Fantasy/Romance

Desert Dreams

By Gracie C. McKeever
PROLOGUE

Bedouin Encampment

Arabian Peninsula, Rub al-Khali—18th Century

"Allah has forsaken you, Kane."
He heard the husky declaration as if from a great distance, glared at the sensual orifice from which his death sentence had just been emitted, saw her executioner's grin. Beautiful red lips curved into a wicked smile.

How could such lips—full, moist and capable of giving him so many of his first and only carnal pleasures—deliver such a lethal sentence? His death sentence, or very near, unless she decided to change her mind and spare him.

Sahir shook her exquisitely-shaped head, jet-black curls dancing around her face. She arched her lush eyebrows as if she knew what thoughts he harbored.
"You are aware of your error, djinni?"

Slowly, he nodded, loath to admit defeat as he had never done so. But yes, he was aware. More than aware that she could never be trusted.

I will not beg.
"Perhaps had you been able to do thus..."

Again, she had read his thoughts. She was more than wicked. She was a liar and a charlatan. And she had trapped him.
"You realize your mistake too late, Kane."
She uttered the words with such smooth elegance, his name rolling from her lips with traitorous familiarity, that it was easy for him to believe he had been moved by the sound so many times in the past, warmed to distraction by its promise.

By Allah, he would die before entrusting his title again!

Kane felt the storm raging outside, desert wind blowing and piling loose sand. But it was nothing to match the tempest raging through his veins, pooling in his chest and bringing the most precious pain.

He took a deep breath, held on tight to the ache, reveled in it, storing it for future reference. He wanted to remember this moment, his last few breaths of freedom.

"It is my wish that you will serve your next mawla as well as you have served me."

Sand pelted fala'if, drowning her sentiments and reminding Kane of the desert's random fury. He welcomed the intrusion, swallowing hints of the cool night air seeping in through the opened ruag.

"This is how you repay me," he murmured. "I granted you everything you asked."

"Yes." Sahir nodded and pierced him with a strange and grievous look that said he had insulted her. "And I you. It is an even trade."

There could be nothing to requite the loss of his freedom. No amount of mental or worldly wisdom could make this trade "even."

"I know that you do not understand why I do this but perhaps in time..."
"There will never come a time when I will understand." Kane fingered the small platinum pendant at his neck—a horse and rider—feeling his first real pangs of vulnerability since she had dared him, remembering his old enemy. His other enemy.

I trusted her!

"These are your crosses, Kane, this pride and devotion. They will be your downfall."

"You are teaching me a lesson?"

Sahir nodded. "The most important." She cleared her throat as she pulled her eyes from his fist encircling the pendant and began her pronouncement.

Kane gritted his teeth, barely heard her sealing his verdict. One year or until such time when his new master saw fit to liberate him before his service was done.

It might as well have been an eternity.

* * * *

Sahir shook her head; tsk tsking as she popped home the cork and settled the ewer between her legs, reveling in the way cool multifaceted metal felt against the insides of her thighs. She smiled, stopped herself from chuckling outright at the memory of Kane's expression when she had bested him at a contest he was unaware of having entered, and later when she had passed down her judgment and had imprisoned her imp.

Sahir caressed the jug now with her fingers, closed her eyes and willed him to feel her through the brass and silver inlay. The jug trembled between her legs, vibrating against
her palms and she did chuckle. As richly decorated a piece as was the Blacas, it was too unglamorous a piece in which to house so sinfully beautiful a creature as her imp. But there was nothing else for it. It was either bind him now or let him fall victim to his own male impudence later. Sahir chose the former; it was for his own good even if he could not see it.

_I vow to kill the one who sets me free…_

He always had a flair for the dramatic. She knew he had not meant it. Were that he had. But she knew. Kane was one of the "good" djinn, of which fables and fairy tales would be written, sincere in his beliefs.

_Unlike Ifreet._

Now that vindictive shape-changing demon would kill Kane as soon as look at him. Sahir could not take the chance. Better enslavement than death. Her "punishment" was far more merciful.

She would only keep him inside for a short time, just until his newly chosen _mawla_ could safely release him. He needn't build pyramids from a grain of sand.

_Their Lord, Allah knows best about them…_

Oh but how she hated when he spouted his Holy Qur'an rhetoric at her. Were that she could be so faithful, so passionate about _anything_ except him.

But Kane was young yet, just barely past a century, Sahir reminded herself, still inexperienced and a mere babe compared to her and her kin.

_Ifreet…_

This entire unfortunate contest could have been avoided, of course, had he been able to submit. But even if he had said
he would, Sahir could not trust him to be true to his word. He was no longer in control of his destiny. Or heart.

_Therese._

The name beat against her brain as forcefully as the sand beat against the _beit al-sha'r_.

She was the one whose destiny was connected to Kane's, the one to whom his heart would belong.

_Therese._

From Allah's mouth to her ears, it left a taste more unpalatable than camel dung at the back of Sahir's throat, a memory bitterer than Kane's impending betrayal.

Incarcerating him had only been a temporary solution, but it would have to do until she figured out exactly how and when this other woman—her competition—would come into the picture. All she had now were her pilfered visions.

In the meantime, Sahir had to get out of the path of the approaching sandstorm ... and Ifreet.
CHAPTER 1

Present Day America

Mount Vernon, New York

Therese turned into her husband's body, buried her face against his broad back. So hard and uninviting. She inhaled the familiar male scent of him anyway—clean and spicy—tried to garner some comfort as she released her breath on a long hot sigh, closed her eyes and braced herself to eat crow.

Jury reached back with a hand to pull her close. "I'm sorry," he whispered, beating her to the punch as he so often had in their five-year marriage. Probably why they had been together as long as they had. Because God knew if it were up to her to give an inch and compromise, the marriage would have been declared DOA the first six months.

But then she didn't see why she should be the one to have to give an inch when she knew she was right.

He blamed her. Even through all his grief and concern for her, years later and through all their arguments and make-ups, she knew deep down he blamed her.

"He'd be almost three."
"Terre, don't."
"Don't what? Talk about my baby?"
"God, why do you keep doing this to yourself?"
"You mean why do I keep doing it to you, don't you?"
He cursed, bolted upright, threw back the comforter and slapped his bare feet on the wood-finish floor. "I don't believe you're starting this all over again."

"You think because you apologized that I'm supposed to forget all the hurtful things you've said? The hurtful things you've done?"

"And you haven't done anything hurtful?" He glanced at her over a shoulder, gawking.

Yes she had, Therese thought. And that was the worst part. There was no right and wrong, no black or white. Just them and their loss.

"You can't hold me responsible for your feelings, for your..."

"What, Jury? Say it."

He took a deep breath, cradled his face in his palms. "I'm not going to go through this with you, Therese. I can't."

"You think I'm feeling guilty."

"Your words. Not mine."

"You as much as said them."

He whirled on her, body half-on, half-off their sleigh bed as he leaned in. "You're so hung up on this guilt and who's to blame. Let's talk about why."

"Shouldn't that be obvious?"

"There's nothing obvious about any of this, baby. Just the fact that we're both hurting." He motioned to touch her—ever the consoler, the dutiful husband—but must have thought better of it, dropped his hand and murmured, "He was my baby too."

"You think I'm not aware of that?"
"I cared about him."
"And you're saying I didn't?"
"Terre..."
"That's what this is all about. You never ... you didn't want me to work."
"That has nothing to do with this."
*It has everything to do with it.*

Therese sat up now and glared at him, surprised when he didn't spontaneously combust, her look was so heated, surprised that the memory of his look, the pain, could assail her so powerfully even now, years after the doctor had related that she'd miscarried.

"...There's no reason not to try again. You're both young, you're healthy ... These things happen ... It's no one's fault...."

All meaningless words after the silent indictment Jury had given in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. Just a look, but it had said it all.

Why was it all right for him to leave her high-and-dry emotionally, dedicate long hours to his career tracking down bad guys, catching killers and playing with dead bodies, but when it came to her career, the rules suddenly became null and void?

She knew she was being childish, but her career was important to her. He had known that coming in. She had made sure he understood the rules she played by.

*Who are you trying to convince girl? You or him?*

"No one's begrudging you your career, Therese. Not then or now," Jury said and this time when he reached out a hand,
he stroked her arm. "But did you have to work so much, so ... hard?"

"Did you? Do you now?"

Jury frowned, took a deep breath. "That's ... that's different."

"Not even you believe that." Therese smirked. "God, you couldn't even get it out with conviction." But he had gotten it out. Conviction or not, he'd said the words, released what he hadn't been able to until now, what had been hovering at the edge of his thoughts all these years.

What had been sleeping and living between them day and night.

*Your fault, girl. Your job. Your fault.*

"Terre..."

"My job is just as important to me as yours is to you."

"Fine. We've established that. So where does that leave us both now?"

*Childless and wallowing, Jury, that's where!* *Get a grip ... hold on girl. Hold on.*

She had the biggest exhibition of her life opening up tomorrow, had been working on it for months now—grant writing, fundraising, publicizing. And as small and intimate as *TIHAM* was, she found being short-handed a definite hindrance—several interns, volunteers and docents were falling to the flu bug early this year.

She wasn't so sure she didn't have it herself. She felt like crap, like she'd been coming down with *something* for the last several weeks that just refused to make a full-fledged
appearance, just hanging on the periphery enough to annoy her.

And could she afford to take time off to see about it? Did she even want to knowing it might jeopardize everything she'd worked for in the last few years? No, she didn't have the time or the energy, and what was worse she wasn't in the mood to deal with this whole guilt trip.

And especially not half its source.

"Therese, maybe if we get this out in the open, once and for all..."

She sighed, long and wearily, shaking her head. "Jury..."

He just didn't get it. They couldn't get this more out in the open if they tried.

Any more open and their neighbors would be dialing those infamous three digits, Jury's brothers in blue would be popping by for a visit, and Marsh would lose his canine mind trying to decide whose side to take and who to snarl at—mommy or daddy.

"Jury, I'm tired, exhausted actually. All I want to do is salvage what's left of the night and get some sleep so I can be ready..."

She saw the grimace before she finished. Resentment, plain and simple. Even now. And blame. Still.

Well, just because he wanted to forget didn't mean she should have to, Therese thought, and she wouldn't.

"I don't want us to go to bed on this note, baby. We need to resolve this."

She turned on her side and gave her husband her back determined to shut him out. She closed her eyes tight and hoped he’d get the message and just leave her alone.

*Sleep. Please, just leave me alone and let me get some sleep...*

"Therese...?"

* * * *

*Sand. All around. As far as her eyes can see.*

Therese hates sand with a passion. Well, maybe not that much of a passion. There was the one time, ohmygoodness, when she loved it, when she made love in it.

Bermuda. Their first vacation—a postponed honeymoon to paradise—and she and Jury got busy on a secluded area along Hamilton Beach.

Now that was something right out of one of her fantasies or her favorite Red Shoe Diaries episode. Not even the unpleasant parts—plucking grain and grit out of her hair and nether regions days after—was enough to mar the experience. Especially when she found out later that she and Jury had conceived.

Therese swallows hard now, throat parched and clogged, reminding her of her unpleasant and confusing circumstances.

This isn't a beach, at least not any beach she has ever visited or known. There is no water—not a drop, not an ounce or a trickle—in sight.

She needs to find a speck of shelter from the God forsaken heat, wonders why she feels so weighted. Then she glances down at herself and realizes she is clad in an abayah.
She had fallen asleep in short flannel pajamas. When did she put on the voluminous black cloak? When did such decidedly unusual garb sneak into her wardrobe?

Therese walks, aimless and lost as the desert wind kicks sand her way. She's glad she has on such a practical outfit, and suddenly misses a veil to protect her face from the grit. All she needs now is sand in her eyes and teeth. The veil would have gone quite nicely with the cumbersome Bedouin jewelry she has on. Large dramatic pieces—silver, amber, turquoise, bells, balls, and chain-mail mesh. Bracelets, necklets, anklets and head ornaments all so chunky and heavy. They feel like they weigh a ton!

Why is she so decked out?

Sand and heat scrape her face and Therese visors her eyes with a hand as she pushes against the wind. She peeks through slits at the horizon, almost shakes her head in disbelief when she notices several men bustling outside a large tent, and a few camels loaded down and idling beside the poles, chewing cud.

An oasis or a mirage?

As if in answer one of the men—decked out in full gulf Arab gear and looking so like a Bedouin warrior—turns to her, flashing an adventurous smile as he waves. In this moment, Therese knows that he is the reason she is here. He is her ...

God no! He is her mate?

But this can't be. This can't be.

He removes his gutra, reveals wavy golden mane that blends into the natural sand-colored surroundings, signals to her again as if realizing she is torn and this action will decide
her. He pierces her with green eyes that turn almost predatory as he takes several steps in her direction.

Therese takes several steps forward instead of back. She is afraid, but if this strange and disturbingly alluring nomad can explain why she is here, she will face him.

"I can tell you all that you need to know."

She jerks around at the voice, sure that it has only sounded in her head even after she sees the figure behind her.

It is small, not much more than an inch taller than she is and she can't tell if it is man or woman. It is covered in earth-toned cloth from head to toe and she can only make out the orange eyes that glance at her from the black face.

Oh God, Oh God, what is it?

"Your destiny, Therese."

She is certain of it now, for his lips did not even move. It was most definitely a he, and he was speaking to her telepathically.

No crazier than anything else that was happening to her, she decides.

And then the horse—large and imposing—materializes between them and the figure does a meandering leap onto its bare back, silently cackling as he rides off into the salmon twilight, away from the encampment. Away from civilization.

"Beware your beloved, musad'afin!"

Jury.

* * * *
Therese snapped open her eyes, darted them around the room to assure she was safe at home in bed. With Jury.

But he wasn't with her, his side of the mattress cool, long vacated.

God, what time was it!

She glanced at the bedside clock/radio, the LED reading not nearly enough to alarm her.

*Why is he up so early?*

The aroma of Sunday morning cooking wafted out to her almost on cue and Therese threw off the covers and got out of the bed, expecting to still be clad in the *abayah* she had worn in her dream. *It had seemed so real!* She was relieved to see she only had on her good old American short Tasmanian Devil flannels.

She stretched as she got up and headed across the room, stomach roaring in anticipation.

Marsh picked that minute to leap into the room—a boundless hundred-and-ten-pound ball of Rottweiler energy, wagging tail and salivating mouth.

"C'mere, mush-mouth. C'mere boy..." Therese hunkered down, arms outstretched to welcome the unwieldy beast. He slurped her face, and the bacon scent emanating from his doggy breath confirmed her suspicions. "Traitor. Have you no shame, Marshmallow?"

He whined, ducked his head and gave her a big brown sheepish look.

"C'mon." Therese stood, slid her fingers into Marsh's leather collar and led him out of the bedroom. He followed her down the long carpeted hallway as she made a right into
the kitchen where Jury was busy putting Julia Childs to shame.

"Hey sleepy-head." He gave her a bright smile and she wanted to hate him for acting as if nothing untoward had happened between them. But that was his way, always had been.

*Someone has to make the first move. And he's so good at it.*

"Hey yourself." Therese strolled over to the stove where Jury was transferring a couple of sunny side up eggs onto a plate already piled with several strips of bacon and his famous silver dollar pancakes smothered in butter.

He proffered the plate. "For you, madam."

"Thank you, sir." Therese took it, salivating like Marsh. She knew she was starving enough to eat every scrap and still want seconds.

Where was this monster appetite coming from?

Therese took a seat at the kitchen counter several feet away. "Not Sunday. Might I ask what's the occasion?"

"Besides me groveling and trying to make things up to you?" Jury joined her at the Formica counter, took the wooden stool facing her. "Just thought you should get your day off to a good, healthy start is all." He shrugged, digging into his pancakes.

She stared at him for a long silent moment. Tears sprang to her eyes and heat flooded her chest with love for this man.

"Oh, c'mon now. If you're going to start with the waterworks, then I'm not going to give you your surprise."
"What surprise?" Therese gruffly swiped at her eyes, grinning through her tears as Jury magically produced a black velvet box and handed it to her across the counter.

"Happy anniversary, baby."

*Oh no! Is it really? And I forgot? How could I? How could I? And on the heels of being such an unbearable bitch too!*

Therese took the box, wincing. "I ... I didn't get you anything, Jury."

"Of course you did." Jury shrugged again, guiltily ducked his head as if he had just blabbed a secret. "Aren't you going to open it?" He broke off a piece of bacon, lifted it to his mouth and crunched.

Therese forgot all about her hunger, despite her husband's obvious relish, her entire being focused on the small box cradled in her palm.

*Weightier than Pandora's.*

She flipped open the lid and almost gasped at the sight of the jewelry resting against the satin insides. A square medal, brass covered in silver inlay with an inscription in a calligraphic script that Therese barely recognized.

"Do you know what it says?" Jury asked and Therese sniffed, dragged her eyes away from the piece to stare at him.

"I'm not sure, but I think something to the effect of..."

"Allah is beauty and is pleased by all that is beauty," Jury quoted and reached across the counter to take her free hand. "Allah is pleased by you, Therese."

"Oh Jury..." Therese swiped at her eyes again. He was making her into a weeping basket case.
She glanced back down at the medal, wanted to pick it up, examine it, put it on and feel the cool metal against her breasts knowing his hands had touched it before hers.

But she was afraid. It was almost too beautiful to touch. She finally slid her hand out of her husband's, gently removed the medal from the box, caressing the figural Kufi before she turned over the piece and saw the decoration, a scene of the princely cycle—courtly audiences, hunting, feasting, dancing and music—accurately and surprisingly detailed.

"Do you like it?"
"I ... I..." Therese nodded, reached across the counter for Jury's hand and gently squeezed as warmth filled her. "Where did you find it?"
"My secret." He smiled, lightening the mood.
"Stinker." She playfully slapped his arm.
"It's for luck and the b—" Jury cut himself off and gawked. Therese grimaced. "Luck and the what?"
"You know. The beginning of your exhibit."
"Oh. Okay."
"Figured it was appropriate."
"It is that." Therese stared at the medal. It was more than appropriate. It was the most thoughtful thing he'd done in a long while.

*Maybe we're not on a sinking ship. Maybe we can work this out. I want to. I want to so badly.*
"Well, let's get that bad boy on, see how it looks."
"I've got a better idea."
Jury arched a brow as Therese stood, sidled over and eased herself onto his lap where a nice hard-on stood waiting for her.

"Why don't we work on getting this bad boy off."
"You are so nasty."

"I learned from the best." Therese leaned in to peck his cheek but he quickly turned his face and crushed her mouth beneath his in a deep soul kiss. He glided his tongue over hers, caught the taste of tears before he pulled back and licked his lips as he stared at her.

"I love you, baby," Jury murmured, reached up to thumb leftover tears from her cheeks.

Therese had no words. There were no words, nothing left for her to say or do except....

She stood from his lap, took one of his hands in hers and led him back to the bedroom.

Breakfast would have to wait. She had an entirely different hunger she needed to feed. Desperately.
CHAPTER 2

*Game day.*

Therese felt as if she had been waiting her whole life for this moment to arrive.

*The Islamic Historical Arts Museum*—or *TIHAM* as Therese, her co-workers and the museum's administration liked to affectionately call it—was tiny, housed in a private brownstone in Brooklyn.

Surprisingly tiny to Therese, since the institution accommodated one of the largest and most singular treasury of Islamic history and culture around—costumes and traditional Saudi Arabian garb on display, along with rugs, woven objects, jewelry, musical instruments and other artifacts. The library alone contained several thousand books, periodicals and other media relating to Islam.

On a normal day, the institute boasted healthy traffic, a wide variety of visitors—students, researchers, professors, art historians and just the garden variety curious wanting to explore and expand their knowledge base.

But until this day, *TIHAM* had never seen so many patrons from so many different walks of life and passions—the learned to the connoisseur, the untutored to the idle fan, the perennial Five-Percenter to the devoted believer.

Gathered at one time to ogle the exhibit Therese had wangled compliments of the American Numismatic Society—a collection of coins and medals from around the world.
Therese wove her way through the onlookers congregated around several different glass displays scattered throughout the newly shellacked main floor.

She'd had her fill when the collection had first arrived—overseeing the cataloguing, evaluating donations, research and scriptwriting—bleeding, sweating, eating and sleeping Iraqi, Iranian and Indian coins.

She was more interested now in the unexplained piece that had found its way into the institute's basement storeroom.

Amber Brown, one of the museum's interns, had approached her with an ominous pronouncement this morning right before the opening ceremonies had kicked off: "Therese, there's something I think you should see."

And God almighty did she know what it meant when a sentence started out like that.

Trouble.

Until this moment, Therese hadn't had a chance to drag herself away from all the campaigning, hobnobbing honchos and kowtowing sycophants.

"Hey, Hunter!" Jakob Lundquist spied her and waved from across the crowded room before strutting in her direction. One of the many eulogists who wanted her job.

Get in line, buddy.

Therese could think of several whom were not only more deserving but also more capable and even nicer than Jakob Lundquist. Her assistant Darius for one.

Her assistant, whom she had yet to locate.

