

# The Queen of the Peri Takes Her Time

*By Corey Flintoff*

**T**HERE ARE MANY STORIES of how Faiz Mungummary Khan lost his right hand. This is the best:

When Faiz was a young man, the queen of the peri took him as her lover. Immortal beings love humans the way the poet loves roses, because they are beautiful and they are brief. When the war came, the youth told the queen that he must go and fight, but he swore by his right hand that he would never touch another woman. He was gone four years.

To the peri, four years is but a sip from an overfilled cup, but to a young man, it's a very long time. When Faiz finally returned, he had embraced several women, in the desperate way of men at war.

The queen was furious, not only because of the betrayals, but because Faiz had spoiled his beauty with the famous wound he received at Ku'ufa. She chopped off the offending hand with the young man's own *janbiya*, but even before his blood spattered the floor, she felt the pangs of regret. Later, she gave him a hand carved from purest crystal to replace the one she had taken.

It is said that she keeps Faiz's hand in one of her Birkin handbags, where it stays as fresh and warm as the day it was severed. Sometimes she reaches into the bag with her own ivory-white hand and caresses it. At those times, no matter where he is, Faiz can feel her touch, and his heart aches.

Faiz Mungummery Khan wasn't wearing the crystal hand when I called on him at his office in Dubai. It lay palm-up on his vast desk, and he was using it as an ashtray. He barely glanced up from his laptop as I was ushered into the room. "You're here about the cement?" he asked. "Tell them they need to start delivery tomorrow. We're pouring foundations."

"It's not the cement rep, sir," his assistant said. She was an efficient young woman in a severe hijab. "The group from Tehran won't be here till this afternoon. This gentleman is the driver."

"The driver?" He looked up with real interest. "The auto racer? Well. We've been buzzing with curiosity here ever since we got your message. Come in, come in!" He wheezed with the effort of hoisting himself out of his chair. I'd stupidly extended my hand, but he ignored it. "Sorry to say I don't follow the Formula One as I should. I understand you did very well on the circuit, until that unlucky crash."

He nodded toward a suite of leather couches by the windows. His office looked out at the billowing silhouette of the Burj Al Arab. The building shimmered like a mirage against the haze over the Gulf. His walls were hung with drawings of other fanciful structures, all marked with his logo: a hand supporting a skyscraper and the name Mungummery Middle Eastern Development, Ltd.

It took an awkward minute for the two of us to lower ourselves into the seats, I with my cane and leg brace, and he with the weight of old age. "There, that's better," he said, once his assistant had propped him up with a pillow at his side. "You'll have tea, coffee?" For all his years and infirmity, Faiz Mungummery Khan's eyes still gleamed with the energy of the man he'd been, the revolutionary, the visionary.

I'd heard his story just a few weeks before from a friend of mine in Beirut. It sounded like an answered prayer, the revelation that there might be a living man who could believe me and help me face a danger that had been growing over the past three years. My friend loves me like a brother but still thinks I'm mentally unsound. He said that if anyone could

understand, it might be Faiz, a man who'd had many strange adventures and known every emotion in life except fear.

The wound from Ku'ufa had left a deep cleft in Faiz's skull that was fully exposed now that he was bald. In his younger days, the scar had been mostly concealed by his hair and obscured by his brutal beauty.

I'd been looking at some old photographs on the wall in his reception room. One placed him at the center of some guerilla fighters in the mountains. He was young and lean, unbowed by the weight of his machine gun and cartridge belts. Another showed him receiving a bouquet from a little girl when he was governor at Ku'ufa, and one taken later, when he was in exile with the beautiful American film star.

"Well," he said, "I'm sorry that our time is limited. I'd like to know more about this racing career of yours, but I'm afraid we have to be more direct. What can I do for you?"

I glanced at the assistant, who'd been hovering just at the edge of my vision. She had an air of hyper-alertness, like a human antenna. "I wonder if we might speak privately."

"We are speaking privately," the old man said. "Huda can hear anything you might care to propose."

"Even regarding the queen of the peri?"

He looked up sharply. "I hope I'm not about to hear some fairy-tale rubbish that's been dismissed a hundred times before."

