

Frances Soty published several stories in Analog in the early 1990s but hasn't been heard from in a while. "The Second Kalandar's Tale" marks this author's welcome return to the fields of fiction.

The Second Kalandar's Tale

*A story of the encounters between Hassain
Mohammed al-Shehr, a Prince of Arabia, and the
Ifrit Jirjaris bin Rajmus, in A Thousand Nights
and A Night; translated from the original Arabic*

by Sir Richard Burton

Retold by Francis Marion Soty

DESPITE THE UNCOMFORTABLE shackles binding my arms behind me, fatigue and weakness from three days without food caused me to fall asleep. I awoke when the man seated on the floor to my right bumped his knee hard against mine, while muttering a warning. Raising my sagging head and opening my eyes, I saw that the three mature but lovely sisters who had made me captive, unveiled and clad in harem silks, still reclined on cushions in front of us. I had been sitting there, helpless and fearful for my life, for almost an hour before weariness overcame me. "That is my tale," said a deep voice to my left. I turned that way, to see the shaven face and head of one I knew as the First Kalandar, as he crawled backward to his place in the line of captives. "I swear before Allah, every word is true."

I stared at the one-eyed man, realizing I had slept through his entire story, and had no idea of its worth. But no matter how strange and marvelous the tale, it would pale before mine.

I looked to both sides, at the six other men taken captive with me, seated in a semicircle on the thick carpet, with our arms bound behind us and roped loosely to each other. Three of us were Kalandars, dressed in the poorest of black robes, looking somewhat alike with our shaved heads and faces, including eyebrows. One, who had been introduced as a porter, had been the first to speak. The remaining three, well but not richly dressed, were apparently merchants.

"Your tale is a fine one, and with it you have earned your life," said the strikingly lovely woman in the center of the three. "Rub your head, and go your way." She gestured for one of the seven huge Nubians standing guard against the wall to release the man.

"My lady, if it is well with you, I would do as the porter did after finishing his tale, and stay. I yearn to hear the stories of my fellow mendicants, and of these other three travelers."

"As you wish. But if you stay, then before the night is over, you may still lose your head," said the senior lady. But she smiled as she spoke, and I had hopes she was not as determined on our deaths as it had at first seemed.

The lovely woman nodded to me, second in the row of three black robes, and I got to my knees and crawled forward as far as the tie-rope permitted. "Ladies, it would bore you to hear how I, the son of a King, a renowned scholar in my own right, came to be a simple woodcutter, in one of the distant kingdoms of Hind. Travels and travails I knew in plenty, but the most fantastic part of my story began after a year of this hard life, when I wandered away from my fellow woodcutters one day and chanced on a lowland of fine timber."

In my mind I returned to that time of two months ago, and again saw the old tree stump, rich with resin, hidden in the center of the grove. I remembered that I had decided to dig it out, and put shovel to the ground, but had barely begun when I heard a distinct *chink!* My shovel had hit something solid, a few inches down, that sounded like metal. But buried metal had no place in this isolated wood.

Curious, I cleared away the dirt and saw a copper ring, wider than my

hand, set into what seemed a wooden trapdoor. I thought immediately this must be someone's hidden treasure, gold some rich man in the nearby city had hidden from the tax collectors. I shoveled off the remaining grass and soil, and pulled on the ring. It took all my strength, but when the door tilted back and stopped, I saw a set of stone stairs descending into a shadowed underground.

I took a slow, careful look around. The trees were thick, the raised door well hidden. It seemed unlikely any of my companions would follow me here. And if the rich man had left some monster to guard his treasure, I did not want to be caught while straining to lift that heavy door from below.

Leaving the shovel behind, I shouldered my ax and walked down the stairs for about twenty feet, into a dark, stone-walled tunnel. Ten steps ahead I saw a second door, an upright one, with light leaking through around its edges. Holding the ax ready in my right hand, I cautiously opened the unbarred door with my left.

Brightness flooded around me, dazzling my eyes. When they adjusted, I stood looking into a noble hall, carved out of the stone of Mother Earth. Thick carpet covered the floor, and colorful cloths and swatches of silk hid the hardness of the walls. Walking toward me, surprise and wonder on her face, came the most beautiful woman I had ever gazed upon. As the son of a king, raised in his harem until my balls descended and the Chief Eunuch expelled me, I had seen many female beauties — but never one to equal her.

She stopped a few feet away, gazing earnestly into my eyes with a mixture of fear and curiosity. She wore harem pajamas, loose-fitting silk that clung to her body in places, hung freely in others. The upper edges of large breasts, white as snow, peeped from beneath the clinging folds. She stood only five feet tall, and I saw now that she was a mature woman, approaching her prime; certainly a decade older than myself, three years away from thirty. In what was clearly her home, she wore no veil. Jet-black hair framed a round face of surpassing loveliness. The eyes looking up into mine were long-lashed, and dark as the skies at night when the moon is hidden.

"Are you Man or Jinn?" she asked, in a voice as soft and womanly as her body, hope now mingling with the fear on her face.

"I am a man," I replied, stepping inside the hall. I slipped off my dirt-encrusted sandals, leaving them at the edge of the rich carpet. As I walked toward her she retreated, keeping well out of my reach. After a few steps I stopped and knelt before her, in admiration for her beauty, but also to show I intended no harm. My ax I laid on the carpet as I bowed my head.

"Truly? Then how did you come to this hall, where I have lived for five-and-twenty years without seeing a living soul? The mighty Ifrit, Jirjaris bin Rajmus, hides me from Jinn as well as humans, for he took me without his family's consent, and would suffer if they knew. Every tenth night he comes to bed me, and has done so since he snatched me away on what should have been my wedding day."

I got to my feet, leaving the ax on the floor, and said, "I am Hassain Mohammed al-Shehr, the son of a King, and the tale of how I came to be a simple woodcutter, and found your prison, is long and sad. Let us save it for another day."

