

## The Magic Lamp

By Charles Niu

A light breeze sweeps gently over cool sands, blurring the faded glimmer of the Moon's light. A small djinn, made of gravel and dead shrubbery, stirs up in a tiny whirlwind, but dissipates as quickly as it was formed, scattering back into the sands. The city is quiet. The stumble of an alley cat is heard in the distance, and the soft tinkling of shop bells sets a muted rhythm to the night. Moonlight seeps through the curtains of the bazaar, casting grey shadows behind draperies of red, yellow, and azure. Every stand sits emptied, their shopkeepers safeguarding their wares from the night's vagrants. The only light comes from a nearby caravanserai, where weary travelers take rest after a long journey. The tired whinny of their horses are followed by the pungent smell of animal dung, dulled by an even fouler smell coming from the market center. The market is dead. Pieces of metal shine against the dirt street: a spearhead buried in the ground, spikes broken off a shattered cudgel. An abandoned palanquin rests in the middle of the crossway. A shapeless mass lies beside it, unmoving; the smell of dried blood and decay. Street rats scurry back and forth around the corpse. In a shadowy corner, a small figure hides from the peering moonlight, with thin hands clasping a golden lamp.

The figure eyed the lamp hungrily, carefully rotating it with both hands. The street was quiet enough for him to hear his own haggard breathing as it fogged his reflection in the cold metal, but he could still make out the image his boyish teeth chattering to form a grin. He finally got it. He had heard them talking about it earlier, when he was tailing the caravan. *A magic lamp*, one of the soldiers had called it, *capable of granting any wish you could desire*. *A cursed bottle*, another soldier warned, *used by Magi to summon terrible Djinnns*. Wild superstitions, as the boy had dismissed, after all, why would a powerful spirit ever obey a mortal? There was one thing

they said that did catch the boy's attention however. *Without a doubt*, agreed the soldiers, *this vessel is valuable beyond the rarest of sapphires*. "Beyond the rarest of sapphires", the boy mused. The thought of it cracked an even wider grin on his face. His reflection in the lamp grinned back, nakedly revealing missing teeth. The boy caught his breath and quickly tried to snuff out the image. He rubbed at the lamp feverishly, as though he could smudge out the crooked face with the oils from his unkempt fingers. A pain tugged on his gut that finally stopped him and instead forced the boy to clutch his stomach. A loud growl echoed through the silent street. It felt like his stomach was going to fall through his body, yet the boy did not wince. With heavy breaths, he held the lamp up to his face again. His eyes were unmoving as he stared at it longingly. He finally got it. With some spit he wiped the occlusion off its surface and peered into his distorted reflection, his own skeletal face stared back. He studied the visage, keeping calm. "I am Abar," he whispered to himself, "and with you, I will never go hungry again."

His eyes strayed up, surveying the carnage left over in the dark street. By now, more rats had discovered the corpse and joined in the fray. Abar watched the rats fight amongst themselves, remembering a very different fight that happened earlier in the same spot. He wondered to himself if he should feel remorseful for the soldier, whose death distracted the crowd long enough for Abar to sneak into the palanquin. Most likely the son of another farmer suffering from the drought, brought on to guard the caravan of a rich effendi. When the mob couldn't capture the effendi, they turned to stoning his guard. *That which is not given must be taken* they shouted. A life for a life – that was the way of the desert. Abar quietly pitied the soldier, but a feeling of hatred suddenly swelled up inside him. Why would they attack a guard, who was innocent to their frustrations? His mother had always told him that the taking of a life is a sin – surely they knew that they would be condemned to the Abyss for committing murder? A

violent cough overtook Abar, followed by another jolt of pain from his stomach. An unsettling feeling of guilt pressed on him; he used the death of the guard to steal the lamp. Abar wondered if that meant that he too was condemned to the Abyss. “That which is not given must be taken” he whispered aloud. Abar patted his depressed stomach and concluded that there was nothing that a boy like him could have done for the guard. But with this lamp, Abar thought to himself, even he could be as rich as an effendi. Everyone would have to listen to him – no, he would be above the problems of mere commoners, and he would be able to eat whatever he wanted! Even still, he sighed, the lamp would do nothing to cure his ails this night. Abar’s ears peaked up as he heard the sound of sandals pattering on gravel; a hooded figure walked by. Another lecher headed for a brothel. Instinctively, Abar thought to beg for food, but quickly caught the idea in his throat, choosing instead to scuffle further into the shadows. He tore off a sleeve from his tunic and wrapped it around his lamp to conceal it. Abar remembered a time when he did ask for charity from passersby; if he was lucky they would spit on him, or maybe even beat him, but most of the time he was treated as if he wasn’t even there. As if he was already dead. Abar had since learned that he was better off scrounging on his own.

