

A Ring of Green Fire

by Sean McMullen

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Published by Seattle Book Company, www.seattlebook.com.

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"As I was travelling through Westbury forest, I met with a man with a ring of green fire around his penis," Avenzoar's visitor said casually.

The poet-physician looked up at his friend and stroked his beard, then gazed wistfully across to the partially built minaret of Caliph al-Mansur's huge mosque.

"Such a wonder," sighed Avenzoar, then turned to his visitor and raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you did not bring him here for this poor physician and poet turned bureaucrat to examine?"

His friend glanced away, and seemed troubled. "Alas, it was not possible."

"Such a pity. It may be an honour to be entrusted with the completion of this great mosque of Ishbiliyah, but I miss the wider world. Is England really such a cold, rainswept place?"

"When I was there, yes."

"What of your patient? Was he a traveller from even more exotic regions?"

"Not at all, yet the story of his curse is fascinating."

Avenzoar clapped his hands. Honey pastries and ripe fruit were brought in by a servant and placed before them.

"My friend, show kindness to a captive of the Caliph's goodwill and tell me this magical story."

"There was no magic, Avenzoar, nor was the curse any more than an exotic disease. Still, the story will afford you an hour's wonder."

* * *

How to begin? Affliction with the green fire was growing common in the midlands of England in the Christian year of 1188. The man in Westbury forest was a tinker, I saw that from his pack. He approached a toll-bridge where I was resting in the dim light of late evening, and he drew his cloak tightly about himself as he came near.

His name was Watkin, and he was a small, thin but very energetic man, a little over thirty years of age. I introduced myself as a physician, and offered him the protection of my five men-at-arms while we camped for the night. He was glad to accept, as the forest was full of outlaws and we had also rigged a shelter against the rain. As we ate the night's meal I raised the subject of illness with him.

"You have an affliction, I can tell that," I said. He made no reply, yet his face was sad. He shaved slivers of cheese from a rind with his knife but did not eat them.

"Your affliction is distressing, but without pain," I continued. "I have learned to read the signs of distress in sick people."

He tossed the rind into the fire and wiped his knife on a crust. "You have never seen the like of my complaint," he said miserably. "Nobody can help me. I went to the physicians of the Church and they said that I was possessed by a devil. They wanted to torture me until it was driven out, but I'd have none of that. I broke free and ran. I run very fast."

"Wise of you, but there are other ways."

"I'm afeared of witchcraft too."

"I am no sorcerer, I am a physician who has studied under some of the greatest Moorish and Jewish

masters of the day, including Maimonides himself."

"Who is Maimonides?"

"Ah, a great Jewish teacher and man of medicine. He is court physician to the great Saladin."

"Saladin! So... you have Moorish training."

"Why yes. I went to the Holy Land with the Crusade of 1147. I was badly wounded, then captured. The enemy physicians tended me so well that I resolved to learn their ways."

"You place no faith in torture to rid a man of demons?"

"Oh no, I have been trained in far more civilised means."

"Then I'll show you-- "

"No! Wait, and let me examine you first. I wager that I can tell your affliction in moments."

I felt the glands beneath his jaw, looked into his eyes in the firelight and sniffed his breath. He was in good health, I could see that at once, yet I had to make a show of skill to gain his trust. He did not realise that I have acute vision at a distance, and had noticed a faint green glow through the cloth of his trews before he had wrapped himself in his cloak.

"You have a circlet of green fire about your penis," I announced calmly. "It has been slowly moving higher, and in its wake your skin has lost all feeling."

He gasped, then looked down to see if his glow was showing, which it was not. "Truly a man of great medical arts," he said in awe. "What-- what are your fees? I'm but a poor tinker, yet I'd give anything to be rid of the fire and numbness."

I laughed disarmingly. "I have yet to meet a rich tinker, but do not worry. Your earnings for the week past will suffice. Open your robes, lower your trews, let me see your affliction."

His ring was brighter than any others that I had seen, and had moved so far up the shaft that it was almost at the base and glowed through his pubic hair. My companions looked up from their meal in surprise.