The small but exquisite enchantress studied my face intently, looking deep into my eyes. Apparently what she found there satisfied her, for she nodded. "We will have five of those, if you find my company pleasing. It has been four days since Jirjaris came, so he will return in six more. In the meantime I yearn to hear another human voice, trade thoughts with someone from the world of men. I am ensorcelled, and will die if I try to leave this place; but you can ease my loneliness for a time, if you will."

It had been over a year since I left my father's palace, and my own small group of concubines; I yearned for a woman. It seemed certain she was what she appeared, not a Jinni or monster set in place to guard a fortune. She herself was the jewel in this hidden hall.

I walked back to close the heavy door, then followed this mature flower of unsurpassed beauty into her luxurious prison.

"My name is Salima, and I am the daughter of a King." She led me deeper into the noble hall. Through an open arched doorway ahead I saw her Hammam-bath, drawn and ready. As we passed a small alcove she pointed to an inscription burned into the wooden door. "Jirjaris made those symbols, with a finger hotter than an iron poker hours in the fire. I have only to touch them, and he will instantly appear. In all these years I have yet to call him, for I have never been in danger, and have no wish to see any more of him than I must."

Salima did not yet feel entirely safe with me, and had given warning. My statement of being a King's son must have seemed a lie, and a man who would lie could not be trusted in other matters. But the longing for companionship, to ease for a time the loneliness of her days, compelled this lovely creature to welcome even a man of unknown character into her home.

She led me into the bath room and started doffing her clothes. Salima did not need to tell me I was grimy with dirt and sweat, and she wanted me to join her in the bath and cleanse my body before I lay with her. I shed my own rags, until we stood naked before each other. She glanced shyly at my manhood, but quickly averted her gaze, and a noticeable blush stained the ivory cheeks. She had known an Ifrit over 900 nights, by my quick reckoning, but had never before seen a human male in urgent need. In turn I stared at her as if entranced, and in the sense that the body of a beautiful woman ensorcells a man with desire, I was.

As if suddenly aware of a lack of proper modesty, Salima turned toward the bath, to hide her feminine glory beneath the water — but she took my hand, and pulled me after her.

When our bodies were clean and dry Salima produced two long, luxurious robes, then led me back to the central room. She seated me on the larger of the two divans, then brought us food and wine. Salima ate with me, as a wife might, though she now kept her robe modestly closed. She explained that the Ifrit always brought plentiful supplies of food and drink on his visits, but servants were forbidden; she had to cook and clean for herself. He also provided her with books and scrolls in profusion. She had read and studied them all. Learning had become her primary occupation, the means by which she passed the lonely hours; without something to occupy her mind, she would have gone mad.

When we had eaten our fill and finished the first bottle of wine, Salima brought another. We sat and talked for two hours, emptying the second bottle, of which I drank the most. At last she arose, having finally decided I was one who would never do her harm, took my hand again, and led me to her bedchamber. In the light of only two candles we shed those long robes and lay down together. As I took her small body in my arms, I could not help but think my situation wondrous strange. Here I lay in the bed of an Ifrit, a Jinni of fire from hell, about to enjoy the beauty he had kept isolated from Jinn and human alike for twenty-five years. But then her

arms crept around my neck and I turned my mind to nothing, sinking entirely into the moment, as I had been taught by Sufi scholars at my father's court. Some experiences are best enjoyed without the distractions of conscious thought.

During one period of rest Salima brought us a fresh bottle of the delicious wine; another as dawn appeared in the world above. Our congress continued long into the morning, our delight in each other yet unslaked. She looked askance at me when I emptied the current bottle and asked for another, suggesting we break our fast instead. But I demurred, having no appetite for food, and she did as I asked.

About noon, even my healthy young body and her long-unmet needs had been satisfied. I arose with an urge to relieve my bladder, but found I could barely walk. I managed it, though my feet were unsteady, and afterward came back to the bed.

I looked at the unclad beauty of Salima, still deeply asleep, and knew I had to have this woman, not just for now but the rest of my life. Instead of joining her I slipped on my robe, returned to the main room, and found the ax I had left there. Weapon in hand, I staggered over to the little alcove, where the evil Jirjaris had left his call sigil burned into the door. I lifted my free hand to press it, but heard a cry of alarm from behind me. I turned to see Salima, also robed, emerging from the bedchamber.

"Oh my love, I beseech you, do not touch that symbol!"

But the wine I had drunk, and my great love for Salima, made me bold. "I am a man, and a scholar. I have studied the Jinn, and know that any spell cast by one ends with his death. I will slay Jirjaris, which will free you of his ensorcellment. Then we can return to my father's kingdom, where one day I will rule, and you shall be my queen."

But Salima only looked terrified. "By the grace of Allah, do not attempt this! No man can stand before Jirjaris!"

"Nonsense," I said, again lifting my hand to touch the symbol. "He has treated you foully, and I intend to kill him and remove you from this spell-bound prison."

But Salima said, "Oh dear to my heart, do not destroy what we have! Nine nights out of ten I can be yours, and the evil one need never know."

Confident in my youth and strength, my wits befuddled by far too much wine, I ignored her woman's pleas and touched the sigil.

At once the room darkened, thunder boomed, and lightning flashed. The very stone beneath my feet seemed to heave and ripple, like waves in an angry sea. In an instant the wine fumes left my head, my brave intentions vanished like pipe smoke in a desert wind, and my guts turned to water.

"The Ifrit comes! Oh flee, my love, save yourself!"

I dropped my ax, a useless toy, and ran for the door. I pushed the heavy wood open, stepped through, and started to close it behind me, but then paused. Salima could not leave, and I was abandoning her to the mercy of one who had no mercy. But she had urged me to go...cowardice and courage warred in my heart, and I stood indecisive, the door closed but for a slight crack. And as I watched, the stone floor and carpet seemed to split asunder. A mighty Ifrit rose from the opening, which closed into a floor again beneath him.

Salima had said Jirjaris assumed human form, that of a tall Persian, when he visited and bedded her. But this time he had been called without warning, and came in his true shape. He stood twice as tall as a man, on legs thick as trees; huge feet smoked on the thick carpet. I saw two short black wings, furled close to his back. His eyes were hideous cressets of red fire. Two long teeth from the upper jaw extended down past his chin.