He gathered himself to walk in the opposite direction, hugging the shadows underneath the colored canopies. He had become accustomed to living off scraps left over in the bazaar, but the growing unrest from the drought had made food all the scarcer to find. Abar touched the bevel of his ribs under his rags and wondered if he could survive going another night without anything to eat. Rows upon rows of market stands stretched into the darkness ahead of him. The first time he tried to walk the bazaar in its entirety he had quickly found himself hopelessly lost in the maze of vendors. He was missing for a week before his father had finally found him. It

was the first time he understood hunger. Ironic now that the bazaar had turned out to be the best place for a boy like him to find food.

It didn't take long before he came upon a rat lying dead in the street, dimly visible. Abar had never eaten rat before. He looked down at it, stretching a shaky finger to prod it, and noticed that the rat's entrails had been freshly ripped out. But more to Abar's surprise, the pasty moonlight had unveiled a web of thin blue veins protruding from his bony arm. When had I become this skinny? Abar thought to himself. The rat meanwhile, continued to lay there, looking so plump and juicy. With the drought and the riots, if anything was eating well recently, it was the rats. Rats – feeding on human flesh, Abar recalled, stone-faced. He set the lamp down, still bundled in torn linen, as he knelt next to the rat and stared at it quietly, jaws clenched. If he was already condemned for thieving, what does it matter now if he consumes human flesh?

A growl reverberated through the street, prompting Abar to look up. This time it wasn't his stomach. Angry yellow eyes leered at him from the night's shadows. A pack of street dogs stepped into view, barring wet teeth, snarling. Abar suddenly felt really foolish; food doesn't simply fall from the night sky, of course the rat was another's bounty. As he made to stand up he realized that the dogs had already surrounded him. The thought passed through Abar's head – is this how I die? He made a quick decision, to sprint away and pray that he could outrun them. As he motioned to run however, his foot caught a snag and threw his whole body to the ground. Abar felt the wind knocked out of him as his body went numb. Ears ringing, he cursed his frailty for dooming him like this. As his vision blurred he could barely make out the rapid pattering of someone's sandals, and the faded sound of yelling. Then everything went black, darker than a night with no moon.

-----

It was his nose that eventually woke him up. The smell of bread. It had been so long, Abar doubted that he could even remember what bread smells like. When his eyelids did peel apart, he was surprised to find a loaf of bread staring back in his face. Abar wondered if this was one of those “mirages” he had heard about from tailing soldiers who had been on campaign, and haltingly reached out his hand. When it connected with solid bread, a sudden surge of energy flowed through Abar, and he threw himself at his prey. Tears wet his face as he gorged himself on the bread. Through choked breaths, Abar accepted that he must have made it to Paradise after all.

“A mighty appetite, effendi!” a voice called out.

Abar had not yet taken in his surroundings, and became crestfallen as he realized he had awoken in the same place where the dogs had attacked him – although daylight had changed his surroundings considerably. He sat in the shade of a tall sandstone house, at the end of the bazaar. The dead rat was still there, just a few paces away from him, almost unrecognizable from the blanket of roaches that now writhed on top of it. A small fountain nearby pouted the sound of rushing water, making Abar suddenly very thirsty. He was not dead. Abar tried to recollect what had happened the previous night. He was sure the dogs would have ripped him limb from limb if someone hadn’t come and rescued him, but what would anyone have to gain from saving him? Abar looked at the bread in his hands. The way of the desert – a life for a life. Nothing is free, he reminded himself.

“Your bread is yet but half-finished!” the voice rang again.

Abar turned to the source of the voice, and saw a young man seated on the steps nearby. He wore a tattered green coat with golden fetters, the uniform of the imperial cavalry corps, but

from his dirtied complexion and ripped outfit, Abar could tell that it has been a while since this youth saw service – perhaps a deserter, or just another street vagrant that stripped the coat off a dead cavalryman. The youth was holding onto a tall stick, which he used to stand himself up and walk over. Abar noticed a slight huddle in his steps, and realized the youth was a cripple.