Perhaps he was with Amber and the mysterious piece?
Lundquist beamed his infamous insipid smile down at her. "Bet you're almost sorry you took this gig, huh Hunter?"
"On the contrary. These are the moments I live for."
He stared at her, skeptical and more probing than a MRI.
She loved her job, no lie, but it was times like these—being visually stripped and quartered by the likes of Lundquist—when she wanted to run to the nearest shower and scrub her entire body raw while ranting at the powers that be for letting her fall into this profession. Because had she known that she'd have to deal with a collection manager that made her skin crawl day in and day out...

Who was she kidding? Give up all this? Let a Dolph Lundgren wannabe run her away from something so fascinating and beautiful and not be able to touch a piece of history every day?

Well, no one—not even the toady and acquisitive Lundquist—could turn her away from what she had been born to do, her passion, or even hint that she wasn't paying her dues now for being "blessed" so early in her career with a coveted curatorship. She was paying it royally and in spades today with her first exhibit.

"Nice turnout." Jakob glanced around now, encompassing the room with one hand as he tipped his almost empty champagne glass at Therese with the other. "My hat's off to you, Hunter."

"I wouldn't have been able to get this all off the ground without the help of my full dedicated staff." She flashed a smile just as insipid as his and watched as he actually blushed.
"Therese, make no mistake, you pulled this off."

Was he toasted? She wondered, because he never gave her compliments, and never, ever had he addressed her so familiarly or civilly. He seemed to prefer denigrating her lineage and marriage simultaneously when he addressed her.

He made her rue the day she'd decided to work under her married name, but at the time, it had seemed like the safest, most beneficial bet. She had figured "Hunter" was so sufficiently neutral and indefinable—to go with her looks—that the brass at TIHAM had had no choice but to choose her, the most qualified female candidate for the job.

She didn't know why she had known that that's what they'd been looking for three years ago when she'd interviewed. Perhaps something about the disturbingly gorgeous female director of the museum had given Therese her first hint.

She smiled now as she remembered how intimidated she had felt, despite her credentials, appearance and strictly Barbie persona all being on point.

Therese was as ghetto as the next Shaquifa-Candida, but she knew how to come correct when she needed to.

"...Two-year internship at the Brooklyn Museum ... volunteer at Museum of Natural History..."

Therese had unconsciously nodded at the director ticking off her job history before the woman glanced up at her again. "Very impressive."

"Thank you."

"I noticed on your application you're bilingual...?" The director perused the small stack of papers on her desk before
giving Therese a direct look with her shiny black eyes. "Spanish is it?"

"Correct. I've also had a semester of French, another of Italian." But Therese knew that the woman was more interested in the Spanish. The woman's next question confirmed it.

"I don't detect a Spanish accent. You're...?"

"Puerto Rican. But I was born and raised here in New York." Get that straight right from the back, lady. You're not dealing with some banana boat refugee who doesn't want to take the time to learn the native tongue. This ain't West Side Story and I ain't Maria

The director lowered her eyes to the curriculum vitae again before piercing Therese with another arched-brow look. "I take it Hunter is your married name?"

Therese nodded. "Yes, that's correct," she said and had to stop herself from telling the lady to cut the bull, either give her the job or not. She hated ceremony and she hated playing games even more. And interviewing was definitely not her forte. Everything a curatorship demanded. Maybe it wasn't the best position for her except for the fact that Therese knew she could bust the job out.

She couldn't wait for this torture to be over with.

"Ah, I see it here. You did check off married." The director stared at her again. "Lopez is your family name?"

Therese nodded, swallowing hard.

Wouldn't this woman just be so surprised if she got a load of my husband? Don't sleep on Black, lady.
The director closed the folder—Therese's career, vital statistics, dreams and ambitions all enclosed within the manila portfolio—and folded her hands on top.

Therese waited for the don't-call-us-we'll-call-you spiel, surprised when the director stood, gave her a beautiful wide smile that could've blinded Superman, and proffered a smoothly elegant, olive-toned hand over her large mahogany desk.

"Welcome to the staff, Therese."

Numb, she rose, put her hand in the director's and firmly shook. "I ... I have the job?"

"There's a couple of things we need to iron out of course, like salary, hours. But I'm sure you'll find our remuneration and benefits competitive."

"Yes."

"Otherwise, you most certainly do have the job."

"Thank ... thank you very much..." Therese cleared her throat, gathered herself enough to sound a little more clever and professional. "When do I start?"

"Next week, bright and early if that's not too soon."

"No, not at all."

The director went through her we-run-a-tight-ship rigmarole—outlining duties, expectations—as she stepped from behind her desk to lead Therese to the office door. "I'm not going to mislead you, the hours are odd and long. You may be asked to work on weekends or travel when you're not in school."

"I understand."
"But I promise you, you'll never be bored and the satisfaction level is high."

Just what Therese wanted to hear. She needed this in a mean way, something in which to throw her soul.

The director put a hand on Therese's back as she opened the door. "I'm looking forward to working with you Therese."

"And I you, Ms. Binte."

"We're a pretty close-knight group here, Therese. Like one big happy family..." She gently squeezed Therese's shoulder, aimed that million-dollar smile again. "Please, call me Sahir."

* * * *

"You're being summoned." Lundquist raised his brows as he drained his champagne glass and motioned beyond Therese's shoulder. "So in demand."

Therese glanced over her shoulder, saw Amber frantically waving at her. She turned back in time to catch Lundquist's glower.

Back to normal already.

Therese tipped her empty glass at him, placed it atop a serving tray as one of the event's attendants floated by with one held overhead. "No rest for the weary." She turned to leave.

"I'll keep the muckety-mucks warm while you're gone."

"You do that," she muttered, joining Amber near the basement entrance as fast as she could without looking conspicuous. "So, Am, what gives?"

"It's like I mentioned earlier, there's a piece here that hasn't been tagged and I don't know where it belongs."
She would kill Lundquist, Therese thought.

This lapse definitely sounded like his handiwork. Who else would do something so underhanded? But underhanded would mean there had been some intent involved. Jakob would have to know that a mistake like this would lead back to the collection manager, that a misplaced item could only make the whole team look bad, him included.

Maybe he was more consumed with envy than Therese had first thought upon being introduced to him her first day at TIHAM.

Okay, get a grip, girl. You don't even know what you're facing. This might turn out to be nothing that can't be fixed. Not a fiasco yet.

Therese followed Amber at a jog, caught the younger woman by an arm as she flipped on the overhead lights and they headed down the basement stairs. "Where is Darius, by the way?"

"Didn't I say?" Amber nervously pushed a long blond lock of hair out of her face and tucked it behind an ear, blue eyes banjo-wide.

Therese smiled, shook her head. "Hmm, not that I remember."

"Oh, he called in sick. Said he had the flu bug that's been going around. I'm sorry. I thought I mentioned."

"You might have." Therese didn't want to totally discount it, what with all the excitement going on here today. She wasn't infallible, though she liked to think she was sometimes.
Amber took her by a hand and led her down the stairs. "You really have to see this."

They made it down to the bottom and Therese didn't know why she was so out of breath. It was only two flights down and she kept herself in pretty good shape. Maybe not good enough.

She glanced at Amber as the girl pointed her to the piece. The kid was barely winded.

*Don't get old girl. It's not a pretty picture. Stay under thirty, trust me.*

"I mean it looks like it belongs, but I don't know exactly where it came from or where it's supposed to go or, just nothing."

Therese neared the marble podium upon which stood the most finely carved piece of metalwork she had ever seen up close. She reached out a hand to touch the decoration, so artfully ordered in alternate rows of bands and medallions, composed so that neither scheme overwhelmed the other, each in perfect balance. "It's beautiful," she murmured, and heard Amber's quiet uh-huh of agreement behind her.

Beautiful and so familiar, Therese thought. Something about the design, the rich decoration reminded her...

"I did a preliminary search for something like it in the database..." Amber approached the podium on Therese's right, stood opposite and caressed the squat body of the ewer as she faced her boss.

Therese arched a brow. "And?"
Amber shrugged. "Nothing came up. I don't know whether that means it was in and wiped out, or we never entered it or—"

"It looks like a Blacas..." Therese gaped at Amber, wondered where that had just come from, why she knew it. "Ooh, you're good." Amber grinned. "I knew there was a reason Sahir hired you."

Were that all her competition could be half as worshipful. "Do me a favor, Am?"
"Sure, name it."
"Don't mention this to anyone just yet. I want to do some checking."

The girl gave her a conspiratorial smile. "My lips are sealed."
"I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation for it being here like this."
"You think your friend and mine...?"
"I'd like to believe he's not that stupid."
Amber gave her a look that said she believed he was. "Want me to stay and help with the investigation?"

Therese glanced at the girl, almost ready to take her up on the gracious offer, but figured why should both of them lose sleep over this? Or their jobs. "I'll handle it, Am."

"Am I sensing another all-nighter?"
"Probably." *Jury will kill me.*

* * * *

30
Therese averted her eyes from the screen's blinking cursor, gently pressed them with a thumb and pointer before she resumed reading from the blasted glaring screen.

She'd been surfing for the last couple of hours, getting sidetracked several times—as she so loved to do—and following her hunch looking for information about the Blacas ewer. She'd finally stumbled across a reference at an Islamic art site.

It probably would have been ten times easier and quicker just to grab a book from one of the museum's library shelves and settle in the reading room, but she was such a spoiled Internet junkie now that the concept of the old-fashioned way was almost alien to her. Besides, she thrived on frustration.

Pity Darius wasn't here to spell her. Not only had he missed out on an event he had worked so hard to help bring to fruition, he was laid up sick and in bed at home.

Therese had given him a call a little after the exhibition hall had closed for the day, greeted with the sound of furious sneezing and sniffling from his end. She'd thanked her lucky stars that flu germs couldn't travel over telephone lines and unnecessarily asked him how he was doing.

"I'll live."
"Doesn't sound like it."
"Sorry I deserted you today."
"Hey, you'll make it the next time."
"That's a promise."
"The most important thing is that you get better."
They'd signed off with Therese sending him her well wishes and Darius assuring her he'd be up and as good as new in no time.

"I'm going to hold you to that."

She liked Darius, hadn't quite figured out if it was because he reminded her of her and her nephew Jabari's favorite boxer—Prince Naseem—or whether he charmed her because he'd been one of her staunchest supporters next to Sahir since she had started at the museum.

"...In *The Genius of Arab Civilization*, Oleg Grabar writes that the decoration is..." Therese read from the screen, scrolled down with her mouse and scanned through the paragraphs, eyes darting until she found what she was looking for. "...The 'Blacas' ewer, named so because it was part of the collection of the Duke of Blacas, is rich in decoration..." She scrolled down some more, saw the term "figural Kufi" and froze.

Where had she heard that before? It seemed recent. And why was she feeling this oppressive sense of *deja vu*?

*Okay, enough of this lollygagging.*

She was punch-drunk and her eyes felt ready to fall out of their sockets. Besides which, she hadn't called Jury to let him know what was up. Though she was sure he had his guesses.

Therese could just picture him sitting at their dining room table, grouchy and grumbling as he loudly drummed his fingers atop the rich cherry veneer.

Or better yet, maybe he was doing a little overtime himself. Not too outlandish a possibility knowing him.

Maybe he hadn't even missed her yet.
"Promise me you'll come home at a decent hour. I've got another surprise for you..."

Then again, maybe he had.

Therese glanced at the towering grandfather clock in a far corner of the room and confirmed this notion when she saw the late hour displayed. Eight-thirty.

Oh yeah, he'd most definitely noticed and was either cursing her out or on his way over to drag her home for her "surprise." Probably a little of both.

Therese pushed herself away from the computer desk, stood and tried to stretch the stiffness out of her limbs.

She walked through the reading room/exhibition hall on her way to the basement, only vaguely aware of the eerie quiet as she opened the door, flipped on the light and made her way down the basement stairs. She wanted to get one more look at the ewer before she left for the night.

She got to the bottom step, not knowing what to look out for, not understanding why she expected to find the thing gone or destroyed or ... or what?

Therese slowly approached the podium, simultaneously drawn and repulsed, her ambivalence a living, breathing thing supplanting her resolve with indecision.

It hit her all of a sudden why the Blacas pulled her.

She slid the silver chain up out of her silk blouse, cradled the medal in her palm as she neared the podium stroking the script on the front of her piece for comfort and strength.

Her eyes homed in on the scene depicted on the main medallion, the same scene on the back of the medal around her neck.
The scene was repeated on the smaller medallions. The neck had portrayals of the planets and signs of the zodiacs. Two bands had inscriptions, figural Kufi.

_allah is beauty and is pleased by all that is beauty._

Therese took two steps back.

_oh God, oh Christ. What does this mean? Is it all a coincidence? Where did Jury find this medal? My secret._

Therese moved back in to read the second inscription.

"La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah..." She gawked, stuffing a fist in her mouth as she stepped away again. She'd read it in Islamic as if she were fluent in the language, and she damn sure wasn't.

There is no power and no strength save in Allah.

So far everything she'd read, everything she'd seen, only bode good wishes and blessings. Positive things.

So why was she so freaked out?

Because that thing, that ewer was alive. She could feel it. Pulsing, calling her.

La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah ... La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah ... La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah...

She said the words over again and again, the phrase flowing from of her mouth like water pouring out of a spout. So comforting. So soothing. Fluid.

Was this what Buddhists experienced when they did their nam yo jazz? This heady feeling of peace and serenity?

Therese wished she had known about this back when ... back when she had lost the baby. Maybe she could have
handled it a little better. Maybe it would have saved her and Jury from the alienation. The hard feelings.

La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah ... La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah ... La hawla wa la quwwata illa billah...

The ewer trembled on the podium, easing towards the edge several inches before toppling over.

Therese winced, closed her eyes and braced her nerves for the crash that didn't come. She waited a few seconds, then opened her eyes to see the ewer floating a couple of steps away, levitating an inch above the cold concrete floor.

"Therese, where you at girl? The security guard said you hadn't left yet. You hiding from me?"

Jury!

Therese jerked her eyes up to the door just as some unseen force slammed it shut. She turned back, coming face-to-face with the ewer's squat, multifaceted body.

"Therese, you down there?" Jury pounded on the basement door above her and Therese wanted to scream for him, warn him not to come in, but her vocal chords had shut down.

And a minute ago you were spouting Islamic gibberish. What the hell is going on here?

The Blacas pushed closer, hovering before her eyes as if trying to give her a message like some metalwork Lassie. Therese noticed the stopper in the mouth as the neck tilted towards her. She hadn't noticed it before, the cork pushed so snug down the throat.

Pulsing.
"Terre?" Bang. "Therese, are you all right down there?"

Bang. "Terre, open the door."

She fingered the stopper, felt the heat, vibrations pushing up from the center as if they were going to shoot the stopper out like—

Therese found her feet and ran for the stairs right before the stopper did exactly what she thought it would do, exploding from the mouth with such force it sounded like a shotgun blast.

Therese hit the concrete near the bottom step, air whooshing out of her lungs as she went fetal, ducked and cradled her head between her arms.

"Therese, what's going on down there?" Her husband banged again, but this time it sounded like he had slammed his whole body into the wood instead of just a fist.

The ewer now lay on its side several feet away from Therese's nose and she watched in wonder as purple mist oozed out of the mouth.

She found her voice. "Jury, don't come down here!"

*Why didn't I just say come oooon down!*

"Terre! Open this door!" Bang. Slam!

She heard wood splinter above her.

The mist whirled over her. Caught her in iridescent vortex like a tiny tornado enclosing her. She felt like she was in the middle of a Bugs Bunny cartoon with Speedy Gonzalez, The Road Runner, Tasmanian Devil and throw in a little bing-bing- *bing* Ricochet Rabbit for good measure all running circles around her and making her eat their variegated collective Looney Tunes' dust.
On its way up to Jury. God no ... no!

She heard his footsteps on the first landing, felt rather than saw him draw his service pistol. She reached up a hand through the cloud, clutched the second step from the bottom.

"Therese?" Jury's footsteps neared, then suddenly stopped. "Terre, what the—?"

God only knew what he saw to cut him off like that.

God only knew what the mist would do to him when it got through with her.

"Therese ... !"
CHAPTER 3

Purple maelstrom surrounding her. Battering and slamming, stealing her ability to breathe, to hear and to see ... stealing her ability to think clearly. Stealing everything that means anything to her.

There is a presence in the mist with her. More than a presence. Something alive with firm working limbs and manic searing green eyes and warm breath blowing in her face. She's not sure if it is human.

The thing from the desert with the orange eyes maybe? Can he change? Is he stalking me? Is he real?

But of course he's not. And neither is this. Just keep thinking this and maybe it'll all go away and leave you alone and leave Jury unharmed.

Jury...

Heavy footsteps stumble forward, frantic and in a hurry, nearing her.

"Terre!"

The mist turns—entity distracted, sensing fresh meat, a new target—and deserts her. It eddies in a giant sinuous cloud, ever expanding and resonant electric blue ... vigilant.

Shots fire in quick succession. One-two-three.

She hears the explosions through a fog. Sees her husband grappling inside the vortex before he collapses like a snowman in the sun. Through tear-blurred eyes, salt stinging and half-blinding, she watches him somersault down the
stairs, head over heels and the mist—larger, black and orange, vibrating angrier—is at the top of the stairs.

How did it get up there so quickly? When?

*She sees the other, still blue, calm and hovering above her and the realization—that there are two—ushers her trip to sleep.*

* * * *

Therese opened her eyes in the hopes that she was home again, and waking up from another vivid dream.

*No such luck.*

Her eyes almost immediately homed in on the strange woman in white standing at her bedside. Just behind her emitting varying degrees of anxiety and concern were her mom and her sister-in-law, Jamilah.

She wasn't surprised or displeased when she scanned the room and didn't see hide or hair of Jury's mother. The woman didn't like her, had never wanted Jury to marry her and made it no secret that she thought her daughter-in-law was too hoity-toity and full of herself to be a proper and supportive wife to a policeman *cum* homicide detective.

But she was surprised and alarmed when she didn't notice Jury on either side of her.

Maybe he was hurt worse than she was and languishing in bed in another room in the hospital.

*ICU?*

"Ju..." She paused at the raspy sound of her voice, felt the sandpaper scraping her vocal cords as she closed her eyes and cleared her throat.
Her mother stepped forward to pour her a glass of water from the bedside pitcher, eased the full paper cup to her lips and waited for Therese to take a couple of sips.

"Easy girl. Just take it easy, now." Jamilah's voice drifted out to her on a soothing hint of Guyanese accent.

Therese smiled and settled back against the mattress. So dignified and sounding like Iman, she thought, had always liked and admired Milah. Way more than her other sister-in-law, Candida. That catty *puta* would cut Therese's throat and stab her in the back as soon as give her the wrong time of day.

Therese for the life of her had thought Marilyn Lopez had raised Adriano with a little more sense.

"Rest easy, *bambina* ... You're going to be okay ... just fine..." Her mother smoothed back her hair, touch as soothing as Jamilah's voice.

Therese caught her mom's wrist and opened her eyes to pierce her with a look. "Jury?"

The strange woman stepped forward now, deep-copper coloring contrasting against her white coat, her grave expression exactly matching those of Jamilah and Marilyn.

"Mrs. Hunter ... I'm sorry."

"No. He can't be..." Therese tried to sit up again and Marilyn restrained her, gently gripping her daughter's shoulders.

"*Bambina*, lay back. Don't—"

"Where's my husband?" Therese only had to peek at her mother and Jamilah's glistening eyes to know the answer.
The woman-in-white sidled closer, glanced over a shoulder at Jamilah and Marilyn. "Maybe you should leave me alone with her for a moment?" she murmured.

Marilyn opened her mouth to protest but backed off when Jamilah caught her arm to lead her back toward the door.

Therese followed them all the way out into the corridor and delayed looking at the woman-in-white's grievous face as long as she could. She didn't want to see the pity. She didn't want confirmation. Not yet, not ever.

This isn't happening.

"I'm Doctor Vishnu." She put out a hand and Therese reluctantly shook it.

"Wish I could say it's nice to meet you."
"That's quite all right. I understand—"
"What I'm going through?"

Doctor Vishnu nodded.

"Well, that's all fine and hunky-dory since I sure as hell don't." Therese watched the scandalized look come into the doctor's eyes. "Sorry," she mumbled. Wouldn't do to be rude. It wasn't the doctor's fault that she had lost her husband to ... to two mysterious supernatural freaks of nature!

Therese grabbed the woman's arm. "Doctor Vishnu, what did happen? How long have I been here? Was anyone else hurt?"

The doctor gave her a sad smile. "In answer to your first question, it appears there was some sort of electrical fire at the museum where you work."

"Electrical fire?" So that's the official line they've decided to go with? What a load of ... "Electrical fire."
"Preliminary tests and investigations confirm it."
No way on God's green earth did that explain what had happened to her in that basement. No way. There had to be something else. "How did I get out?"
"The fire was, for the most part, contained. At least before your Mr. Avatar arri—"
"Darius?" But he was home in bed. Sick!

Doctor Vishnu nodded. "He explained to the police and fire marshals that he had had a bad feeling after he hung up with you earlier in the day. He was just making it to the museum to see if you needed some help when the fire started. He pulled you out to safety." Doctor Vishnu paused to pat her hand and give her a compassionate look. "You're quite a lucky woman to have so dedicated and concerned a co-worker."

*Not lucky enough.* "What day is it? How much time have I lost?" Therese blurted.

"You've been unconscious for a week."
"And ... my husband? What ... how...?"