"Is it rubbish — the story about your hand?"

The old man held up his stump and practically shook it at me. "It's common knowledge," he said. "I lost my hand in the first assassination attempt. Someone tossed a grenade into my car when I was governor at Ku'ufa. I caught it, but I wasn't quick enough when I threw it out the window." He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a gold case, opened it one-handed, and plucked out a Turkish cigarette. He didn't offer one to me. The assistant veered to his side with a light. "If that's all you came for, I'm afraid we'll have to draw this meeting to a close."

It was clear that he meant it, but I was desperate. "I've met her," I said. "I've met the queen, and I'm in the same situation you were in. I need your advice."

"It's nonsense," he said, but something stirred in him. There was

uncertainty in his eyes, and I could see him trying to shrug it off. "Huda, please show the gentleman out."

"She'll take more than my hand," I said., "You've got to help me!"

The old man sighed a stream of smoke and watched as it vanished into some hidden ventilator. Then he looked critically at me. "You're a handsome fellow," he said. "You're a certain type." The fact is that he and I were more or less the same type, judging from those old photos on his wall. Maybe it was a type that particularly appealed to the queen. When a wealthy lady loses a beloved Pug she's not likely to replace it with a Pomeranian. Eventually, she'll get another Pug. "Tell me," Faiz asked, "how do you imagine that you met this so-called 'queen of the peri'?"

"On Japan Air — the flight from Tokyo to New Delhi."

It was a week before the race in Delhi, and I was catching up with my team after a couple of days with friends on the Shima Peninsula. I was pleased to see there was no one beside me in First Class, but once we were in the air and the seat-belt sign blinked off, a woman appeared in the aisle.

"Hello," she said, "I've had to change my seat. It seems I'm next to you." Oddly, I can't remember any first impression of this woman, what she looked like, other than that she was beautiful. I got up to let her into the window seat, inhaling some faint exotic scent as she slipped by. Once she was settled, I fiddled with my watch and asked her if she knew what the time difference was between Tokyo and Delhi. "Time?" she said. "I never think about time. Does it matter?"

"I suppose it depends on what you're doing with the time," I said. And so we were off on a conversation that lasted the whole nine hours of the flight, the kind of intimate talk you can have with strangers when there's not much prospect of seeing them again.

Her name was Persian: Afsoun. She had the profile of a goddess in a Babylonian bas-relief, a predatory curve to her elegant nose. I might have been warned, but she smiled at me with such charm that I dismissed any unease I might have felt.

She knew nothing about auto racing, but she was excited by the idea of it. "Moving so fast," she said, "always pushing. Can you even think about what you're doing? Or do you decide with just your eyes and your muscles?"

"I don't know, exactly. When it's best, there's no time to think. You can't put together sentences in your brain. I suppose your body decides." My body was making choices just then, as I leaned toward her.

"And so dangerous!" she said. "You could be snuffed out in an instant. You're not afraid?"

"Not when you're in control. You want to go just to the edge of being in control, not quite to the point where you could lose it."

All this came back to me that night in her suite at the Oberoi Hotel, far beyond the edge of control, with our bodies making all the decisions.

I didn't elaborate on that part of the story as I sat in Faiz Mungummary Khan's office, with his assistant Huda in the room, but I could see that the old man knew exactly what I was talking about. His eyes were fixed on some distant memory.

"Well," he said finally, "you met her in a place that's neither here nor there — a place that's in motion, where she can pass from her world into ours. I met her on the train between Baghdad and Basra. When at first you couldn't form a clear idea of what she looked like, it's because she was reading you, figuring out what sort of woman you'd be attracted to, and shaping herself to suit."

So all those days and nights with her were really just me, just me with some mirror that reflected back my own desire?

I couldn't help glancing over at Huda, to see how she was taking all this. She appeared to be trying to control her expression, but she looked faintly appalled. Her perfect posture made her seem like a person who lived by her self-control. Women like her must think men are such utter fools.

"What promises did you make?" he asked.

What promises? At the time, it didn't feel like a promise at all. That first week in Delhi, I thought I was in love with her.

