

The Book of Scheherazade

It had taken me almost two years to track it down: the Book of Scheherazade. Research, legwork, and summoning just the right simurghs, djinn, and graeae. But it had finally paid off. I found it, and recovered it.

At the time, I was working for one of my professors from Oxford. He had accepted a job as Curator of Supernatural Antiquities at the Museum of Cairo. He knew of Demongate High, and my own abilities, even though he had no powers. Apparently he had some affiliation with the Foundation, but I'm not sure exactly how deep it went. I never asked, and never told him anything he didn't already know.

I had brought the book to him (I continued to call him Professor, even when he was no longer teaching; his actual name was Ahmed Motanni) and he was going to enter it into the museum log, and put it away for safekeeping. Not three days passed, though, before a stranger came to the office.

I had arrived in the morning, just after nine, to find a well-dressed gentleman in the Professor's office. He was short and stocky, spoke with a European accent (I couldn't tell if it was German, Russian, or what), and had an arrow-tipped tail that waved incessantly from under his suit jacket as he spoke. There was a hefty metal briefcase at his feet, and his voice stopped short as I opened the door. When I entered, the professor greeted me, "Marcus, good morning. Do me a favor, would you? Go fetch me the Book of Scheherazade."

I didn't think much of it at the time. I was accustomed to dealing with demons and Cambions of all sorts, and my first thought was that the Foundation had sent this man to examine the book, maybe even take it for safekeeping. So I fetched it without hesitation.

I returned to the office, and caught the end of what the half-demon was saying. "...quite a find, if it is genuine. I have your payment, as promised."

The Professor held up a hand as I entered. "Excellent, Marcus, thank you." He took the book and looked it over quickly. "Yes, the Book of Scheherazade. Within its pages are the lost Arabian arts of Black Magic, and the imprisoned souls of 1,001 fiery afiti. Marcus, would you care to explain to our guest how you managed to find it? Perhaps that will reassure him to its authenticity."

Still not putting two and two together, and trusting my old mentor implicitly, I went into the details, though I won't waste your time with them. As I finished, the half-demon was nodding. "Yes," he said, "a quite compelling story. And I can also sense the Book's power. I have no doubt it is the real thing." And with that, he lifted the briefcase onto the table. I could tell it was heavy by the deep creaking of the wooden desk, but he held it like it was an empty cardboard box. And that was when I realized what was happening.

He popped the latches and opened the case, turning it to face the Professor. As he did so, I saw that it was filled to the brim with gold bars. "The agreed upon payment," he said. "Four million in gold, for the Book."

I couldn't believe my ears. "Excellent," said the Professor. "Such an effortless transaction." He smiled genially.

"Wait a sec," I stammered. "What's going on here? Professor, you're just *selling* the book?"

He looked at me with eyes that showed a mixture of annoyance and disdain. "Don't worry, Marcus," he said. "For your efforts, one of these bars is for you."

"I don't want it," I snapped back, my anger boiling. "I can't believe you'd sell it! We worked so hard to track it down, and to get it here to keep it *safe*! Who knows what this guy is gonna do with it?!"

The Professor shrugged. "That is none of my business." The stranger smiled confidently, as if he had just won a contest, as my mentor spoke. "And none of yours. Now if you'll excuse us," the Professor went on, gesturing to the door.

But my feet wouldn't move, even if I had wanted to back down. This was unacceptable. "I'm sorry, Professor," I hissed through clenched teeth, "but I can't let you sell it. That book is too dangerous."

He glared at me. "That's none of your concern," he retorted abruptly. "Now get out!"

I wouldn't move. My mind was racing. I had to do something. I couldn't let this stranger walk off with the most dangerous ancient artifact I had researched to date. I still had a favor left, and considering the circumstances, I knew now was the time to cash it in. I whipped my hand to the amulet under my shirt, and shouted a name: "Omarek!"

An explosion of smoky brimstone erupted in the air before me, the smoke billowing out in clouds black as night, until brilliant orange flames took their place. When the spectacle cleared, mere seconds later, there floated the fire djinni, Omarek, the afrit who had helped me track down the book in the first place. I knew this sort of task was not part of our original agreement, but it was the last time I could call on him: I felt the amulet crumble to dust. But I had sufficient payment.

"It would seem," the demon said in a rumbling, regal voice, "that this is the last time we will see one another."

I nodded. "And I have a task for you. That case of solid gold there is all yours if you can keep this man from taking that Book."