Doctor Vishnu took a deep breath and Therese knew what she was going to say before she got a word out.

"We had no idea when you would come around or be able to attend a service and your mother-in-law..." Doctor Vishnu helplessly shrugged. "Well, to put it bluntly Mrs. Hunter, our assurances weren't promising enough for your mother-in-law and she wasn't willing to wait."

"So what you're telling me is she's already had a service for him? She buried my husband without—" Therese choked back a sob, punched the mattress with a fist.
God! She couldn't believe this. That vindictive, spiteful woman couldn't wait another lousy day or two? She'd just gone out and disposed of Jury and taken away Therese's right to say good-bye and see her husband one last time.

"If there's any consolation, Mrs. Hunter, there ... well, there wasn't much of him left—"

"Consolation! That's supposed to console me?"

"What I meant to say is, you're mother-in-law had the remains cremated. The service was very private, small..."

Therese closed her eyes, gripped the bed-rail with her free hand. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to take it out on you, Doctor."

"That's quite all right."

*A week lost. Seven whole days, Toni Braxton. I've lost my husband, missed his viewing, his wake, his funeral ... Cremated.*

Even though Jury had never made it a secret and she knew that this was what he had always wanted, the whole concept just stuck in her lapsed Catholic craw.

*Cremated. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.*

Therese wondered where they'd laid him to rest. Probably sitting on a mantel or some other conspicuous place of honor, in his mother's fifth-floor walk-up housed in an urn like the one that had released the thing that had killed him.

*That thing you released.*

"Mrs. Hunter, there's a couple of other issues of which I must apprise you..." Doctor Vishnu took the seat at her bedside, gently enclosed her fingers around Therese's, careful not to disturb the IV imbedded in the back of her patient's hand.
Therese's stomach churned when she looked at the doctor's dark expression and wondered what more there could be.

"You've come out of this whole ordeal a lot better than we expected you would."

"Thanks."

"But you, uh ... you..."

Therese frowned. "I what?"

Doctor Vishnu took another deep breath. "Mrs. Hunter, you lost the baby."

"Baby?"

"I'm sorry. I thought you knew ... You were pregnant. Two months...."

Oh God. Pregnant? She was pregnant and she lost it?

*It's for luck and the b—*

Jury had known and she hadn't. And now it didn't matter because she wasn't pregnant anymore and she didn't have a husband anymore in whom to share and confide her loss.

Had God spared him from experiencing that agony all over again, letting him die at the hands of those ... *things?*

*Well, dammit, he certainly didn't spare me.*

Why hadn't he let her die too, huh? What kind of justice was this?

"Mrs. Hunter, there's more I have to tell you."

*What more? What ... ?*

Therese felt her heart speeding, thought it was going to fly right out of her chest. Her ribs ached beneath the pressure. Hyperventilation was a foregone conclusion at this rate.
For some strange reason, she wanted to ask Doctor Vishnu for a blindfold and a cigarette.

"...As I said, you're recovering quite well, and we feel you're out of the woods but ... your internal injuries were rather ... extensive, Mrs. Hunter, and we ... we had to...."

No. No. NO!

* * * *

Eight years.

Why did it feel like she had known him and shared more than half her life with the man instead of just under a decade?

And besides the new and obvious absence of some vital plumbing, why was she feeling such an exquisite ache in her chest, such an endless void in the pit of her stomach?

Why was she missing him so much when he had done nothing but cause her grief?

That's not true. Be fair girl.

Well, at least in the last several months, he had. They'd caused each other much grief. She had to admit that much to herself if no one else.

They'd had good times. Plenty of them. Therese wouldn't have been able to stick with him through the bad if she hadn't had the good to fall back on and keep her going.

She had flashes now of the Halloween party where she'd first met Jury.

A mutual acquaintance. An apartment packed to the rafters with costumed revelers. Therese present under duress, detached from the raucous crowds, trying to be low-
profile and unobtrusive in a corner of the room after her latest break-up with yet another brother who couldn't handle a serious-minded sister and didn't want to take the time to find out how.

"Someone looking as sweet as you doesn't need all that sugar."

Therese turned to her left, handful of candy corns poised at her mouth as she noticed the brother who had insinuated himself beside her.

She gawked, feeling like a big kid. But he was so handsome and impressive in his GI Joe outfit she couldn't help herself.

Marines? Air Force? Navy?

She wasn't sure what branch he was sporting. She just knew he looked so damn fine and probably was commensurately full of himself that it would have been redundant to tell him how good-looking he was, so why bother anyway?

"It's not a costume."

"Huh?" Therese could only stare at the mouth that had released that smooth baritone and realized it wasn't just his uniform that impressed her since he had the most gorgeous and intense gray eyes that she had ever seen on anyone.

She watched him finger the lapel of his dress greens.

"Just sprung."

"Work release or parole?"

He smiled, leaned closer to be heard over the party's blaring salsa music.
Not too tall, though he dwarfed her 5"2 by more than half-a-foot. She didn't like really tall guys. Too unnerving. But Mr. Soldier Boy was compact and just right for her.

"...Desert Shield."

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch all of that. You said you were in Kuwait?"

He nodded. "I just got back from The Gulf."

"Over there fighting the good fight for your country and doing your patriotic duty, huh?"

He snapped to attention, saluted. "Stars and Stripes Hunter at your service ma'am!"

Therese chuckled, charmed and impressed that she was talking to a real live person who had traveled to the places she knew about only through her studies in sterile classrooms; places she longed to go. This man had trod upon desert sands, had labored and fought beneath the Arabian sun.

As if sensing his advantage, he leaned in again, cupped one of her elbows. "Let's go someplace more quiet to talk?"

Her head bobbed up and down of its own volition as she followed him through the crowded living room, weaving in and out of assorted groups of ghouls, goblins, vamps and frighteningly accurate renditions of historical figures.

He seemed to know the house pretty well, led her directly to a bedroom at the end of a long hallway, far from the chattering and music, and closed the door behind them.

Made her wonder just why he was so familiar with this house and how often he visited.
"Well, now that you have me where you want me..."
Therese opened as she took a seat in the maple rocker adjacent the full-size platform bed.

Her escort chuckled and took a seat on the edge of the bed facing her as he slid off his hat.

"Eh, eh, eh..." She grabbed his wrist before he would have put the hat on the mattress, took the headgear from him and settled it on her knee.

"Oh, you're one of those superstitious women."
"I see you know it's bad luck?"
He shrugged. "Can't help it. Southern roots."
"Where from exactly?"
"My mother's from South Carolina. Father's from Virginia. I was born and raised here."
"Mmm-hmm."
"What about you? You're not from here."
"And what's that supposed to mean?" She would have been insulted, but he didn't give her a chance to, leaning forward to capture her lips with his as he slid a hand behind her head.

Therese caught her breath, closed her eyes two seconds before he ended the kiss and sat back to stare at her, fingers playing in her hair.

"It means..."
If he said she looked "mixed," Therese thought she might scream.

She hated that term almost as much as Riano did.
"I think you're too beautiful and exotic to be from anywhere as mundane as New York."
God, he had a silver tongue. To go with those silver eyes. This guy was going to be serious trouble. He proffered a hand and Therese took a deep breath, trying to get her bearings as she slipped a hand in his. And she'd thought he wasn't unnerving? "I'm Jury."

*What a cool name. Why does it sound familiar?* "Therese. Therese Lopez."

"So how are you enjoying yourself at this Halloween shindig, Therese Lopez?"

She shrugged, trying not to show just how much she was enjoying herself in his company. "S'kay." Then it hit her. The banner hanging from the ceiling in the living room.

*Welcome home, Jury and Happy Halloween!*

"This party's for you, isn't it?"

"Guess so. But I can't take all the credit. I mean, it is Halloween."

"Trick or Treat."

Jury laughed, still holding her hand. He drew her near as he leaned forward, and Therese braced herself for another kiss that didn't come. His face was so close to hers she could smell the rum punch on his breath. Sweet and tart and intoxicating.

"Marry me, Therese Lopez and have my babies."

Such a tired line, she thought. But coming from him she knew it was anything but.

* * * *
They had talked hours into that night and the next morning, about his experiences in Kuwait and her interests in Muslim belief and Islamic culture.

Jury had shared his hopes and dreams—for him, for his single, working mom—had confided his frustration with and disappointment in his wayward younger brother.

"He's a good kid, just doesn't have any direction, you know?"

Therese had nodded her understanding. Her older brother Riano caused their mom the same kind of grief.

Jury had lost a buddy in the desert, had seen blood spilled, had spilled blood, up close and personal.

Therese had lost her father, for whom she'd been named, to Vietnam when she'd only been a tot. She hadn't known what it was like to lose someone she loved. Up close and personal.

But now she did. Oh, how she knew.

Jamilah knocked on the doorframe right before a nurse rolled in a wheelchair.

Therese took a deep breath, hefted her overnight bag from the hospital bed and settled down into the wheelchair.

"Ready to make that move, girl?" Jamilah took the overnight bag from Therese's lap as the nurse aimed the wheelchair at the door.

Therese braced herself before looking up at Jamilah, all cried out from the night before.

Finally she smiled and gave a thumbs up. "I'm ready, girl." Or not.
CHAPTER 4

Therese unlocked the front door and entered her clean-as-a-whistle brick and frame house exhausted, totally unprepared for Marsh's enthusiastic greeting when she closed the door behind her.

"Marsh..." The dog crisscrossed in front of her, panting, playful and almost tripping her as she baby-stepped down the hallway to her right en route to the kitchen. "Marsh..." Therese sighed long and hard as she stopped and glared down at the dog over the top of her grocery bags. Marsh glanced up at her with his adoring five-going-on-fifty-year-old brown eyes and barked.

God, she wasn't in the mood to deal with him right now, not after a full day of errands and doing Jamilah a solid playing soccer mom carpooling Jabari, Aziza, and company from their various practices.

Like she had anything else better to do with her time besides mope around and act like she was the first and only woman in the world who had been widowed in the last several months? Several long months that felt more like years pressing against her chest whenever she thought about Jury and how bizarrely he had been snatched from her.

Therese dodged by Marsh as the dog ran circles around her on the way to the Formica counter. She put her two bags on the counter top, took a deep breath, gritted her teeth and whirled on Marsh just as the dog got on his hind legs and lunged at her, tail pinwheeling.
"Marsh!" She pried the dog's forepaws off her shoulders and slammed her hands on her hips. The Rott looked up at her, confused and watchful. If he could have talked, "What's up with you?" would have been the first sentence out of his mouth.

*What's up with me indeed.*

She couldn't fault the dog. He was an animal. An animal whose company she, most of the time, enjoyed and reveled in. And right now, she should have been more than thankful for that company and the fact that her two overprotective brothers had seen fit to bestow the beast upon her after a rash of break-ins in the neighborhood.

"*Yo, Jury can't be with you twenty-four-seven. You need protection when he ain't around...*" Riano, the hothead.

"What Adriano is trying to say is that a dog is company as well as protection, and safer than a gun in the long run, for both you and Jury..." Raphael, the tactful.

"*Yo homeboy, I know exactly what I'm saying, and the sister needs something to cover her back, man or Rott...*"

Therese smiled at the memory of the argument that had followed her "opening" her birthday present four years ago.

Rafe and Riano were like an oil portrait and a Polaroid snapshot. Riano thought Rafe was an ivory tower sell-out and Rafe thought Riano was an immature and unambitious spendthrift.

But when it came to their sister's well-being they couldn't have been in more agreement than two pickpockets on a train.
Right about now, Therese would have given anything to be one of their wives and know that when she walked down the halls in her house and entered a room, someone would be there to greet her and respond if she called out and needed a hard hug.

"Sorry Marsh, but someone not of the furry canine variety." Therese squatted down to ruffle the dog's coat, cupped his face between her hands and gave him a peck on his wet muzzle. "You are some piece of work, you know that, Marshmallow?"

He barked as if in agreement.

Her salvation for now since she didn't have her work to turn to anymore. Didn't want to turn to it. The place held too much pain for her. She didn't know if she'd ever go back, at least not to TIHAM, maybe to any museum.

An extended leave of absence had been approved and granted by Sahir and TIHAM's other higher-ups with assurances of Therese's job waiting for her whenever she was ready to return.

Darius had kicked in his own personal assurances when he'd visited her a couple of days ago just to let her know that though she'd be desperately missed, he'd do his best to keep everything sailing smooth while she was out.

For better or worse, it gave Therese no motivation at all to rush back. On top of that, she was pretty flush with savings, the house payments, and insurance and death benefits from the military and Jury's job....

Yeah, pretty damn flush.
She'd trade it all just to see his face one more time—those gray eyes, that dazzling smile—run her hands over his short curly fade, smell his scent and feel him close to her as she slept.

God, when she remembered all the times she'd wished him gone, away from her, the house, out of her life. All the times she'd ignored him and given him the cold shoulder and the silent treatment when he hadn't given her her way or he hadn't tried to see eye-to-eye on an issue.

*My job. His job. OT. The baby...*  
All the times she hadn't said, "I'm sorry."

Therese collapsed into one of the mahogany dining room chairs and buried her face in her hands, the tears coming quick and hard as Marsh parked himself at her feet and whined in commiseration.

She didn't know how long she sat there crying like a big baby and a woe-is-me-feeling-sorry-for-herself loser, but when the clamor sounded from the attic, she started and jerked up her head.

Marsh stood on all fours, and growled at the ceiling.  
"What the—?" Therese slowly stood, frowning at the ceiling as she headed out of the kitchen through the dining room, Marsh on her heels.

Okay, now she was ten times more thankful than she had been when she'd arrived earlier that she had this mutt-beast here with her.

"C'mon boy..." Therese let the dog sidle passed her, watched him fly up the stairs, fearless and eager to protect
his master from ... *Whatever the hell made that racket up there.*

"Marsh?" She cleared the first landing, peeking around the cream-colored corner before continuing her ascent. The Rott was nowhere in sight, only his heavy intermittent pants and snarls alerting her to his presence.

Therese cleared the top floor and noticed one of the attic windows was open a notch. She wondered if the burglar had forgot to shut it on the way in or out.

What the hell had she been thinking coming up here with just a dog—though loyal and intrepid he might be—to protect her? And not her husband's gun.

This was ridiculous, just plain insane.

Therese spotted the ewer, overturned on the floor in a far corner of the attic. Resting beside Jury's footlocker.

Her heart tripped a couple of beats as she approached it, mind working overtime, wondering how it had gotten there, if it was the same one, who was behind this and...

*Why? Why is this happening? Does God have it in for me? What did I do to deserve this ... ?*

Okay, stop feeling sorry for yourself, she thought.

Her initial reaction was to run over and fling the damn thing out the attic window and listen to the satisfying sound of metal crunching on concrete. But then she remembered what had happened the last time it had "fallen."

Her next thought was to throw it out in the trash. But that would involve *touching* it. And she was closer to it than she wanted to be already.
It was her damned curiosity that pushed her closer and made her hunker down a couple of feet away from it to assure herself it was the same piece. Curiosity and an underlying need to face and slay her demons.

She owed Jury that much. She owed herself.

Marsh stood beside her, growling.

*Fine time to assert yourself. Where were you when this thing found its way into our castle, Rover?*

She hoped that whatever came out of the thing this time, *if* anything did, that Marsh would have better luck with it than Jury had. She hoped but who was she kidding? She remembered all too clearly what the thing or its kin or *whatever*, had done to her husband. Were she and Marsh supposed to be some dynamic duo human-canine tag-team fighting supernatural forces of evil wherever they found it?

Yeah right.

God, she was losing her mind to think she had a chance against this thing. And why not, she had lost everything else.

*Get a grip, girl. Just get a grip and get in gear.*

She took a couple of steps forward from her haunches, something making her brave. Probably blind rage, cuz dammit she refused to be terrorized in her own house.

Yeah, that's right. She'd been violated. A little indignation was in order. The thing had taken her life already. She wouldn't let it take her home.

Therese reached out a hand.

Marsh's barking grew to deafening levels beside her.

"Easy boy ... nice and easy..." She didn't know to whom or what she was talking—her Rott or the ewer.
She touched the squat multifaceted body, expecting to be burned, shocked when her palm met cool brass. She peeked in the mouth as she righted the ewer then set it on the carpet. No stopper, of course, since it had almost killed her shooting out.

Therese rose and took several steps away. Stared at it from her spot on the carpet, silent and waiting.

No chanting today, she decided, but held onto her medal for comfort anyway. If that man-thing came out, it wouldn't be by her bidding. Not totally.

But Therese watched as the ewer vibrated on the carpet, creeping closer, and she realized the situation or choice wasn't entirely hers anymore.

_Had it ever been?_

The ewer toppled over again, as if in defiance of her righting it, and in slow-motion the mist percolated from the opening like purple fog. Just like before.

But then Therese hadn't had Marsh at her feet, barking his head off like Cujo and ready to protect her or die trying.

_You go boy._

For whatever reason, she felt safe.

Until the haze rose up six-feet-plus—eddy ing, gradually materializing.

_Into what? And what am I doing standing here is what I want to know?_

But she couldn't pull herself away, watched as first toes, and then feet—_no curly elf shoes?_—curved up into long legs encased in blue loose fitting ... genie pants?

_Can't touch this, Hammer!_
Finally, a torso appeared, naked, deeply bronzed and well defined.

The whole transformation took ten seconds tops, but Therese felt like she had stood there—*God, I can't believe I'm still in the building, Elvis*—forever watching it.

She dragged her eyes from the lean-muscled abdomen up to the genie-man-thing's face and those green eyes gripped her for the second time in her life.

He advanced and Marsh leaped between Therese and him, barking and snarling up at the intruder.

"Ifreet?" The genie-man-thing glared down at the Rott for a long moment—that was all it took—and Marsh's barks died down in whimpering increments until the dog was a silent mass of canine flesh retreating to a corner of the attic.

*Oh sh*—

Therese turned, rushed for the stairs as genie-man started forward again. She was *not* staying around for a floorshow.

*God Marsh ... I'm sorry, boy ... I'm sorry*...

She stumbled on the bottom step, felt a childhood soccer injury spring in her ankle as she listened for footsteps behind her and prayed for her dog.

"Damn," Therese mumbled as she hobble-jogged towards the kitchen and bumped right into genie-man in the middle of the floor.

He stood like a human wall, arms folded over finely carved chest as he blocked her path to the back door and glared at her.

"Please, I—" Therese staggered back, eyeing the door behind him, praying for a miracle as he advanced.
He eyed her sharply, looked at her medallion. "You are..."
Gone, is what I am. "Stay away from me." Therese turned and made a dash for the Formica counter. She reached for the closest sharp metal object she could get her hands on, snatched a carving knife from its hearth in the wood block and turned on genie-man. "Stay away from me," she repeated.

He grinned but didn't move.
A small victory she had little time to enjoy as the knife handle superheated in her hand.
Therese flung the knife away, watched it bounce against the polyurethane floor as she shook her hand and felt like a kid who had touched a hot stove.
Genie-man started forward again.
Therese took a stance, Jury's hand-to-hand combat training kicking in.
Genie-man froze and arched a brow.
"I'm prepared to defend myself."
"I can see that you are." He lunged for her.
Therese bellowed, dodged to one side, grabbed his closest hand—surprised when hers didn't go right through his—and heaved him over a hip with everything she had.
She pivoted and dashed for the back door.
Genie-man rebounded too quickly for her taste, must have laid stunned for a hot second before he was up and chasing her.
He caught her a second after she turned the knob, wrapped his arms around her and dragged her back.
Therese lashed out with her feet, Nike soles catching the doorframe with such force that she sent herself and genie-man flying back against the linoleum. He held tight as she struggled in his arms and she could have sworn she heard him chuckling as he subdued her.

"Let me go, dammit! Get off me!"

Genie-man flipped her beneath him, straddled her, imprisoned her hands above her head with one hand, and cupped her mouth with the other. "I will release you if you stop struggling."

Ooh, she was on fire! His calm voice ignited her more and made her want to scratch out his cat eyes.

Nothing like a life-and-death struggle with some Neanderthal genie-man to clear the cobwebs and the sorrow and—

"You will submit?"

_Not on your life, genie-man._

Therese nodded her acquiescence, glared up at him. He slowly took his hand away from her mouth and she flexed her jaws, trying them out as he warily eyed her.

For some strange reason, she didn't feel the need to scream anymore, settled for watching him as closely as he watched her.

_Submit my eye. Two could play this game._

"You said you would release me if I stopped struggling."

"And I have."

"You—" Oh, he was being technical was he?
Therese saw red and lurched against him, tried to get up a knee, but he held her down with almost no effort at all. She'd known there was a reason she didn't like tall men!

*Tall with hard muscles and magic powers and*—

Therese swallowed hard as her predicament gradually dawned on her. She was at this man's mercy. He could easily hurt her. He could ... "Please don't kill me." She hated that her words came out on a whimper, was even angrier with him for making her feel helpless and weak.

Genie-man frowned. "Kill you?"

"It's not like you haven't before. Killed I mean."

"I have not."

"You murdered my husband."

He sighed, closed his eyes and shook his head before pinning her with his green cat eyes. "That was an unfortunate ... incident."

"Unfortunate incident?" Therese shouted, struggled against him again. No go. Nothing. He had her secured. She took a deep breath and released it as she counted to ten. "If you're not going to kill me, then let me up."