I felt my bowels quake with fear. I dared not move the door even the bit that would close it, afraid he would hear a squeak, or notice the movement. As I stood there, paralyzed, I heard the voice of Jirjaris, rumbling like thunder close overhead. "Why do you disturb my rest, wife? I see no danger here."

"Oh my lord, forgive me, it was an accident." Salima kept her composure far better than I; she must have seen this hideous, fearful form before. "I had a full bottle of wine after dinner, and the effects were still with me when I awoke late. I stumbled walking past the alcove, and touched your symbol when I kept myself from falling. But — " I saw an inviting smile curve the wine-red lips that had pressed mine so often during the long night " — since I have accidentally brought you here for the first time, will you not assume your human form and come lie with me? I grow lonely over nine days without you, and desire your company in my bed."

"You lie, whore that you are!" bellowed the Ifrit. He had seen my ax,

and picked it up. Looking around, he spotted my sandals; Salima had cleaned them yesterday, and they waited at the foot of the smaller of the two divans. My rags of clothing had gone into a back area, to be cleaned later.

Jirjaris brought the three items to Salima. "What are these but the belongings of some mortal who has found you here? You lying strumpet, you have lain with him this past night, and now seek to lure me to your bed to distract me from my vengeance."

"I have never seen these things before," said Salima, but her voice quavered with fear. "You must have brought them yourself, clinging to your garments."

The Ifrit reared up even higher, until his head neared the tall ceiling. "Lying harlot! Your words are absurd, and you shall pay for saying them."

Jirjaris seized Salima, stripped off her robe, and threw her naked body to the floor. He produced four cords, pulled her arms and legs apart, and tied each to a heavy piece of furniture. She lay on the carpet as though crucified, her beauty all exposed. But the Ifrit had no eye for her loveliness. He shrank down to just more than human size, then knelt by her left side. Jirjaris raised his right hand, and suddenly the outer part of the thick forefinger glowed red, as though burning.

The Ifrit brought the tip of his glowing finger so close to her ribs that Salima must have felt the heat. "One last chance for truth. Confess your sin, and name the man who bedded you."

Salima raised her head enough to look up at her master, and past him to the outer door. She saw what he had not noticed, that it was open a tiny crack, and guessed I was still in the tunnel. Her head sank back to the floor, and she again denied any man had entered her prison, or lain with her last night.

Jirjaris placed the finger of fire at the top of her rib cage, and slowly drew it downward.

Salima screamed in agony, her body arching upward in a useless effort to escape. She threw her head back, beat it on the carpet, and writhed and twisted, all to no avail. The red-hot finger moved down her ribs until all were marked by a black gouge, so wide I could see it from the door. Some smoke drifted upward, and I smelled burned flesh.

"Now will you speak, or must I decorate your other side to match?"

As Jirjaris rose to his feet and stepped over her prone body, Salima raised her head again and looked at the door. With the Ifrit's eyes not on her, she shook her head; a clear message telling me not to sacrifice my own life in some hopeless effort to rescue her. I had known this woman only one night, but she was willing to endure horrible torture to save me.

While the Ifrit looked the other way I pushed the door closed, making no sound, then turned and hurried to the stone stairs. Up them I went, closed the trapdoor, and with the shovel I had left outside, covered the wood with dirt. I stood there, helpless, knowing an evil Ifrit tortured the woman I loved just a few feet below. I had disturbed her quiet life, enjoyed the most wonderful congress with a woman in my experience, then brought torture and likely death upon her with my foolish bravado. Yet she had urged me only to save myself.

Overwhelmed by sadness and loss, knowing I might never again find a woman like Salima, I nevertheless turned away and started back to the city. She had sacrificed herself for me, the final gift of her love. I accepted it, though the hurt was bitter.

Through the woods I walked, barefoot but dressed in a sumptuous robe. An hour of fast travel brought me to the poor city, and the shop of the kindly Tailor who had befriended me on my arrival a year earlier. I entered, and the Tailor welcomed me, very happy to learn I had survived a night in the woods. But he was busy with a customer, so I retired to my corner in his small home, of which the front formed his shop. The Tailor soon finished for the day, closed the shop, and came to me. He enquired of my disappearance, and I burst into tears. When my sobbing eased, I told him all that had happened. The Tailor looked at me askance, a look that clearly said he considered my actions less than honorable; but the good man spoke no words of reproach. He finally left to prepare his dinner. Exhausted, I put away the rich robe, changed into the poor but clean clothes I wore around the house, and lay down to sleep.

I awoke late, after a night of deeply troubled sleep, where dreams of fear and wonder alternated with lustful memories of the beautiful Salima; experienced as a courtesan, but with the heart and true love of a young maiden. But barely were my eyes open than the Tailor appeared, a happy smile on his face. "Come, my son. A tall Persian found an ax and sandals

in the woods. Being an honest man, he came to the woodcutters to enquire as to who might have lost them. An ax is an ax, but one thought he recognized the handle, and sent him here."

My heart quaked with fear. Apparently even torture had not caused Salima to reveal my name, and the Ifrit had come seeking me by other means. I arose, intending to deny the items were mine, but then the floor seemed to split asunder, and a tall Persian rose from the sand beneath. The Tailor hastily stepped backward to the wall, eyes bulging in amazement and fear, as the floor solidified beneath the demon. I had no time to do more than cry aloud in surprise before the Persian seized me, threw me over a broad shoulder, and stepped out the back door. He rose into the sky, moving like the wind, and in minutes took us to the isolated little wood. By magic he passed us through the earth and into his hidden hall, where he forced me onto my knees before Salima, sitting naked on the larger divan in the main room. She raised a tear-stained face, one that had aged years in a single night. Down her right side I saw a wide, blackened gouge, matching the one I had watched the Jinni burn on her left rib cage.

Jirjaris seized a cloth from the smaller divan and tossed it to Salima. She covered her nakedness, then turned to me. "Who are you? And why has my master brought you here?"

The body of the Persian seemed to melt and flow, and suddenly the Ifrit again towered before us. "Do not lie, wife! This is the man who bedded you, and left his ax and sandals."