She came to watch me race at the Buddh International Circuit. Sebastian Vettel won it, but I turned in my fastest time ever. The racing press made quite a fuss over me, because Vettel had dominated the circuit all season and they were eager for a new challenger. You can see my interviews on YouTube, but for all the TV crews and paparazzi there, you won't find a single image of the woman who was with me.

It was on the plane for Abu Dhabi that she told me she wouldn't be able to join me for the next race. "Something's come up at home," she said. She'd told me that she was from someplace near Herat, but it was never clear whether that was still home. "I'll have to whisk off. You won't even see me when we land in Abu Dhabi, but I'll be back, I promise." She pressed a finger to my chest. "And you must promise me that you'll wait for me, that you'll be true, and most of all, that you'll keep yourself safe."

"I swear," I said, and kissed her. "I swear, with all my heart." I must've fallen asleep at some point, with her hand in mine. The flight attendant woke me, reminding me to fasten my seat belt as we descended into Abu Dhabi. The woman beside me was gone without a trace — her wrap, her expensive handbag — everything, gone.

I looked for her, of course. I made a fool of myself at the airport, until my teammates got me into a taxi. "She gave you the slip, is all," one of the mechanics said. "She'll turn up again."

But she didn't. I had my first really bad race in Abu Dhabi.

"With your heart," the old man said. "My God, man, why did you break that promise?"

"Time passed. I never heard from her. I had no trace of her — no keepsakes, no photos. After a while, I started wondering whether she'd even been real."

It was worse than that. I had a lot of bad races. I drank and partied, and my driving was erratic. Before the crash, there were threats of dropping me from the team. "I was taking too many chances, trying to get my stats back up. I thought I was going to die."

The old man nodded. "I thought I was going to die, too — in the hills above Ku'ufa, with artillery on us all the time. After I got hit, my promise didn't seem to matter." I stole a glance at Huda. She was staring out the window, a severe expression on her face. "You last saw her when?" the old man asked.

"Almost three years ago."

"And no sign of her since," he said. "You know, time means nothing to them. They live outside of time. When she returns, it'll feel to her as if she just stepped out of a room, then came back in again. For her, no time will have passed."

"What — even if it's ten years — or twenty?"

"It won't be long," he said. "They do understand that humans age. She'll be back soon, I should think, hoping to savor you before your youth and your energy are gone."

"What do I do? What did you do?"

He held up his stump. "I couldn't save myself. She pruned me, like a palm tree. In your case, it would be rather more severe." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and Huda came to prop him up again. His old man's torso tended to subside into the waistband of his trousers. "I think you need better advice than mine," he said. "I think you need to summon Shamhurish al-Tayyar."

**I**T GOES TO MY state of mind, as the lawyers say, that the idea of summoning a djinni was no more unbelievable than the idea of visiting a psychiatrist. I wouldn't have been surprised if Huda had drawn a chalk circle on the parquet and launched into some mumbo jumbo to set up an appointment — any day but Thursday, for Shamhurish is the master of Thursday and he's busy all day.

It was even simpler than that.

"The peri can come and go from their world to ours whenever they please," the old man said. "They just need to find an entry point that's neither here nor there. The djinn can only come when summoned, and they can only be summoned in certain places, where there's a gate between the worlds." He nodded at his incomparable view of the Gulf. "There's one here. It's been here since Dubai was just a camp for pearl fishers. It was a well, called Kef, where people used to draw their water, but now, of course, it's been covered up. Huda can take you there, and you, in turn, can take her to a very nice restaurant."

The old man's instructions kept me busy all afternoon at the Mall of the Emirates, the one with the indoor ski slope. I bought a *dishdasha*, size XXL — it's that Arab robe the guys on my racing team used to call a "man dress." I also spent a lot of time at a jewelry store, picking out a gold chain. I wound up with something breathtakingly expensive, such as gangsters or rappers might wear.

"Gold," the old man had said, "gold can pass between the worlds — and it has to be wearable gold, like a ring or a bracelet, something the djinni can put on to carry it through the gate."

