

## The Magic Apple

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*“My name is Abú al-Sa’ádát. I am the slave of this seal-ring,  
standing in the service of him who possesses it.  
Whatsoever he seeks I accomplish for him,  
and I have no excuse in neglecting that he bids me do.”*  
Arabian Nights, The Cobbler’s Tale

*“Sir,” said the merchant, giving it into his hand, “if you look at the outside of this apple, it is very worthless, but if you consider its properties, virtues, and the great use and benefit it is to mankind, you will say it is no price for it, and that he who possesses it is master of a great treasure. In short, it cures all sick persons of the most mortal diseases; and if the patient is dying it will recover him immediately and restore him to perfect health.”*  
Arabian Nights, The Story of Prince Ahmed and the Fairy Paribanou

### 1

“I’m by nature a cautious man,” Aemir Zamar ibn Sakran repeated to his Wazir Abdur.

“This plague that afflicts us knows no rank or title and I feel as vulnerable to it as any of my men. I need to make sure I don’t get it.”

“*Inshallah*,” replied Abdur, “you are in no danger in your quarters. Every room is kept scrupulously clean, and no filthy creatures can gain access to you. You are as safe from infection as we can make it.”

“Yes, but...” Zamar drew breath shakily. “It’s not only my fate that is at stake. The army I lead is ready to move west to redeem Egypt for the true faith. If I falter, who will lead them?”

2

Despite all precautions, the plague caught up with Zamar. It started out with a fever that would not yield to cold compresses and baths in frigid water. The fever was accompanied by headaches and fatigue and multiple body aches. The second day, diarrhea and vomiting added to the symptoms.

Zamar realized he was infected and in mortal danger. He summoned Abdur and demanded: “You must find a doctor who can arrest this curse. Don’t come back unless accompanied by one.”

Abdur knew his own life might be at stake, so he left on his errand. Meanwhile, Zamar’s condition continued to deteriorate daily.

One morning, Zamar was semi-conscious, so he did not notice at first the arrival of two men: Abdur and a stranger dressed in black robes.

Abdur approached the bedside. “Sire, with me is Ma’aruf bin Ka’b. He is a sorcerer who practices *sihr* in a city south of here.”

Zamar reacted sharply to this. “Sihr, and all forms of witchcraft, are condemned in the Quran. Why is he here?”

“Sire, I found no practitioner of the healing arts who knows how to deal with the plague. However, Ma’aruf here thinks he might be of assistance.”

“What is your plan, Ma’aruf?”

“Lord, I’ve come across a *jinni*, a member of the unseen race of beings that are more than humans but less than angels. This jinni is a kind spirit who has assisted me with many tasks. I propose that we summon him and see if he can get us a magical cure for your malady.”

“How can you contact him?”

“He is bound in a gold seal-ring which I always carry on my person.” Ma’aruf proffered his left hand, on the middle finger of which sat an oversized ring covered with graven names, symbols and wards. All I need to do to summon him is rub the center of the ring.”

“Why don’t you do it?” asked Zamar, who was beginning to lose consciousness.

“I shall presently do so. But first I must give you a warning.”

“What’s that?” interjected Abdur. “My master is dying; we have no time to waste.”

“Abú al-Sa’ádát – that’s the name of the jinni, though I call him just Abú – will obey any commands that would have him perform physical tasks. However, he will not carry out any forbidden or abominable acts. Other tasks he may consent to do, but only as part of a bargain in which he is offered something he wants.”

“Never mind. Please hurry...”

### 3

Ma’aruf rubbed the center of the ring and the room filled with a dense vapor which slowly condensed into a dark figure: a vast shape, vaguely human. It had twisted legs like a goat, one of them lower than the other. Huge genitalia hung from his naked body, which was covered with coarse hairs, and red vertical eyes gleamed fiercely in the middle of a misshapen head. His hands were oversized and had only four fingers, lacking thumbs. It stank of sulfur, filth and corruption.

The apparition announced itself in a hollow voice:

“I am Abú al-Sa’ádát. I am the slave of the seal-ring, standing in the service of him who possesses it. What can I do for you, master?”

Ma’aruf responded: “Hail, Abú. I summon you today on behalf of Lord Zamar ibn Sakran. As you can see, Lord Zamar is gravely ill and there is no known cure in the human world for his malady. I call upon you to search in the hidden spheres for a magical remedy that will restore him to health.”

Abú turned his fiery gaze upon the prostrate figure. “Human, I am not bound to render you any assistance. What would you give me to help you?”

In a voice that was a mere whisper, Zamar responded: “What do you want? I can get you riches, beautiful palaces, vast domains, fame and honors. What would it take for you to agree to help me?”

“Human, the riches of the earth mean nothing to us jinn. We do not care for your palaces or your cultivated lands. And what honor can you bestow on us, who are superior to humans in every way?”

Zamar fell into despair and had no more to say. At this point, Ma’aruf turned to his slave and asked: “Abú, are you married? In all the years of our association I’ve never heard you mention your wives or children.”

“No, I am not.”