Salima studied my face, as if being very careful in her identification. I dared not speak, but with eyes only I pleaded for my life. She seemed to understand, for she turned to the Ifrit and said, "I have never before seen this man."

The Ifrit heaved an exasperated sigh, a strangely human sound. "Were my caresses of your ribs not enough? Must I repeat them over the rest of your harlot's body?"

"In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful, I have never laid eyes on this man until now," said Salima, her voice a little stronger.

The giant Ifrit pulled a long sword from a scabbard at his belt. "Since you know him not, then take this blade and strike off his head."

Salima took the extended blade and rose to her feet, adjusting the coverlet to hold it in place. Wincing with pain at each step, she walked to

my side. I turned my head to look up at her. Again with eyes only, I begged forgiveness for my naiveté, and the foolish bravado that had brought this calamity upon us.

And Salima understood my silent plea. She looked up into the fearful face of Jirjaris, and tossed the sword aside. "This man has done me no wrong. It would be a sin against Allah to take his life, and I will not, though you decorate the rest of my body as you did my ribs."

"No, you refuse to take his life because he is your lover. You endure my torment, and obstinately refuse to confess, because of your affection for him. It comes clear that you never truly loved me as a wife should, wanting only to bed a human — like to like."

The Ifrit seized Salima, forced her to her knees before me, then picked up the sword. "Arise, and take this blade. Now look at this woman, swear in the name of Allah that you have never known her, and strike off her head. Then I will believe you, and grant your freedom."

For the first time since Jirjaris had seized me, hope flowered in my heart. I took the blade and stepped toward Salima, but she raised her head to look at me. Again with no words spoken, she asked with her eyes, *Is this how you return my love and faith? Would you take the life of one who endured torture to save you?*

The desire to live warred with shame in my emotions. I looked up into the fire-red eyes of Jirjaris, intently studying my face, and longed to thrust the sword through his black heart. But I knew now that to him the blade was a mere toy, of no concern at all. I could not defeat him, but in extremity I at last found my courage. I threw the sword down and said, "I swear in the name of Allah that I never saw this woman before you brought me here. My sandals are by my bed where you seized me, and my ax with the other tools at the Tailor's house. You have caught the wrong man. Though I drink the cup of death and perdition, I will not slay a woman who has done me no wrong. Indeed, who faces death when she might have saved herself by lying and naming me. Now kill me if you will."

The mighty Jirjaris sighed again. "Like calleth to like, and you twain show a good understanding between you. Still, there is no doubt at all she fluttered *some* man in my bed. And this is how such matters shall always end." He picked up the sword, grasped Salima by one arm, raised her in the air, and struck off that hand. As blood gushed from the severed wrist he

set her on her feet, changed his grip to the other arm, again lifted her, and hacked off that hand. As I watched in spellbound horror he dropped her to the floor, tore the covering from her body, and lifted her by one leg. A foot flew through the air, and seconds later, the other. He released the dying woman, who fell to the carpet on her back, blood spurting from all four limbs.

With eloquent eyes Salima found mine, and signaled her farewell. I saw my own death only a minute ahead, but tried to say with my gaze that I loved her truly. I had forsworn my soul before Allah, and now must burn in hell for blasphemy, but my only regret was that the lie had not saved her.

"You are a whore, but a brave one," said Jirjaris, and struck Salima so hard across the throat that her head separated from her body, flying two feet away.

Silently I prayed to Allah to forgive me my transgressions, arguing in my head that I had forsworn his name only to save myself, and the woman I loved. But instead of lifting the bloody sword and sending me on to judgment, Jirjaris said, "By Jinn law, it is rightful to slay any woman who commits adultery. But the evidence that you were the man she bedded is scant; one woodcutter thinking he recognized the handle of an ax. And she denied unto death, and you while expecting the same, that you knew each other. Still, I believe both of you to be liars, and will not let you leave here alive save with my curse. Therefore choose: will you spend the rest of your miserable life as a dog, an ape, or an ass?"

And again hope warred with horror in my heart. I saw that the Ifrit was adamant. He did not feel free to slay me, but nevertheless intended to make unbearable any life I might know after this. And while I stood paralyzed with doubt, trying to make the best choice, he seized me, passed us both through the dirt roof over the noble hall, and flew high into the sky.

I noticed that the short black wings never stirred as Jirjaris flew. Magic alone propelled us, faster than any bird. After a half-hour he descended, landing on a high mountaintop, where he set me on my feet before him.

"Choose!" Jirjaris said again, and I did. A dog was one of Allah's lowest creatures. An ass was designed for sweat and toil, made to carry panikins

and bundles through the dust and heat. I knew very little of apes, but thought surely they must live better lives than that.

"So be it," said Jirjaris when I named my choice. He picked up a handful of dirt and sprinkled it over my head, while uttering magical words that hurt my ears as if they were knives. My eyes closed, and my senses grew faint. I felt my body shrinking, flowing, and changing...and when it seemed over, opened my eyes to see straight ahead of me the leather-clad knees of Jirjaris. I raised my gaze to find his face. He looked down at the hairy, tailless ape he had made and smiled, well pleased with his work.

Without another word the Ifrit rose into the sky and flew away, soon vanishing in the distance.

I looked around. Nothing grew on this rocky mount, and a cold wind in my face warned of bad weather coming. I started down the mountain, seeking shelter and food. I could stand erect, but found it more comfortable to keep my knuckles also on the ground when walking.

Water I found, but little food and no shelter. Even so, my ape body proved hardy, and I slowly made my way across the barren country toward the inland sea. After a month I stood, hungry and exhausted, on a headland above a sheltered cove. In the distance I saw the topsail of a tall ship, heading toward me.

No sound broke the silence of the little cove, but directly ahead I saw a natural rock quay, with trees close enough to provide tie-offs for a ship. A small stream of clear water ran into the sea, only a few yards away. It seemed obvious this was a watering spot well known to mariners, and some captain was bringing his ship in to refill its barrels.

