a new plan, but this time it would not come from the countless wise men whose advice had thus far proven

fruitless. They needed a way out, the wisdom that would win them the war against their wicked foe. They had suffered enough loss and pain. It was time to execute a plan that would make the underworld folks scratch their heads.



The men of Tofretha – the city council – gathered but reached a dead-end, the wise men were unable to find a solution and put an end to the fight, and the people of the oasis were waiting. Members of the council debated and quarreled at the top of their lungs. This had never happened before. Many of them insisted on keeping their women out of the equation – it was against the ethics of war to drag women into battle. They feared they would be damned by generations to come. The rest of the council – which was the minority – failed to convince the others to include women in the fight as their enemy had done.



The war continued into the next generation. The oasis folks finally set aside their skepticism and fear of damnation. Women joined the fight. The underworld folks refused to give up. Patience was one of their dominant traits, as was determination. The underworld women decided to change their plans and employ new tactics, “If we cannot make our foe’s women suffer and shed tears of blood, then it is not war but child’s play,” they would protest.

To defeat an enemy, one must strike where it kills. The underworld women struck the oasis women in their most valuable trait. A trait that is also a weakness – posterity.

At first, it seemed natural. Losing an infant in the oasis was not out of the ordinary. But the death of many infants was alarming. It became suspicious and horrifying when the folks realized that all the dead infants were males. The oasis women took all precautions to protect their soon-to-arrive heirs, but to no avail. The infants would die just a few days after their birth. No one understood the cause of these deaths. It was a mystery that filled them with sorrow.

Every alley in the oasis mourned. The cemetery’s gate remained open to the little ones. A dark cloud hung over the oasis. The folks had lost their joy in life – no more dancing or singing. Although the women kept singing, the tunes they sang were different now. Their songs no

longer celebrated the victories of their heroic men, but rather reflected their loss and bitterness. The men feared the underworld folks would gloat over their pain, so they tried to keep the women from singing sad songs but failed. The women's broken hearts could not be mended.

The oasis women gave birth to more baby boys, but those sons too met the same fate. Just as the oasis celebrated the newborn and ululations filled the air, a week later, wailings and cries were heard in the same household, and a new grave was dug in the cemetery. No means of defense and protection could stop the constant loss of newborn males.



Years went by. The alleys of the oasis were empty, bereft of young boys running around joyfully. Elderly women in the oasis longed to have them gather around for story times. Their laughter and quarrels were deeply missed. Only the echoes of crying souls were to be heard.

The underworld folks expected the oasis folks to surrender and give in to their terms, but the response they got was a strong one, a statement that came from the same aching hearts – the mothers who lost their little ones, “We will not let the underworld women gloat over us.” With great faith and utmost trust in their women, the men of the oasis let them lead that they might put an end to this tragedy once and for all. Some of the folks in the oasis avoided marriage to save themselves the pain of losing a child. Others left the oasis to settle and start a family away from home and the endless war. The few who remained in the oasis stayed on to fight for their happiness, for life. So they threw wild and luxurious wedding parties as a symbol of resistance.

The underworld folks were perplexed by the challenge and resistance of the oasis women. The women's patience and endurance drove them mad. They were expecting a messenger from the oasis folks to negotiate a truce and submit to their authority, but that messenger never came.

The war never stopped, nor did the grudge.

The more male infants died, the more tolerant the women of the oasis grew.



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For every end of a war there is a beginning.

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It all started with Hasnaa. She ended up as her parents' only child after losing and mourning many brothers. Her only cousin, though, miraculously survived. They said it was because he was born somewhere away from the oasis. He only returned to the oasis with his father to ask her hand in marriage. She happily accepted. Her friends and relatives all gathered around her after word of the engagement spread. Some were happy for her, others were envious, but they all warned her of her unavoidable and devastating fate, "You will suffer greatly, dear. It is less painful to stay unmarried than to lose a child." She neglected their warnings with a smile. And unlike them, who preferred to stay unwedded, she chose to marry and start a family.