“It’s a good thing I found you effendi, those dogs would have suffered a particularly bony snack last night if I didn’t.” the young man chuckled as he hobbled over.

It dawned on Abar that he must be in some kind of trap. As the man approached, Abar anxiously snatched up the remaining bread and shuffled backwards. He had heard faint mention before of slavers from the outlands who kidnapped boys his age, although this man looked far too ragged to be a slaver – more likely a hired thug. Abar looked around to see if there were others with him; brigands were well known to work in groups. Not watching where he was going however, Abar stumbled over something on the ground, but managed to catch himself before falling down this time. Cursing again, Abar looked down. It was the lamp, wrapped in his rags, still sitting on the ground where he had left it earlier.

As if reading his mind, the young man spoke up. “Ah yes, you tripped over that last night during your little scrape with the dogs” Abar maintained a wary silence, darting his eyes around for the best direction to flee. “Might I ask what it is?” The man approached, making his way to reach for the lamp. Abar reacted, hastily snatching up the lamp as quick as he could, turning to run, but the polished metal slipped through his clumsy bundle and fell to the ground with a soft thud. Frozen with a dumb look on his face, Abar could not decide if he was more shocked to have dropped his precious lamp, or to have had it revealed.

The young man, mouth open, quickly collected himself and squatted down to inspect it. He showed a boyish fascination with the lamp, looking at it from every angle but making sure not to touch it. “What is this?” he said, with one hand rubbing a chin that gave only the faintest hints of a scraggly beard.

“I-It’s nothing,” Abar’s held a defensive posture, his body was still sore from the previous night, but he would not show vulnerability. Slaver or not, he would not let this footpad take what was his. “A family trinket.” He lied under his breath.

The young man raised an eyebrow to Abar while straightening up. “I do not believe that. What family would leave one as young as you out alone with an item such as this? You will have to try harder than that, effendi.”

Abar bent down to pick up the lamp again, which was thankfully undamaged. The day’s pedestrians passed by without a glance in his direction. Shop peddlers could be heard in the distance touting off their wares. Abar realized he was still safe as long as there were people nearby. “Leave me be, brigand, before I call out against you.” he hissed, keeping his gaze on the ground.

Yet the young man only pressed closer, looming over the boy at twice his height. “You may *call* me Raab,” he said with confident eyes. “And we both know you dare not bring attention to yourself.” Noticing the way the boy backed up however, the young man’s expression softened. “Don’t worry effendi, I’m not looking to harm you.”

Abar swallowed dry spit, and nearly fell over again. The brigand was right, others would be just as suspicious about his lamp. Irritated by Raab’s persistence, he lashed out. “This is mine, I found it. I will choose what I wish to do with it. A-A thousand deaths for all thieves!”

Raab tilted his head and pursed his lips in a smile. “But how was it that you came to possess such a treasure?”

“That’s none of your busi –”

“In your other hand, what do you carry?” interrupted Raab. He pointed at the remaining bread in Abar’s hand. “You were food for the dogs last night, effendi. Yet here you stand before me.” He turned his finger to Abar. “A life for a life. And I saved yours doubly. You are indebted to me.” he said with a glint in his eye.

The shade had lifted to allow the sun to beat a heavy drop of sweat down Abar’s temple. The brigand knew about the lamp, he knew about the dogs, and he even knew to give Abar bread. It is blasphemy to break the debt of a life-saving bond. A life for a life – that was the way of the desert. Abar felt an uneasy heat quell up inside of him. “It belonged to an effendi – a real effendi. I stole it from his caravan.” Abar admitted begrudgingly.

Raab nodded as if he already knew. “And you planned to sell it.” Abar nodded in silence. “I’m curious as to how you intended to find a buyer.”

It occurred to Abar that he had not actually thought that far, it had been enough for him to have managed to swipe the lamp. He tried to maintain his confidence, but he felt his face betray him, reddening as blood rushed to his head. “The shop owners in the bazaar-”

“Would take your hand for a thief, and pay you nothing – or maybe worse... ‘A thousand deaths for all thieves’ I hear it’s said” Raab gave a wry smile. Abar felt a terrible sinking feeling in his empty stomach. Nearby, the bronze coats of the roaches glinted under the sun as they continued to fight over the rat carcass. When Abar continued to stay silent, Raab spoke up, “We must return this lamp, effendi.”

“We?” cried Abar. “You would just report me to the guards!”

“Guards?” Raab laughed. “Forget about what guards may do. What happens to oath breakers in the afterlife, effendi?”