“Why is that?” The jinni waved his massive arms above his head as in lamentation.

“The *jini*, the females of our kind, find me repulsive and will not couple with me.”

Ma’aruf asked softly yet another question: “Would you like the company of a human female?”

“I have never contemplated such a union. Yet, it is known that humans and jinn have gotten married and have had children as a result of their coupling.”

Abdur cut in on the conversation: “Would you agree to help our Lord if he can provide you beautiful females for your pleasure?”

“I have lived many hundreds of years and yearn for companionship, even from a human.”

Abdur walked over to Zamar’s bed and shook him back to consciousness: “Sire, would you be willing to offer human maidens to the jinni in exchange for his help?”

“Of course. How many slaves does he want?”

Abú responded to the dying man in an offended tone: “I am Sultan over two-and seventy tribes of the jinn. I will not couple with a human slave. It would have to be a free maiden of high birth.”

The jinni’s words unwittingly brought to Zamar’s mind the image of his favorite daughter Muunis. She had just turned sixteen and was exceptionally beautiful.

It is well known that the jinn can read human minds if they choose. Abú fixed his burning gaze inside Zamar’s head and gasped. “YES!” he roared. It is HER that I want!”

Zamar uttered an animal shriek: “NO! Not my daughter!! NEVER!!”

Abú thundered back: “Human, refuse me and you will be gone before night falls. Give me your daughter in marriage or die!”

#### 4

Ma’aruf faced the jinni sternly and commanded: “Abú! I order you to assist Lord Zamar without making ridiculous demands! We’ll find some other fair maiden to your taste anywhere in the world, but you must save this dying man!”

“Master, you know you can’t order me to do this, and I refuse to do it unless your Lord and I come to terms.”

“Abú! I only need to rub this ring twice in quick succession and you will be consumed by the fire of the names graven on the ring. Obey me or you’ll cease to exist.”

“Do as you wish. I have lived a long life already. You shall not bend me to your will!”

The tense exchange was cut short from a sound from Zamar’s bed. “I’ll do it!” uttered Zamar in an agonized voice.

“Swear to it,” shot back the jinni.

“I swear by Allah, the Most High. Cure me and my daughter Muunis shall be yours.”

“Your bargain is accepted. I shall return.” With that, there was a dull sound like a candle snuffer putting out a flame and the jinni vanished.

## 5

In the next few hours, Zamar’s condition deteriorated markedly. He was bleeding through every opening of his body and breathing with great difficulty. Death is at his door, concluded Abdur.

Ma’aruf was getting ready to depart when a noise at his back made him turn around. A cloud of dense fog had gathered at the foot of the bed where Zamar was at the point of expiring.

“I have returned” announced the hollow voice of the jinni. “And I have the cure your lord needs.”

Abú held in his hand an ordinary looking apple, a little bruised, mostly red with an irregular yellow band around the stem. He brought the apple close to the face of the dying man, who inhaled its aroma and gasped.

“What are you doing?” asked Abdur, alarmed.

The jinni replied: “At the heart of one of the most desolate deserts in this world there is an oasis graced by a magic stream. At the edge of its waters, a single apple tree grows. The apples from that tree are magic. Their taste cures sick persons of the most mortal diseases; even if the patient is dying, eating one of these apples will restore him to health.”

“Will the apple you are holding make Lord Zamar well?” inquired Ma’aruf.

“Yes, but not right away. He is too close to death and would not be able to eat the apple. But the very scent of the apple is magic and will stave off the progress of the disease. I will return in three days to feed him the apple and start making arrangements for my betrothal to his daughter.”

The jinni then vanished.

## 6

When Abdur visited his commander early the following morning, he found Zamar awake and in somewhat better shape than the day before. Yet, Zamar was still prey to high fever, chills, and retching.

Abdur proceeded to recount the events of the previous evening and mentioned that the jinni would return in three days to complete the cure and move ahead with the wedding. Zamar became agitated.

“Abdur, go find Ma’aruf right away, and have my daughter sent to me.”

Muunis was even more beautiful in person than the image of her that Zamar had formed in his mind. This morning, though, she was beset by worry. Dark circles under her eyes showed how little sleep she had enjoyed in the last few days.

“You called for me, Father? How are you doing?”

“A little better, my child. Please bring cushions over beside the bed and sit near me. We need to talk.”

Muunis did as she was bid and sat facing her ravaged father.

“This loathsome disease will probably kill me, as it has thousands of my men” he started. “I want to live to serve Allah and my Caliph and spread the true faith throughout the land. I also would like to remain alive for many more years, for a conquering warrior enjoys many rewards in fame and wealth.” He released a sigh of shame.

“For those reasons, noble and selfish, I did a terrible deed yesterday. I made a bargain with a jinni risen from the depths of the abyss. I promised, in exchange for his returning me to good health, to give your hand to him in marriage. The jinni accepted the bargain and is in the process of making me whole.”

Muunis said nothing, but the tears that streamed down her cheeks spoke volumes of her distress. At last, she braced herself against the edge of the bed for support and responded in a shaky voice: “You are my lord and master. Order, and I will obey.”

