
DJAMILA MORANI
WINNER ENGLISH PEN AWARD
The
DJINN'S
APPLE





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Djamila Morani

translated by Sawad Hussain



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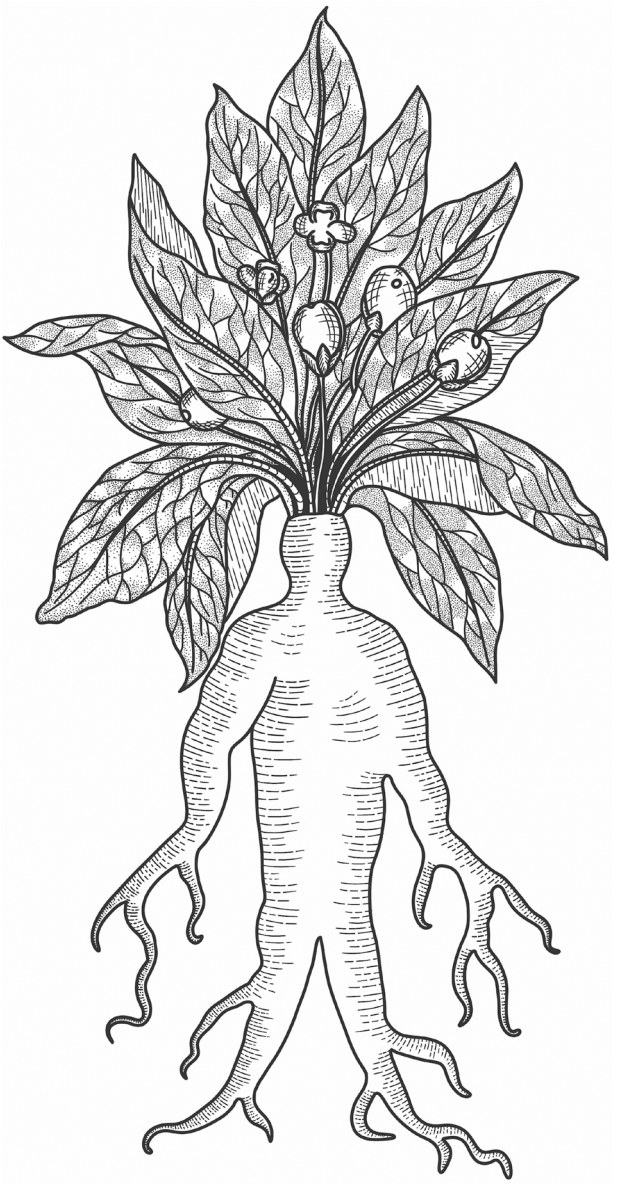
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To those whom I taught so they could pass exams…
You all taught me how to make it in life.

For my students, 2009-2016.