The man would not stop mocking him. If Abar really became an effendi he would not have to put up with the prattle of this street thug, but if he was an effendi he would not have had to steal the lamp either. Abar felt his face reddening even more as he became increasingly mad at himself. “S-Stop calling me that!” Abar screamed through halted breaths. “I-I have nothing! No riches. And now you would even take this lamp from me.” Abar fell to his knees, holding back tears.

“That is where you are wrong again, effendi.” replied Raab calmly. “The boy I see before me is rich. Rich with new *life*. And that is something I could not take away from anyone.” He knelt down and forced Abar to see him face to face. Looking him straight in the eye Raab cracked a wide crooked grin lined with missing teeth. For some reason Raab felt warm and familiar to Abar. “Come, come!” Raab spoke up. “We will make our way to the Vizier’s palace to return this lamp to its rightful owner.” He pushed himself up with his stick and turned, already knowing Abar to follow.

Abar sat still, making sure to give no signs that he almost cried. The rat carcass was bare now, its bones baked naked white under the sun. He suddenly remembered that he was very thirsty. He made a quick run to the fountain for a drink before following after Raab. Abar noted that since the drought began it had been incredibly uncommon for any water to flow through the fountains. Even still, the water tasted bittersweet when matched with his fate. At least he would not be hanged an oath-breaker.

-----

The Vizier's palace sat at the center, an isolated acropolis looming above the rest of the city. On some nights Abar would make his way up to the rooftops of the bazaar to see the gilded dome of the palace glitter in the moonlight; he could even make out the fires burning at the top of the four cardinal spires. The palace was made by the old shahs, or so the soldiers had said. Abar found it interesting that he spent most of his time in the past following soldiers and listening to their tales. Now that he was bound to this life-debt, things he once took for granted in his past suddenly seemed more important. Yet even now he still follows a soldier, at least in uniform. Though he could not trust what this deserter's intentions were, he no longer had a choice. In a way Abar found some relief in being powerless to someone else's decisions, he no longer had to fear the responsibility of his own mistakes.

The parched ground cracked beneath him with every step, throwing off his footing every once in a while, but Abar continued to sulk forward. He felt pain from his skinny knees as they quivered with every step, while his calloused feet no longer told him how they felt. In front of him, Raab marched with a lighthearted grace, hardly using his walking stick. Abar noted with a bit of envy that the ground remained firm for Raab's steps, in fact, his curled boots didn't even seem to make sound as he walked. It had been hours since they had left the bazaar, and though he was hungry, Abar preserved the remaining piece of bread in his tunic to save for when he really needed it. The golden lamp had become more of a curse than a boon, and its weight threatened to force it out of his grasp again, only this time it might well take Abar's arms with it.

The sun had begun to set when Raab finally motioned to stop. He turned to look at Abar, "Do you know where we are effendi?" he asked.

Abar had been staring hard at the ground all day, in a vain search for a worm to serve as his next meal. He did not look up when he replied, “No.”

“Look above you.” Raab directed with his stick.

Abar looked up. The wind forced his eyes to squint but what he saw took his breath away. He was standing beneath a gigantic arch. It was taller than anything he had ever seen. Twice as tall as the minaret Abar’s seen in the bazaar. The arch stood at the top of a small hill, with its stacks of polished sandstone glowing a blinding orange to greet the setting sun. As the sun continued to go down however, deep shadows cut into the arch, and Abar could make out numerous cracks and holes dotting the structure. The shadows of other half-destroyed ruins also deepened, revealing them from their cover of dirt and grass.

As if reading Abar’s mind, Raab spoke up, “We’re in the old city. The center of the ancient Empire. Known in legend to have enslaved the Djinns and used their power conquer half the world, and then to build colossal wonders such as this to commemorate its victories.” Raab reached his arms out in front of him, as if to measure the size of the arch he stood beneath. He was panting in wonder. Abar had heard as much from the soldiers he tailed, but nothing could have prepared him for the sheer size of the monument. For some reason standing beside it instilled a sense of pride in Abar. His father had once told him that he carried the blood of the ancient Empire in his veins. The memory brought out a faint tear from the corner of his eye, but Abar made sure to wipe it away before Raab turned to look at him.

“We shall rest here tonight effendi.” Raab decided, “There is a small pond nearby, you should use it to clean yourself.” He pointed down the hill, before himself departing.

“W-wait! Where are you going?” Abar called out.