Zamar watched as hopelessness took hold of his beloved daughter. He searched for words of consolation, and could only come up with vague reassurances: “It’s not all set yet. I may be able to find a way to save you from this fate.”

Muunis got up and walked away from her father, her shoulders heaving and her face twisted by desolation and grief.

7

When Ma’aruf entered the sick room, Zamar asked: “Sorcerer, in your work you come across dangerous creatures like ifrits and shaytans, isn’t that so?”



“Yes, My Lord. When you probe into the depths of the unseen, you risk calling forth malevolent beings that may wish to destroy you.”

“How do you protect yourself against assaults from such beings?”

“Adepts of the hidden arts often fashion themselves an amulet as protection against many forms of spiritual evil. I’ve one such amulet, which I wear around my neck.” At this, Ma’aruf brought out a round object the size of an egg, which dangled from a silver chain. He took it out and handed it to Zamar.

“The talisman typically contains, as does this one, graven words of power and the sacred names of our saints. In a small cavity in the center of the talisman I have dropped a few grains of pure sulfur mixed with tar. The smell of this mixture attracts and binds jinns, demons and other fell creatures.”

“How long would it take to fashion one of these talismans?”

“Not long, my Lord. A skilled artisan under the supervision of an adept like me can get one finalized in a couple of days.”

Zamar turned to Abdur and commanded: “Give this man a purse of silver.” And then, to the sorcerer: “Ma’aruf, I want you to deliver into my hands two talismans like yours by tomorrow night, at the latest. See that you have these ready on time or you will face my displeasure.”

Ma’aruf balked at the strange order. “My Lord, I must warn you against taking any rash actions that you may later regret.”

“Thanks for your concern, Ma’aruf. Now, get to work on my assignment. See you no later than tomorrow night.”

8

The sun was setting when a breathless Ma'aruf made his entrance into the chambers where Zamar lay. Zamar raised himself on his elbows and greeted the sorcerer eagerly: "Do you bring what I require?"

Ma'aruf inclined his head respectfully and, as he replied "Yes, my Lord," produced from his tunic two identical necklaces, which he proceeded to present to the prone warrior.

"And you are certain these will protect the wearers from attacks by the jinn?"

"Yes, my Lord, they have saved me from harm a number of times. But why are you in fear of such an attack?"

"I will be meeting with your jinni tomorrow and want to be protected in case things don't turn out as they should."

"But why would they? You have entered into a bargain with Abú. He would do nothing to hurt you."

"Perhaps" replied Zamar. "In any case, I want you to come back tomorrow and stay with me until he comes." Turning to Abdur, he directed the Wazir: "Take one of these talismans to Lady Muunis and ask her to put it around her neck and always keep it there."

"Your wish is my command."

9

Late in the afternoon the following day, Abdur and Ma'aruf sat near the bed where Zamar shifted restlessly. As in previous occasions, the air in the room suddenly became thick and darkened to be filled, bit by bit, by the presence of the jinni. Abú was carrying the magic apple in one of his four-fingered hands.

The jinni addressed Zamar with courtesy: “Greetings, Lord. I come to banish the ills that afflict you.” He approached the bed and tendered the apple to the prone figure.

Zamar tried to reach for the fruit, but he was too weak and his attempt failed. As he sunk back into the mattress, Abú’s face registered surprise followed by anger. “There is a smell in your body that draws me to it.” He then looked intently into Zamar’s chest. “What is that? If I come closer, I fear it will tear apart my essence!”

Zamar attempted again to reach for the apple, but Abú had already withdrawn to the far side of the room. “Foul human! You have betrayed me!!”

Zamar attempted to explain: “We can’t proceed with our bargain. My daughter shall not marry you. I was afraid you would react violently at the news.”

“Violently? Do you think that I would dirty myself attacking a filthy human? THIS is my reaction!!!” His hand closed on the apple and squished it to nothingness.

Ma’aruf had been watching with sickening fascination as the deal between the jinni and the warrior unravelled. Now he shouted: “Abú! Abú al-Sa’ádát! I am your master, and command you to come forth and serve me!”

He was not getting an answer, so he rubbed the seal-ring time and again. There was a flash, a loud explosion and, all of a sudden, the room seemed empty again, save for three terrified humans.

## 10

Years passed. The plague was finally over, and the armies of Islam moved to occupy the near and far corners of Asia and Africa. Yet, in the now deserted headquarters of the Levant army, one house remained occupied but barely inhabited.

Muunis had never married and had become a bitter old woman, prematurely aged from cares and pain. Her life was simple: she kept house, saw to her religious duties, and cared for her father.

Zamar was the last person on earth still afflicted by the plague. The disease would never go away, forever causing fevers, nausea, diarrhea, and intense pain. Zamar and his daughter, separately and at times together, prayed to Merciful Allah to end the old warrior's life and thus his suffering. But the cells in his body, once reinvigorated by the scent of the magic apple, refused to die, clinging to the blind hope that soon the juice of an otherworldly fruit would render them sound again.

THE END