

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz
4110 Faith Ct.
Alexandria, VA 22311
(703) 472-6463
mtravies@hotmail.com

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The Girl, the Stallion and the Talking Ape

“Magical pendants are so overrated” bemoaned princess Adelfa as she rubbed again the iridescent stone that hung from a gold chain around her neck. “Can’t get this one to do anything for me.”

Adelfa glanced around and fought bravely to hold back tears. Crying would not solve anything. She pressed her stuffed monkey against her chest and declared, a bit melodramatically: “Why should I, a princess, the daughter of a high king, be imprisoned in a filthy tower like a criminal?”

She knew the answer only too well. Her father had been a just king, who had ruled benevolently and tried to do his best for his subjects. His care for the common folk, with whom he had sided on more than one occasion, had placed him at odds with the aristocracy and the landed gentry. When a spate of noblemen led by that despicable earl had revolted against him, her father – no warrior he – had been defeated and slain. She had been seized and confined to this tower. Only the earl’s ambition had saved her life: his plan was to force her into marrying him, thereby quelling popular unhappiness and allowing him to become the legitimate ruler of the country.

Of course, she had resisted his advances and spent the last three months languishing in her prison. Bread and water and a cot hard as stone had been her fate. Other than the guards

who came twice daily to bring her food and empty her chamber pot, she was alone, her stuffed monkey her only companion. She could look out of the barred window of her cell and watch life go by, soldiers and farmers, palace servants and tradespeople, but nobody could hear her cries for help and probably would have done nothing to assist her even if they could. She was alone and increasingly desperate.

“Oh, Bananas, why did my godmother give me this pendant if it was going to be of no use? I am supposed to get three boons, three wishes that I can get fulfilled by rubbing on the magic stone. But I rub and rub, to no avail. I ask for this miserable tower to crumble and fall, for the doors to my prison to open and allow me to go out, for a bolt of lightning to strike the earth dead, and it is all for nothing. What am I doing wrong?” Bananas did not answer, but for one instant, one fugitive second, Adelfa thought she saw a strange gleam in the toy’s glass eyes. Had she imagined it?

Adelfa pouted. (She was already fourteen, but had not yet abandoned a tendency to pout for which she had been often scolded by her tutors.) Then, willfully, she seized Bananas with one hand and rubbed the stone in the pendant with the other, repeating the incantation her godmother had taught her: “O, holy stone, grant me a boon. Make Bananas able to talk to me, so I will have a companion in my misery.”

There was a sudden flash of light, as if a thousand candles had been lit at the same time, and then gone out. Before her astonished eyes, the little cloth monkey shook itself from her grip, dropped to the floor, and began growing until it was almost Adelfa’s size.

“Oh, Bananas!” cried the princess. “What happened to you?”

There was no immediate response. The creature before her stretched and contorted, adapting to its new size, and then rolled its eyes and grimaced, as in the grip of some inner pain. Finally, it looked at Adelfa and declared in a husky voice:

“Nothing, my Lady. Thanks for liberating me. I feared I would never regain my true self.”

“What do you mean, your true self?” This big fellow was certainly not her toy.

“Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Cynamon, prince of the clan of the Ouroborus.”

“No!” she cried in shock. “You are Bananas, my little toy monkey.”

“Excuse me, my Lady, but I am actually a chimpanzee, an intelligent ape never to be referred to as ‘monkey’”. His very broad mouth curved down in disapproval.

“I beg your pardon. What I meant is that up to a moment ago you were a felt toy no larger than my arm, and now you are almost as big as I am. What happened?”

“You did this yourself. You asked the pendant, as a boon, to make me capable of talking, and it reverted me to my natural form AND gave me the ability to speak.”

“But I did it only as a joke. I have asked a thousand things from the pendant, and it has done nothing for me.”

“Yes, I have been watching. My impression is that you have always asked the pendant to do physical things, like crushing stone or moving objects. I think it only works at modifying living beings like you and me.”

“What a worthless piece of junk!” retorted Adelfa angrily. “That is of no help in my situation!”

“Perhaps” said Cynamon. “But maybe if we can get out of here, your remaining boons may prove useful.”

“But how am I going to get out of here!!?” cried Adelfa, almost hysterically.

“There may be a way. The guard that brings your evening slops, he comes around sunset, is that right?”

“I think so.”

“Next time he comes, I will create a distraction so you can slip out of your cell. Once you are out, you may be able to escape. I am sure someone will give you shelter.”

“I don’t know, it seems risky.”

“Yes, but what do you have to lose?”

“I guess nothing. If I stay here I will die, or worse yet, be forced to marry that monster.”

“So there. Better dead than a slave, I say.” Adelfa was not happy with those choices, but reluctantly nodded in agreement.