"Gladly, *mawla*, but I need an assurance from you."

*You'll be lucky if I don't pile-drive your balls to another time zone.*

Which is what Therese would do, she decided, as soon as she had the chance. "Whatever," she mumbled.

"You will not try to escape."

"Okay." *And if you believe that, Ali Baba, you're crazier than me.*
He quirked his lips at that smart-alecky angle that was already getting under Therese's skin and made her wonder if he had heard her. But naaah.

"I do not believe you, mawla."

"Either you do or you don't. You're going to have to let me up eventually."

He shrugged. "Perhaps. Perhaps not."

"What?"

"I am quite comfortable." He squeezed her wrists to emphasize his point.

He didn't hurt her physically, but just knowing he was in control and she wasn't made Therese want to rip that cute little gold hoop out of his left earlobe.

"Well, I'm not comfortable, dammit, and I'd appreciate it if you'd get the hell off of me!" She bucked like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum and he restrained her accordingly, glancing down at her with a raised-brow, Mr. Spock look.

"It is your choice."

"Okay." Therese huffed and rolled her eyes. "I won't try to get away." She hoped he didn't notice her crossed fingers.

He glanced at her for a long silent moment. "Very well," he said finally, releasing her hands as he dismounted her.

Therese sat up, exaggeratedly rubbed her wrists for good measure and had a tiny flash of satisfaction as he winced.

Was it possible the genie-man cared whether he had hurt her or not?

Genie-man stood, reached a hand down to her and after a long moment of hesitation Therese slid her hand in his and let him help her to her feet.
He pulled out one of the wooden stools at the counter and took a seat, arched a brow for her to do the same thing. Therese cautiously took the stool beside him, decided to jump in. "So, are you really some kind of genie-man or a figment of my imagination?"

"I am a djinni, yes."

She had hoped he wouldn't confirm her insanity. This isn't happening. This isn't possible.

"I assure you, it is."

"Is what?"

"Possible."

Ohmygoodness, he's reading my mind? "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Stealing my thoughts." She glowered.

Genie-man shook his head. "I would not. I only read—"

"My thoughts."

"Not at all. I merely read ... people."

Something told her he wasn't being completely honest with her, but it was either believe him or herself and either was a frightening proposition at this point. She reminded herself to be careful of what she thought around him. For as long as this situation lasted.

"Mawla, we must talk."

"What is this 'mawla' stuff?" She had a vague remembrance of the term, ashamed for not knowing it. This was her arena, what she'd learned in school, at work, months and years living and breathing Islam and Arabian culture.

Being so near this genie-man turned her memory to mush. "I am sorry. I assumed you understood—"
"Look, Ali Baba, this is America, in case you were wondering. And I don't understand. So if you're calling me some nasty name in another tongue, I want to know what it is."

He hesitated.

"So that's it. You're calling me dirty names to my face?"

"Not at all." He quirked his lips as if in amusement, the action revealing a little dimple in his right cheek.

That smirk of his was really starting to get on her nerves.

"It actually has dual meanings. It can mean either master or servant."

"I don't understand." Yes you do, you just don't want to admit it. "Explain what you mean."

"I am bound to you. You released me."

"You released yourself, Ali."

"You wear the talisman."

Therese fingered the medal at her neck. Her last piece of Jury and it had been the end of him.

Tears sprang to her eyes.

"I ... I am sorry if this news grieves you."

She angrily swiped at her eyes. "I don't want your pity."

"As you wish."

Hell, if it was as she wished, this genie-Ali-Baba-man wouldn't be in her house, in her face filling her head with more craziness than needed to be in there. And she'd still have her husband and her baby.

"I need your assistance."

"You need my assistance?"
He nodded. "To find the one responsible for my enslavement."
"I've got news for you, Genie, this is the twentieth-century-going-on-a-new-millennium."
He frowned at her as if to say And?
"Look, what I'm saying is, slavery as an institution doesn't exist here in this century, this country..."
He scowled, chopped the air with a hand as he stood. "I do not lie!"
Therese bolted to her feet too, slammed her fists on her hips. "You know, you have a serious attitude problem, buster."
"Who is this Buster?"
"You're a real smart aleck."
"Buster, Aleck. I am neither."
"Look, whatever you call yourself, you're going to have to check this attitude at the door."
"Check."
She gaped, quickly recovered. "Besides, it seems to me, Ali, that you've got it all wrong."
"I am in error?"
"Well, from your explanation and the way I remember the legends and myths, you're supposed to do what I tell you."
He nodded his head without missing a beat. "That is correct."
"Oh..." She gaped. "Am I supposed to, uh, make a wish now or something?"
"If that is your wish."
"My wish is your command and all that, huh?"
"It is a bit more complicated than that, but basically, I am at your service."
"Of course, everything has a catch."
"A catch?"
"Look, Ali, here's a wish for you..." She paused as he perked up slightly pointed ears. Pointed and cute like an elf's.

My God, what kind of being am I dealing with? And why do I trust him enough to sit here debating wish fulfillment when he most probably had something to do with Jury's death? I should be running out the door in terror, screaming for my life.

She didn't understand why she wasn't afraid anymore, or why she had so much faith that he didn't want to hurt her, and wasn't going to try. There was something about him. Something between them.

She still had to put her foot down before this went too far; couldn't let him think he had it like that and so easily.

Therese crooked a finger at genie-man and when he leaned close enough, she bit out in an ear, "I wish for you to get the hell out of my house!"
"I am afraid I cannot grant you that one."
"What kind of genie are you?"
"As I said, I am bound to you and it is a bit—"
"Yeah, yeah, yeah, complicated."

He nodded, seemed kind of smug to her and she hated him just a little more than was probably healthy for any human to hate another.

"Look, this is getting us nowhere. We're going in circles."
"We are not in motion."
Therese sighed. "Tell me how to get out of this ... this binding. What do I have to do to get rid of you?"

He paused, seemed to give her request some serious thought before responding. "We will help each other."

Wearily, she nodded. "What do you want...?"
CHAPTER 5

Whatever else he may have been, whatever magical powers he possessed, Genie-man was first and foremost a man. And like any other mortal man that Therese had ever known, he was just as fascinated by and enamored with anything of an electronic and gadgetry nature.

Genie-man was out in the living room right now with the remote glued to one hand, a batch of candy corn in the other, and wondering if the light really went out in the fridge when the door closed.

Wide-eyed like Tool Time Tim at Sears.

The thought made Therese smile as she walked down the long hallway from the living room, passed the dining area and bathroom to finally make it to her house's master bedroom.

She was so drained, but also felt strangely hopeful.

She wasn't sure if her good will was due to the fact that she had just left a beguiling and strangely innocent genie-man behind in her living room, or the fact that she was finally going to be able to catch some much needed shut-eye.

At three-in-the-freaking-morning.

It wasn't like she needed the sleep to get up early cuz she had anywhere important to go in the morning, just that she tried to convince her circadian rhythms that now was a nice time of day for her to lay her body to rest, and her circadian rhythms weren't hearing it.
Therese's smile grew as she pulled back the comforter and slid between the cool sheets, wondering at how trusting she was being. Or was it dementia?

Heck, if he were going to kill her, he would have done it by now, and calling the police at this stage of the game, with the weird story she had to tell? Inane at best, plain lunacy at worst. Enough to get her put away for real and she didn't think Sahir or Darius would be able to hold her job no matter how hard they tried if things came to that.

Therese almost laughed out loud at her train of thought, somehow feeling safe enough to do it. As safe as she had to have felt in order to undress, get into pajamas, and go to bed with a curious genie-man down the hall under the same roof ... and Marsh at her side.

Therese leaned over the side of the bed to spy the Rott faithfully lounging at the foot of the sleigh bed, relieved that he had recovered from his earlier encounter with Genie-man.

She sat up and tapped the mattress beside her. "C'mere boy..."

The Rott popped up his dark head, glanced at her as if to say "Who, me?"

"Yeah, you Marsh. Come."

He eagerly hopped up besides her, slathering her cheek with his uniquely sloppy Rott spit. And she loved it. Of course she was breaking all the rules cuz she would have never done it under normal circumstances or while Jury had been alive and kicking.

But Jury wasn't alive and kicking and there was a strange genie-man depleting her healthy supply of houseguest sweets
and watching CNN in her living room, so desperate circumstances called for desperate measures.

"Night Marsh."

Marsh yelped and Therese cut off her bedside lamp and fell asleep to the unusually comforting pitter-patter of grown-up male feet roaming her halls, and the thought that her ankle didn't hurt her one teeny tiny bit after her spill.

* * * *

Such a marvel, Kane thought, this electricity that powered marvels like the television,

CD player, microwave and refrigerator. There were other things too—communication and entertainment devices called telephones and radios that emitted the faceless voices of people he would never meet or see, and ... Just a whole wonderful array of things he had never before known or seen.

Magical things. Almost more magical than the historical and religious reference works he had discovered and scanned through from the glass and cherry shelves of the curio cabinet in mawla's vestibule and the well-stocked bookshelf in this room of the house called a den.

His mawla had, of course denied that she or her world possessed anything that could match the power of his magical "smoke and mirrors" gifts.

Smoke and mirrors? He would gladly give up these "gifts" of which she spoke for a taste of ... freedom. Freedom and revenge.

But these thoughts could wait for now as he had more important things to consider like being released into the
Twentieth Century and having lost more than a hundred years.

He had a lot of catching up to do, the least of which was learning from this Turner fellow's CNN station and the History Channel what struggles were underway and amidst in his homeland and around the world.


Wars and Disease. Sinners and saints, madmen and geniuses.

Nothing had changed, just horrible and great people doing better and worse things on a bigger, more global scale than he was used to. So many miracles of science and Allah, but also so much death and strife and unnecessarily spilled blood.

He grieved and took particular offense at the coverage of the situation in the Middle East. Especially when the Western TV and radio newspeople referred to *jihad* as a "holy war." They did not know the first thing about the meaning of *jihad* to refer to it thus, as it was a personal, internal struggle with one's self. Nothing more and nothing less.

He did not like this Saddam Hussein or the Al Qadhafi fellow either, thought each of these men put particular black spots on all that was Arab and all for which Allah stood.
Power hungry megalomaniacs, Kane told himself, and he had known enough of these in his life to know one when he saw one.

*Ifreet.*

This American President, Bill Clinton, needed to learn a little self-control and keep his pants on, Kane told himself, though he thought the gentleman did appear to have done *some* good while in office, despite his scandalous libido.

He also admired this Malcolm X gentleman, thought him a perfect example of the true meaning of *jihad*. Pity such a prophet had been murdered at the beginning of his struggle.

What Kane did not understand was Farrakhan's black separatism principles and the whole concept behind the Nation of Islam and this Black Muslim Movement for which Mr. X had once been a spokesperson.

A Muslim was a Muslim as far as Kane understood it, and there was nothing more important to a Muslim than Allah.

*Well, perhaps something*...

But again, he did not want to think about *that*. At least not just yet when he had so many other enjoyable and new, lighter things to divert him.

Like these wonderful marvels TV and Cable that captured the ferocious enmity of lions and hyenas in this wonderful "Technicolor" on *mawla's 27"*-screen with Dolby stereo sound; and the deadly cold killing machines of Shark Week on the Discovery Channel.

One minute he could see what was going on clear across the world and at the push of a button just as easily hear a
bulletin about murder and thievery at a neighborhood *bodega* around the corner.

Such wonderful magic.

His *mawla* called it "technology" not magic, but it amounted to the same thing in Kane's eyes.

She was absolutely right about one thing though. And that was how irritating candy corn was when stuck in one's teeth. "*But it'll make your dentist real happy...*"

Kane did not know about making this dentist person happy, but the root of the *arak* tree would do to make *him* happy.

Ah, what he wouldn't do to get his hands on a *miswak*.

His *mawla's* infernal animal barked from the bedroom and Kane tensed in a corner of the green chenille sectional.

He would do what he had to if that beast came out for another battle, he decided, but preferred *not* having to. He remembered how upset *mawla* had been at his communing with her dog.

He did not like it when she was upset. And this upset *him* that her vexation should matter so much.

*Ah! Such trivialities!*

Kane berated himself, sprung from his seat and raked a hand through his hair as he paced the floor and reveled in the silky feel of the Oriental rug beneath his feet.

He needed to focus on the situation at hand, for instance, the lie of omission in which he was now forced to wallow.

Kane had told his *mawla* he was at her service, but he had not told her for how long and that she indeed could unbind herself from him if she wished. He had not apprised her of her
options—defeating him at an issued challenge for example, or making one special request that would release him and even allow him to kill her. Needless to say, his kin did not normally share any of this information willingly. He certainly was not going to entrust such sacred secrets to a mundane. Especially not one he needed and to whom his destiny was connected.

Connected to the strange wild female with long fluffy hair of cinnamon, smooth skin of caramel, fiery eyes of hazel and a perfect little body with soft curves and fullness that fit in his embrace as if she had been made for hi—

_E-nough!

Kane chastised the strictly human half of him that responded to that mad woman in such a carnal way.

Desire at this stage of the kinship was unwise, perhaps at any stage. He regretted that this was so, but unfortunately he had learned his lesson and learned it well. He could not trust a woman he desired and he would not desire a woman he trusted.

The two did not go together for him, an ironic quandary he now wallowed in along with his lies of omission.

His _mawla_ had already succeeded in taking him by surprise, not once but twice, almost besting him.

He could not allow her to surprise him again. He could not and, by Allah, he would continue to omit all of that information if this meant keeping her bound to him. There was no alternative.

Kane almost laughed at the irony of _this_ quandary.
There had been a time after Sahir's verdict, and right before his captivity, when he would have moved heaven and earth and anything in between to gain his freedom.

But something told him his chance at retribution depended on him sticking as close to his *mawla* as possible ... and so did her chances at survival.

* * * *

For the last couple of months she had been playing the lady of leisure a little too well and liking it a wee bit too much. Therese was not used to getting up at the crack of dawn anymore, especially not to the deep alien lilt of morning prayers.

But damned if she didn't find herself being awakened to just this at six thirty in the morning.

*No, no, no.*

She slammed a feather pillow around her head.

*What is he doing up so early?*

She had drifted to sleep by the sounds of the TV and Genie-man roaming her halls in search of God—or Allah in his case—only knew what. That had to have been near four a.m.

He wasn't entirely human, she reminded herself. Cuz after that crash course in Twentieth Century, Western culture she'd given him last night/this morning, he should have still been asleep, turning over into his ninth dream and subliminally digesting it all.

Therese got up, stretched, and loudly yawned as she wandered down the hall to see him facing a brick wall of her
living room, in what must have been the general location of Mecca, performing one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

*Shalat. Or is it Shalah?*

The words came to her, as a lot of things in the last twenty-four hours, had—suddenly, surprisingly. Like learning to ride a bicycle—various rules and regulations, essential customs and traditions all so familiar and natural, pushing up from her memory, asserting themselves, insinuating into the forefront of her brain at odd moments of the day.

But unlike learning to ride a bike, this was less painful and without all the fall-down-and-scrape-your-knee-learn-as-you-go-trial-and-error intimacy. Which gave her several moments to silently watch from a distance and appreciate the view unnoticed.

On his knees, head bowed, voice so musical and soothing she wanted to join him.

*Or join with him.*

Where had *that* come from?

She was a new widow, still grieving the death of her husband. She wasn't supposed to notice men, especially not in that way, not distractingly handsome men of the weird foreign variety from her worst nightmares.

*Hell, I'm not dead.*

And how could she not notice the smooth surface of his bare bronze back, the broad cut and muscles? Or overlook the longish tawny hair curling down around those Spock-like ears to just touch his nape in warm and sandy waves like a lion's mane?
Genie-man turned to her as she stood on the threshold of the beige and taupe living room mentally licking her chops. He flashed that devastatingly bright smile on her and made her gasp against her will. "Morning, mawla!"

Therese felt herself flush and quickly cleared her throat before speaking. "Morning, Genie-man."

He was a hunk, plain and simple, in any century or culture. And I'm not dead.

At least not yet, she thought, remembering her rough and scary first brush with him yesterday.

"You slept well?"

"Huh?"

"Was your sleep time pleasant?" Genie-man asked as he stood and approached, stopping just a foot away.

Therese silently nodded, tilted back her head to glance up into his eyes, dazzled by the light shining from tiny green mirrors. Like polished emeralds.

God, what's getting into you?

She shook her head, eyes landing on the horse-and-rider pendant hanging from a silver chain around his neck. Nice piece and it seemed vaguely familiar.

As did everything about him, come to think of it.

She cleared her throat again. "And you? How did you find the sectional?"

"Find?" He grimaced, looked confused. "I did not realize it was lost, this sectional."

Therese smiled, had to remind herself he took things literally. He would be a real trip to communicate with on a
strictly Gen-X-urban-Western slang level. "What I meant was, did you sleep well?"

"Ah, yes. Very well, thank you."

And so proper, she thought, enunciating every syllable, rarely using contractions. He was going to keep her on her P's and Q's grammatically. Like a stodgy stuffy English professor. The description didn't fit him by a long shot, of course.

"You were pretty wrapped up in the boob tube last night," Therese opened, said the most neutral thing she could come up with as she settled in a corner of the sectional and stretched her legs out beneath the round silver cocktail table.

Genie-man took a seat inches away from her, invading her personal space in a decidedly frightening but stimulating way, and trapping her against the arm of the sectional.

"I do not understand. What is this boob tube of which you speak?"

"The TV. Some call it the boob tube. Idiot box..."

"I find it anything but these!"

"Give it some time. Or maybe a rerun of Three's Company..." Therese paused, realized the example was not the best one for her to use or think about right then.

"Three's company?"

*And two's a crowd, Genie-man.* "Never mind."

"I have missed so much, mawla. I suppose it is my way of trying to catch up, watching this ... boob tube?"

"How much are we talking about? Years, I mean."

"That I was in captivity?"

"Yes."

"One hundred or so, I'd hazard to guess."
Therese gaped, afraid to ask her next question, but she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't. "How old are you exactly, Genie-man?"

"More than two hundred, almost three perhaps." He carelessly waved a hand in the air. "It is difficult to keep up with such things."

"I'll bet." More than two hundred ... years? Well, it's certainly not months or weeks. But years? "And you don't even look a day over thirty," she joked, realized he really didn't, that he barely looked a day past twenty-five but from the way he frowned at her, Therese could tell he didn't get her humor or understand that she had just flattered him.

Not only was he turning her life upside down, but also he didn't get her sense of humor? Well this was just intolerable. Therese smiled, thought how Jury had always accused her of having a weird sense of humor. She guessed it was a foregone conclusion now.

"You are amused by something, mawla?"

"Hmm ... No, not really, Genie-man."

"Why do you call me this djinni-man?"

She arched a brow. "Well, let's start with the fact that I don't have anything else to call you."

"Oh."

Therese stared at him, saw the dark expression cloud his eyes as he regarded her.

_Fear or just healthy caution?_

Whatever it was that kept him from spilling, she decided she didn't like it. They had slept under the same roof, for God's sake and she didn't even know his name!
"I am ... Kane."
Just when she'd been about ready to blow her stack.
"Hey, like in Kung Fu!"
"Kane. Not Kung."
Therese shook her head, rolled her eyes and released her breath at her own stupidity. How could she expect an eighteenth century man to understand her twentieth century references? But she figured the concept alone was something he would relate to and appreciate. And she refused to let him off the hook that easily.
"It was a TV show from the 70's? About a man who walked the earth. Spent a lot of time meditating in the desert, roaming from town to town like a nomad, doing good deeds..."
"Was this gentleman a Muslim?"
"Uh, no. I think he was a, uh, Shaolin priest or a monk or something like that."
"Ah, but he was a holy man of some sort?"
"Yeah, I guess you could say that. Am I living with some kind of magical saint? God, she was going to have to watch her mouth around him.
Among other things.
"And you, mawla? What is your title?"
"Therese."
"Teh-reese?"
She nodded, liked the way her name rolled off his slightly accented tongue.
Liked a lot more things about him than she wanted to, than was healthy for her to.
This isn't good. This entire situation is a big, unhealthy and dangerous mistake. I don't know what I'm doing here, calmly sitting in my living room talking about a stupid 70's show with a man who has been alive and walking this earth for more lifetimes than I care to know about.

"Something is troubling you, mawla?"

"No," she murmured. "But I'd appreciate if you didn't call me that anymore, please."

"Of course." He inclined his head. "If that is your wish."

"Yes, it is." Therese stood, realized she was being short and rude but she couldn't help herself. She needed distance and time to herself.

And she needed to get this genie-man out of her life as soon as possible.
CHAPTER 6

He decided he would give her space. Space and time. Not nearly as much as he knew she wanted, of course. But a modicum to help her adjust and get over the recalcitrance she seemed to harbor where his presence was concerned.

Kane almost felt sorry for his mawla, for her feeling bombarded with so many conflicting emotions, so much stimuli from so many different quarters: guilt, desire, fear, hatred, mistrust ... He knew because her emotions exactly mirrored his and he resented that this was so.

He sat across from her now—actually at the opposite end of the long mahogany dining room table as she refused to sit any closer and had moved to her current position earlier when he had taken a seat adjacent her.

He glanced upon her face—countenance more morose than a toddler who had been denied her way, sulky like a bear—and wondered when the situation had all of a sudden changed.