I knew my chimp throat could not form words, because I had tried hard to speak during my first few days as an ape. If I was to save myself, it had to be by my wits.

A rock big enough to hide behind stood on the land at the base of the quay. I made my way to it and concealed myself. A brisk wind brought the ship quickly ashore. I heard the sounds of sails being furled, and the shouts of men as they heaved into place thick rope bumpers to protect the ship from the rock. Two men carrying mooring lines jumped onto the quay. The closest passed within two yards of my hiding place, but in his hurry did not notice me. As they secured the ropes to two well-worn trees, I ran

around the rock onto the quay, down it for a few yards, and leaped aboard the ship.

I had been seen during my short run. Cries of alarm followed my boarding, and several sailors rushed toward me with knives or clubs. But closer were two well-dressed men, clearly merchant passengers, who drew swords and stepped forward, as though vying to see which could be first to pierce my guts. But this ape body was fast and agile. I dodged both blades, looked around frantically for a place to flee, and saw the captain. I ran toward him, knelt two yards away, crawled to his feet, and seized his skirt. I buried my face in the cloth, and began to weep.

"Now this be a thing of amazement!" cried the captain, who had drawn his own sword when I approached, but stayed his hand. With my face hidden and my back exposed, I feared the thrust of either a merchant's sword or sailor's knife, but kept my face down while I loudly wept.

"Hold your weapons!" I heard the captain say. "This creature means us no harm."

"Even so, this is a beast of ill-omen, and should be slain," said one of the sailors. The two merchants agreed, urging the captain to let them kill me. But I clung harder to his skirt, and wept still more loudly.

"Nay, it is clear the creature understands you, and pleads for its life," said the captain. "I think this is a thing of enchantment, not something to be slain as if it were a true animal. Put up your blades."

With much complaining between the merchants and muttering by the sailors, they sheathed their weapons, and the crew returned to watering the ship. Soon we made sail again, and the captain ordered his body servant to take me to his cabin. With the ship safely at sea, he came and tried to converse with me. My throat would make only grunts, but I could nod to agree with his statements, or shake my head in negation. And thus I managed to convey to him, for this captain was a kindly and sagacious man, that I was as he suspected, under an enchantment; in my natural form, as human as himself.

When his questioning had revealed this, the captain said, "Very well. I will protect you from the merchants and my sailors. But you must earn your keep, as do all on board, so you shall be my second body servant, while we seek someone who can lift your enchantment."

I went to my knees again and kissed his feet. He patted my hairy head.

And thus I became servant to a kindly ship's master, who intended to help me if he could.

The captain ordered the other servant to bring me food, and I ate until my stomach bulged. Then exhaustion took me, and I made signs to the man that I craved sleep. Also kindly, he made me a pallet of soft cloths in a corner of the small cabin.

When I awoke, refreshed and feeling much stronger, I began my new duties. Light work and plentiful food soon restored my ape body to its natural state of health and great strength. Allah provided us with good weather. Three weeks after I boarded the ship we turned toward the land, and were soon sailing under the walls of a great city. Barely had we anchored in a busy harbor when a small boat came speedily toward us, bringing two splendidly dressed Mameluke officials. They came aboard and spoke with the captain, though all standing about heard. The king's minister, a calligrapher of renown, had recently died. The king had vowed that his replacement must be his equal or better in that art, which he revered. All aboard who were literate were invited to contribute a line or two to a long scroll the Chief Mameluke carried.

The merchants, both of whom could write, took the parchment into the captain's cabin and opened it on his map table. They eagerly took turns at composing their lines. Even the captain joined in. When they had finished, I seized the reed from the inkpot and signed that I wished to write also. They stared at me in amazement, but the captain said, "Let him write! There is more mystery here than any of us know."

Working as fast as I could, while making certain to keep each letter perfect, I wrote in Naskh character a couplet: "When to sore parting fate our love shall doom, To distant life by destiny decreed, We cause the inkhorn's lips to 'plain our pains, And tongue our utterance with the talking reed."

The two merchants marveled to see that an ape could write, and my hand was better than theirs or the captain's. The two Mamelukes stood silent, watching that which they could scarcely believe. Only the captain smiled, realizing he had done right, under the judgment of Allah, to protect me.

Not certain a single couplet would be sufficient, I composed another in Ruka'i, a third in Rayhani, a fourth in Suls, and a fifth in Tumar. The

cabin had grown silent as I worked, the merchants drifting away, shaking their heads in disbelief. I had been educated in my father's court by the finest tutors, had from childhood displayed a thirst for knowledge equaled by few, and a knack for letters and penmanship. But I spent so much time in musty libraries and dry archives that my father the King felt it best I learn more from the real world. He appointed me his envoy to bear gifts to a King of Hind, leading to a ship wrecked on a reef by an ignorant captain, and a long swim to shore. Apparently only I had survived, to be taken in, penniless and hungry, by the kindly Tailor. On learning my name he had urged me to silence, for the ruler there was a sworn enemy of my father. None of my skills were useful, in a poor city where few could cipher and only the elite read. I had been forced to become a woodcutter, simple work any man could do, to earn my daily bread.

When I finished at last, dried the scroll with sand, and handed it to the Chief Mameluke, he took it with every sign of respect, and departed.

The captain commenced unloading the part of the ship's cargo bound here, and the merchants took theirs and departed into the city, to sell dear and buy cheap for the next port. I returned to my duties attending the captain, but with high hopes in my heart. And sure enough, as the sun rose next morning a splendid train appeared on the quay, and a boat bearing the Chief Mameluke rowed out to us. When he signed for me to accompany him, the captain protested, stating that I was his property. The Mameluke assured the captain that the King had instructed him to pay fairly to procure me. The captain, a truly noble man, said that he sought not recompense, but an assurance of my safety. The Mameluke gave this, in the name of the King.

On shore, waiting attendants dressed my hairy nakedness in a splendid robe of honor, which I had to gather around my waist to walk upright. Then they mounted me on a she-mule, and escorted me through the city to a splendid palace. The Mameluke took me into the presence of the King, an elderly man with white hair and a long beard to match. He received me sitting at table, for he had not yet broken his fast. I knelt before him, crawled to his feet, then three times kissed the floor between my hands. He marveled to see an ape with such good manners, and invited me to eat with him. The Mameluke had informed him that I understood the spoken word.