The djinni took a split second to make his decision. "Agreed," he said. And with that, he raised his hand and unleashed a gout of flame, engulfing the stranger and sending waves of heat smashing throughout the office.

The Professor shouted in terror, and ducked beneath his desk, clutching the Book. Ashes from incinerated papers and burning books cascaded down around him, and I had to shield my eyes from the immense heat. But, much to my astonishment and dismay, the stranger stepped out of the flames unscathed, his eyes glowing angrily. He muttered something in some other language, and then in English went on, "That was a mistake, young man. One that will cost you your life!"

The first thought to cross my mind was that I never asked Omarek to protect me. I had only told him to keep the man from getting the book. And Omarek couldn't harm him, clearly. I had to think fast.

The man, in a single bound, covered the distance between us, and swung a strike at me. I toppled backward, narrowly avoiding disembowelment as his claws tore through my shirt. I saw the remnants of the amulet and its broken chain fly through the air, and beyond them Omarek, swiftly reaching for the gold. The Cambion turned to face him, shouting, "No you don't!" I took the chance to begin another summons, one I knew would work but might spell my own death as well.

The man leapt for the djinni, raking his claws along the demon's bare red back. Omarek let out an infuriated snarl, and struck back, tossing the man through the air, sending him smashing into a bookcase to my right. The man seemed unfazed though, and quickly regained his footing.

I hastened my summons, looking carefully around for the Professor. I had never expected such treachery from him; he had taught me all I believed about safeguarding these dangerous artifacts. It made me wonder how many others he had sold on the black market.

The stranger leapt onto Omarek's back, knocking the afrit off balance and sending heavy gold bars smashing to the floor on the other side of the desk. I heard the Professor squeak like a frightened mouse, and caught a glimpse of him scrambling away, toward me, still clutching the book. Omarek's eyes followed him; he had made a deal, and had no choice but to adhere to it. He

tossed the half-demon from his back, and threw the desk aside. Anyone outside the office must have heard the commotion; the ceiling and walls were burning, and the desk exploded loudly into smashed timbers against the far wall. The Professor screamed, but I didn't care. He was endangering the entire world for mere money, and I could never forgive him.

I finished my summons, being sure to conjure the demon with its eyes away from me. If it saw me first, then all I was doing would be for nothing. Then, I prepared to banish it.

It was something out of one of my own recurring nightmares, one I'd had since I was a child. To describe it would be too difficult; all I can say is nothing could be more terrifying, more sanity-breaking, than this Terror.

Omarek reached the Professor and made a grab for the book, but the Professor's grip held. The stranger leapt onto the djinni once again, growling fiercely. And then the Terror moved.

In a swift motion, too fast for me to even see, it snaked out a barbed tentacle. I heard the tentacle embed itself in the far wall, and saw the spray of blood paint the bookshelves red. There were several wet thuds as the stranger's pieces fell to the floor. I didn't think, didn't look, just concentrated on my banishing. The danger was gone. I had to get rid of this thing now, before it killed me.

Omarek turned to see the Terror, and his own eyes went wide in horror. Over his shoulder, the creature's tentacle dissolved, leaving a rusty bladelike barb embedded in the wall. The afrit hurled the book toward me, then lunged for the gold. He wasn't leaving this realm without his payment.

Unfortunately, the book was an unexpected impact. It knocked me back, and I lost the banishing ritual. I only needed a second more!

The Professor screamed and scrambled toward me, and the book, but was stopped in his tracks by the snap of man-sized jaws. Blood and gore splattered on my face, but it didn't even seem real. This was some horrible nightmare, spiraling out of control. I let my senses go, and focused only on banishing. I didn't even look at the Terror. I couldn't. The slightest hesitation meant my death.

But it didn't seem to notice me. It went for Omarek. It lashed out at him again, as the djinni's own telekinetic sorcery flung the gold bars into the briefcase. He was slammed back against the far wall by a massive, stonelike fist. I could hear snapping and crunching, though I don't know if it was his bones or the shelves behind him. I saw a burst of flames engulf the two demons, then clear a moment later as I kept concentrating on the ritual. The terror raised back its tentacles and struck again, this time succeeding in killing the djinni.

Omarek, and the briefcase in his hand, vanished in a puff of smoke. The Terror then turned back toward me. I had enough time to look into its eyes before I banished it.

I then sat there on the floor, shuddering, staring, for I don't know how long. Those eyes, those indescribably terrible eyes, were burned into mine, permanently seared into my memories and my nightmares.

But the Book was safe.