Getting out proved easier than Adelfa had expected. As she heard the sound of footsteps approaching, she placed herself behind the cell door. When the key rattled on the lock, she held her breath in anticipation; Cynamon stood two paces back from the entrance, and as the guard entered carrying a tin plate and an earthen cup, the chimp jumped up and down and made guttural noises that rattled the surprised soldier. He cursed and made a pass at the crouched figure, dropping the plate and cup with an unnerving crash. Cynamon was too fast for him, though, jumping up and down and sideways to all corners of the cell, foiling each attempt at capture. Meanwhile, Adelfa quietly slipped out of the open cell door and marched quickly down the corridor towards the stone stairs at its end. Before she reached those, Cynamon emerged from the cell with the guard in hot pursuit. Adelfa began racing down the long flight of stairs as

fast as her young body allowed. She was reaching the bottom when Cynamon caught up to her, running with inhuman speed.

The guard had stopped chasing after them and, instead, was blowing a whistle to summon help. Adelfa and Cynamon reached to courtyard and were heading for the forest across from the tower when several soldiers emerged from all corners of the castle, carrying swords, pikes and other weapons. Cynamon, who had been looking in all directions seeking an escape route, caught the girl's arm and forced her to make a sharp left turn in the direction of a donkey that stood grazing at the sparse grass of the yard, unperturbed by the commotion.

"What...?" began Adelfa. Cynamon did not give her time to complete her question. He pointed at the donkey and said: "That ass. Ask your pendant to turn it into a swift steed."

"But..." "Do it, there is no time to lose."

Adelfa rubbed the pendant dangling from her neck and said, panting as she tried to catch her breath: "O holy stone, grant me a boon. Turn this donkey into a gallant, but docile stallion, a fast horse that can ride like the wind." No sooner had she finished uttering the words of the incantation, the twilight gloom became bright as day and the donkey, braying in surprise, was enveloped in a cloud from which emerged a tall steed, white as snow, which trotted towards them majestically.

Adelfa was confounded by this turn of events, but Cynamon gave her no opportunity to tarry while the guards approached. The chimp seized her arm, dragged her towards the stallion, and commanded: "Horse, bend down so we can mount you." The horse obeyed, and girl and ape climbed onto its capacious back as the first of the guards reached them. The soldier grabbed Adelfa's leg and tried to unseat her, but the horse reared up and gave him a vicious kick that sent him sprawling several feet away.

“Well done,” encouraged Cynamon. “Now take us down that road, as fast as you can.”

The stallion wasted no time. Moving so fast that it became a colorless blur, it sped away, with Adelfa and Cynamon hanging on its mane for dear life.

“Where to?” inquired Cynamon. “Let’s head west. My uncle’s domain is that way. If we can reach him, he will protect us.”

“How far do we have to go?”

“I’m not sure. I have been there only once, when I was very young. We went on a beautiful carriage driven by four identical black horses The ride seemed to take all day, but I slept through much of it.”

“Great” sneered the ape. “We don’t know where we are going, nor how long it will take us to get there.” The horse merely neighed as it galloped away.

They rode like the wind through the night, and well into the morning hours. Finally, Adelfa cried with voice made hoarse by exhaustion: “We need to stop and rest. I can go no further and it does not appear that anyone is following us.” Cynamon turned to the horse and directed: “Horse, take us to that copse of alders and stop there.”

“We need to give this horse a name. What should we call him?” asked Adelfa as she gingerly dismounted, every portion of her body sore from the ride.

“I don’t know. He is your horse.”

“Let’s call him Lightning, because nothing alive moves faster.”

Adelfa turned to the horse, which was looking at them attentively, as if following the conversation. “Steed, from now on you shall be known as Lightning, and I will sing your praises to all we meet.” Lightning lowered its head and uttered a contented neigh.

They found a nearby stream and Adelfa rinsed the dust off her face as best as she could. She and Cynamon drank deeply but their thirst was replaced by a growing hunger.

“How far are we from your uncle’s land?” queried Cynamon.

“I don’t know” replied Adelfa uncertainly.

“We best get going again” replied the ape. They remounted Lightning and headed again towards the lowering sun.

As night approached, it became obvious that they were lost. The road had narrowed to a dirt track and the landscape had become more barren, with no farms or other signs of human habitation within sight. “On my trip here, maybe they made a turn while I slept, and I missed it” acknowledged Adelfa ruefully.

“Let’s find a safe place to spend the night and wait until the morning to decide what to do” suggested Cynamon.

There was no shelter to be found so they slept in the open, Adelfa resting her head on the ape’s shoulder. They had no food or fire and it was biting cold. Adelfa had never felt so miserable.

As the first rays of the sun broke over the horizon on the east, Adelfa struggled herself awake and rose, chilled to the bone and stiff as if her body had turned to leather. Cynamon was already up and presented her with a handful of berries. “This is all I could find,” he said apologetically. Adelfa took the berries and chewed on them greedily. They were sour and tasted of wilderness, but she ate them anyways. They barely made a dent in her hunger. “How about you, Cynamon? Did you find anything to eat?”