When had her attitude veered from tolerance to animosity? When had she decided she couldn't stand the sight of him, feared him and needed his immediate removal from her life?

One moment they had been discussing television and this sagacious Kung Fu gentleman and the next she had been snapping at his head like a camel with a bad tooth.

What had he done? When had he erred?

Kane thought the tides must have turned around when she had called his title. Were that he had not divulged his name.
It would have made things so much simpler. But she had asked and much like a granted wish, he could not take back his words or undo what was done.

Their beginning could never have been described as ideal under any circumstances, but up until that point they had been making progress. Now they would have to start all over.

Divulging his name—revealing even this small measure of himself, especially to a mundane that was privy to his true nature—was not something Kane had wanted to do. But he had sensed that he could ... trust her.

The concept left an unforgettably bad and frightening taste in his mouth, a horrible taste he would have completely erased from his memory had it been possible.

The same way his mawla wanted to erase him from her life.

Well, this was just tough ... What was the term he had gleaned from her thoughts?

*Tough noogies.*

Well, tough noo-gies on her. He was here and here to stay. He just regretted that he did not own more of her acceptance or cooperation. He would need both and more to complete his task.

She was in such distress, his mawla—mental, physical ... The mental he knew was directly related to his presence—confusion, ambivalence—but the physical? Some of it he could attribute to himself—if his reactions to her were any indication. But there was something else, something not quite right with her insides. He was not exactly sure of the nature
yet, but he would discover it. He just needed a little more time around her.

If she did not "blow her stack" as she had threatened.

Kane glanced at her across the table, almost smiled at how like a sad little girl she looked, tried not to be taken in, or lose his resolve.

He could not do as Therese wished and leave her.

Kane watched as she stood from the table suddenly and took her plate to the kitchen sink. She seemed to take an inordinately long time in the kitchen, so long that he started to worry and was drumming his fingers on the cherry veneer, ready to go after her, by the time she reappeared on the threshold of the dining room trailing that canine beast.

"I'm going out for a ... for some air."

Kane forced himself to remain seated and calmly nodded, sensing her struggle.

*Time. Give her time. Time and space. You need her, she needs you.*

He inclined his head. "Very well, mawla."

She hesitated at the doorframe, as if unsure of his sincerity, doubting that he would not follow her.

"I'll ... I'll see you later."

Kane silently nodded, visually followed mawla and her four-legged companion out the back door, closed his eyes and listened with a sense of desperation as the lock clicked into place.

Perhaps he needed to go out for a little air himself.

* * * *
Therese did exactly what she had promised herself she wouldn't do. She let that genie-man drive her out of her own house. At least for a little while, anyway.

Problem was, she had nowhere to go to kill time away from his disturbing presence.

She thought of the museum, a quick friendly hey-how-are-things-going visit, but couldn't bear being in the vicinity of the place that had given birth to her current situation. And taken away her husband.

Raphael and Jamilah's place was another option.

She'd always been able to talk to this sister-in-law, confide in her like no one else. Even the idea that Milah might not be home—already off to the office with her workaholic husband, even on a weekend, where they shared an accounting business—was not a deterrent to staying away. She could garner comfort just being in the house where Milah dwelled, probably more so now than if Milah were there. If Milah were home, Therese would have had to deal with the curiosity of a concerned and perceptive family member and she didn't think she was ready for the whole interrogation scene. She knew she wasn't.

Truth was, she couldn't go or be around anyone close to her, anyone she knew, not until she felt sure enough to lie convincingly because she certainly couldn't talk about what was really going on without seeming crazy.

So where does that leave me?

Almost simultaneous to thinking the thought, Therese made a U-turn and aimed her holly-green Trooper toward the Bronx River Parkway; hightailing it as far away from Mount
Vernon West as she could without getting stopped for speeding.

Marsh panted beside her, periodically sticking his head out of the slightly-opened passenger-side window as if directing traffic from his seat, then turning back to bark at her as if he'd just gotten the best directions on how to get where she was going and was now telling her.

Therese barely knew for sure where she was headed until she exited FDR South and headed toward Houston Street.

A little under a half-an-hour from leaving her house, she pulled her SUV into one of the narrow cobble-stoned streets for which the Village was famous, squeezed into a spot between a panel truck and Darius's sleek red Porsche parked in front of a loft on Prince and Broadway.

Therese got out of the Trooper, ushered Marsh in front of her on the way to the entrance.

Normally, she would have left him in the SUV, but she felt more comfortable having him tag along. She wasn't sure why she wanted him beside her, but had a feeling the genie-man was behind her edginess, twenty miles between them and all.

She had nothing to fear from Darius.

He buzzed her up instantly after hearing her voice, encouraging, and vindicating her instincts that had commanded her to mosey on over.

Darius opened the brass and silver inlay door of his loft space and another reason suddenly surfaced why Therese had always been drawn to him—as an invaluable assistant and friend: his size was so non-threatening.
Barely filling the door with his feather-weight, 5'4 frame, Darius Avatar had more in common with Prince Naseem than just similar heritage and background.

All her life tall imposing men had surrounded Therese. Both her brothers were over six feet. All of her boyfriends—the few she had allowed into her full and academically focused life since one high school sweetheart—had all been six feet and above.

Jury had been the "smallest" man she'd known intimately and he had topped her 5'2 by seven inches—more than enough for her.

She didn't know from where these size hang-ups and phobias had come, except that when she'd been a child her two brothers used to gang up on and terrorize her with their purely older-sibs' testosterone-induced sense of fun. The swinging her between them like a sack of potatoes, the tormenting, spiders-and-snakes pranks when the lights in the house were low and their mom was out missing her kids' spooky movie-fest and hot buttered popcorn feasts.

Actually, she guessed she had Raphael and Adriano to thank for her strictly tomboy, anything-you-can-do-I-can-do-better persona. Not bad traits to have in any world, but essential for dealing with the likes of Jakob Lundquist and company.

Not including Darius, of course.

Therese felt safe and sound around him, more than she felt around most men. More than she felt around ... that infuriating genie-man she had left brooding in Mount Vernon.
But she didn't want to think about that tall and lean-muscled drink of water right now. She wouldn't. She had left the house to get away from him so she wouldn't have to think about the damn man.

Marsh barked as Darius pulled Therese into his arms to welcome her and Darius released her slowly to smile down at the animal.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

The Rotty yelped and got on his hind legs to greet his master's friend and Darius fearlessly offered his thin chest to Marsh's forepaws, laughing as the dog vigorously licked his face.

"My you are a friendly scoundrel, aren't you."

Living up to his name in spades, Therese thought. Like a toasted marshmallow, crusty on the outside and mushy to the core. She'd named him well. "He's not like that with everyone."

"I guess we are soul mates."

Therese guessed so, gaping at the pair. She had never seen Marsh react to anyone as he was acting with Darius except Milah's and Rafe's two rugrats. Marsh hadn't even doted on Jury the way he now doted on Darius, which only reinforced her reasons for coming over and her good vibes about her most constant supporter.

"Come in, Sweet. I've been expecting you."

Therese arched a brow and grinned. "Well, it's nice that someone knows my mind since it appears I no longer do."

"Do not be silly. You know your mind better than most. More than you think."
Darius put a gentle and well-manicured hand on her back and guided her into his spacious apartment.

The walls were brick, as in Therese's house the overall color scheme a neutral cream-and-beige that complimented the myriad authentic Islamic artwork scattered throughout and dominating the apartment floor and walls.

Everywhere she turned there were pieces to remind her of TIHAM—or just any museum in general—evocative and detailed in design, strategically placed just so for the best effect.

*A place for everything and everything in its place.*

Therese had been to Darius's loft on numerous occasions for a couple of different affairs for the museum brass. But she had never been struck before now by how forbidding and forbidden Darius's living space seemed, as if every piece had been taken from its originator fresh from creation, ill-gotten gains acquired from around the world.

She shook her head against the weird thoughts, wondered why her brain was going in such cockeyed directions.

*It's that man ... that genie-man. He's turned your life upside down.*

Therese took a seat in a corner of the putty cotton-twill sofa, Marsh stationing himself at her feet as Darius sat in the matching loveseat adjacent and leaned over the arm towards his guest.

"He's a good bodyguard to have around," Darius observed, indicating Marsh with an amused wave.

"He'll do. If nothing else, what he lacks in killer-instinct ability he makes up for with enthusiasm."
"And do you need this killer instinct ability?"

Therese sighed, didn't know how to broach the subject or what she wanted to say now that she was here, near her rescuer.

Darius helped her along, squeezing her arm as he leaned in further. "You've suffered a great loss. Your ... paranoia, for want of a better word, is perfectly understandable, Sweet."

Did he know something she didn't? Cuz paranoia wasn't sitting back at her house impatiently drumming his fingers on her dining room table. Plain old-fashioned harsh reality was.

Therese stood, sidled passed the sofa, faithful Marsh on her heels. She felt Darius following her with his long-lashed honey eyes, felt his curiosity. But instead of rushing her, he sat silently, waiting for her to come to a decision.

One she wasn't even aware she had to make before now. "Sweet?"

She paused in front of a particularly fetching piece, if only for the mere fact that it seemed so out of place.

It was a horse and rider sculpture. Nothing crazy in and of itself, except that Islam discouraged artists from producing such figures through art. Creation of living things that moved—humans and animals—was considered the realm of God.

This was one of the first things Therese had learned in her art history classes, one of the tenets that had intrigued her enough to pursue Islamic art in her studies.

"I see you've noticed my pride and joy," Darius whispered beside her.

Therese whirled, surprised by his voice.
She hadn't heard him approach and wondered why Marsh hadn't warned her in some way.

Maybe because the Rott was curled up and snoring in a corner near the sofa, she thought as she glanced over a shoulder to catch the deserter.

"It's quite rare isn't it?"

"Most. Figural art in Islam is almost unheard of." Darius reached out to stroke the head of the horse and turned his enigmatic look on her. "But then we are not in Islam, are we?"

"No. I guess we aren't."

"You came by because...?"

"I'm not real sure anymore." She tried to pull her glance away from him, but the best she could do was follow the caressing movement of his hand as he smoothed a palm down the horse's ivory mane. Hypnotic.

"You are sure, Sweet."

No, she wasn't. She wasn't sure of anything anymore. Not since she'd lost her husband. Maybe even a little time before that. She wasn't sure of her past, her present or future.

Was she even sure of where she was anymore?

"You are sure."

She reached out a hand to stroke the horse's mane, following the same path as had Darius, her hand moving in synch with his.

Such a beautiful piece. And so familiar. She'd been here before and never noticed it. Had he just acquired it? Was it new? It had to be. She would have noticed something like this. Something so rare and beautiful and ... Familiar.
The rider with black face and orange eyes. The rider adorned in a maroon sash and a scimitar sticking from his belt. He wears a platinum pendant around his neck, a miniature portrayal of the sculpture.

I have seen this pendant, this sculpture before. I have seen this ... In my dreams. Felt it in the basement. Two whirlwinds. Two. Which is which? Who is who?

* * * *

"...Therese? Sweet, wake up..."

Marsh barked beside her and someone placed a cool wet cloth on her forehead.

Therese blinked open her eyes to stare at Darius leaning over her. She tried to sit up but a wave of dizziness slugged her like a sledgehammer in the side of the head. Anger quickly joined the dizziness as she lay back and rested her head against the soft beige floral pattern throw pillow.

She'd never been a weak-kneed female. She would not be one now, doggoneit!

"Are you all right?"

"What happened to me?" She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes and sat up against the sofa's camel back, feet firmly planted against the Persian rug.

"You passed out."

He only confirmed what she had known, but hearing the words out loud made her more scared than angry now.

Maybe she'd left the hospital too soon. Maybe there was something else wrong with her, something they hadn't found when they'd been poking around in there removing her
insides ... vital insides she missed now almost as much as she missed her husband.

"You have been through much in the last several weeks. It is to be expected."

"Really?" She smirked, couldn't help the sarcasm.

Darius didn't seem to notice her surly mood, or he did and chose to ignore it, gently pressing the cool cloth against her forehead as she leaned back her head.

"How long was I out?"

"Only a few minutes."

Only? A few minutes at this point were a lifetime out of her precious existence. She'd lost enough already.

"I have to go." Therese tried to stand, but another wave assaulted her and she flopped back on the sofa.

"I think your body would disagree."

"I can't stay here."

"You obviously came by for a reason other than to pass out on my sofa. And do not get me wrong, as flattered as that makes me, I am still curious as to what the reason was."

Therese grinned at his warped sense of humor. As warped as hers. Maybe that's why they got along so well. "I came to..." She paused and turned her head to peer at him. "I wanted to thank you for saving my life. I never got a chance to do it properly before."

Darius bowed his head. "There is no need, Sweet. Saving you was tantamount to saving a part of myself."

Her chest filled, rising up to her throat to clog her airways. "You are in no condition to drive."

"I'll manage."
"Either I will call you a cab, drive you home myself, or you will wait here until you are steady enough to leave under your own power."

Therese weighed all of these options, and none of them were that appealing.

She tried to picture genie-man's expression when she would pull into the driveway with Darius.

For some strange reason, this idea made her smile.
CHAPTER 7

Therese watched Darius from her living room window as he got into the yellow cab parked in the driveway. She waved and he waved back as the cab pulled away from the curb out front.

She turned to the empty living room, felt oddly dejected instead of relieved that the genie-man wasn't home when she and Darius had driven up several minutes ago—Darius dropping her off as good breeding and his promise had dictated.

Where the heck was he? She wondered. It wasn't like he knew anyone in town. Or did he? He was so fascinated with technology, and a definite quick study. She wouldn't have put it past him to have ... What? Made some calls to round up the genie-crew from the hood and go cruising with his home- genies in some den of virtual iniquity down at the local video game store?

Therese chuckled at her silliness and was promptly answered with Marsh's yelp as the dog stationed himself in front of her, vigorously wagged his tail and panted.

She absently reached down, gave him a pet on her way to the kitchen. She guessed she needed to get some kind of dinner started. Genie-man or not, she had an appetite and needed all the sustenance she could get.

The thought struck her again as she pulled a pack of thawed pork chops out of the fridge, that genie-man was gone, out in the world alone and on his own.
He's 6'2 (at least), a hundred-and-ninety pounds (at the very least) and two-hundred-plus years old! Get a grip. He can take care of himself.

But she was left to wonder just how much she had alienated him, when and if he would return and why in God's name didn't she just run for the hills and escape ... again.

Therese had to face facts; she'd had her chance. She'd been out on her own all day, hours away from him. And he hadn't attempted to follow her and drag her back.

 Damn, but he must be a pretty cocky genie to just assume I would come back and be a prisoner in my own home. In America.

Which she had done, just as nicely as she pleased. Where else did she have to go? Which was probably what genie-man had been counting on, her defenselessness and isolation.

 Well, you've got another thing coming, Mr. Kane Genie-man.

She went to the kitchen door on automatic pilot, made sure it was secure and both locks were in place. Never had she been so meticulous, and she would pick now, when she was dealing with a genie-man, to play paranoid damsel-in-distress-in-the-big-bad-city when the man could probably pop up and appear in front of her out of thin air.

 Why bother with the façade?

This strange man had waltzed into her life and usurped her good sense and logic and here she was wondering where he'd gone when she should have been rejoicing or either on the phone calling ... Who, exactly? The Missing Genie Bureau? The Federal Bureau of Genie Affairs?
Yeah, right.

Therese preheated the oven to 400 degrees, grabbed her Taz-adorned apron from an overhead towel rack adjacent the sink and tied it around her waist. She set about tenderizing her chops, tried to figure out who she was really mad at as she beat the meat to within an inch of its beyond-tender life, before seasoning. She finally just gave up, angrier with herself for wasting her energy and being such a gullible fool.

"I am glad I am not on the other end of your mallet."

Therese whirled, meat pounder held overhead as she pinned him with a glare. She'd somehow known he would do this to her, so she wasn't really surprised. Just rankled.

The idea suddenly occurred to her that he didn't seem to follow the rules of geniedom at all, and actually just made them up as he went along.

Kind of like Riano with cards, when she thought about it.

The minute she started beating this older brother at cards, especially games he'd taught her, Riano would flip the script and change the rules right in the middle of a game. He did this with Monopoly and Scrabble too. For years, Therese had never read the rules on board game boxes, she just took her older brother's word for it and trusted what he said as the law. Until eventually, at age nine, fed up with him cheating her out of her hard-earned savings, she had put several hours aside after homework one weekend to conduct some research into the changing-rules phenomenon. She'd gone on a reading spree, giving herself a crash course in all the ins and outs, and absorbing the rules of every board game in their
house—from the simplest checkers to the more detail-oriented, strategy-laden chess.

He never cheated her again. And Therese never trusted anything anyone told her at face value again. Hell, if she couldn't trust her own flesh and blood, whom could she trust?

Certainly not genie-man here.

"You are contemplating rather arduously about how best to do damage with that instrument. You should not put such undue stress on your person."

"Undue stress?"

He walked over to her and slid the mallet out of her hand.

Big deal, she let him. So?

"Where were you?"

He arched a brow as she planted a fist on a hip and she realized what she must sound like to him: a jealous shrew of a wife who'd "slaved over a hot stove all day" with his meal.

*God, what is happening to me?*

"I might ask you the same, *mawla.*"

"Look, *Kane,* I am the *mawla* here. I ask the questions. You give the answers."

He inclined his head in that subservient way that wasn't really subservient at all and said, "As you wish."

Therese gritted her teeth as he sauntered passed her to peek at the chops marinating in a pan of Kikkoman's sauce and actually dipped a finger in to test the meat before lowering his face to take a whiff.

He raised his head and frowned at her. "I cannot eat that."

"Who said it was for you, Sam-I-Am?" *God, I'm letting this man revert me to childhood. Next thing you know, I'll be*
sticking out my tongue, jamming my thumbs in my ears and waving my hands at him ... Nah-nah, take that!

"There are three pieces of meat. I just assumed..."
"Maybe I have a big appetite."
He gave her the once-over and grinned. "I do not think so."

Therese grimaced. It was the one area of her appearance where she was inordinately sensitive, and this concerned her weight. She had never felt she had "enough" in certain areas. Jury had assured her she had more than "enough" for him but she had never thought so.

She shook her head now and glared at Kane. "Are you trying to say I'm skinny?"
"Not at all." He stepped to her, slowly wiped the offending finger on her apron.

His nearness unsettled her in ways nothing else ever had and she wondered if it were connected to his genieness or just his pure maleness. "Why can't you eat that?" Therese blurted, pointing at the meat in the pan and noticed her hand shaking. She slammed her arm against her side as if to hide her nerves, and realized right before Kane responded, the "why" and that she had committed a faux pas.
"It is pork. I do not eat pork."
He didn't say "swine," at least. And he hadn't spoken in that judgmental, know-it-all tone of a Five Percenter, just stated his case in that neutral-logical Mr. Spock baritone that drove her just as mad for its smoothness.
"It does smell appetizing. I however cannot partake."
"Don't throw the dog a bone, okay."
He turned, swept the room and hallway with those sharp green eyes before he faced her again. "Where is your friend?"
"I give up," Therese mumbled and threw up her hands as she turned away from him to finish her chores.

In minutes, she had taken out and thawed a couple of minute steaks, tenderized and seasoned them before placing them in the broiler beside the pan of chops.

Just because he couldn't "partake" didn't mean she wouldn't. She liked chops and she was going to eat chops. She'd let him change her life around enough already.

Marsh trotted in just as Therese slid the broiler closed and dusted her hands against each other before wiping them on her Taz apron. He followed her as she made her way over to the counter where Kane sat munching strawberry Fig Newtons from her ceramic Pooh cookie jar.

"Come in after all the work is done, huh?" And all the action has died down. Therese bent and smooched his muzzle then watched as he growled at Kane when she hopped up on the stool beside the stranger. "Boy, he really doesn't like you," she observed, a little worried.

Kids and dogs know...

"He will get over it."

Therese arched a brow, stared at the stack of cookies in his hand and decided to change the subject again. She didn't want to go there with him. "You're going to ruin your appetite," she said instead and chuckled when Kane blushed, such a rare occurrence, his uneasiness.

He didn't give her much of a chance to revel in it, however, quickly bouncing back to his unaffected self as he
popped a cookie in his mouth and gave her a childlike smile of awe. "These are so delicious!"

Therese grinned and shook her head. He was a bigger sugar-junkie than she was. She never thought she would see the day.

Jury had been such a health food fanatic. Sunday was the only day he'd let loose with the grease and fat and throw down with down-home southern cooking. He'd lived by the "everything in moderation, a little won't kill you" motto.

She smiled when she remembered their last big breakfast together. Had she known it would be their last one...

*Jury, Jury, Jury ... He's not coming back. You need to stop dwelling on him like this. Get on with your life. Get on with it with ... with an overbearing genie-man in your kitchen!*

Therese stared at him, noticed for the first time since he had popped into her kitchen that he was ... God she couldn't believe she'd let him leave the house dressed like ... like a genie-man. As if she could have *stopped* him from doing anything even if she had been here when he had left, and had tried. He had her, after all, by about 200 years.

He was a grown man, she reminded herself again.

*And where the hell had he gone, anyway?*

She looked him up and down, shook her head in disbelief.

The man had on genie pants and no *shirt or shoes*. In October! He had to have raised some eyebrows even in New York.