"Can you break this spell?" Watkin babbled eagerly. "Have you seen the like before?"

"Ah yes, and I have had great success where all others have failed."

He sighed with relief. "So, you have secret incantations and philtres, perhaps?"

"I have those, but they are for later. The real mode of breaking a spell is to learn the circumstances of its casting in the fullest detail possible. An honest, truthful account of the casting weakens the grip of the devil, who is behind all curses and spells. One lie, one slight deviation from the truth, however, and his grip is strengthened. How did you acquire your ring, Watkin?"

"It... appeared a month ago, after I bedded my wife, and each time that I enjoy her it moves a little higher-- "

"Stop, stop," I laughed. "Three lies within one breath! Watkin, you will have to do better than that. The ring of green fire begins at the tip of one's member and moves higher only when you bed a woman for the first time. It also becomes brighter as time passes. In women the glow is all internal, yet there is also numbness and other such effects that increase with time and new lovers. I would say that you acquired it around May last year, and since then you have mounted eight dozen women. As to being married, no, not you. Am I wrong?"

He slowly shook his head and stared at his boots. "To my shame, no."

"Then tell the truth, however reproachful your conduct has been."

"It would burn the ears of a good Christian."

"But Watkin, I am not a Christian." He gaped at me. "When I was in the Holy Land I adopted more than the medical scholarship of Islam. Now tell me of how you were first snared by the ring, and tell the truth."

"It was in a village called Delmy, to the south, near the coast. I arrived there early one afternoon, during the May festival. The villagers were celebrating the victory of summer over winter with feasting, May carols and dancing. Strangers were welcome, especially an honest tinker like myself.

"For a time I sampled the tartlets, manchets, fried figs and ales, then I turned my thoughts to a companion for a little frolic. I'd been travelling for a long time, I was lonely, it was spring-- "

"I am not too old to know the needs and urgings of the flesh, Watkin. Go on."

"It seemed easy pickings. Many young folk of the village were dancing and fondling most intimately, raising my hopes of a quick and easy conquest. Alas, no girl would spare me the deeper smile, indeed there seemed no girls unpaired at all. After so long tramping the road I was lonely, and with so many pairs of lovers cavorting before me I was quite beside myself to be part of it.

"At last I saw one girl who was unpaired, a big-boned, hairy-armed wench with a face that only a beard could have improved. She was alone, tending the tables, and she smiled broadly whenever I came near. At first it seemed worse to mount her than no wench at all, yet the fire of spring burned within me. I made up my mind, approached her, whispered words of compliment, then with unseemly haste did I shepherd her away from the fair-- more in shame of being seen with her than in shame of the act to come. I chose a place among bushes behind a broad oak. I-- I could not bear to look upon her, I just bent her over a rack of poles and flung her skirts up."

He paused for a long drink from the crock. "And you did the deed with her?" I prompted.

"Ah yes, master physician, and she was a virgin, wouldn't you know it? Hah, it was wearisome work, yet I am a diligent tradesman. To the beat of the distant village band, I placed my rivet and began tapping. At last I was spent. I eased back as she stood panting, then I slipped away as if I had been a wood sprite vanishing into air-- lest she have thoughts about wedding me. I skirted the village, took up my pack and trotted away briskly.

"By evening I was five leagues gone and some way contented. My hammer had been well worked, in fact he even felt a little numb, so hard had I clinked the pan-- or so I thought. Imagine my alarm when I unlaced to piss and saw a ring of cold, faint green fire encircling his head."

"The girl was a virgin, you say?"

"Indeed, no doubt of it, I have initiated many. Alas, she passed this cold glow to me, and soon I noticed that as I worked the pots of goodwives and maids on my travels, the ring would move a little further up each time. Where it had been the feeling that is lust's reward was no more."

"But surely the women you have bedded since then noticed your green glow?"