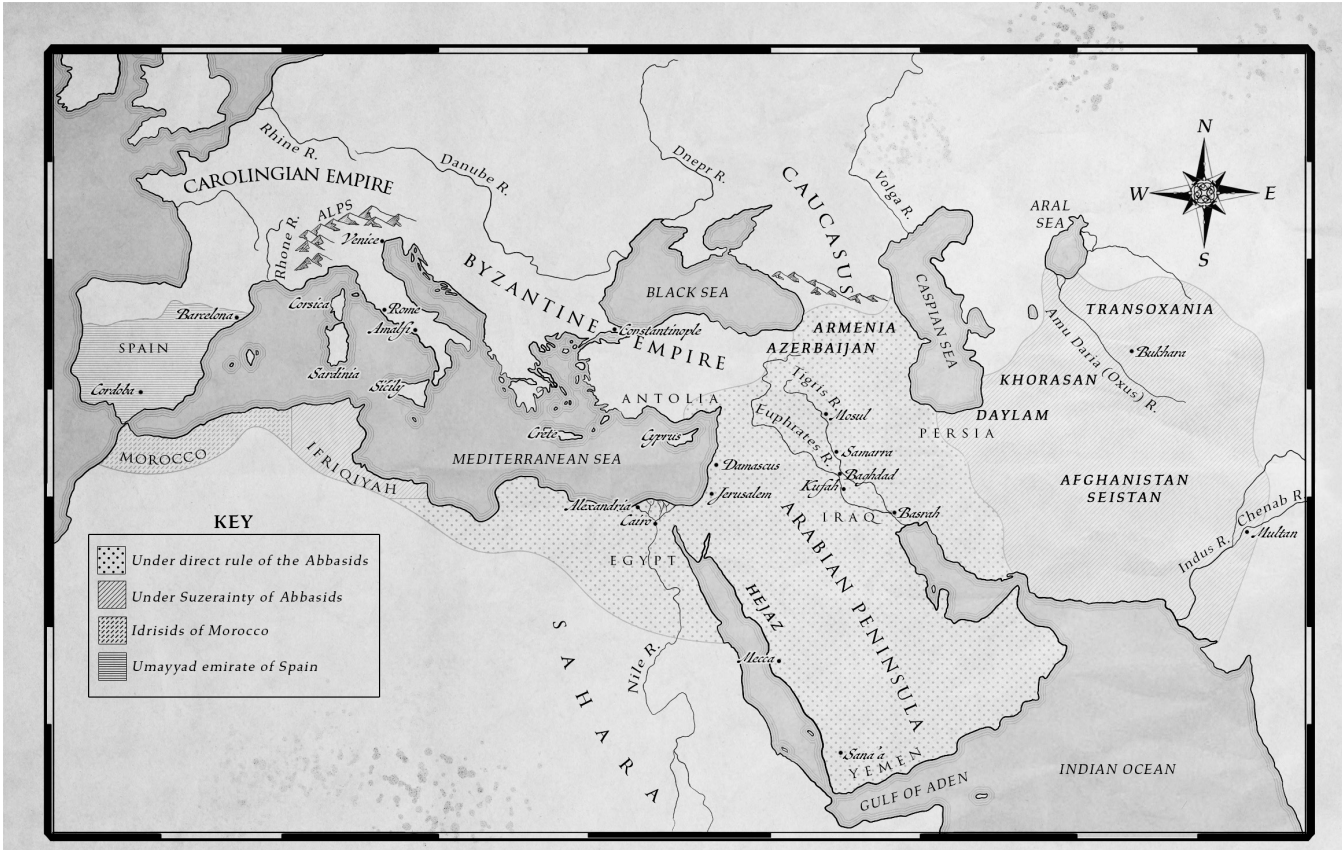
Grandma Djamila



If the Djinn's Apple was asked, which would you rather be: a blessing or a curse—who knows what it would choose!

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The Djinn's Apple

PART 1





My siblings' screams still pierce my ears no matter how hard I squeeze my head between my hands. Their cries ring out, filling my head until it almost bursts.

I'm recalling that day so long ago. It had started like any other with the meuzzin's early morning call to prayers sounding across Baghdad—the most opulent city in the world they said—and my home.

I'm curled up in my bed as I hear Laween and Rohan arguing in the hallway. Rohan must have been dragging his feet to get to prayer like he always did, and the last thing Laween would want is to upset my father. My mother's head pops out from behind the door, and she's surprised to see me awake.

"Here you are! Your father is waiting for you so we can pray. Hurry up!"

"Okay, okay," I say as I lift my blanket off my body. But instead of getting ready right away, I pause by my window and open it. I fill my lungs with the scent of basil grown just below—my favourite way to start the morning. How could I do anything different when we have a garden with plants of all shapes and colours? Maybe this house isn't as big as our last one in downtown Baghdad, but having this garden makes it the most beautiful place to be—a haven after we escaped with our lives from the caliph's constant threats.

And then that night disaster struck.



I couldn't see anything in the dark; the moon hidden behind the clouds, embarrassed by what it might see or hear. I felt my way through the willow trees, my father's face coming into focus as he opened the back gate to our house. "Go, now," he ordered. "We'll be right behind you. I've got to get your siblings and mother." He shoved me out and shut the garden gate, but I didn't budge. How could I leave knowing that he was going back to die?

We had been in his study, Baba as usual transcribing something or other while I gazed curiously at a strange manuscript, the candle in the hanging lantern casting flickering shadows on the parchment. "Leave that manuscript alone and finish your reading, Nardeen," he scolded. Tugging on my bottom lip, I stared at the odd drawing on the page, which kind of looked like a human: it had four limbs that seemed like arms and legs and a small circle that could have been a head.