The groom threw his bride a massive wedding and disregarded all criticism, "Life must go on. We must spread joy in the oasis. One cannot live if one cannot be happy. Our grief will only help our enemy."

From the early weeks of her new life with her husband, something started to move in her womb. Her fear overshadowed her joy. To protect her child, she kept her pregnancy a secret from everyone, including her husband. She managed to hide it from all eyes, but surely, not for long. Her husband received the news with heedful joy. Time went by fast. Their heir was soon to arrive. She shielded herself with protection spells but still had doubts and fears. Her son was born. Ullulations filled the air for the first time in years. Hasnaa was overjoyed. She surrounded her newborn with protection spells summoned from all four corners of the earth. But as they said, "You cannot fight fate."

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Like all the other infants lost, her little boy was buried in the cemetery. He lived in his mother's arms for one day then left her heartbroken, tears running down her face. She mourned her child and accepted condolences in her Kubit . Her weeping was heartbreaking. Her husband kept his composure for her sake. He tried to stay strong even though it broke him. He, too, needed comfort.

As her beloved ones surrounded her with love in her grieving, she could sense their scolding of her for neglecting their advice and constant warnings. The tears she shed were enough to turn the desert into a green orchard. She realized that she, too, now shared their

pain, the pain of losing a child. Her failure to protect her boy from the evil-doing of the underworld folks was a source of constant despair.

One night she stopped weeping, not that the tears of a childless woman could ever dry up, nor that she feared her mourning would turn her face pale, but because she had to find a way to protect her next child. She refused to let the underworld women take joy in her loss ever again, "Thinking of my loss will only bring me more tears."

There had to be a way, a weapon to defeat them.

A new heir was coming. She had to gather her thoughts and put together a plan to protect him. So she visited all those who lost their infants in the oasis and even in neighboring areas. She listened to their stories with keen attention and returned home with worries piled up like a mountain. But she would not let that break her spirit.

She prepared herself for the imminent arrival of her son. There he was, a healthy baby boy with a beautiful smile. However, his fate in life was not so beautiful. He, too, joined his brother and the other infants in the cemetery after only four nights in his parents' arms. This time Hasnaa refused to accept any condolences. She grew more insistent and determined than ever to defeat the underworld folks.



Time went by, and her third and fourth children met the same fate, managing only to survive a few more days than the first two. And despite the various precautionary measures she took, the result was always the same – death. And in every bitter experience, her tears would run dry to a point where she wished her next newborn would be a girl. But her womb would only give her boys. Her wounds never healed. She did, though, notice one thing: in each case, her child had died when she left him out of her sight. It seemed to her that the underworld folks took advantage of her absences to take her heir away for good.

Her fifth child lived longer than his brothers, but still only for a few weeks.

"A moment of distraction can cost a life."

This time she sobbed violently, crying her eyes out. She thought she had finally overcome her misfortune, but she had been defeated again, a victim of distraction. Yet she refused to give up. It puzzled her for a while – how could the underworld folks break through all these protection spells? There had to be an explanation. There had to be a

way, an effective weapon to fight this.



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One evening she learned she was pregnant again. She panicked, fearing for her child, that he would meet the same miserable, unavoidable fate as his brothers before him. It made her anxious and sad that this child would be nothing but bait in this endless war, another piece of wood to feed this destructive fire.

The oasis folks had suffered greatly throughout the previous years and someone had to end this suffering.

She thought and thought, trying to understand how she could protect the life of her coming heir, until finally, her thinking bore fruit. Something crossed her mind. She realized that the distraction was not of sight but hearing. How did the underworld folks get to their target? They must have a way. Could it be through eavesdropping? More strongly than ever, she believed that she finally had the answer; but she did not reveal it immediately. She needed to make sure she was on the right path to victory.

The underworld folks could get to an heir through one way only. Not through the bond with his father, but through the unbreakable bond with his mother. A child may carry his father's name, yet may he might grow unfond of him and even forget him, but he would always remember the womb that carried him. The connection between a mother and child is beyond the umbilical cord and nutrition, a connection too strong to be severed. It is a connection of warm love and secrets. Once the umbilical cord is cut, a new bond is created between mother and child. The underworld folks knew that what would break the oasis men the most was seeing their women weep. It was their technique to win the war all along.