"Ah no master, you are obviously not a tradesman. We visit houses and cottages during the day, when the menfolk are in the fields and their women are at home, alone. Most times will there be a sly look, or even a saucy suggestion, then we will be coupled on the hearthrug in the light of day. Since the ring was slipped upon me, I have shared the glow to, oh, ninety-five women, mostly lowborn, though some were of no mean rank." He nudged me, winking suavely. "Master, if foolish knights would do no better than fight and drink, well someone must plant the seeds of future knights."

"One last question, Watkin. Could you write down the names and villages of all the women that you have bedded since the stout maid gave you the green fire?"

"Alas, Master, I cannot write, yet I could recite the names of all! When I lie alone at night I like to recall each wench that I have ever mounted and set a name against a star, but of late the number of stars has grown insufficient. Since the stout virgin of Delmy there have been... now let me think... one hundred and five, yes. Ah, but it is becoming difficult now, as so much of my hammer has no feeling."

Without any warning I seized his wrist and twisted his arm hard behind his back. He cried out in surprise and pain as I shouted "A firebrand! A firebrand! Quickly!"

My men at arms jumped to their feet at once but Watkin tumbled in mid-air, twisted his arm free of my grip and darted for the woods with speed of a startled hind. Worse luck for him, the sentry had been alert for just such a flight. His hand-axe went spinning flat after him, tangled his legs and sent him sprawling in the mud with a cry of pain. We soon had him in hand and dragged him back to the fire.

"A good throw, Sir Phillip," I said as they held him down and I tended the gashes and cuts in Watkin's legs. "The great tendon is severed in his right leg, he will never again run from cuckolded husbands with such speed."

Watkin's moaning suddenly died away as he realised that something else was not as it seemed. Beneath their shabby robes my men-at-arms were well dressed warriors with fine weapons. They stood before us, glaring, their eyes sparkling with fury in the firelight.

"What-- who are you?" the tinker stammered.

One of the men began to unlace, and the others followed his example. A moment later the light of five

rings of green fire glowed steadily from their loins.

"Lied... you lied to me!" gasped Watkin.

"Lied, Watkin? I am indeed a physician and breaker of curses, and my faith is the Way of Islam."

"Then who are these men?"

"You may call this man Sir Robert," I said as he brought a coil of rope to tie the tinker's hands. "This fine, burly warrior is Sir Peter, and Sir Phillip was the sentry who brought you down. Sir Charles is the blonde man, and Sir Douglas has the black beard and is scowling as if he would cheerfully cut your heart out. You may call me William."

"Those are not your real names," he said fearfully.

"Those names will suffice for you, false or not. Speaking for myself, I really am an Englishman, and although I do have an Islamic name now, I was christened William when I was born. I have returned to England at the request of Sir Peter here."

"A Christian physician could well have had us denounced or burned for demonic possession," Sir Peter explained. "Some folk afflicted by the green fire have already suffered such a fate. This infidel, who is also my friend, can be trusted not to do that. On your feet now!"

The nobles tied him spread-eagled in the rain between two trees. "False physician, you betrayed me!" wailed Watkin.

"And how many women did you betray by passing the green fire on to them?" I asked.

"No, no, I have ceased to spread the green fire," he cried. "Look in my pack."

"You certainly have," I agreed as I rummaged through his goods. "Just look at these knick-knacks. All manner of little presents as might please a wench and entice her into bed. Aromatic oils and scents, and, and... less savoury items."

There it was, in his pack, the cursed device. I sat back, and examined the sheath while my companions cheerily tormented Watkin with what was to come. With such a plague as the green fire to be caught from casual dalliance it was only a matter of time before these sheaths of sheepgut became very popular. Still, that was not my concern. Watkin was the man I had been seeking, the Alpha firebrand, the butterfly king. The plague of green fire was about to end and he would play a role.

I stood up. Sir Douglas had just proposed a crude surgical operation to rid Watkin of his green fire and the others were roaring their approval. "Stop! Stop!" I shouted, rushing forward to seize Sir Peter's arm. "My good lords, this one is not to be killed."

"But he's the one who began it all," exclaimed Sir Peter, so hot with anger that the rain steamed from his face.

"Precisely. Other firebrands may be killed for spreading the green glow, but this one might well be used for a cure."