“You’re a grown effendi aren’t you? Surely you do not need me to wash you as well!”

Raab shouted back mockingly.

Abar fumed. The brigand was still mocking him. Maybe he should steal those boots of his when he sleeps, just to teach him a lesson, but Abar quickly threw off the idea, as such thoughts were what got him into this mess in the first place. Being angry soon became too tiresome of an activity. The sun had all but set by now. The melodic chirps of crickets welcomed Abar as he made his way down the hill and parted the tall reeds, discovering the small pond hidden behind them. He made sure to set the lamp down on dry ground, before slowly taking off his tunic. Abar winced as the linen stubbornly tugged onto his dry scaly skin, peeling off chunks of it as the tunic came off. His bare body was purpled with bruises while his extruding ribs cut deep shadows into his chest. Despite this Abar felt pleased to see his stomach develop a small bloat, assuming it to be the bread he had eaten days before. His haggard breathing was matched by the soft croaking of unseen frogs, and he noted that he would need to catch one to eat before he left. Abar waded into the water and began washing himself. The pond was shallow but Abar had become accustomed to low water from cleaning himself in market fountains – the few times they had flowed during the drought. He was careful not to scrub too hard, as his patchy skin kept painfully rubbing off. Abar recalled a time when he used to complain about how his mother would scrub too hard. He quickly brushed off the memory.

When he finished cleaning himself he made his way back to dry ground. He shook his head around vigorously in the same way he saw dogs do after coming out of the bazaar fountains. His hair sprayed water everywhere. It was even kind of fun. He reached for his tunic, but instead he was distracted by yellow blotches that had formed on his stomach. A short rustle from behind caught his attention however, prompting him to turn around. The lamp was gone.

A feeling of dread slowly overtook Abar as he stared at the empty ground in front of him. With a mad fervor he leapt into the tall reeds, following the sound of the rustle. Whoever stole his lamp could not have made it far. Abar surprised himself at how fast he could move in the heat of the moment. Insects that he would once consider food were now hindrances that darted into his eyes, and Abar could not count how many times the sharp reed leaves cut into his bare body, but he had to get the lamp back. It had been his only hope. What would the brigand do to him if he lost the lamp? – Probably end up selling him as a slave after all. Abar heard something cry out in the darkness ahead of him. He turned to the direction of the sound, running forward, preparing to pounce.

Abar parted the reeds to a small moonlit clearing and saw a small figure laying on the ground. A boy even younger than Abar was curled in a fetal position, panting meekly while clutching the lamp, which was almost the size of his whole body. Abar saw the drum of a broken stone column on the ground half covered in grass, and pieced together that the boy had tripped over it during the pursuit. Abar felt his face contort into a devilish grin. Maybe someone is watching out for me after all, thought Abar as he stepped forward. He was finally bigger than his opponent. Abar felt a great sense of power. A thousand deaths for all thieves, thought Abar. As he got closer however, Abar slowed to a halt and his grin gave way to gape. The shriveled figure before him had translucent skin that barely stretched enough to cover his scalp, which was itself poorly patched with hair. A tattered cloth failed to cover a stomach that was far more bloated than Abar's. For some reason Abar no longer felt that the bloat was a sign of being full. When the boy's eyes opened and saw Abar, he gave a panicked expression. He left the lamp on the ground and scuttled backwards until his back hit the column. But Abar could no longer bring himself to harm the pitiful thing, he could only stare. The full moon reflected brightly into the

boy's wide frightful eyes. It was the second full moon that Abar had seen since he had been left alone, after his father died on campaign and his mother fell to the drought. The memory chilled his bones, but Abar remained expressionless, even as he felt tears wet his face.

"I am the same as you." Abar found himself saying. No response. Abar wondered what the boy could be thinking; probably asking himself if he could escape. What should I do? Abar asked himself. Should I let him go? An idea suddenly came to him, and he reached into the folds of his tunic and pulled out the remaining piece of bread. A life for a life, thought Abar, as he reached out a thin arm to hand it to the boy. The boy stared back at him but gave no reaction save for the drool that began collecting at the edge of his mouth. Abar decided to lightly toss the bread at him. It landed on the ground between them, collecting dirt. The boy looked at the bread, and back to Abar before apprehensively crawling forward to pick up the bread. He slowly brought the bread to his face and began nibbling on it.