"What's this, Baba? Did a child draw it?"

He cut me off with a sternness I wasn't used to. I raised my book in front of my face, pretending to read the words, while my eyes stayed glued to that manuscript…but the next thing I knew, a powerful boom shook the room, causing the book to slip from my hands.

"Al-Rashid's men! Al-Rashid's men!"

The name of Harun Al-Rashid echoed in every part of our large house, a name that spelled our death. Strange, seeing how—just a few weeks before—it had meant the life we had always dreamed of.

It's hard to wrap your mind around the fine line between life and death.

Sometimes it's so thin you can barely tell the difference.

I rushed to the balcony and craned forward to see men with their swords drawn, chanting, "Kill the apostates! Kill the infidels!" They didn't look anything like Al-Rashid's guards. *How did they find us?* Flinching at their voices, I turned to my father, who had jumped up from his chair when he heard the word "apostates". He grabbed my hand and dragged me behind him down the stairs, his eyes surveying the area before him. He turned round to look at me. My eyes clung to the fear I had seen in his. I pulled on his hand and mumbled, "Baba…"

He stumbled but didn't stop. I pressed my small palm into his sweaty one. Fear, for me, at twelve years old, was usually a bogeyman from my mother's stories chasing me; he would melt away, disappearing completely, whenever I ran into my father's arms. But this fear that had blanketed Baba's eyes was uglier than any bogeyman. He opened the back door and

pushed me out harshly towards the garden gate. I tried to open the door again, but Baba had locked it from the inside.

I stood on the doorstep, listening to the sounds of bodies and things crashing to the floor; my brother and sister yelling; everyone calling out for everyone else, but nobody answering, like they couldn't hear each other. Bayan's loud wail…I could pick her out in the middle of the storm of shouting. Usually her cries were loud and annoying, but now it was a desperate wail that tore my heart up. A loud wail that didn't belong to her five-year-old self. Suddenly she fell silent. The quiet slithered slowly all through the house and garden, and the voices fell away. I only heard the cautious, firm steps that Death itself took inside, searching, it seemed, for another life, the final one to snatch before it left the place. My grip on the door handle loosened and I pushed my ear up against the door.

"Sire…I've looked for her everywhere."

"She *must* be here, look harder," Death ordered.

My knees felt weak. I backed down a few steps. My foot slipped and I fell. *Are they looking for me?*

"I told you, keep looking!" Death yelled.

I stared at the shut door and imagined it opening. I sprinted outside the garden, not looking right or left—if I glanced back even once, Death would swallow me whole. I ran without knowing where I was going, my feet leading me to a nearby mosque. I used to love looking up at the lamps that hung from chains along the streets, watching as they swayed in the wind and the dancing light guided us along the path. But that night, I did not look up even once.

I steadied myself against the wall and sank to the ground to catch my breath, my heart pounding so wildly it felt like it was going to burst out of my chest. I caught sight of the ink that had drawn a line along the length of my hand. A reminder of another life when I sat with my father making notes in my book while he talked. It looked like henna, actually, just like the henna of the Bedouin women! I remembered the face of that woman Anan, the dark Bedouin soothsayer, whose hand was dyed with henna—she had visited Mama a few days before. A cold shiver travelled through my body, without me knowing why. Was it the cold night wind or what she had said?



"This land is no longer for the likes of you all; everything that was for you will be against you, Bani Yahya. All of you will drown in blood." Anan was sitting on the divan along one side of the room and I was sitting near Bayan's bed with my book.

My mother, Qasma, raised her hand to stifle the gasp that nearly slipped out. Catching herself, she went to the bed to check that little Bayan was still sleeping soundly. She didn't want my baby sister to hear what awaited her, what awaited the Baramika people in the coming days. I pretended to be absorbed in my reading but spied her normally clear grey eyes grow dark, her brow furrowed. She returned to her spot facing Anan. "Oh God…have mercy," she whispered under her breath. Out loud she added, "But the Baramika in the

caliph's entourage have already been severely punished, and my husband's friends promised that they would protect us."