Their hard and vengeful glares were at once softened by amazement and hope. Even revenge took second place to removing the glowing green shackle from their manhood.

* * *

Watkin was bound, gagged and bagged, then taken to Sir Peter's castle some seventy miles away. The journey was done in a single stretch, with no sleep, and even meals were had in the saddle. It rained for most of the way. The castle was no great wonder, it was a mean, low fortification of rammed earth, logs and stone blocks from ancient Roman ruins. The thatch and log roofs leaked, and it rained most of the time that I was there.

Although surly at first Watkin became wonderfully co-operative after a single touch of the torturer's red-hot iron. We wrote down the details of his 105 seductions, and in the weeks that followed established that only sixty-two of the infected women had survived beatings by their husbands and attempts at exorcism by religious healers. Ten had escaped ensnarement by the green ring since he had begun to use his sheepgut armour.

In the months past we had travelled far and wide killing firebrands who had spread the green fire, and thanks to the fire their trails were easy to follow. With Watkin safely in chains we now visited Delmy, the

village from where he had borne the green fire to torment the world. The stout virgin that Watkin had seduced was named Gerelde, but while she was indeed not comely, she was skilled with herbal cures and was a surpassing good cook.

Her mother was buried nearby. The woman had once lived alone in a forest some way up the coast, and was reputed to have been a witch. Cornish brigands had raided the area and seized her, and their leader had ravished her until she was some months swelling with his child. He had then taken her out to sea and cast overboard to drown, yet she lived to struggle ashore and be found by the villagers of Delmy. The village midwife said that she had treated herself with a glowing green paste to ease the pain of the birth. It was a difficult delivery, as Gerelde was a very big baby for such a small mother as she was. The witch had died of the stresses of birth and cursing her ravisher.

Sir Peter assembled a squad of men while I went with Sir Phillip to locate the witch's house, a ransacked shell by now. We exhumed the witch's bones and reburied them in the overgrown garden of her old home. In the meantime Sir Peter had attacked and annihilated the brigand stronghold, avenging the witch after eighteen years. Every one of his fighting men had the ring of green fire and was frantic for revenge against anyone connected with it.

On the evening that we returned to Sir Peter's castle, I spoke with him in his dining hall. Rain dripped from the roof beams as we sat before the fire.

"That was clever work, finding the first firebrand of the green ring," he said to me. "Why didn't you tell us that we were on such a quest?"

"If I had told that I wanted a man of such-and-such a description you would have tortured dozens into confessing to be him. Better to take you on a vendetta against all firebrands and do the questioning myself."

"Well then, what good came of it? We avenged the witch, yet her magical ring still glows on my gronnick, and the ring on Watkin the Tinker is still bright enough to light his way on a moonless night. What sort of a sorcerer are you-- "

"I am a physician, not a sorcerer. Magic does not exist, only illness in all its guises. The full cure for the ring of green fire is close. I have made progress."

"What kind of progress?"

"I returned the witch's bones to her garden and reburied them there. A month has passed since then, so the aura from her bones will have permeated the roots of her herbs and be taken up into the leaves. I shall soon return to her grave and harvest some leaves to grind into a paste."

"Will that be enough? Leaves?"

"There is more, Sir Peter, much more. Even though she is dead she is trying to teach us something of the new notion of chivalry-- it's new to you English at least, us Saracen scholars have taught it for years."

"That's why we employed you, dammit!"

"And your faith in me is not misplaced. I can see some kind of symbolism of pain being avenged while its resulting sorrow still lives on. The witch wanted you to do more than just avenge her."

"Well what did she damn well want?" shouted Sir Peter, pounding the table so hard with his goblet that a gemstone fell out of the silver filigree.

"Patience, patience, I dare not tell you everything yet."

* * *

Sir Peter had a mistress as well as his wife, and it was this woman that Watkin had bedded one afternoon in the summer past. The noble had argued with her a little earlier, and she felt lonely and neglected. Watkin had arrived, and cleverly spoke in a cultivated voice, as if by accident. Then he hinted that he was himself a noble on some secret mission, and so he won her trust and bedded her. Understandably, Sir Peter was all for impaling Watkin on a stake at the castle gate until the crows pecked his bones clean, but I restrained him.