"Weren't you cold?" Therese blurted.

"Not particularly."
"You know, you might want to do something about your wardrobe if it's at all possible."
Kane stood, spread his arms wide and looked down at himself before pinning her with a familiar look of confusion. "This is unsuitable attire?"
"For twentieth century America? Uh, yeah. I think it might be." Therese grinned.
"Ah yes, that term again. Twentieth century."
"Didn't you ... Did anyone...?"
"Yes?"
"No one stopped you, or...?" Tried to arrest you for indecent exposure or offered you a coat cuz they thought you were some crazy homeless person?
Maybe everyone figured he was celebrating Halloween early, Therese told herself.
"Several little boys were rather enamored of my 'outfit' and inquired as to where I had acquired such a ... cool? Yes, cool Aladdin costume."
She was sure they hadn't been that literal, especially not little boys. Little girls, maybe.
"Oh yes! And there were several others ... how do you call these young men with the multicolored hair? Ah yes, punks. Well they alluded to my libido being deviant, using some unmentionable names that challenged my masculinity and were rather unflatt..."
Therese put up a hand. "No need to explain further. I think I get the picture."
"Yes, well, they were not very nice so I had to—"
"What? Kane, what did you do?" She felt as if she were interrogating and threatening Marsh with a rolled up newspaper after finding only one of her pumps chewed up but still missing its partner.

Kane shrugged, casually checking under the immaculate fingernails of his right hand. "I had to discredit them, of course. Show them that their version of my sexual orientation was erroneous."

She was afraid to ask him exactly how he had accomplished this and the only picture she could come up with was of Arnold Schwarzenegger demanding the punker's clothes in an early scene of the original "Terminator."

"Kane, you didn't ... you didn't hurt anyone, did you?"
"Not irrevocably. They will recover."

Therese sighed and he gave her a look that made her burst out laughing. Against her doggoned will.

She hated that she enjoyed his company so much—when she wasn't totally pissed with him, of course.

He was a killer—at least he had killed her husband, or had had something to do with it. He didn't deserve her good humor, or her hospitality or her good will, despite that dimple-exposing smile that held her heart in its grip.

"You might want to think about changing your ... attire."

And putting on a shirt!

"Very well, but into what should I change?"

Therese threw up her hands. "I don't know. Something less revealing, more..."

Kane grinned. "I think I understand."

Smug. Just a plain old nasty smug genie-man.
He glanced around the room for several seconds for she-didn't-know-what before his eyes seemed to settle on something riveting across the Formica counter, in the dining room.

Therese watched as he exited through the kitchen's swinging doors and made a beeline for the mahogany credenza where a brass-framed 4X6-color photo of her and Jury stood.

Kane picked up the picture, and the only thing that stopped her from screaming at him to put it down was the gentle reverence with which he handled it.

The picture had been taken at Dorney Park, about a year ago. She and Jury had "double dated" with Riano and Candy, who'd argued and sniped each other for one thing or another most of the outing. They had made Therese ashamed of herself, wondering if she and Jury had ever sounded like Riano they did when they went at each other.

The only saving grace of the entire day had been the impromptu picture that Adriano had snapped when Therese had leapt onto her husband's back for a piggyback ride.

Therese swallowed hard, almost choking as Kane changed before her eyes. Not him, really, but his clothes. From torso to toe, he clad himself in new attire. New but yet familiar.

Kane turned to her suddenly and smiled. "Is this more acceptable, mawla?"

Therese blinked, still couldn't believe what he'd done. She slid off the stool, slammed through the doors into the dining room and did snatch the picture from his hand. "How dare you."
"I do not understand. You are angry?"
"You're damn right I am. You took his ... you took his clothes!"
"I merely borrowed the image. I thought it would be acceptable."
"Well, it's not." She felt the tears welling and could do nothing to stop them. Dammit, you're a big baby. She just barely missed hurling the picture back onto the tabletop without breaking it.
"You rather I change back into the djinni clothes?"
She glanced at him, standing there wholly innocent and hurt. God, she had hurt him, hadn't even known it was possible to hurt the feelings of a genie-man who seemed so smug and invincible most of the time, so foreign. But she guessed he had feelings too.
Therese reminded herself that this was not her problem, regardless of the fact that she had just tromped all over his ego.
Kane caught her closest hand, gently squeezed. She felt a current jolt her heart better than an electronic defibrillator ever could and wondered at the source.
He was capable of causing innumerable disturbances in her body that weren't always appreciated. This instant acceptance and forgiveness for instance. What was that?
"Kane..." She started out firm and angry, but crashed and burned somewhere between him drawing her closer, and raising inquisitive brows to peer at her, waiting.
Therese tried to form the right words as he circled the backs of her wrists with his thumbs as if he had a mission. He
took away one hand and slid his free arm around her waist as he led her to the living room.

_Where is he taking me? And why am I letting him? Like a lamb to the slaughter._

She felt his hand at her waist, almost circling it, caressing, gently cradling her abdomen with a palm.

"Kane..."

"Here, sit. You are exhausted."

She was, but how did _he_ know? Had he been following her earlier? Did he somehow know what had happened to her at Darius's?

Therese stared at him as she sat on the edge of the sectional and Kane hunkered before her, still holding her hand.

_So gentle. So comforting._

"You were saying?"

"I was saying..." She gave him the once-over. At a glance, he looked like any other urban Gen-Xer clad in black Gap jeans, gray Henley and casual black shoes. But she knew different. He wasn't like any other _anything_ she had ever known and he never would be. "It's acceptable," she whispered, thought his clothes were more than acceptable, for they covered a hunky genie-man.

Kane stood, bowed and left her side to return to the kitchen.

She sat for a long moment just watching him, admired the smooth economy of movement, liked the way his lithe muscles played beneath the fine fabric of his shirt, enjoyed the way black denim clung to lean runner's legs.
Therese shook her head as if this could eradicate the desire that bloomed low in her belly.

She stood to follow him into the kitchen, smelled her meat on the verge of burning and broke into a run and burst through the swinging doors again. She forgot a potholder and singed her fingers on the broiler handle—almost as hot as her waist where he had touched her.

*So warm.*

She used the end of her apron to open the oven and rescued the pans from the broiler in the nick of time. Another minute and she would have had five crispy critters suitable for use in a NHL game.

Therese glanced at Kane standing nearby like a guilty boy and he shrugged as if to say "Sorry, I didn't know what to do."

"Is everything okay with your dinner?"

"Our dinner," she reminded him, put the pans on the sink counter and poked each piece of meat with two different forks in turn. *No sense contaminating him any further.* A little more well done than she was used to, but they would do.

*Another minute ... and they would have been as well done as my insides and outside.* "Everything's fine." *And if you believe that, Ali Baba...*
CHAPTER 8

"You're pretty quiet over there, Kane."

Her voice came at him from a fog. His name ... so foreign yet familiar on her tongue floated out on an undulant warm lilt that crashed over his consciousness like foamy ocean waves and made him look up from his food.

"The dinner is delicious," he murmured, thinking of his earlier sensations when he had touched her and realized what was wrong, what emptiness and pain existed within.

*Am I in any way responsible for that?*

"Say it with a little more feeling, why don't you."

He grinned automatically, becoming accustomed to her brand of humor and liking its irony. He thought that he would have a firmer handle on it soon enough if things continued to go the way they were going and they stayed in each other's company as they had in the last couple of days. Just a few hours a day and he found himself able to read her inside and out. He wondered if she even suspected what he had done, was doing, to her. He wondered if she knew what she was doing to him.

"So..." Therese slid her plate to the side, leaned her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her palms.

Kane glanced at her from his place at the opposite end of the table. He didn't know why she preferred to keep her distance in such a way. They shared too much for her to try and separate herself from him thus. But perhaps it was better
that she kept this distance. He had enough problems trying to keep his own.

"When do we start this search for your enslaver?"
"Search?"
Therese rolled her eyes and sighed. "We had an agreement. Which I'm still not entirely sure is legal, since you elicited it through coercion."

"Agreement indicates we came to a mutually beneficial conclusion for both of us."
"You're wrong on several counts, but let's start with that mutually beneficial part."
Kane quirked his lips and waited for her to do that rolling thing with her eyes again.
"Understand Kane, I don't see where *I'm* getting anything out of this 'agreement.' I agreed to help you find your enslaver in exchange for your departure. Now, never mind, I never signed on for this assignment and never would have except I had no choice."
"You do not find having me at your service beneficial?"
"That remains to be seen. But you're changing the subject. How do I help you to help me get you out of my life?"
"I would gather that she is nearby."
Therese sat up in her chair, looked left then right. "Okay, how near are we talking?"
"Near enough to have manipulated the circumstances of my release."
"You think it was prearranged?"
Kane arched a brow. "Of course. You do not?"
Therese shrugged, a delicate movement of her shoulders that sent tingles to his lower region and made him want to pull her against him until he could no longer breathe.

This nearness without touching her would be the death of him, he thought. His fingers, his hands ached to remedy, to do what they were meant to do, and he knew that she would not allow him this, not if she knew why he wanted to touch her thus.

He could not blame her. They were djinni and master, not mates. Although, if he could ... he would like nothing better than to—

_No! Stop this at once!_

He would have to find a way around this "touching" dilemma, he decided. And he would.

She stared at him from her spot, looked as if she were trying to see inside him.

Did she know something she was not telling him? "Who is this Lundquist person?"

Therese gawked. "I thought you said you didn't read minds?" she accused.

"You were thinking out loud. I have excellent hearing."

"I'll just bet." She smirked, fell silent for several seconds, so contemplative and still, he _almost_ could hear all the rationalizations and realizations whirling in her brain. Only because she was aware of him and gifted, more gifted than he had first thought, was he unable to get sharper images. Either this or his time in the ewer had weakened his abilities more than he had anticipated.
She could not block him totally, though she tried, but she was rather adept at scrambling what and which of her thoughts did hit the airways around them, scramble enough to confuse him. He might not have caught "Lundquist" if the repugnance surrounding this particular individual had not been so strong.

"You are overthinking again."

"Does it worry you that I might figure out your secrets?"

"Not at all. I simply do not enjoy seeing your eyebrows furrow so." Kane stood as he finished, sauntered to her end of the table and plunked himself in the chair adjacent. He felt her body react instantly—heat radiating out to him, heartbeat speeding so that he could hear it as if he had an ear resting against her breastbone. He reached out and touched her hand on the tabletop, silently coaxing her.

"Lundquist is someone I work with at the museum..." She stared at him, full of resentment. He felt this and could not stop himself from grinning.

Therese lurched to her feet, stumbled away from the table, and him.

Unperturbed, Kane stood and followed her. He asked, "What does he do exactly?"

"He's a collection manager..." Therese paused, explained the variables involved in the job, described her co-worker in some detail.

"He sounds like an emperor I once knew in India."

"If he was a pompous a—" She cut herself off, blushing profusely.
Kane chuckled and reached out to palm her caramel cheek. *So soft and sweet.* "I am a Muslim, yes, but not a saint."

"I wish you would stop doing that," Therese said through her teeth.

Kane laughed even more. He knew she did not like him touching her brain any more than she liked him touching her skin. "No. I do not think this Lundquist is the one responsible."

"It would help if you gave me a name."

He grimaced, averted his eyes.

"You really have a thing about divulging that, huh?"

"It is difficult to explain ... a part of my culture."

"Even prisoners can give their name, rank and serial num—" She winced before the last word almost left her mouth.

His *mawla* was so sensitive.

When she was not impetuously hissing at him like an agitated asp.

"Sorry," Therese murmured. "I guess someone who's been imprisoned more than a century is entitled to be a little guarded."

"I will go with you to this museum. Perhaps I will find my *kahin* there."

"And this would be?"

"Who I am looking for."

"Is that a name or a designation? Because if you ask me, it sounds like a female version of your name."

"It is ... a designation."

She shook her head and glowered.
"It is not necessary for you to know names."
Therese folded her arms across her breasts. "Look Kane—"
He impatiently sliced the air between them with a hand, silencing her. "Enough! We will not discuss this issue now or ever again."
"You want my help don't you?"
"And you will give it."
"You know what...?" Therese huffed, threw up her hands and before either of them knew what she planned to do, she pushed her palms against his chest with as much power as her anger could muster.
Caught by surprise again, the very thing he had intended never to be, Kane found himself supine on the Oriental carpet, staring up at the beige ceiling, his mawla long gone down the hall and slamming a door with such force in the distance that the entire house shook around him.

* * * *

The nerve!
Therese paced her bedroom floor like a starved lab rat trying to locate cheese in a maze, punched her palm with a fist and didn't even notice Marsh this time as he ran in panting circles around her.

He was so ... so arrogant! That cocky, bossy, supercilious genie-man! Well, he could take his search, and quest and re-quests for help and shove 'em all where the sun didn't shine,
cuz she had had just about enough of his big headed ...

*Oooh*, he was so insufferable! And to think she'd been starting to come around to liking him.

Well he had turned on a cold shower with one little sentence—five little words—"*And you will give it.*"

Therese's eyebrows shot up as if hearing them for the first time, all over again. She didn't know why she was shocked by anything that came out of that man's *mouth*.

This entire situation was just totally intolerable.

There had to be a way to get rid of him—some spell or incantation—that could send him back where he had come from, one that wouldn't make things worse or put her into more hot water than she now found herself.

How much worse could it get, really? She was already living her worse nightmare, co-habitating with a Neanderthal with intellect, intellect and mind-reading abilities. And he'd actually had the nerve to try and convince her she had been thinking out loud. He was more horrible than Riano. At least Riano hadn't had such an awesome talent. God, she might never have survived her childhood if her brother, someone already prone to slickness and getting over, had had that type of power.

Therese wondered at how slick *Kane* was.

He'd pulled Lundquist right from her brain. And she'd told him the rest, without him even having to drop water on her forehead, she'd just spilled the beans.

Lundquist had been the first of her staff to come to mind. He was the only one she thought capable of besting someone like Kane, the only one physically capable of imprisoning him.
But then that would mean Lundquist was ... Naaaahhh. He couldn't be. Or was it possible that her collection manager was hiding more than met the eye behind that greedy and impolite smile. Like a couple of centuries.

Still, he just didn't "feel" right, too ignorant and crude by far to conquer Kane.

And this kahin? What or who was this supposed to be and how was just that one "designation" supposed to help her—either of them—find this person who had locked him down? He did want to, didn't he? Find this person?

And maybe this was the problem. Maybe he didn't really want to. Maybe this whole enslavement scenario was all a ploy to fool and enamor the poor lonely widow, gain her sympathy for...

For what? The whole thing just seemed so elaborate and unnecessary since she was willing, more than willing to grant him his freedom, wanted nothing better. Kane was the one throwing up obstacles.

She couldn't forget that Jury had died in the middle of all this either. And she couldn't get over the idea that Kane's appearance had precipitated her husband's death.

Responsible but not responsible.

She'd seen him come out of that ewer, not once but twice. She'd seen him.

But there were two. Two. Is the other this kahin person? Or thing?

Therese stopped in the middle of the floor so suddenly Marsh ran headlong into her shin. She didn't even notice, just plunked in the middle of her bed exhausted as if she had
finished the last leg of a triathlon. She put her face in her hands, wondered what she was going to do with this genie-man.

She guessed she really should have been more hospitable, at least show that she hadn't been raised in the wilds by wolves, and help him make provisions for the night in one of the spare bedrooms. But he was so self-assured and ... Cocky, why should she bother? Let him make do.

Therese had to admit the thought of him squirming and squeezing his six-foot-plus frame on her sectional sent the most evil tingles of pleasure undulating through her stomach. Let him suffer.

* * * *

Therese sees the light, burning hot and vivid at the end of the tunnel. Standing at the mouth is a figure, taller than the rider from the desert, but just as familiar.

Kane.

Genie-man, invading her dreams. Or is she invading his?

Their union seems like a mutual circumstance, as if she is reaching out for him when he was reaching out for her and they are connecting somewhere in the middle.

Not quite yet, for Therese tries to turn from him, but can't pull herself away before he catches her with his gaze—glowing green and as hot as the light. She drifts towards him, unaware of her feet touching ground, just of the figure in front of her. Where he belongs ... in front, beside and behind. Everywhere she is.
"Mawla..." Kane takes her hands and she feels that familiar jolt of current whenever he touches her—stronger on some occasions than others.

This is a strong occasion.

He draws her forward, pulls her against his chest and holds her. And she does not struggle though everything in her head tells her that she should, that he is the enemy, the killer and the taker. Her body is another matter, cannot struggle, and does not want to leave.

"Mawla..." He whispers as he lifts her against him, hugging her snug, so snug that she thinks he might squeeze the life out of her.

Is this how it ends for me? Crushed to death by a hunky genie-man?

Kane eases her back to the ground, his fingers warm on her lower back as he girdles her waist with both hands. He makes lazy circular motions against her belly with his thumbs, at once gentle and firm. Pressing, pressing until she realizes that her stomach is bare and open to him and his hands are so warm on her skin. Warm and becoming warmer as he strokes.

Therese no longer knows if the heat source is friction or his skin, only that her body where he touches her superheats. Superheats like the knife had in her hand. But now she cannot fling away the source. Does not have the power, does not want to, despite the pain.

Sweet pain. Healing pain.

"I am so sorry that you suffer, mawla."
She groans in acknowledgment, unable to enunciate anything more artful as he lowers his face to hers. She closes her eyes and tilts her head anticipating his touch.

His lips are at once soft and firm, the lower lip fuller than the upper lip, teasing her. She darts out her tongue to taste him but he intercepts, nipping her lips before meeting her tongue with his as intense and insistent as his thumbs still pressing her belly.

"Know that he is not gone, mawla. Never gone as long as there is breath within you."

"Yes?" She almost chokes on the word, unwilling to admit hope, not a smidgen. But she cannot help but follow Kane's hand when he turns from her and signals to the mouth of the tunnel behind him. Standing there now, her Jury, a dream and a nightmare all rolled into one.

"Jury…?"

"Your mate, yes."

Mate? She smiles at how good his words make her feel inside. Only Kane could say something so clinical and technical and make it sound attractive and romantic.

"He ... Is he real?"

"In your heart. He always will be."

"And you are doing this for me? Giving me this?"

"I ... I..." He lowers his head, takes a deep breath before pinning her with his eyes again. "I suppose I am doing this for myself as well as for you."

"Can I ... touch him?"

"With your heart."

That feels right, sounds right.
Therese closes her eyes, surrounded by white heat and light and the two men in her life—old and new—reaching out to her, touching her with their hearts. She sways, weak and heady with feeling as strong arms encircle her, hold her. Close, so very close.

His heart pounding hard and loud in her ear, his body trembling with feeling against hers.

"I am sorry, mawla. I am so sorry that I must—"  
* * * *

Therese jerked awake in bed.

Marsh's barks, frantic and swelling from somewhere below, pulled her from sleep with their urgent tone.

"What is all this racket?" She threw her legs over the side of the bed, lurched to her feet and rubbed her eyes as she followed Marsh's wagging tail to the closed bedroom door. "I know you don't think I'm taking you for a walk at..." She squinted at the illuminated digits of her clock radio across the room. "Marsh! It's after one. What is your prob—"

Someone bellowed from the living room.

Marsh lunged at her, his forepaws scraping her thighs as he grabbed a leg of her Tweetie shorts with his teeth, pulled and jerked his head back and forth.

"I will trounce you, intruder!"

Oh God, what is that crazy man up to now? What intruder?

Marsh howled for good measure just as Therese turned the knob and flung the door open. He almost knocked her down getting past her to run down the corridor to the living room.
Therese followed him, in hot pursuit before she came up short on the threshold of the living room and saw the two men scuffling on the carpeted floor.

"What is going on in here?" She flipped on the overhead chandelier, flooding the room in blinding light.

Marsh rushed at Kane, but stopped a foot away as if a memory of their first encounter had kicked in at the last second.

Kane however was distracted long enough for his prey to gain some momentum, and when the man put both feet into her genie-man's gut, Therese felt air rush out of her lungs as if he had kicked and flung her across the room.

"Justice!" God, what the— "No!" She flung herself in front of him as Kane bounded to his feet several steps away, mad as all wrath.

Kane was unarmed and more than a yard away from herself and Justice, but Therese couldn't have feared more for her brother-in-law's life than if Kane had been a gun-wielding mugger pressing the barrel of a hair trigger automatic flush to Justice's temple.

"I will turn him into a club-footed dromedary!"
"Kane stop it this instant!"
"What the hell is going on up in here?"

Therese felt Justice panting behind her, felt his heart racing near her back. She knew only too well the fear he was feeling and wasn't fooled by his crack.