"If only devotion could stop death, then the most devoted of us would never die, my lady. But the final hour is victorious, and the appointed time isn't in my hands. I'm just sharing the message to the best of my knowledge."

My mother gasped, her face pale.



My mother had thought, as my father had, that disappearing from the angry caliph's sight—and that of his entourage—would protect our family from any danger. She didn't understand why the soothsayer was all doom and gloom. Even if we were of the Baramika family line, we were as far as we could possibly be from its politics and all that went along with it. Baba had chosen the medical profession, studying at Bimaristan medical school in Baghdad. He wasn't like the rest of the Baramika men who had served the Abbasids, one caliph after the other. All that tied him to the family line was his last name, and the wealth he had inherited from my grandfather.

When Harun Al-Rashid's relations with the Baramika turned sour, things got so tough for Baba in Bimaristan that he had to leave his post and stay at home. Everyone in the royal court was pointing the finger at each other. With so many accusations swirling, people's lives were being turned upside down. Everyone seemed to be constantly looking over their shoulders, Harun Al-Rashid especially. And when the nobles in important positions, including even one of the

caliph's closest cousins, started getting murdered—no one had a clue who the murderer was!

During those troubled days, all Baba cared about was protecting us from the caliph's outpouring of fury that had crushed Baramika lives without a second thought. Maybe the caliph himself hadn't ordered their slaughter, but he left them up for grabs for whoever wanted to attack them. Baba tried to calm Mama's fears, but her heart told her that the soothsayer's words were our inevitable fate. A fate that opened its arms, called out to us, waiting for us. A fate that became our shadow, staying with us until it scooped us up once and for all into its arms.

I used to eavesdrop whenever Mama invited one of her soothsayers over. I liked listening to the web of lies that they were so good at spinning, so that I could share them with my father when he came home in the evening. Not for one second did Baba believe what they came up with. "Even when soothsayers are telling the truth, they're lying," he'd say, his eyes never leaving the book in his hands. But he couldn't get Mama to drop the habit that was so popular with the Abbasid women, and their men too, with soothsayers reaching the courts of kings and caliphs. The strange thing was that Anan wasn't like the rest: she didn't dress up her prophecies or fill her lies with dried-up hope. Instead, she snapped her vision out like a whip, the crack in the air more painful than where it actually landed. Like this, her words were terrifying long before they might have come true.

Anan scattered her stones on a patch of black fabric—which was meant to show the way forward—shaking her head, listening for the evil spirits that had just fled the heavenly kingdom, arriving with stolen bits of news. She swatted the air as if to get rid of something and opened her eyes as wide as they would go, trying to see what was hidden behind the screen of the unknown. Hugging herself, she murmured, "A sea of darkness will drown everyone, a black fury is coming."

"How can we all be punished for one man's sin?"

"O child of Yahya Al-Baramika, family is a necklace; if it comes loose, all its beads will fall."

With a trembling hand Qasma wiped the sweat dripping down her forehead. The Abbasid caliph was raging against the Baramika, the same people who had grown up alongside him, provided stability, supported him, shouldered the burdens of the nation, advised him, defended him; those same people were now his worst enemies, and his first victims. Why? A question that was out of place, it seemed. Politics has a beautiful side that charms men who fall into her clutches and worship her, giving her everything they have. But she's also a woman with secrets too holy to divulge, desires too ugly to speak aloud, promises like sandcastles crumbling under the waves of her fury. If she showed them her true face with all its adornment, their souls would be the sacrifice.



"Even when soothsayers are telling the truth, they're lying," I repeated to myself while a lantern's shadow danced on the

mosque wall. *The soothsayers told the truth, Baba, they told the truth even though they're lying.*

I hugged my legs to my chest, rested my head on my knees, and cried. That stupid prophecy had come true: my family was scattered, our peace of mind gone. Our lives were a living hell. In the few weeks that had passed, my life and that of every Baramika descendant had been turned upside down. Just a few days had been enough to either humiliate everyone or drag them to an awful death. My parents had been worried about us, telling my siblings and me not to go outside the house. Even friends no longer dropped by, afraid prying eyes would get them in trouble with the caliph. One by one, they all slipped away, leaving my father and our family to face death alone.