Huda was ready when I came for her at eight. She wore a long-sleeved gown, and she'd dressed up her hijab with a glittery scarf. Her dark eyes were alert and searching as a freshly unhooded falcon's. "I hope you like Thai," she said. She didn't sound enthused.

It was a very fancy restaurant in a downtown hotel, with a view of an artificial lake and a fountain show. The name, *Thiptara*, supposedly means "magic at the water." The reservation was in Faiz Mungummary Khan's name, so we had the best table. Huda ordered some nonalcoholic cocktail with an orchid, and I had a Thai coffee.

"The table is set for three," I said. "Will this djinni come out of the fountain, or what?"

"There won't be a djinni." She spoke English with a boarding-school accent, precise as a recorded message. "In a few minutes, we'll go down to the basement. We'll follow my grandfather's instructions..." She caught my look of surprise. "Yes, my grandfather. We'll do exactly as he says — I promised him I would — but there won't be a djinni. There won't be anything." She leaned forward so she could speak softly. "Look. He's mad, but he's only mad on this one subject. I don't know how mad you are, but you've no right to wind him up."

I sat and let her resentment seep into me. The fountains gushed. A pianist played "Manhattan." A group of Chinese businessmen began to get loud. "I don't know how mad I am. That's the trouble."

"How do you know she was the queen of the peri," she asked, "and not...not just one of your glamorous conquests on your glamorous racing circuit? How do you know she wasn't just a psychotic episode?"

"I felt the beating of her wings."

Looking back on it, there were uncanny things from the very beginning. Time didn't exist, so even that first night felt like it would never end. Food and drink appeared whenever I wanted them, but I never saw a waiter. Afsoun responded to my thoughts before I spoke them. "Golab and eglantine," she said once, "narcissus and honey, from the court of Jamshid." I must've looked surprised. "My scent," she went on. "You were wondering."



We made love a lot, more intense and dreamlike as we went along. Once, I woke with her on top of me. When she came, her whole body began to buzz. There was a flutter in the air behind her, like an unfolding paper fan. I couldn't see them in the dark and I was repulsed by the thought of touching them, but I know they were wings—insect wings, like a locust's.

Huda gave a dismissive shake of her head. "It must be wonderful to have such a vivid imagination. You and my grandfather can go riding about on flying carpets and having erotic adventures with creatures out of Scheherazade. The rest of us have to rely on the telly." She looked at her phone, something she did with annoying regularity. "It's time." We finished our drinks, and Huda told the waiter that we'd be away from the table for a few minutes while we went to meet our guest.

"We'll have to go down to the basement," she said. "This hotel is built right over a spring. They've had trouble with water seeping around the foundations for years. As a matter of fact, they've pulled up part of the basement floor to get at the problem." She led me down a flight of stairs to the toilets, and past that to a service stairway that connected to the basement. We ignored the "Keep Out—Work in Progress" signs and came to a sub-basement where the concrete floor was broken up and sand was piled around a deep hole. I could smell turbid water.

"So," she said, "there it is. That, supposedly, was the well called Kef."

"What do we do?"

"You have the gold? Toss it in the hole. Either it will catch a djinni or it'll be an exciting find for the workmen when they come back in the morning."

I took out the chain. The weight of it brought home what a stupid exercise this was. If Huda hadn't been standing there, mocking me, I might have quietly put it back in my pocket and gone upstairs for a drink. It didn't bear thinking about. I tossed it.

There was no splash, no clink of metal hitting bottom in the darkness. The chain vanished. No rumble in the ground, no puff of smoke, just a figure emerging from the shadows on the other side of the hole.

The djinn of Bajir are said to be black as basalt, but those of Kef are red, like brick. Shamhurish al-Tayyar was something over eight feet tall, with a leonine face and yellow eyes. Except for the chain and a gold wristwatch, he was naked.

I glanced over at Huda, who gasped and turned her back. Her shoulders were shaking.

"*As-salâmu 'alaykum*," Shamhurish said.

"*Wa 'alaykumu as-salâm*." I handed him the *dishdasha*. It was far too small, but as he pulled it over his head, he appeared to shrink to fit it. In the end, he was only a head taller than me.