"He is not an intruder, Kane."
He arched a brow, unconvinced.
"He's not. He's—"
"Her brother, yo."
"You know this person, maw—?"
Therese gave him a frantic look and was glad for the man's quickness when Kane caught her expression and stopped himself mid-address. Justice was ten times quicker and slicker than Adriano and Kane put together. He would pick up on the "mawla"-jazz in a heartbeat.
"He's okay, Kane. Everything is copacetic."
"Copa...?"
"Cetic. Damn, homeboy."
"Justice."
"Sorry Sis, but..." He sprung to his full lanky 6'5, towering over Kane by only a couple of inches.
This was probably the only thing that had saved him—his rangy agility—all elbows and knees.
Justice dusted himself off, standing just beside Therese as he pointed at Kane, fuming. "What's up with the bodyguard, Terre? Homeboy almost killed me."
"What were you doing lurking around wali's abode, nefarious interloper?"
"Nefa—What?" Justice grimaced at Therese. "Is he even speaking English? Or is he just cursing me out in a nice way?"
"I think it's probably the latter." Therese turned to Kane.
What was this "wali" stuff now? Some new and improved mawla for the millennium? She probably should have known, but the testosterone tag-team had scrambled her memories to mush. "Kane, what happened here?"
"I found this one prowling about in the kitchen. I did not hear him when he broke i—"
"I didn't break in."

"Very well. However you gained access. I did not hear you when you did. My apologies to you, wali for not preventing his invasion altogether." Kane cut short his bow as Therese gave him a private hand signal.

_God, must he pick now to be so ... so ... foreign and formal?_

She wondered if he were doing it on purpose, trying to put her on the spot to explain. But his eyes were so clear and guileless as a child's that she couldn't imagine intent.

"First of all, let's get some things straight. I wasn't _lurking_. I have a key."

"Where is this key of which you speak?" Kane folded his arms across his hard chest, raised his brows.

If the situation hadn't been so deadly several minutes ago, Therese might have been rolling on the floor, belly-laughing that moment. But the male element whirred too sonorously in her head; she didn't dare have a New York minute to entertain humor.

Justice jerked a thumb at Kane. "Is he for real, Sis?"

And what did he just do _that_ for? Therese wondered and helplessly watched Kane lunge toward her brother-in-law before she threw up her hands and planted her palms in Kane's chest. She glanced at Justice over her shoulder, breathless and angry herself now. "Will you stop antagonizing him."

"He started it."

"And _I'm_ going to finish it!" _God, it's like I'm dealing with two little boys._
Justice gaped for a hot second before he snapped shut his mouth and Therese turned back to Kane.

She caught him by the lean, hard biceps of one arm and pulled him to a corner of the living room.

*Like a referee separating two fighters, I tell ya.*

Kane gave her his most innocent confused look to date, glared over her head at Justice on the opposite side of the room, then looked at her again.

"Kane, you can't go around turning people into ... into dromedaries."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" She stared at his naïve look and had to fight not to smile. She didn't want to encourage him. "Because it's not ... it's not polite."

"Is it polite for him to violate your privacy and prop—?"

"He didn't violate."

"Violate?" Justice piped up.

Therese whirled on him and hissed, "Shush!" before turning back to her genie-man. "Kane, he's my brother-in-law. He used a spare ke—"

"So he says." Kane eyed Justice suspiciously over Therese's shoulder before nailing her with the same look. "He shares this abode with you? Yet he is not a blood-relative or your mate?"

"He is my mate's ... my *husband's* brother. And we don't share this abode except on—" Therese cut herself off, shook her head out of frustration. She couldn't believe she was justifying herself to him.
She was sharing an "abode" and more with him, after all, the strangest of non-relative males. Oh, but she guessed that was different, and she could just hear him now reasoning.

Well, I'm here to tell you now, genie-man, it's not only different, it's worse cuz I don't want Justice like that. But I want y—Oh goodness, what am I thinking?

"In Islam we—"

"We're not in Islam, Kane. Let's get that straight right now. We're in America and we do things differently here."

"You tell 'im, Terre."

"No comments from the peanut gallery, please!" She didn't even bother turning this time. "Look Kane, we're family. My family and very close friends have access to my keys, my house when the need arises, so you'd better get used to it right now..." She pressed a pointer in his chest.

"Understood?"

"Understood."

Is it actually going to be this easy? "Good."

She leaned in, lowered her voice so that only he could hear her. "You weren't really going to turn him into a dromedary were you?"

"You are asking whether I would, or could?"

"Well, could you?"

"I do not make idle threats, mawla."

No, she didn't think he did. And when she stared at his impish look, she realized the phrasing of her question and had to restrain herself from glancing over her shoulder to make sure there wasn't a one-humped camel standing in her living room.
Kane leered at her. "You would do well to think about your choice of words from now on."
"Is that a threat?"
"Not at all. Just a gentle reminder of the circumstances."
Therese nodded, suddenly cold in her centrally heated house.
She had a flash of two camels with rainbow spiky dos, roaming the streets of downtown Mount Vernon.
If she saw or heard of any weird news item like this on the TV or radio in the next couple of days, she was sure she would know whose handiwork it had been.
"Kane, I need a few minutes alone with Just ... my brother-in-law. To explain things."
He arched a brow, shook his head like a disapproving parent and folded his arms across his chest in a way that was becoming maddeningly frequent. "I cannot allow that."
"Excuse me? You what?"
He reached out and lightly palmed her chin. "In the kitchen perhaps, if it must be unsupervised. But not in the living room or any of your bedrooms."
*What kind of antiquated burgers is he flipping?*  
*Calm, girl. Be calm. The quicker you mollify him, the quicker you'll be able to clear some of this confusion up with Justice and get this genie-man out of your hair for a few hours.*
"Fine. Whatever." Therese pushed him towards the hallway. "Go wait for me in the guest bedroom..." *The one I should have put you up in earlier, dammit. And I'll be by to tuck you in.*
"Tuck me *in*?"
"Yeah. In a jiff. Now *go.*"
He frowned before turning to go. "Very well."
*Not really, but I'll take what I can get.*
"So, nefarious interloper..."
"Ha, ha." Justice grinned and reached for the bottle of Tequiza that Therese placed on the coaster in front of him. "I see your sense of humor hasn't suffered."
"Hey, gotta have one to keep up."
"Keep up with...?"
"There's some leftover chops, mashed potatoes and spinach in the fridge I can heat up for you." Therese looked away, folded her hands on the table in front of her.

Justice tipped the chilled bottle to his lips and took a hearty gulp before speaking. "I'm not really hungry right now." He reached across the table to engulf his sister's-in-law fists with a hand and jerked his head toward the bedroom. "So, what's our friend's story and how does it connect to yours?"

"What I want to know, is what's yours ... this time?"
Justice sheepishly shrugged.
"He's right you know. What were you doing 'lurking around my abode'?"
"Aw, c'mon, Terre. I usually drop by in the middle of the night. It's habit. Besides, I didn't want to wake you, and I wouldn't have if your friend—"
"Don't blame him for your no-manners-having behavior."
"Terre..."

She cut him off mid-whine. "Being awoken by you fighting my guest in the middle of the night, or get a good-night
sleep, wake up and find you in my house in the morning and have that scare me to death..." She spread her arms out, tipping them back and forth like a scale. "Hmmm, I can't decide."

"You should be used to me by now."

"I should. Since you seem to think you have it like that."

"I do." Justice waggled his eyebrows, made her chuckle.

What was it with the men in her life, who could make her laugh, even at the height of her pissed-ivity?

"It's been a while since you've been by to surprise me with your special brand of family togetherness."

"I tried to stop her," Justice blurted, cast down his eyes.

"You should have tried a little harder, Just."

"I know. I should have."

"You're making it real hard for me to chastise you when you agree with everything I say."

"I know." He gave her a serious look. "I'm sorry for what she did."

"You know how many times I've thought about just marching right over there to get my husband's remains and bring them back here where they belong?"

"I can imagine. And you have every right."

"You really believe that?"

He gawked. "Of course I do. And I think deep down, Ma does too and realizes she wouldn't have a leg to stand on if you were to come claim him. You were his wife."

"She took away my chance to say good-bye to him, Justice." She glared at him, hot tears filling her eyes, surprising her as she pushed away from the table and lurched
to her feet. "She took away closure," she murmured and Justice stood and went to her, arms open but instead of going into them she pummeled his chest, hard-harder-hardest, taking out her frustration and anger on the closest available body.

He let her until he couldn't take it anymore, finally caught her fists and pulled her into his arms, her tears instantly soaking his shirt as she buried her face against his abdomen and hugged him tight.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here for you. But I'm here now."

She pulled away to stare up at him, smiled as she swiped at her eyes. "For how long, Houdini?"

"Long as you need me."

"Or until you find another place to stay, freeloader."

Justice shrugged, chuckling. "But you love me anyway?"

She slid a hand in his and was about to lead him to the living room for more comfortable surroundings before genie-man's mandate kicked in: not the living room or any of the bedrooms.

*And I'm actually listening to him.*

Well, she guessed she could respect his sense of morality—that he actually *had* one—even if she didn't exactly agree with it. She understood his point.

Therese felt like he was standing over her shoulder, nodding with approval when she finally retook her seat and Justice followed her lead and sat in the chair adjacent.

"So, I'm asking again. What's up with Mr. Henchman? Kane...?"
"Chambers," Therese blurted, had little time to wonder where the lie had come from before Justice hit her with another question.

"What's the deal with you two?"
"You're being impolite and I should ignore you."
"You could."

Therese took a deep breath, released it slowly as she looked at him, still holding his hand.
How could she tell him that she was keeping house with the genie-man half-responsible for his only brother's death? Nah, she didn't think that would go over too well and figured now was as good a time as any to try out her story. One she hadn't been aware of having prepared until she had seen her brother-in-law and Kane tussling in the middle of her living room floor like two boys in a school yard.

"He's an exchange student from..." Therese paused as he gave her a look that said You've got to do better than that, homegirl, and instantly put her on the defensive. "I'm serious." She glowered.

Justice released her hand, sat back against the high-back chair and threw up his hands as if in surrender. "Hey, I didn't say anything."

"Anyway, like I was saying. He's a student from Saudi Arabia, part of the junior docent program of TIHAM."

"Uh-huh." Justice planted his tongue in his jaw, nodding as he gave her a skeptical look. "That explains who and what he is, but it doesn't explain what he's doing here with my sister-in-law."

"I don't think I like the accusation in your voice."
Justice raised his brows and chuckled. "I don't care whether you like it or not, Sis. I'm just saying what is and looking out for your welfare."

"I can look out for my own welfare just fine. I've been doing it for a long time, even after Jury came into my life."

"Yep, I'm sure you have. Doesn't mean someone else besides your husband can't do it for a while."

"And you've appointed yourself the job?"

"Damn skippy." Justice jerked his head up and down once, reached across the table again to take her hand. "And there ain't nothing you can do about it."

He just wasn't going to allow her to be mad at him, huh? But he shot this theory to hell with his next words.

"Jury wouldn't appreciate—"

"Wouldn't appreciate what? Me shacking up with a man only months after his death?"

"I wasn't going to say that, Terre," Justice murmured, pinned her with a look. "I was going to say, Jury wouldn't appreciate me not looking out for you in his absence. But since you brought it up..."

"Kane is a student, like I said. And I agreed to put him up while he's here in this country. I've got more than enough room, and it was convenient for both him and me. Plus, the museum..."

Justice leaned in and squeezed her hand. "I got it."

Therese smirked, not sure he did, and still not liking his know-it-all tone. "Oh do you?"
Justice shrugged, sat back again. "You're alone in this big house. It's only natural that you might want a little company."

"It's not like that." At least she'd never thought of it that way. But maybe this was why she was finding it so hard to get rid of Kane. Maybe she didn't really want to? "Besides, you know me better than that."

"Yeah, I know you: the independent, take-charge and resilient Aries."

"Damn skippy."

Justice giggled and suddenly became serious. "I also know you're a woman, Terre. Not the superwoman you like to sometimes believe you are."

"Your point?"

"You're also a human being with needs..."

"Don't go there, homeboy."

"I'm saying, though. You have that right."

"Thanks for giving me permission to feel and have needs."

Justice shrugged. "Anything to help." He sat back in his chair as if to say, "My job is done here."

_God, are they all like this, or is it just me associating with all the arrogant men in the world who could drive a woman to thoughts of violence?_

If the situation weren't so annoying, it would have been funny.

"Since when did you become so philosophical?" she asked.

"Hmm, since I been hanging out with you, I guess."
"Smart ass." She reached out to punch a sinewy arm as she stood to go. "You know where the fridge and microwave are if you get hungry."

"Yep." He rubbed his stomach as it growled. "Some chops'll hit the spot real nice."

"I'll bet." Therese giggled. "See ya in the morning." She thought twice of warning him about her new alarm clock, finally decided against it.

* * * *

Therese snapped open her eyes, knew it was important for her to get up and get up early, but didn't know why until she remembered her conversation with Justice the evening before.

* * * *

Therese ran down the corridor to the living room, Marsh on her heels and banging into her calves as she slid to a stop at the doorframe.

Oh God, how much have they been talking to each other? Has Kane blown everything I said last night out of the water? Whose idea was this and ... ?
"Hey Terre!" Justice noticed her, leapt to his feet and, clad in a pair of spare pajamas that she and Jury kept at the house for him, he ambled over to her from the mat where he and Kane had been praying. "How'd you sleep?"

"Uh ... okay." She was still catching her breath when Kane turned from the wall and also made his way over.

"You are flushed, wali. Are you well?" He squeezed her shoulder as he passed her and headed to the dining room.

Therese followed behind, took a seat adjacent Kane at the dining room table.

Justice made his way over and took the seat opposite her on Kane's other side, surrounding her genie-man.

_Like police detectives moving in for an interrogation under the hundred-watt bulb._ "So, uh, I see you two have made peace."

"Oh very much so," Kane said. "Your brother-in-law is rather spiritual."

"I'll bet." Therese rolled her eyes at Justice and he stuck his tongue out at her.

"See. I'm spiritual."

"What'd he do? Throw a few _Assalamualaikums_ your way?"

"As a matter of fact he did. But his spiritual knowledge goes much further than mere vocabulary. And I find this Buddhism of which he speaks very interesting."

"Yeah, so did he. For a couple of months anyway."

"Don't be jealous, Sis. Homeboy's giving me a compliment."

"He's a notorious dabbler, Kane."

"That's not true. I just like to try out different things."
"And commit to none."
"I am sensing discord. Have I brought up a difficult subject for the two of you?"

Therese forgot how perceptive the man could be. But then she guessed it didn't take much perception to know that she had differences with her young brother-in-law that went way beyond the company she kept in her house.

"Don't worry about it, Kane. We argue like this all the time. Terre thinks I need to find purpose and focus in my life. My brother did too."

Therese noticed Kane wince as he reached across the table to squeeze Justice's shoulder.

"Everyone needs a purpose. Some of us find it later in life than others do. Allah has taught man that which he knew not."

"Yo, just like Grasshopper, Terre. Word is born."
"Grasshopper?"
"From that show I was telling you about before, Kung Fu?"
Kane nodded. "Ah yes. The one about the wise man traveling in the desert."

Therese glanced at the clock above the china cabinet, noticed the early hour—earlier by an hour than the last time Kane had started his mess. "So, uh, how long have you two been up and around?"

"I must apologize for waking you. I was rather restless after last night's ... encounter."
"And I was kinda channel surfing and—"
"Eating me out of house and home."
Both Kane and Justice burst out laughing and Therese could imagine what damage the two of them had wreaked while she and Marsh had been drifting through la la land. She stood, pulling the flaps closed on her robe and tying the belt as she sauntered to the Formica counter. "Do I have any Fig Newtons left to snack on before breakfast?" She addressed both men as Justice loved the cookies as much as Kane did.

"There are a crumbs left, wali."

Therese shook her head, chuckling as she turned from the counter to get breakfast started. She froze in the middle of the kitchen floor as Justice asked Kane, "Yo, I been meaning to ask you what this 'wali' stuff is all about?"

Yeah, what does that mean exactly? And it better not be something that's going to blow me out of the water.

Therese made her way back to the counter, casually leaned her elbows on it as she glared at Kane.

"The literal meaning is 'legal guardian'. It is also a title of respect for someone who looks out for your interest. A friend or protector."

"Oh, so like Terre's your sponsor in the States so, that makes her..."

"Yes, my wali." Kane turned from Justice to give Therese a look of such sincere adoration, she gasped as he finished. "It can also mean 'saint'."

"Yo Terre, you got it going on." Justice winked at her.

She needn't have worried about Kane blowing her cover story. From the way he and Justice were interacting, it was plain to see he had everything well under control. How could
she ever have doubted him? Even when he made her doubt herself—her sanity and good sense—at every turn?

Therese cleared her throat. "Yeah, well..."

Justice nudged Kane in the shoulder, giggling like an elementary school prankster. "You got her blushing, K."

"Don't listen to anything that Five Percenter has to say."

She hunkered down to retrieve a frying pan from a lower cabinet, heard two pair of footsteps make their way into the kitchen.

Kane and Justice plopped onto the two counter stools and Marsh deposited himself on the floor between them, closer to Kane than Justice, she noticed.

*Canine traitor!*

"What is this five percenter of which you speak?"

"Well, my take on it is a perpetrator." Therese retrieved a package of Sizzlean from the freezer and butter and eggs from the fridge. She brought the eggs with her to the counter.

"Perpetrator?"

"I'd call a Five Percenter a half-stepper. Kinda what she thinks of me."

Therese giggled, pinched Justice's cheek as she took a fork from the silverware drawer at the counter. "I haven't met one yet that wasn't full of—"

"You're being rough."

"Being truthful. But if you want, I'll tone it down, okay? How about a Muslim on reserve."

Justice burst out laughing with Therese.

Kane warily eyed them each in turn. "Muslim on reserve?"
"It's a joke." Therese smiled. "Urban, western humor." She reached out and squeezed his biceps, thought as she did it she was probably making a social gaffe against some Islamic custom, but hey, she'd done that and much more with him in her dreams and ... *That dream!*

For the first time since last night she remembered the images of herself and him together at the tunnel. Kane kissing her. Kane caressing her. Kane holding her.

Kane returning her husband to her—for a moment, an hour, a day—and giving her a chance to say her last good-byes. She was grateful to him for that despite the losses she'd suffered since he'd surfaced and insinuated himself into the fabric of her life.

"Yo, Terre, I thought you said he was from Saudi Arabia, not Mars."

Justice's chuckle broke through her haze and she stared at him, trying to focus. "Huh?"

"I guess they don't get *Def Comedy Jam* out in the desert."

"Deaf Comedy?"

"Never mind, Kane. Justice has diarrhea of the mouth. It's terminal as far as we can tell." Therese cuffed her brother-in-law a good one before she cracked several eggs into a mixing bowl and began beating.

Sometimes the boy could be so tactless, she thought, acting more like a teenager than the twenty-something that he actually was. But she loved him anyway, despite all the flaws that had made him a pain-in-the-ass younger brother to Jury.
She stared at him now—sitting at the counter with Kane, looking so much like his older brother despite his darker, raisin-brown complexion, tall lanky frame and Latrell Sprewell cornrows—her heart swelled with both longing and comfort.

"Would you like help with the preparations, wali?" Kane squeezed her shoulder as he stood.

"Thanks Kane. At least somebody in this house is a gentleman."

"Hey, I'm just a guest." Justice shamelessly shrugged.

"You outgrew guest status long ago, bub."

Kane took a steak knife and a pair of tongs out of the silverware drawer, made his way over to the sink counter and slit open the package of Sizzlean.

"Yo K, I know you don't throw down with no swine," Justice called to his back.

"This from someone who greased down on my leftover pork chops last night."

Justice's only answer was to devilishly chuckle.

"Swine?" Kane asked.

"Yeah, you know. Pig. Pork. Swine."

Therese turned as she first heard then smelled butter sizzling. She watched Kane skillfully place several Sizzlean strips into the pan before he answered Justice.

"Ah, yes ... pork."

"So, you don't grease down, do you?"

"If I am to understand that you are asking whether or not I consume pork, then no, I do not 'grease down.'"

"Oh. You had me worried there for a minute."
"Could you stop bad-mouthing food I like to eat." Therese swiped at Justice's head before she left the counter with her seasoned and well-beaten eggs and joined Kane at the stove. She stood on her tiptoes and peeked over his shoulder to see his handiwork. "You're doing a good job here, Betty Crocker."

"I had a good teacher. And I am an—"

"Excellent student," Therese finished for him and smiled.

"You know, you can eat that. It's not pork."

"Don't let her convert you, man," Justice piped up from his place at the counter. "It's got stuff in it worse than pork."

Therese started to answer, but Kane put a hand on her arm and turned to her brother-in-law.

"I may not eat pork, Justice, but Teh-reese prepares this meat temptingly enough to make me think about trying it."

She thought he might have been joking until he turned back to her, leaned in and pecked her mouth. She could tell that he had shocked himself as much as he had shocked her, for when he pulled back, his eyes were banjo-wide.

Therese barely heard her brother-in-law's crack about them playing smoochy-face over the food.
CHAPTER 10

Kane did not know how he made it through the duration of breakfast without his body succumbing to the heat his mawla generated from her place at the end of the dining room table. But he had, probably only managing to keep his responses at a minimum because she was sitting so far away.

His mawla was a very intelligent and safety-conscious mundane.

"So Kane, How long've you been in the States? How do you like it here so far? Sis take you to see any of the sights yet?"

"Do you know how to ask one question at a time?" Therese asked, but Kane could tell that she was more amused than annoyed.

He could tell a lot about her relationship with her husband's brother from just the short amount of time they had all spent together. The pair acted more like blood kin than in-laws—true sister and brother—and loved each other fiercely. It made Kane feel immensely secure and ... relieved.

"K's not bothered by my questions, are you, bro?"