I hiked up the robe and climbed into a chair, though it was not high enough for me. I managed by standing upright, letting the robe fall to hide my appearance. We ate a hearty meal of quail and sand-grouse, after which servants brought us each a bowl, and I washed my hands in seven waters.

The King gestured, and an old eunuch standing nearby handed him the scroll from yesterday. "Now I am told you wrote these lines," said the King, pointing out my work. "That is a marvel, for I have a large library of books and scrolls, and not one of them speaks of an ape that can write. Therefore I wish to see this wonder for myself."

The King unrolled the scroll to a blank area, and the eunuch handed me reed and ink. Drawing on the best of my skills, I wrote in Ruka'i: "Wail for the little partridges, on porringer and plate. Cry for the ruin of fries, and stews well marinate;" and on until I had composed a paean of praise to our breakfast. I concluded with: "Be patient, soul of me! Time is a haughty, jealous wight; Today he seems dark-lowering, and tomorrow fair to sight."

I arose from table and seated myself on the floor at a respectful distance while the King read my discourse. When he had finished, he turned to the eunuch and said, "O Mukbil, go and fetch my daughter Sitt al'Husn to the library. I would that she see this marvel of an ape."

The King led me to his library. It was as he had described, large and as full of scrolls and books as my father's. We seated ourselves, and after a few minutes Mukbil ushered in a lovely dark-haired woman, of about my own age. She wore lounging silks, with a veil tossed back over her head. When she saw me she immediately drew down the veil, leaving only her beautiful dark eyes showing, and turned to the King. "Oh my Father! Have you lost all sense of decorum, not warning me to veil myself before entering the room where you entertain a strange man?"

The King glanced around the library, looking very puzzled. "Sitt al'Husn, beloved oldest daughter, I see no man here but myself, and the eunuch who raised you from birth."

"Appearances lie, my Father. This creature in the ill-fitting robe is not an ape, but a young man. In fact I know his story. He is the son of a King of Arabia, ensorcelled by the mighty Ifrit Jirjaris bin Rajmus. That wicked kin of Iblis put to death his wife of twenty-five years, Salima, daughter of King Ifitamus, then turned this young prince into an ape."

The words of his daughter puzzled the King even more. "I know thou

art wise and learned, my beloved child, and so I have heeded your pleas not to marry you to some rude prince not your equal in manners or grace. But how came you by this knowledge, when you have not left my palace in a hand of years?"

Sitt seated herself at her father's feet and looked up into his face, for the moment ignoring me. "O my dear Papa, for several years now I have lived in two connected but separate worlds. My body remains always here, but my spirit flies among the clouds, touching down hither and yon in diverse and strange lands. I have converse with others who ply this realm, and we share its secrets, its rewards, and its dangers."

The King studied the veiled face of his daughter with some consternation, but above that, a great love. "And how came you by these rare and wonderful powers?"

"Dear Papa, you may remember that in my childhood you hired an old woman, much experienced in the care and education of royal children, to look after me. She was very wise, and also wily enough to hide that wisdom, thus avoiding envy, and the malice of those less gifted. She taught me the theory of magic, and its practices. I have committed to memory one hundred and seventy chapters of egromantic formulas, the least of which could transport all the stones of this city beyond the Mountain Kaf, or the circumambient ocean."

The King marveled, and said, "My daughter, I knew you possessed great knowledge for one so young. I rejoice that you love your old father enough to forbear from such actions as you describe. But now I think it time for an exercise of these powers, if they be appropriate here. This prince in an ape's body has been grievously wronged. Disenchant him, and I shall make him my Wazir, and if you so choose after seeing him in his natural form, give you to him in marriage. For I think we may at last have found one who measures up to your high standards, and it is past time that you wed."

Sitt rose to her feet, bowing low before the King. "It shall be as you will it."

Sitt said to Mukbil, "Please fetch me a fresh scroll and ink, O my second father." When he produced them, she laid the scroll on a table, and directed us to chairs at the side of the large room. Sitt took an iron dagger from beneath her silks. I saw Hebrew characters cut into the shiny blade.

She dipped the knife in the inkpot and began writing, in large letters. I had a good view, and my ape eyes were very sharp. The characters were Cufic, but the words she formed were mysterious, names and talismans I could not identify. As she wrote she chanted aloud, some phrases in our own tongue, but most in languages strange and unknown even to me. She finished with a flourish, spoke a final few words, then rose and stood waiting.

The air inside the room seemed to swirl, as if circling around Sitt; the light dimmed to twilight. Then thunder cracked and boomed, the floor before Sitt heaved and buckled, and rearing up out of a wide crack came the giant Ifrit, Jirjaris bin Rajmus.

The floor closed again beneath his smoking feet, and I saw the wood begin to smolder. The Ifrit glared down at the lovely young woman who had summoned him. I felt my heart quail. If he turned and saw the hairy ape he had made, sitting with the King and eunuch, I knew Jirjaris would not spare me a second time.

In a voice like thunder the Ifrit demanded, "Why have you summoned me, witch? After our last encounter we agreed not to oppose each other again. How dare you pull me away from my affairs without great cause!"

"The cause is great, thou dog among Ifrits! You ensorcelled this fine young prince — " she pointed to me, and the fire-red eyes of the Jinni sought me out " — and I want you to return him to his natural form."

Jirjaris continued to stare at me, and I saw my death on his face. "I have cause to think he did me grievous wrong. He lives because I had no certain proof. I will not change him back."

"Then be gone!" said Princess Sitt. "I will follow the harder path, and do it myself." She began a series of gestures and incantations to dismiss him.

"On my life you shall not!" bellowed Jirjaris. "Now you will die with him instead!"

The Ifrit started to change before our eyes, and Sitt's dismissal had no affect. As we watched in fear and horror, the tall body of the Jinni wavered, darkened, and sank into a black mist that formed near the floor. The mist convulsed, grew solid — and seconds later became an immense, tawny-maned lion.