Now you are in debt to me, thought Abar. The boy however, only gave him a look. A look that saw Abar as a fool. The boy slowly extended a finger pointing to the blotches on Abar's naked stomach. With wide eyes and a soft voice he sounded out "P-la-gue." Then with an inhuman trill of glee the boy hopped on all fours and quickly dashed back into the thick of the reeds. He was out of sight before Abar could even make a sound. A hush of silence took him as the boy's trill echoed in Abar's ears.

A voice eventually broke the silence. "You did well, effendi."

Abar turned to the voice, Raab stepped out from the shadow of a broken column. Abar looked down in thought. "He broke the bond."

“There is no bond,” Raab replied. “None, at least, that you can wish upon him. Let the afterlife decide his fate. You sacrificed to save his life.”

Abar still felt unsettled. “What he said –”

Raab rapped on a stone ruin with his stick. “Don’t mind that. We have a journey ahead of us yet effendi, and you will need your rest, come.”

The full moon gave light to their path. Even though he did not eat, Abar no longer felt his stomach aching that night. A faint smile brushed his lips as he followed Raab back up to the arch.

-----

The next morning Abar finally made it to the heart of the city, the Citizen’s plaza. More people than he had ever seen in his life were passing about on the plaza, going about their daily routines.

“A place of high culture and learning,” interjected Raab, again as though he could read Abar’s thoughts. “The greatest madrasas in the land are located here. Scholars from across the world pilgrimage here.” Of course, Abar had heard it all before, students from lower schools wouldn’t shut up about it when passing through the bazaar. Raab paid no mind to Abar’s lack of attention, inhaling heavily he continued “And above it all is –”

The Vizier’s Palace, finished Abar, blocking out the rest of what Raab was saying. It loomed over the plaza like a mountain of solid limestone; its spires were even taller up close, reaching above the clouds; its dome was blinding in the morning sunlight, prompting Abar to bring a hand up to his eyes. The violent cough came back to him however, forcing the hand back

down to cover his mouth as he wretched a bloody spittle into his palm. His cough had gotten worse ever since his stomach stopped aching, almost as though the ache had simply moved, every hour he felt it more and more in his head. Dizzily, Abar put the back of his hand up to his forehead, and felt an unusual heat.

Where should we go now? thought Abar.

“We could probably find something if we head towards the Palace gates, effendi.” said Raab, sounding a bit more tired than usual.

As they cut through the plaza, Abar saw all kinds of people mixed together. They walked past artisans carrying their heavy tools, and cavalrymen trotting by on barded horses, as well as people who wore strange clothing and spoke in tongues Abar had never heard before. He even saw a number of palanquins riding on the shoulders of dozens of servants, carrying effendis that seemed far wealthier than the one he stole from. There were also the lower people, quiet thieves who tried to make themselves unnoticeable, and loud beggars who only managed to go unnoticed. Abar hugged the lamp a little closer to his chest, being careful not to lose either it, or who he was following, to the bustling crowd. Raab was not as much of the standout he used to be. Abar could tell that the journey had taken strains on him as well. His upbeat march was now a slow-paced haggles, and he was ever more reliant on his stick to stand himself up. Abar felt a taut of concern for him, even as he himself hacked out another patch of blood.

The gates to the palace were as colossal as the arch Abar had stood under. Two gargantuan blood-red doors lined with brass bosses, and a large gilded lock to keep it all sealed. There was no way he could pass through here. The feeling of hopelessness slowly dawned on Abar. He retched blood again, stumbling to keep his footing. All feeling in his body began to

numb. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead. Even Raab showed signs of defeat, limping towards the wall, only to sit down with his back against it.

“I may need to rest for a while, effendi.”

Abar was not ready to call an end yet, even as the sweltering heat of the sun hazed his vision. He paced up and down the wall. It seemed to stretch on forever on both sides. The sun had reached its zenith when Abar finally came upon a tiny crack in the limestone, just large enough for a small boy to fit through. Abar did not even think to thank his luck, he immediately began squeezing himself through it. The rough stone cut deep gnashes into Abar’s chest and face, but he no longer cared, he became numb to the pain. When he finally got across, Abar could not help but collapse on the ground, barely catching himself with his wavering arms, dropping his bundled lamp. He spat blood on the green lawn of the palace courtyard. But it was not over, Abar picked up the lamp again, and raised himself up, staggering towards the nearest building.

The door was left open. Abar entered into a darkly lit room, in its center was a desk that stood a head taller than he did.

“H-hello?” Abar called out as he made his way towards the desk.