"Tell me," he said, "what time is it in this world?"

THE WAITSTAFF at *Thiptara* showed no surprise that a large red being was seated at their best table, but they were pleased by the size and variety of his order. "What they see," he said, "is a standard-issue Emirati businessman — nothing to get excited about." Huda clearly saw him as I did, because she appeared to be trying hard not to look at him at all. For his part, Shamhurish looked at her as if she were the last course on his very large menu.

"You understand about *peri*," he said, when I'd explained my dilemma. "They don't live in time, as we do, so for them, contact with humans is like taking a very fast-rushing and powerful drug. It's through humans that they can experience intense desire and fulfillment, the desperate cycle that makes humankind so dangerous" — he looked over at Huda — "and so enticing."

"As *we* do?" she repeated. "So djinn also live in time?" She fixed her gaze on his hands, which, apart from their color, were human-looking and rather graceful.

"We do," he said, "only on a slightly longer scale. I, for example, am young for my kind, but I can remember when Salah ad-Din defeated the Crusaders at the Battle of Hattin."

"So," I said, anxious to get the conversation back on track, "is there some magic that will keep her away, make her forget about me?"

"There is no such thing as magic," the djinni said. "You humans dreamed up the idea of magic because you're so impatient, so desperate to do things and have things before you die, you just imagined powers that would make that possible."

"You're doing magic right now," Huda said. "You're making the people around us think you look human, while we still see you as..." She

looked up at his face briefly, then away. "As something else."

"What you see as magic is just competence," he said. "You could make people see whatever you wish, you could acquire any skill — if you had a few hundred years to practice."

"I could be a world champion," I said, "only I don't have time. What can I do?"

"Maybe nothing," he said. "I see you've already damaged your leg rather badly. She won't like that. She won't understand it. The beauty of humans is like flowers, but the beauty of the peri is that of gemstones."

"What's the beauty of the djinn?" Huda asked. She was looking him full in the face. Her mascara appeared to have spread, making her eyes big and liquid.

He smiled as much as the angles of his face would allow. "Beauty isn't everything."

"Afsoun," I said. "We're talking about Afsoun. She might not want me, but she'll take her revenge, just as she did on Faiz, only she'll rip my heart out."

"Matters between humans and peri cannot be resolved by djinn," Shamhurish said. "Relations between peri and djinn are very delicate. I don't dare to upset the balance."

"I suppose you don't give three wishes, either."

"Put this in your mind," the djinni said. "I said magic was a human invention. Ask yourself, what is your magic power? What is it that you can do so well that it looks like magic?"

"I don't know. I used to be able to drive."

"You can still drive. And you weren't afraid to chase death, even knowing that death might stop very suddenly, right in your path. Did that deter you?"

"It didn't then. It might now," I said. "Even if I could get into the cockpit, I know what it feels like when your body comes apart in a wreck, and it might stop me."

"Then ask yourself this: What do you have now that you didn't have when you first met the queen?"

"I can tell you what I don't have. I don't have time to sit and philosophize."

"Just remember your magic power." The djinni crumpled his napkin

and dropped it on his plate. "Thank you for an excellent meal. It's nice to visit this hectic world."

"You're not going back to...to wherever?" Huda asked.

"Not in a hurry," he said. "After all, I don't get summoned that often. I'd like to have a look around." He nodded at me. "I can see you have a lot to think about. I'll be happy to see the lady safely home."

"No way!" I said. "I don't know what you think — " But Huda had already gathered up her purse.

"It's fine," she said, blushing. "Don't worry. It'll be fine."

The waitress brought a small bamboo basket with a very large check, and I was left to pay it. By the time Huda and the djinni reached the door, they were perfectly in step.

The night was hot as I came out of the hotel. I stood a while on the steps, watching the valets trying to keep pace with a line of luxury cars, as sheikhs and oligarchs rolled up for a late-night snack.

Nice cars. Impatient owners. A princeling in a pristine white shirt with a perfectly unshaven jaw jumped out of his Porsche, waving his keys to no avail. Suddenly my way was clear.