But the witch Princess knew her danger, and had plucked from her

head a single hair. As the Jinni changed form she waved it in the air, while quickly muttering a few strange words; the hair transformed into a long, two-handed sword. Sitt grasped it by the hilt, and seemed to grow taller and stronger as the Ifrit completed his transformation. When the lion gathered its mighty haunches under it and sprang at her, Sitt stepped quickly to one side and swung the shining blade in a great blow, cutting off its head. The body crashed to the floor, the Princess adroitly dodging the huge form, but the head changed into a gigantic scorpion as it flew through the air. It landed some distance away and turned quickly, scrambling across the floor to attack Sitt.

The Princess had seen the Ifrit's second transformation, dropped the sword, and changed herself into a huge snake. The snake struck at the scorpion, its long fangs glistening with some deadly poison. The giant insect dodged aside, then ran in past the extended head and struck at the serpent's middle with its own shorter poisoned fangs. Sitt whipped her body aside, reared to half her length, and struck again. The scorpion, lightning fast, dodged once more, then leaped at the neck she had extended. He tried to grasp her around the body, close enough to the head that he would be out of the reach of her fangs. Sitt raised herself so quickly he could not get a firm grip. The scorpion fell to the floor, but landed on his many feet and darted behind her, so that she had to whirl her entire body around to follow him.

The fight continued for what seemed an hour, while the King, Mukbil, and I sat and watched, hardly daring to draw a breath. We knew that if Jirjaris prevailed, we were all doomed. But eventually the Ifrit realized he could not defeat the Princess as a scorpion. During a short pause in the fighting, he transformed himself into a huge black cat, and fled for the open door.

Sitt changed her form to that of a giant piebald wolf, and ran after the cat. We three humans followed her into the open courtyard adjacent to the library, arriving in time to see the wolf attacking the cat. Teeth met teeth in a snarling clash of fangs, but Jirjaris had again met his match. This fight lasted only a short time before the Ifrit realized he would be beaten once more. When both paused a moment to breathe, he turned and suddenly dashed toward the fountain in the center of the courtyard. A red pomegranate lay on the stone at the base of a large pool, fed by the fountain. A

few feet away the running cat form changed into black mist again. As it approached the fruit the mist vanished, leaving behind a worm, shorter than my finger. This worm reached the pomegranate and disappeared inside it. Immediately the fruit swelled to the size of a watermelon. As the piebald wolf reached the pomegranate it burst, scattering a shower of juicy red pieces and a hundred seeds about the courtyard.

The wolf stopped and stood eyeing the scattered fruit pulp and seeds, apparently uncertain how to respond. For a brief moment silence reigned in the courtyard. But then Sitt changed into a snow-white cock. This fowl ran quickly from seed to seed, pecking at and swallowing them.

The cock made quick work of the seeds it could see, including any left in the pieces of fruit. The means by which witch and Jinni fought had long since passed my understanding, but I sensed that to win, Sitt must find and devour every seed. In minutes the cock seemed to have done that. It looked around, and saw none left. Then the cock turned to us, standing against the library wall watching, and crowed, clearly an inquiry. I walked forward, scanning the stone floor very carefully, looking for any overlooked seed. The cock too continued searching, moving out in a wide arc around the edge of the pool.

Looking ahead, I spotted one final seed that had escaped Sitt's notice, lying in a crack where the stone base of the pool's low wall rested on the floor. I turned and cried out to the cock, pointing — and the last seed rose into the air, changing into a fish as it did so. This fish plunged into the water of the large basin, disappearing in its depths.

The cock had been running toward me. It lifted into the air a few feet away and changed into a fish, larger than the form assumed by the Ifrit, as it reached the basin. The fish fell into the water with a splash, and vanished below the surface.

The King and Mukbil rushed to join me. We stood staring down at water that was less than clear, for the first time unable to follow the fierce battle. We did hear cries coming from under the surface, shrieks of pain and bellows of rage. Only a short time passed before the water of the basin boiled, as if suddenly heated by a great fire below. We backed away, fearful again, retreating to the library wall. Jirjaris rose from the depths and hovered over the water, back in his huge natural form, but with a cloud of black smoke pouring from both ears. He opened his mouth, and

tongues of flame shot out between the two long teeth, until he snapped it closed.

The Ifrit saw us cowering against the wall, and turned as if to attack. Before he could, the Princess rose out of the water behind him. She too had returned to her own body, but the same dark smoke poured from her ears. She opened her pretty mouth, and fires red and black as those from hell streamed out.

Sitt cut off the flames and flew toward the Ifrit. When close to him she opened her mouth, as wide as she could, and hurled a blast of flame at Jirjaris. He dodged aside, moving very quickly through the air, and in turn tried to envelop her in a cloud of fire. Sitt flew to her left, and again tried to burn him in a long tongue of flame. They avoided each other's attempts at incineration, moving through the air with the speed of hawks. Both seemed to need a moment to recover between bursts, but then sent out fresh flames in a renewed attack. The black smoke constantly billowing from their ears soon filled the courtyard. Our vision became obscured, and we coughed and hacked as we stood with our backs to the library wall, watching.

"Would to heaven I had not urged my daughter to disenchant this ape fellow," the old King said to Mukbil, ignoring me, whom before he had treated as a Prince. "I imposed on her this battle with yon Ifrit, an evil one so mighty all the armies of Man could not prevail against him. I thought to do a good deed, and earn some of Allah's grace. Instead I have brought calamity upon us. I curse the day I took this fellow under my protection."

The circling of the two opponents about the courtyard had brought Jirjaris unpleasantly close to us, and he happened to glance our way. Through the gloom of the smoke-filled arena I saw a sudden wicked smile, and followed his thinking. Killing her father would certainly distract the mighty witch; perhaps give him a chance to burn her. He moved toward us, rearing higher in the air. I saw his great chest inflate as he gathered air to hurl a blast of flame, one that would incinerate all three of us puny humans.