But the women of the oasis were much stronger and more resistant than the enemy ever expected. Their men were empowered by their strength.



That evening Hasnaa stayed home and gathered her thoughts. Her mind flashed back through all the stories she had heard from the other mothers in the oasis. She discovered that all along, she and the others had one thing in common – the timing of the infants' deaths. There

was no single doubt in her heart now. Death took those little boys the moment they were given a name. The child's name was the enemy's weapon. She wiped a tear running down her cheek and decided it would be her last.

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She now had a trick that would win her the war and a smile on her face.

The women of the oasis had struggled hard throughout all these years to save their sons from the evil-doings of the underworld women but had failed and suffered. Their constant failure was a result of their misunderstanding of their foes' trick.

To shield yourself from your enemy, you must know his weapon. Knowledge is key.

Hasnaa worked hard to prepare herself for her child's arrival. She would help him see the light in a world full of darkness. She now knew the underworld folks' advantage; she would fight back with the same weapon – fight invisibility with invisibility. The trick was not to hide her newborn from their eyes but their ears. With complete faith in her plan, Hasnaa had no choice but to fight. And so the heir finally arrived. She celebrated his birth as if he were her firstborn. The luxurious and wild celebration to welcome his birth amazed all the women in the oasis. Her message to the underworld women was loud and clear. A week later, she asserted, "They will not get him this time."

Her guests carried the news of her bold challenge across the oasis. Hasnaa was the talk of both men and women, even members of the council. That day, her husband gave their son a name that was announced to all the folks in the oasis. His mother, in addition, secretly gave him another name. He carried two names that day. She never spoke the name his father gave him. The oasis folks all waited for the results of her challenge with great anticipation. What a war, they all thought, a familiar enemy, unorthodox weapons, and an unknown fate.

Weeks went by. Women of both worlds were puzzled at Hasnaa's intelligence, which she used to keep her boy alive. The underworld women were unable to get to him. As for the oasis women, they were divided into three groups: the first, which was the majority, were happy for the child's safety. The second, which was few, envied Hasnaa for succeeding in keeping her heir alive and well, and the last group, which was also large, lamented having avoided tying the knot for all those years.

But all three groups wanted one thing – Hasnaa’s secret.



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Curiosity was killing everyone in the oasis, including members of the oasis council who requested the husband’s presence. They needed an explanation. It frustrated them when the husband confessed to not knowing his wife’s secret, “It was a war between women. I had nothing to do with it,” he replied. Then he added, “What matters though is that we won.” The underworld folks, too, needed to know the secret that cost them to lose a lethal weapon in such a short time.

The council gathered for a meeting that lasted for days, then issued a statement that was not as transparent and straightforward as the oasis folks were used to. It had only two words, “Farewell Sorrow.” The folks then knew it was good news.

Hasnaa finally let her secret out. She whispered it to every woman in need of the weapon. They all had to be cautious so the underworld women wouldn’t hear and break through. And for the first time in the history of the oasis, women were able to keep a secret from each other.



The oasis had finally learned to laugh again. Weddings were being held in every corner. Women sang new, cheerful songs and instrument players played new enchanting tunes. The oasis was lively again with children running around and playing, the elderly overjoyed to narrate their stories once again. They had new stories that entertained the little ones and kept them up all night. Members of the council all breathed sighs of relief and celebrated the end of a war they thought would last for eternity.

The underworld folks declared their defeat and surrendered. They even sent a peace delegate for reconciliation. Members of the oasis council accepted on one condition – permission to join in listening to the oasis folk’s music. It was the only thing they truly enjoyed and inexplicably could not resist.

And so, the war between the two worlds finally reached an end. Thereafter, surely there were a few skirmishes here and there, but it did not break the peace between the two folks or stop them from enjoying music together.