“No, my Lady. But do not worry. We Ouroborus are a very sturdy breed.”

“What are we going to do? I fear that forging ahead on this road is insane and may be our death. We have no food, no warm clothes, and no idea of what lies ahead.”

“I hate to say this, my Lady, but I think we must go back. Maybe before we get to the castle we will find the turnoff we missed.”

“Back to my prison?” asked Adelfa, disconsolate.

“Remember the old saying – where there is life there is hope.”

So they climbed again on Lightning’s back and Adelfa told the stallion in a whisper:

“Please take us back, old friend. Sorry for all the trouble.”

Lightning snorted and started trotting back the way they had come.

They had been on the road only a few hours when Cynamon got up with a start on top of Lightning’s back (a maneuver that almost tumbled Adelfa to the ground) and pointed excitedly at something ahead of them. “What is that?” Soon Adelfa saw what had got the chimp so excited – a large cloud of dust, moving in their direction and approaching rapidly.

“Horses, many of them, coming at us in great haste.”

“Can we hide somewhere?”

“No. The shrubs in these parts would not shelter a cat.”

Soon the riders came close enough that they could see their faces. The earl was at the head of the party, grimy with dirt and sweat. He was handsome, though cruelty had left a permanent grimace on his features. He reined his horse when he was next to Lightning and inquired, with barely concealed irritation. “Princess Adelfa. What is the meaning of this escapade? Are you not liking my hospitality?”

Adelfa scowled at him defiantly and spat her reply: “You murdering thief. I wish you were dead.” As she was not grasping her pendant, the wish was not granted and the earl’s demise was not forthcoming.

The earl uttered a derisive laugh. “My pretty thing. Soon I will make you my bride and teach you who is boss.”

“Never!” Anger and impotence colored her shout.

“We shall see. For now, let’s get you back to your quarters. I have a special treat in store for you.”

The nature of the treat never got revealed, for in that moment Lightning reared up and struck the earl’s horse on the withers, just before the saddle. The force of the blow was such that the horse collapsed to the ground, carrying the earl down with it in a tangle of human and animal limbs. The earl lay under the horse, unmoving.

Every man in the earl’s coterie advanced threateningly towards Adelfa, weapons drawn and ready to strike her and Lightning down. Clutching the pendant, Adelfa spoke: “O holy stone, I seek one final boon from you. Please make all the men here love and cherish me and offer me their allegiance as their sole and rightful sovereign.”

The flash of light that ensued after these words did not seem as bright as the previous ones, and Adelfa wondered whether the plea had been at all effective. She needed not have worried. One by one, the soldiers lowered their weapons, dismounted, and bent one knee on the ground in recognition of her majesty.

Adelfa waved her hand acknowledging their vow. Then, turning to Cynamon, she asked quietly: “The earl is still alive. Should I order him killed by his own troops?”

“Not yet, my Lady. Let’s see what he does.”

The earl was visibly hurt. One leg, trapped by his falling horse, appeared broken, and he had cuts and bruises all over his body. Laboriously, he got up, bracing himself on the chest of Lightning, who did not shy away. In a faltering voice, he hailed Adelfa: “Alas, sweet princess. How badly I have used you. Can you possibly find it in your heart to forgive me?”

Adelfa became torn between conflicting emotions. A moment ago she had hated this man who had wronged her so deeply, who had taken away her father and her kingdom, and all the happiness in her short life. Now, however, he was broken and pitiful and begging her forgiveness. What to do?

Cynamon came to the rescue. “The greatest rulers are those that temper justice with mercy. If you set him free, you will have shown yourself to be a worthy successor to your father, and will set you on the course to a long and happy reign. Slay him, and his friends and allies will fight you to the end.”

Adelfa turned her attention to the earl, who was gasping for breath and appeared near the point of fainting. “Earl, I am willing to forgive your misdeeds as long as you swear your fealty to me and promise to make your supporters do the same. Is that agreeable?”

“Yes, Your Majesty” said the earl with a faltering voice, and passed out.

Adelfa patted Cynamon and Lightning affectionately. “Thank you both. I shall be grateful to you forever.”

“My Lady, we only did what a friend would do. Your gratitude is accepted but not required. And a note of caution: Watch that earl carefully, in case he changes his mind in the future.”

“But why would he do that? Isn’t he compelled by the pendant’s gift to stay loyal to me forever?”

“Ah, but who knows,” responded Cynamon, with a mischievous wink. “How long will the pendant’s gifts last? For all I know, I could turn back into a toy any minute!”

“Oh, Cynamon, nooo,” groaned Adelfa.

“Pardon me, my Lady. I was only jesting.” And he winked again.

THE END