"Why do you have such sympathy for the little wretch?" asked Sir Phillip the next morning as we squelched our way through the muddy grounds of the castle, holding sodden cloaks up against the rain.

We were on our way to visit the tinker.

"Sympathy? I have no sympathy for Watkin, but I do have a use for him."

"The talk is that you are sorry for him."

"Sorry? Me? Not likely. I once suffered because of his kind. I was a young merchant's scribe in love with my master's daughter. Although she cared for me, our courtship was slow. I did not have skill with the words and gestures of seduction. My master took her on a journey to Normandy, he had trade business there. She met one such as Watkin, but this youth was a noble. He charmed her with talk as sweet as a nightingale's song, and settled upon her as softly as a butterfly. When she returned to England she grew round with child, and was desolate with remorse. I petitioned to marry her and the merchant consented, yet even then I was aflame with rage.

"I travelled to Normandy and sought out her seducer. Although a mere scribe I was skilled in the use of shortswords. I killed a guard and wounded several more, but the butterfly nobleman escaped and I was wounded. I became a fugitive and outlaw, I could never return to my young wife. She gave birth some months later, then flung herself from a cliff and was drowned in the sea."

"When did all this take place?"

"Your Christian year of 1150."

"But that was three years after the Crusade of 1147."

"Certainly. With a history like mine, would you let the truth be known? I began working aboard merchant ships, they were always in need of people who could write. After five years I had earned enough silver and learned sufficient Arabic to settle in the Zangid Sultanate and study medicine. I had an impressive wound, so I made up that tale of being on the crusade. Now you know my background, Sir Phillip. Please preserve my secret, yet reassure your folk about my intentions. A butterfly killed my sweetheart, and Watkin is another such butterfly. "

"But why do you stay Sir Peter's hand?"

"As I said, Watkin has his uses. Although a mere tinker he is magnificent, the ultimate seducer. He can affect the voices and manners of all types of people, from nobles to ploughmen. His treads have a double strap, so that he can lower them to his knees for a dalliance, yet they stay high enough for him to run unencumbered from an outraged husband. He is a master of escape and could run like the wind until your axe severed his hamstring. He cleans his teeth with soft bark, he washes, and he scents himself with aromatic oils. His trade is tinkering, yet even that takes him roving to meet an endless bevy of women."

We had reached the dungeon, a squat blockhouse of stone with a log roof and narrow slits for windows. I made to enter, but Sir Phillip barred my way. "I'm with Sir Peter, I'm for killing the little rat," he declared. "He-- "

"He seduced a maid on intimate terms with your seneschal, and your seneschal then passed the fire on to his wife-- who was already your secret lover. If the green fire has done anything, it has traced out a fine trail of humpery bumpery at all stations of society."

"So what are you saying? Are we no better than Watkin?"

"I am saying that you can learn from Watkin. In spite of being a short, scrawny, low-born tinker, he charms greatly."

"He preys upon the most vulnerable of women."

"True, but were you English noblemen to clean your teeth, change your clothing at least weekly and take the care to give ladies little compliments instead of kicks, curses and belches, why the likes of Watkin would have no market for their charms. He is poor, but it costs him nothing to speak charmingly and wash. If you did the same, you would still be rich and powerful as well. Who would then choose Watkin over you? A hot iron can wound Watkin's type, but with good manners and clean fingernails you can hurt them a lot more. You English are adopting our Saracen cooking, mathematics and music. Why not our chivalry as well?"

Sir Phillip glared at me from under his cloak, but he was obviously thinking.

"There is a lot of merit in what you say... but it's hard to think chivalrous thoughts with a ring of green fire about my gronnick! What can I do about that?"

"The tinker took a curse upon himself when he bundled into the witch's daughter. He then dispersed

that curse to nearly every woman he seduced in his travels, and hence to all their lovers. That has formed quite an avenging army."