But Princess Sitt had had the recovery time she needed. When Jirjaris turned away from her she flew at him like a stooping falcon. A huge tongue of flame burst from her mouth and enveloped his tall body, just as he started his own blast. The fire that would have burned us alive fell short,

but several sparks leaped from its edge. One hit the King, and suddenly he was beating at a fire in his long white beard. Another reached Mukbil, and pierced him to the heart; the eunuch fell dead. One foul spark landed in my left eye, which went instantly blind.

I cried out from the pain, rubbing at the burning eye, which only made it hurt more. After a moment I realized my folly, closed that eye, and tried to ignore it as I looked about for Princess Sitt. She was now on the ground and walking toward us. Smoke no longer poured from her ears. She stepped around a thick pile of ashes, the remains of the mighty Ifrit Jirjaris bin Rajmus, and embraced the King, who had succeeded in putting out the fire in his beard.

Sitt looked down at her second father, the dead eunuch Mukbil, and tears filled her eyes. But a great urgency drove her, leaving no time for grief. "Come, time is short," she said to her father and me, and led us across the courtyard to the basin, from whose surface smoke still rose.

Sitt picked up a cup that lay nearby and filled it from the basin. She slowly poured the water over my hairy head while muttering some ancient words from arcane texts, none of which I understood. The world grew dim to the sight of my one eye, which I closed. I felt faint and dizzy, but managed to keep from falling. After a moment my strength returned. I opened my eye, blinking to clear my vision, and saw that I observed the world from twice as far above the floor as before. The rich robe the King had given me, formerly bunched around my waist, now fell only to my ankles.

I ran my hands over my body, hardly able to believe, after two months as a tailless ape, that I had become human again. But I was seeing with only my right eye. The spell the Princess had cast to restore me had not healed my hurt. And I knew now that I had been wrong to believe all magic worked by a Jinni ended with his death.

"Rejoice at being returned to your proper form," said Princess Sitt. "But what exceedingly benefited you has dearly cost my papa and me." She turned to her father. "I won this long battle because Jirjaris misjudged his timing when he tried to slay you. In desperation when I attacked him as a fish, he opened on me the Gate of Fire. I had to respond in kind, or die on the instant. But when the door to fire opens, few there are who pass through it unharmed. Though he knew it not, the evil one wounded me with a fire arrow in the first few minutes. I burn inside, Papa. Flames

consume me, body and soul, and the pain is unbearable. Allah granted me the victory, and you and this young Prince are saved. But I cannot endure this torment any longer. Good-bye, my beloved Papa. I wish you joy in paradise."

Princess Sitt turned from us, raised her arms, spread them wide, and looked up into the sky. Tears ran down her cheeks. In a choked, faltering voice she begged for Allah's mercy, to be relieved of the terrible pain burning inside her. As she prayed, a large spark suddenly appeared between her sandaled feet, burned brightly for a second, shot up to her thighs, paused, lifted again to her bosom, hesitated, then rose to hover before her face. She smiled, as if welcoming an old friend, and opened her mouth. The spark darted inside.

Princess Sitt collapsed to the stones of the courtyard, changing into a heap of black ashes as she fell.

The King rushed toward what had been his daughter, and knelt by the ash pile. He ripped away the remnants of his beard and tore his clothes, weeping all the while. I knelt by him, weeping also, and started to tear at the rich robe he had sent to cover the hairy nakedness of an ape. Before I could rend the garment the King turned to me, and his tears dried up. "Young man, I have on your account lost my beloved daughter, and the eunuch who raised her from birth. Through my Chief Mameluke I warranted your safety, and it was my own idea to free you; thus I cannot hold you to blame. Nevertheless, you have brought tragedy and the greatest of sorrows to my court. The sight of you causes me unbearable grief, and always will. Go you now on the next ship that departs the harbor, and never again show your face in my city."

I went from my knees to my face on the stone floor, then crawled backward from the King until I could rise to my feet. I left the palace and fled toward the harbor. Before reaching it I saw a public bath, entered, and presented my expensive robe to the proprietor. In return he allowed me to cleanse my body, then shaved my head, beard, and eyebrows, as a sign of the extreme mortification life had brought me. He gave me the coarse black robe of a Kalandar to cover my nakedness. At the harbor, I found a ship leaving within the hour for Baghdad. After learning I was an educated man, the captain agreed I could work for my passage. I spent the two-week voyage updating, checking, and correcting his books of trade.

There being no further accounting to do, the captain put me ashore in Baghdad. Penniless, I sought work for three days, in vain. This night, hungry and weak, I wandered the streets until I found myself standing in the road before a spacious house. I saw another Kalandar ahead of me, observed that he also was blind in the left eye, and gave him greeting. He returned my salute and we fell into discourse, but were interrupted by the arrival of still a third black-robed Kalandar. I noted with wonder that he, like ourselves, retained the use of only his right eye. All three being strangers in this great city, hungry and without money, we decided to knock on the door of your house, to implore some scraps of food and shelter in your stable, in the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful. Your servants admitted us, but instead of food and water they provided us with shackles and ropes. These three who came later, and the porter already here, you treated the same.

"That is my tale," I said, crawling back to my place in the line of captive men. "I hope it has pleased you, my lady."

The oldest but most beautiful of the three sisters smiled. "It is indeed a wondrous tale, and by it you have earned your freedom. Rise, rub your head, and go your way." She gestured to one of her brawny Nubians to advance and release me.

"If it is agreeable to you, most honorable lady, I will stay, and hear the tale of this third Kalandar, and of the three other travelers yet to be heard from."

The two sisters on either side of the senior lady put their lips to her ears, after which she nodded to me. "Very well, if that is your wish. But know that, as with the porter and the first Kalandar, to stay is to chance losing your head. Leaving now assures your safety."

I looked at the seven huge black men with long swords, standing at restful ease around the large chamber, and debated with myself as to whether any story could be worth possibly losing my head. But this was such a night as few experience in their lifetimes, long though they might be. I decided hearing the tales yet to be told was worth the risk, and said so aloud.

"So be it," said the eldest lady, and gestured for the third Kalandar to move forward. I sat back to enjoy his story.... ¶