A voice responded “Yes? Who is it?”

“I-I’m Abar.” he croaked, “A-am I in the right place?”

A patterned kufi peaked over the edge of the desk, resting on bushy eyebrows and followed by a thin face. “Well you’ve reached my office. I’m the palace scribe.”

“I-I wish to return this.” said Abar meekly, shakily lifting up the bundled lamp with both arms. “I-It does not belong to me.”

The scribe gave a bored look as the lamp was raised onto the table. Raising a bushy brow, he ripped apart the cloth bundle, and inspected the lamp. After a short moment he piped up, “Worthless,” tossing the lamp at Abar’s feet, “Are you here to insult me?”

The words cut like a knife into Abar’s heart. He stood frozen. Even though time passed at the same pace, every instant became sharper. He felt a bone in his body break with every clang of the lamp as it cracked on the stone floor. Abar’s head screamed in pain and confusion.

“W-What d-do you mean. This –” he sputtered. “V-Valuable beyond s-sapphires...”

“That piece of shit? Hmph.” the scribe scoffed “No more valuable than the rags it was wrapped in.”

“B-But it belonged to an e-effendi –”

“– he probably used it as a piss pot.”

Abar could not believe what he was hearing. Every point in his body was on fire.

“T-The guards! They spoke of Djinn...”

“Ho! Of course...the ‘Djinn that were sealed away by the old shahs.’” The scribe’s face looked thoroughly humored. “But *everyone* knows that rubbing the lamp releases the Djinn, leaving the lamp worthless.”

“R-Rubbing?!” Abar stammered. He had remembered rubbing the lamp to block out his visage, the night the dogs attacked.

“Oh yes indeed” said the scribe, “Now away with you, street pest, before I call for the guards.”

Abar was delirious. He picked up the pieces of the lamp and carried them off with him out onto the courtyard. His head felt incredibly heavy as he made his way through the crack in the wall, back towards the gate to find Raab. With each step his pace slowed and his eyesight gradually blurred. He was positive of what he heard the soldiers say, the lamp was *without a doubt* beyond the rarest of sapphires. If this meant that the lamp possessed a Djinn, he must have unwittingly released it the night the dogs attacked, yet the only thing that appeared to him that night was...Raab. Why had Raab helped him all this time? A life for a life. The life-saving bond. It all made sense. When he rubbed the lamp that night and freed Raab from his imprisonment, Raab owed him a debt. The lamp was worthless now because Raab had been the treasure the whole time. Abar felt his body go into violent convulsions, yet against it all he let out a hoot and laughed at the sky.

The laughter slowly turned to sobs, as Abar felt his legs give out from beneath him. It had been so long since he had a meal. Abar lifted his tunic to reveal a significantly more bloated stomach. The yellow blotches that lined it had turned black, and spewed bits of pus. Abar continued to drag himself along the side of the wall. The crawl eventually became a writhe. And before long he stopped moving entirely.

On the edge of the plaza, in front of the palace, at the center of the city, the starving creature laid motionless, unnoticed by the citizens who continued to pass by going about their business. Abar felt tears stream down his face for the last time. All he ever wanted was to make his father proud, to be a good soldier like him. When his father died, he promised he would be strong and take care of his mother. But instead his mother saved all of her rations for him,

starving herself. Abar could not even take care of himself when he was alone. Instead he disgraced their sacrifice by turning to thievery. He could not even perform the deed of returning the lamp. Abar thought of the city around him, the massive structures society had achieved without him. He thought of the boy he gave bread to, who looked at him a fool. He thought of the corpse of the soldier in the bazaar, whose death served only as a distraction.

Abar looked up, "Raab?"

"Yes?" replied Raab, looking down at Abar.

"Am I still going to the Abyss?" Abar sounded fearful.

Raab was silent for a moment. "I do not know, Abar."

Abar thought back to the rioters who proclaimed that *that which is not given must be taken*. They took the life of the guard, when the life of the effendi was not given. "Back at the fountain," said Abar, "you told me that my life, my new life, was something you could not take from me."

"As it is also something I cannot give to you" replied Raab.

Abar smiled faintly.

"Would you grant me one wish?" asked Abar, as he lost all feeling of his body.

"Of course." said Raab, with a knowing sadness in his gaze.

Abar closed his eyes, "Can you allow me to die, Raab?"

"Yes, Abar." Raab gave a warm smile in return, "I can do that," as he slowly faded into nothing.