"And we did avenge her!"

"Yes, but there is more to it than that, so the glow remains. The green fire is a tool to force us to do certain tasks, and even teach us about the ways of men and women."

We entered the dungeon, where the tinker was practising walking with a crutch and in good spirits.

"Have you caught the Delmy witch?" he asked.

"We found her grave and exhumed it. She is nought but bones after these eighteen years."

"Eighteen years? Bones? She was as well-fleshed as a prize sow when I mounted her the May before last."

"That was her daughter. The witch herself died in childbirth, but her daughter unknowingly carried a curse. You turned that curse loose upon the world. Gerelde was raised by a peasant family, and has come to be a fine cook. I tasted her food, it was fine fare for a peasant table. She wants for nought but a husband. She's plain of face and is built as solidly as Sir Peter, yet for all that she is a kindly girl."

Watkin sneered. "Why are you telling me about her? I'd never touch her again, she's as ugly as a goat's backside."

"She was quite taken by you, Watkin, and she is very concerned that you are imprisoned here. Still, you are more fortunate than the brigand who raped her mother. Sir Peter caught him, did you know? He was a great slab of a man, massive rather than fat, full of life and defiance, even eighteen years after the deed that caused all this. He was confident that we would not kill him because he knew where sundry hoards of gold and silver loot lay buried. Sir Peter had him taken to the graveside of his victim, and there his gronnick was sliced from between his legs and rammed down his windpipe so that he choked on it and died most horribly. Those of his men as were watching quickly babbled the location of hoards of coin, plate and jewellery, yet none heeded them. Sir Peter had to kill him with the same weapon that killed Gerelde's mother."

Watkin was deathly pale by now, and had slumped against the wall. "Mother of God, but why?"

"He was a link in the chain that ignited the green fire. You are another link."

"Me? But, but-- "

"You bedded Sir Peter's mistress. That alone should have you in fear for your life, but you also passed the fire to her."

The tinker cowered, but said no more. Sir Phillip lurked in the shadows, smirking at his discomfort.

"I need tears of pity that have been wept for you and no other. In all the world, Watkin, would anyone weep for you?"

"Many regard me as comely."

"Someone must weep for you, Watkin. Your flesh is about to hiss with the touch of the red iron."

"No! As God is merciful, no! Take my pack, sell me into slavery! I'll do anything-- "

"For the final ingredient to quench the ring of green fire you will be able to choose between death and a less daunting fate, but for now you will be tortured. I require that it be done, Watkin, and believe me that there are thousands of men and women who would fight to the death for the pleasure of holding the glowing iron to you. You have often been bold, now you must learn to be brave."

Once we were well away from the dungeon and Watkin's hysterical pleading Sir Phillip took me by the arm.

"That brigand was killed in battle by one of Sir Peter's archers. It was a shaft through his skull, he died at once."

"True."

"Then what was that story about choking him on his own gronnick?"

"Watkin has the attention span of a butterfly. I meant to... focus his mind."

"To what end?"

"That is between myself and Allah. Rest assured, however, that Watkin will be tortured."

"And you will savour his screams with the rest of us?"

"Oh no, I shall be hard at work, preparing certain ingredients to quench the ring of green fire."

"Lord physician, I don't follow."

"You will never follow, Sir Phillip, but your ring of green fire shall be quenched, rely on my word for that."

* * *

By the time I had left Sir Peter's castle for Delmy, Watkin had faced the first of the silent, hooded men that were to torment him. Thousands gathered outside the castle to hear his screams, but these did not last. After he was blinded, the tendons at the source of his voice were cut. This produced such a riot outside that all Watkin's subsequent tortures had to be on public display. As I rode off for Delmy hot irons were being applied to the soles of his feet by the second torturer, Sir Douglas, while Sir Phillip held up a cloak up to keep the rain from cooling the red-hot metal.