I came up behind him and plucked the keys from his hand. "I'll park it, boss," I said. He scarcely looked around.

A Carrera S, nearly new, plenty of gas. It was awkward, getting in with my brace, but it's an amazingly comfortable car. I throttled out of the town center and took the highway toward Liwa, toward the desert, the Empty Quarter.

It's a perfect stretch of highway for a car like this. Once I get the city behind me, the pavement stretches away into the desert, divided road with fresh white lines. My headlights flicker over the dark shapes of bushes on either side.

A comfortable cruising speed for a car like this is 90 to 100 mph, but it's easy to creep up to 120. I scream past the red lights of an occasional truck, but otherwise, I'm hardly aware of the speed. 130. Even the gentlest curves start to feel interesting.

I'm blasting along in the tunnel of the headlights. Everything in my periphery is a blur. 140. Reaching for that place that's neither here nor there.

Above the smell of car leather and my own sweat comes the scent of golab and eglantine, narcissus and honey. "What's this, my love?" Her voice is low in my ear. "It's not racing. What are you doing?"

"We're headed for the Empty Quarter, the desert, the dunes."

"Delicious." I can't take my eyes off the road now, but I can see her knees, turned toward me in the light from the dash. She reaches for my shoulder. Once she touches me, she'll know. "You broke your promise."

"I did." 145. Trucks ahead — four, maybe five, red taillights arching around a curve. 150. A noise like doors slamming as we pass.

"How could you? And what's this? What's wrong with your leg?"

"I had a wreck." It's awkward, shifting and braking with my brace. 155.

"What are you doing? You can slow down. I'm here now."

"This is my magic," I say, "driving fast. We can go faster. It's exciting. Want to feel it?"

"You can't kill me, if that's what you're thinking. Even if you kill yourself, you can't kill me." Her breath is coming harder, like when we were having sex. She slips her hand across my chest, into my shirt, feeling for my heart.

"Not thinking, driving." The white line unravels like a ribbon in the wind. Good as it is, this car doesn't grip like an F1. Sweat is soaking my shirt. What was it that I didn't have before? Fear.

"You fool!" Her nails find purchase in the skin of my chest, as if she might close her claws right through gristle and bone, into the beating chambers of my heart. I wonder what she looks like now, wonder if her eyes are rolling back the way they do when she comes. She's starting to buzz. 160. If this is your drug, get ready for an overdose.

Shapes rocket past in the dark. There's a tremor in the steering wheel. The tires are hot, sticky, but there's a definite slip and slide. 163. I can feel the flutter of her wings. I reach for the window buttons.

Wind explodes into the compartment with a sudden pressure that pops my eardrums. It yanks the car from side to side. She claws my shoulder as the blast catches her wings and whips her out the window like a moth.

It took another four or five miles before I was able to slow it down and

roll to the side of the road. I sat in the dark while the car settled, the engine ticking as the metal cooled down. Any minute, I expected her to reappear beside me, or even to come raging up the road. Maybe she was just lying under the stars in that dreamy way she had after we made love.

Eventually I hitched a ride back to the city in a slow canvas-covered lorry. It felt good to rumble into Dubai at dawn, pink light sparkling across those improbable spires. The driver was an Afghan from Herat. I tried to ask him whether he knew anything about the queen of the peri, but he didn't understand the question.

In the years since, I've expected the queen to turn up at any time and exact her revenge. She may still do so, but I've come to realize that my predicament is no different from that of any other mortal. "Of that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels of heaven."

Faiz Mungummery Khan was terribly worried when Huda didn't come back to work. Over the next few months, her credit-card statements told of adventures in romantic places, but we could never track her down. We even made one more attempt to summon Shamhurish from the well, but evidently djinn don't have to show up if they don't feel like it.

When Huda did return, she was unapologetic about her absence. She is a far more relaxed and indulgent woman than she was before, but she never speaks of her sojourn with the djinni. We know things, she and I, but we keep them to ourselves. We're far too busy, most of the time, keeping Mungummery Middle Eastern Development afloat in these uncertain times. ॐ