I returned after three days, bringing Gerelde with me. Watkin was, of course, the only lover she had ever known, so he was a lot more special to her than the other way about. She was blind to his disfigurements, and she made heartfelt pleas for her feckless tinker. It was an impressive sight, for even on her knees she was taller than Sir Peter. I stood by and collected her tears on a small cloth. At a nod from me Sir Peter relented-- on the condition that Watkin marry her, and that he never leave the village of Delmy under pain of death by torture. Watkin could only nod his head by way of agreement. Now Gerelde wept tears of joy, and I wiped these from her face as well.

A great marriage feast was held, and a good many folk with the ring of green fire were brought in to participate. Before Sir Peter's eyes I ground the cloth with its tears into a paste, then added cuttings of herbs taken from the witch's garden. The food at the feast was wonderful village fare, and to this I added my mixture. All ate heartily, and by evening the green fire was gone from every afflicted man and woman at the feast. There were, well, unseemly celebrations in spite of the rain, but that was only to be expected. The following day I called upon Sir Peter.

"Now that the curse is broken, a simple remedy can be used to quench the green fire in all others who still have it," I told him. "I have trained several clerks and midwives in its preparation already, and they will train more. Soon the green fire will be no more, so my work here is done."

Sir Peter embraced me so strongly that I heard the joints of my spine pop. I was the physician who had returned the feeling to his penis, and he was brimming with gratitude.

"You must have a reward, honours, you have done more good for this land than words can say."

"There is my agreed fee, of course."

"That? A mere trifle! Here's twice your fee." He tossed me a bag of gold. "Now, my Lord physician, if you could but renounce the faith of Islam you could also be given great rank."

"My faith is Islam, please respect that, and rank does not interest me. I am a physician, so although I find it an honour to treat caliphs and kings, I do not aspire to their thrones."

"Then treat a king you will! Our King Henry lies sick at Chinon, a town in his French provinces. I'm his trusted adviser, I'll recommend you to him, I'll recommend you in the very highest words of praise."

"I would be honoured to treat your king, Sir Peter."

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Avenzoar gazed at the fountain at the centre of the courtyard for some moments before turning back to his guest. The constant rain, the glowing green fire, all the strange horrors of his visitor's tale slowly retreated before the warm Spanish sunshine.

"So the girl's tears broke the curse," he said.

"No. My 'other remedy' would have worked by itself."

"Then you could have stopped the green fire months earlier. Why the charade?"

The visitor paused to select a ripe fig, frowning as if troubled. "I was Watkin's first torturer." Avenzoar gasped with surprise. "Yes, I blinded him to Gerelde's face and I silenced his voice that he might never abuse her."

"I see. You made him a match for her and no other."

"I did more than that. The ring of green fire was a type of purgative, it flushed out those men with great skill in coldly manoeuvring women into bed. Watkin was not the only firebrand, we discovered nearly two dozen men, and a few women too, who had hundreds of seductions behind them. They are all dead now, save for Watkin. Many other diseases are spread by the loveless lust of Watkin's kind. We culled in the interests of good health."

Avenzoar considered this. "True, too much of any skill can be dangerous. Perhaps the witch did some good after all."

"The witch was no witch, and there was no curse. She was my dead wife's daughter, sired by a butterfly and born just before her mother cast herself into the ocean. Gerelde was my step-granddaughter, but even though she and her mother were no flesh and blood of mine, I loved them as my own. I provided for them and visited them every few years."

"Ah yes, now it all makes sense. The green fire was a medicine to deaden the pain of childbirth. Your step-daughter died before she could give the antidote to herself and her baby. The fire escaped when Watkin mounted Gerelde."

The visitor nodded. Avenzoar stood up slowly and looked across to the delicate tracery and interlaced arches of the partly built minaret. He glanced at a nearby sundial.

"It is time for my daily inspection of the minaret," he said with his back to his guest, then he turned. "But first I must reproach you for mutilating in the name of medicine."

The guest remained calm, as if expecting the outburst, yet he did not meet Avenzoar's eyes. "No, not in the name of medicine. I disfigured Watkin to have my step-granddaughter married and happy. She has a lame, blind, mute tinker who is nevertheless a prince of seducers, and she has him all to herself. He will be grateful for all that she does for him until the day he dies. Yes, it was evil of me, but perhaps good has come of it. Watkin's wings have been clipped, but at least he has his life."

Avenzoar sat down and fanned himself. "But what of my original question? You have not yet explained why you took so long to release your cure for the green fire? Surely it was not just to mark and slay the promiscuous?"

"You are right, Avenzoar, as usual. I withheld the cure to increase its worth. That increased my reward, in turn."

"Reward? To treat King Henry? It must have been of little comfort to you. I learned recently that he died barely a fortnight after midsummer."

"Precisely," the visitor agreed solemnly, and Avenzoar felt a sudden chill in spite of the bright sunshine. "As a teenage prince in Normandy he seduced my sweetheart. I spent a lifetime hating that royal butterfly, yet it was the accidental spread of the green fire that gave me a chance to get past his guards. Gerelde is his granddaughter, yes, and Watkin is unknowingly married to a princess."

He reached into his robes and took out a folded parchment, which he placed on the tray beside the pastries. "This details a cure for the mould that causes the ring of green fire," he said as he stood up. Avenzoar unfolded the parchment and read it slowly. Finally he nodded, and looked up at his guest in silence. "Well, are you not going to censure me for killing a king?"

"To what end?" Avenzoar replied wearily. "You always have the best of reasons for your behaviour."

"Once more you are wrong," replied the visitor, but this time without his mask of smug composure. He sat down heavily, tears running into his beard.

Avenzoar sat forward. "What is wrong, what did I say?"

"I killed under the guise of healing," he sobbed, suddenly looking much older. "I was so intent on striking at King Henry that I destroyed my integrity as a physician to do it. Avenzoar, I spent four decades rebuilding my life after what he did. I became one of the greatest physicians in all Islam... then I visited him as a physician and defiled my healing hands to murder him. I was so obsessed by the chase that I ignored the outcome."

He stood slowly and shuffled across to the fountain, with Avenzoar following. The poet put a hand on his shoulder as he washed his face. "Accepting that you have done evil is a step toward atoning for it, my friend. Stay here for a while, rest and talk with Avenzoar, your friend and fellow physician."

"No, no. I am sincere in my remorse. You always say that about me, that I am too sincere for my own good. Have you not noticed that since I arrived I have never been able to meet your eyes for more than a moment? Whenever I meet a fellow physician I am shamed to remember that I have murdered, and I have to hang my head. Ah, but soon I shall go to where I shall meet no other physicians, to where I can shout the truth of how I murdered King Henry to the empty deserts of Africa. First I shall sign my worldly goods to you, then I shall travel along the salt road to the barren granite mountains of Aghadez and the marshy shores of Lake Tchad."

"You cannot be serious. The loss of your skills would be a crime in itself."

"My skills will not be lost to the sick in the great desert of Africa. Meantime, use my fortune to train needy students and to foster the arts of healing in whatever way you will-- and should any woman come to you complaining of numbness within, or any man disrobe to reveal a ring of green fire about his penis, well, you now have the cure."

"But this is terrible. Your very words show you to be of good heart. Please stay."

Now the visitor held him by both arms and looked fleetingly into his eyes. "If I agreed to stay, you would probably despise me in the depths of your heart. Come now, let us find a scribe. I have much wealth to make over to you."

* * *

Later that afternoon, when his guest had departed, Avenzoar toured the partly completed Minaret with Ali al-Ghumari, his architect. As the sun's disk shimmered near the horizon they gazed out across the capital of al-Andalus.

"It is safe for now," said Avenzoar, "but one day a green fire may come to blight this fair city."

"Is it a weapon?" asked the architect with mild interest. "Is it like Greek fire?"

"It is English fire," replied Avenzoar.

"Hah! It must be fierce indeed to burn in spite of their rain," the architect laughed. "What is its fuel?"

Avenzoar fingered the scrap of folded parchment for reassurance. "Neglect and hatred," he said softly.

The architect pondered this for a moment, running his hand along the newly laid brickwork. "A cheap and plentiful fuel," he replied at last, and Avenzoar nodded.

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