"No, not at all," he murmured, his insides twisting so with regret at the familiarity with which Justice had addressed him that it took every muscle in his body to keep from throwing himself at the young man's feet to beg for forgiveness.

His guilt was so overwhelming he was surprised that neither Justice nor Therese could feel it.
He wanted to tell Justice so much—the least of which was apologizing for his own part in his brother's death—show him, as he had shown *mawla*, that Jury Hunter was not gone, that his energy and life force burned brightly and existed on a different plane than that upon which they existed in the here and now.

He would have confided all of this to Justice, he decided, if there had been any chance of doing it without revealing his and *mawla*'s secrets.

Kane did not know what made him feel worse, that he was deceiving her, however justifiably, or that he had now made her an accomplice in his schemes to find and capture *his* captor.

His sins since he had been released were mounting. He would spend the next millennium repenting if he kept this up.

"Kane...?"

He looked to Therese when he heard her soft voice call his name and grounded himself in her reality as he took a deep breath. "I am sorry. You were saying?"

"Justice was asking you about where you're from."

Yes, Justice had asked, but he could tell from the way Therese leaned her elbows on the table with her chin in her palms that his answer interested her more than it interested Justice.

"What part of the desert, exactly? Saudi Arabia is a big place," she said.

"Very much so." Kane nodded. "But I did not possess leanings towards any particular region. I ... traveled a lot while I was there."
"Like a nomad?" Justice asked.
"Or Bedouin, if you prefer. But yes, like them."
"Were you in the area during ... you know, the Gulf War?"
"Justice."
"It is all right, wali. I understand why he asks."
"You were there?"
"No. I suppose I was fortunate to have been abroad during that time," Kane murmured and heard Therese release her breath at her end of the table.
"My brother was over there, in the middle of all the action. Made it back okay..."
Kane heard the pride in Justice's voice before the young man trailed off, and he tried to think of something neutral with which to respond, but Justice jumped right back in with another question, as if trying to erase the unease he had brought about.
"So Kane, you lived in tents and traveled by camels and all that good stuff, right?"
Kane smiled at the young man's open enthusiasm and remembered his own equaling if not surpassing it.
He recalled the excitement of traveling with his Jinni tribe, acquiring knowledge from the elders, being revered and envied by the kahana and magi, even targeted and hunted by strict Muslims who distrusted kahana and djinn, and looked to destroy both. The Almoravids in Morocco and Spain also actively killed djinn they found.
Some djinn like himself had been sought by kahana for their rarity—djinn with human blood but powerful and who still possessed so many of the magical traits for which djinn
were famous: shape-changing, manipulating the elements, telepathy.

But being of a magical nature had its positives and negatives, as did all things, Kane thought.

Therese intervened as she stood from her place at the table. "Justice, give it a rest. The man's not a talk show guest." She picked up her empty plate and retrieved her brother's-in-law on the way to the kitchen sink. "You'll have plenty of time to grill him after breakfast." Therese made her way back to the table for Kane's plate, but he met her halfway and they walked to the sink together.

"Thank you," he murmured.

"'S'kay. I know he can be a pain in the butt sometimes, but he's a good guy."

"Yes, he is." Kane took the plate from her, placed it on the sink counter. "I will get the dishes."

"Hey, you don't have to. You're a guest..." Therese raised her voice for Justice. "Unlike some other people around here."

Justice simply chuckled from his spot at the dining room table.

"I know you could probably get these done in a blink, but, uh, the conventional way will do just fine." Therese winked as she handed him her plate.

"Actually, the conventional, manual way will suit me quite adequately. I need the distraction."

She arched a brow. "If you insist on not using the dishwasher, I could hang around, give you some help with the drying."

"I can manage."
"Bet. I want to go catch a shower, maybe brush the old chompers." She glanced at the kitchen clock and shook her head as she left his side, mumbling, "I cannot believe you guys had me up eating breakfast at the crack of dawn ... the crack of dawn!"

Kane chuckled as she threw up her hands and disappeared down the corridor.

"Complain, complain, complain." Justice stood from his spot and started for the living room but paused at the threshold and turned back. "You don't need any help, do you?"

"No, thank you. I have it under control."

"Cool. I'm going to see what type of sports is happening on the tube."

Kane watched him leave, understood his ardor for the "idiot box," though he was growing tired of the device as his mawla had predicted would be the case.

Channel surfing did not hold the appeal it originally had for him. Especially not after he had watched Justice go through the whole gamut in less than fifteen minutes earlier this morning—cable and network, more than 90 channels—before the young man had unhappily shut off the TV claiming "Ain't nothing on this thing, yo."

Kane washed and dried the several breakfast dishes in no time and was left with just the task of placing them in the overhead cupboard, finished with his "distraction" quicker than he had anticipated.

He stood at the sink for a while longer, gazing out the window at mawla's trees in the backyard, a sprinkling of
burnished gold leaves, diehards clinging to the branches of two towering oaks, sentries standing guard over the house beneath the dawning rose-colored sky.

Justice had mentioned the trees had been one of the main selling points of the house for his sister-in-law.

"She said she could just see her kids in a tree house at the top of one..."

Kane could see the tree house himself, at the peak, cradled snug within the sturdy branches, camouflaged behind the lush spring foliage when the season changed.

Below, he could even see a tire suspended by a rope from a thick tree branch, and a hammock strung between each tree.

Kane knew not why he could visualize these things so clearly, knew not why he could see himself in the hammock swaying back and forth on a lazy Sunday afternoon, while nearby one of a pair of children, sat ensconced within the tire, giggled loudly and swinging to and fro.

He saw it so clearly, though he had never lived or seen any of these things in this life.

*But mawla has.*

And he knew that this was the answer. He was bound to her. She was bound to him. He knew her past, her desires and fears and dreams; they had infiltrated and melded to his like a virus.

A virus he would happily die from if he had to.

He had asked Justice about children, more to keep straight the lie he was living, rather than his need to hear a story of which he was already well aware. And the young man had
sadly mentioned *mawla's* and his brother's attempts at having a child.

"*She lost one a few years ago. And another...*"

Justice had helplessly shrugged as if he felt responsible for his brother and sister's-in-law failure, for their pain.

They shared so much, this man and woman who were not related by blood. Love and disappointments and frustrations, more than mere in-laws, Kane thought again, their relationship forcing nostalgia to the fore.

Had he ever had anyone in his life that he cared about as deeply as Justice cared about his sister-in-law?

*As deeply as you care about her?*

Kane hung the dishcloth over the towel rack to dry and headed out the back door of the kitchen. He stood just outside the open screen door, jammed his hands inside the pockets of his new jeans.

He tilted his face to the sky, closed his eyes, reveled in the scent of fall, the touch of cool breeze on his face, as he remembered his first adventure out into "town."

He had not intended to go nearly as far as he had. The people had drawn him; their unique energy and—as Justice had put it—the little town vibe of Mount Vernon West had pulled.

And before he'd known it, a jaunt in the backyard that had started as a fruitless hunt for a tree that could serve as a suitable substitute for the *arak*, had turned into a full-fledged journey. Taking in the sights—curious children running, roller skating and speeding their bicycles up and down the paved sidewalks and streets. Adults walking their various canines—
toy dogs, others as large as *mawla*'s Marshmallow, more in between.

Not even his run-in with the spiky-haired punks had been able to mar his experiences, indeed, it had only enriched everything he had seen and touched.

When he had returned several hours later, lost in time and full of so many things to share with Therese, he had come face to face with her estrous wrath instead.

He smiled now to remember her anger, fascinated more by the vitality and warmth beneath than by her hostility.

Kane opened his eyes now, thought of stripping the bark of one of *mawla*'s oaks, even as poor a substitute that it might have been, then he recalled Justice's mentioning something about the trees being Marsh's "territory".

No, perhaps *worse* than a poor substitute.

He guessed he would have to get used to this toothbrush of which *mawla* had been extolling the virtues. He could not grasp the concept of cleaning one's teeth with a plastic toothbrush when perfectly good bark could be used more effectively for the same purpose.

But, as his *mawla* had said, he was not in Islam any longer.

Kane turned back towards the house simultaneous to the first scream rending the air around him.

He froze just outside the screen door, only a heartbeat passing before he flung open the inside door, dashed through the kitchen then the dining room on his way to the attic.

He bumped into a confused Justice at the living room threshold as the younger man—bath towel draped over one
shoulder and a plastic cap over his braids—paused on his way to the bathroom.

"What's up, yo?"

_Had he not heard_ mawla's scream? _Perhaps he could not over the blasting TV? Is it possible I imagined her scream? Or did I hear a shriek she will make ... In the future?_ 

_By Allah, how far into the future? Where?_ 

"I thought I..." Kane panted, could not explain, and indeed did not have the time or energy to explain something of which he was so unsure.

"Yo, I'ma catch a shower."

"Fine. I ... I need to track down, _wali_. I had some questions about the dishwasher."

Justice shook his head, chuckling. "You two are so domesticated," he murmured as he left Kane in the vestibule.

Kane waited until the young man was out of sight and behind the closed bathroom door. He bent at the waist, squeezed his eyes shut and took several deep breaths as the water in the shower came on full force and a sense of agonizing déjà vu struck him between the eyes with such force it knocked him to his knees.

He gasped and swallowed hard as he reached out for the polished newel and another scream ripped through the house.

This one was real, _now_, and he was only glad that Justice was immersed in his ablutions and that the TV _was_ up so loud.

_Had Allah planned it thus?_ 

Kane pulled himself to his feet, staggered up the stairs as fast as his weakened knees could carry him, burst onto the
top landing to find *mawla* cowering in a corner several feet from the overturned ewer and Marsh.

The dog lay on his side, still and lifeless.

"Not my dog. Not my Marshmallow..."

Kane froze at the top step, her silent murmurs of denial flooding him with indecision. "*Mawla ... ?*" He took a hesitant step forward.

Therese turned to him, not with relief, but with the accusation and revulsion that he had fully expected, and wished not to be the recipient.

She stood and lunged at him. "You! This is all your fault ... you did this..." She swung out with her small fists and caught him with one soundly on the chin.

Kane flexed his jaw as he backed up and she advanced for a second shot. He caught her wrists mid-windmill, restrained her arms at her sides, pulled her against him and held tight.

He could do no less, there was nothing else in the world he wanted to do more, nowhere else on earth he needed to be except where he was: In her arms. He only wished the circumstances were different, that she was not so disgusted by the sight of him.

He stood holding her until he had almost forgotten why he had run up the stairs, why reaching her had been so urgent ... why there was a dead or dying dog in her attic.

Kane leaned his throbbing chin against her head, inhaled the fresh-washed fragrance of her hair, reveled in the tangled softness. "Teh-reese?"

She had stopped struggling and just stood stiffly in his arms, silent and unresponsive.
"Mawla ... ?" He gently swayed back and forth for comfort—more his than hers, he realized—and yet she did not respond. "This was not my doing, Teh-reese. I did not do thi—"

"You and your kahin and searches and mission..." She mumbled incoherently, sobbing softly against him for a long moment before finally taking a deep breath and tilting her head to glare up at him. "My Marshmallow is gone."

"I did not do this, Teh-reese," he repeated, tried to ignore the tears shimmering in her eyes.

She nodded, took another deep breath, closed her eyes. "I ... I know." She opened her eyes and their expression had softened from anger and grief to resignation.

Kane lightly cupped her chin. "What happened, mawla?"

"I'm not sure. I think I might have caught the end..."

"Of?"

"Of whatever happened to my dog, Kane. He ... it, whatever, killed my Marsh!"

He left her side, went and sat Indian-style beside the dog. "I am listening, mawla." He stroked the dog's shiny coat. No breath sounds or movement. He smoothed his fingers along the animal's neck, back, and ribcage, found what he was looking for. Snake bites, numerous and deep.

"I came up here looking for ... looking for Marsh. I hadn't seen him in a while, since before breakfast, and I'd been wondering where he'd gone. So after my shower and searching most of the house, I headed up here and..."

Therese sidled over, hunkered beside him. "I saw a ... a—"

She choked back a sob.
Kane turned and pulled her into his arms, across his lap. She leaned her head on his shoulder and he stroked her hair as he had stroked her dog—gently, with loving care.

"I saw..."

"Ifreet, I would gather."

She shook her head, pulled back to stare at him. "If that's another name for a cobra, then yes. I saw Ifreet."

"It is not another name for a cobra." Kane reached out to pet mawla's brave dog, his chest filling with gratitude at the thought of what the animal had probably prevented. What could have happened to mawla, had he not been here to protect her?

"What I want to know, is what the hell a cobra—or Ifreet, or whatever the hell it is—was doing in my house ... in my attic."

"I do not know."

"You know more than you're telling me, Kane."

He nodded. "I know Ifreet. But I do not know why he was here, nor am I certain it was him."

"I saw that mist again. But it was ... it was different this time. Different from ... you."

"Yes?"

"After that thing ... that cobra attacked my Marshmallow it ... it turned into that orange-black haze from the museum and evaporated, out the window."

"You are sure you saw this ... haze?"

"Yes, dammit. As sure as I saw you come out of that ewer!" Therese pointed to the overturned jug beside Marsh and Kane picked it up and set it atop the footlocker.
"I know you grieve, mawla."
"I seem to do a lot of that since you've been around."
"I grieve for him too. I liked your canine."
"Hmph."
"Teh-reese..."
"So, who is this Ifreet? Or should I say what?"
"Actually, he is a little of both."
"And what is his connection to you?" She arched a brow, prompting.
"He is ... one who wishes me ill."
Therese sat up and crossed her arms over her breasts.
"You seem to have a lot of these type of people on your tail. I wonder why that is."
Kane shrugged. "Believe me, mawla, if I could change this circumstance, what has happened, I would."
"Well you can't. The only thing left for me to do now is ... is to bury my dog." She swallowed hard, and he felt her whole body tense with the struggle as she tried to gather herself. He admired this mundane so much it hurt.
"Your friend," he murmured.
"Yes. My friend." She cupped his face suddenly, piercing him with her hazel eyes. "How Kane? How did he ... it ... how?"
He toyed with how much to tell her, if he should tell her anything more at all. Or would telling her do more damage than good? Put her in more danger?
"Kane...?"
"As you have witnessed, Ifreet can ... take other forms."
"You mean shapechange?"
He nodded.
"Oh great. So he could be someone who's already in my life, someone I know, work with, bumped into on the subway before and..." She fist his shirt and jerked him forward, his face a hair's breadth away from hers. "Could he be a relative?"

"It is possible, but not likely. He has to be on intimate terms with the ... the object or person he appropriates."

"Oh God..." She shook her head, gawking. "And you? Can you also...?"

Reluctantly, he nodded. "On a smaller scale, but yes I can," he murmured, sensed her breaking point. He knew that this was a lot for her to take in, especially on the heels of losing her beloved pet.

"Would you recognize this Ifreet in another form?"

He smiled grimly at her interrogation. She was asking excellent questions, touching on points he did not want her near.

"Kane?"

"It is possible I would not. Ifreet ... they are very crafty Djinn, more powerful than some of those in my tribe."

"I gotta tell ya, Kane, you're not giving me encouraging news right now."

He chuckled, slid his arms around her and clasped his hands to keep her near, glad that she hadn't lost her sense of humor. He sensed how hard it was for her to handle all the new information, felt the anguish and confusion still simmering beneath her façade of bravery and logic. He marveled at how she was able to maintain her level of
calmness and allow him close enough to hold and comfort her.

Therese fingered his pendant, frowning as she cradled it in her palm. "Did you ... did you beat Ifreet for this?"

He furrowed his brows, wondered at her perceptiveness. "Yes, but ... why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "Just a feeling and ... I've been having some dreams about a horseman in the desert. I thought it might be connected."

"Yes?"

"So, I take it this Ifreet Djinn really has it in for you, huh? Doesn't take losing too well?"

"Not very well, no."

"You said he was powerful, more powerful than your tribe?"

"Some in my tribe."

"So when you beat him, was it just luck or skill?"

He grinned, knew where she was going. "A little of both."

"And ... and would you be able to take him again if it came to that?"

"If it came to that, I would do anything within my power to keep you safe," he murmured.

She nodded, took a deep breath and released it on a tremulous sigh. "He was a good dog."

"He was."

"I'm going to miss my Marsh."

"I know. I will miss him also."

"I've had him since he was a puppy. He was a birthday gift from my brothers."
"Yes?" He sat on edge, sensed she needed to relate this.
"They wanted me to have a little ... protection for when ... for when Jury wasn't around."

She leaned her head on his shoulder again and he felt her tears on his shirt though she was quiet and did not sob.

After a long moment, he cupped her chin and tilted her head, gently thumbed the liquid from her cheek, hypnotized by the variegated appearance the tears gave her hazel eyes—bright yellow flecked with gray and green.

Beautiful. So beautiful and strong and I want you...

Kane leaned in to touch his lips to her cheek, tasting the salt of her tears and tempted to explore further. "Mawla?"

She didn't say a word, silently reached for his mouth with hers and returned his kiss, deeper, so demanding and hot Kane gasped beneath the onslaught on his senses, his insides, his...

He hardened almost instantly, his arousal pressing so painfully against the denim material of his jeans it made him fervently wish for the roominess of his jilbab.

Kane adjusted her on his lap for what he thought would be more comfort, but she used his momentum to turn into his body, and wrapped her arms around him. He was at once thrust from Jannah to Jahannam and back again as he felt her heart pounding in synch next to his.

Allah, give me strength. Allah...

But either his pleas fell on deaf ears, or he had not communicated them loudly enough, for no help was forthcoming. Only hunger, the most exquisite white-hot hunger slicing through him so fiercely he thought the
sensations would blast him into so many tiny pieces of grief and bittersweet desire.

He felt her nipples against his chest, hard and ripe through the thin material of her robe, realized she was naked beneath as she called his name between kissing and nipping his lips.

"Kane ... Oh, Kane..."

He cupped her face, returning her kisses ardently as he slid his hands through her hair to the back of her head and pressed her closer. She moaned low in her throat and he slipped his tongue into her mouth, hesitantly tasting before he thrust further and she shifted again and tumbled them both against the carpet.

Therese straddled him, hair tousled around her face in rich swirls of cinnamon, her lips full and bruised from their kiss. He reached up and slid a hand inside the open flap of her robe, brushed his fingers across the warm abundance of each breast in turn, the succulent fragrance of her skin wafting out to him.

"Yo y'all! What up?"

_I have to stop, I have to stop!_

Kane's conscience kicked in simultaneous to _mawla's_ brother-in-law calling them from downstairs and his own realization that he and a mundane were making love not two feet away from the tepid corpse of _mawla's_ brave pet.

He jerked to a sitting position, his tumescence pushing against Therese's soft folds as he held her and pressed his face into her shoulder.
"Be down in a sec!" Therese blurted then her urgent whispers of confusion filled Kane's ears: "Oh God ... oh God! What was I doing? What was I doing ... ?"

"This is my responsibility, Teh-reese. Mine. You did nothing wrong. Do you understand? Nothing." He stood, holding her snug in his arms for a lingering moment before he loosened his hold and allowed her to slide down his body and stand on her own two feet. He leaned in, palmed her face and kissed her long and hard an instant before he left her side to intercept Justice as the younger man cleared the first landing.
CHAPTER 11

…I would do anything within my power to keep you safe.

Evidently, this did not include leaving her alone and getting out of her life, Therese thought. But maybe those two things simply weren't within his power. Just as getting up and walking out in the middle of this weird movie before finding out what had happened to Jury and who was behind it wasn't within hers.

Despite all the dying and destruction around her, despite people and animals dropping like flies, despite these, she felt safer and more secure than she ever had in her life—and it was because of Kane. She couldn't leave, didn't want to.

God, I am a wanton harlot!

Therese closed her eyes now in shame, trying to cancel the memory of her hunger and need, trying to shut out the flushed reflection beneath the black and white feline features glancing back at her from the vanity mirror.

A week ago she had been making love to a genie-man not ten feet away from her dead dog—her birthday present, her pet...

...Your friend.

He always seemed to have the right things to say at the right time, as if he had a bottomless well inside from where he pulled these gems to make her feel better or better understand herself and the world around her, even while he was struggling with understanding it all himself.
What was someone like him—so pure and unfettered by modern-day conveniences and conventions—doing in her life, other than the fact that she had summoned and dragged him here?

Had she? Therese wondered. Had she wished him up at her most vulnerable moment and caused the death of her husband? Or had she merely been a conduit for the inevitable, something preordained and over which neither of them had any power?

Therese put down her brush before she would have removed the black coloring in her hair with another vigorous stroke. She leaned her forehead on the vanity table, tears brimming and ready to stream as she reached for the Kleenex box and snatched a couple of tissues. She gingerly dabbed her eyes and tried not to smear the make-up she had spent an hour meticulously applying.

She needed to put on her game face, and put it on fast. Jamilah would be dropping off her rugrats any time now, and the house was due to overflow with their pitter-patter and those of several neighborhood pre-teen friends. They did not need to have their Halloween party spoiled by a confused and melancholy widow.

The thought of her niece and nephew helped pull her together. She hadn't seen either of them since Kane had made his first appearance in her attic, and she hadn't realized how much she anticipated seeing them today until just this moment.

She didn't know how she was going to explain Marsh's absence, but she guessed she would come up with something
suitable, especially if Kane had anything to say about it. He had handled it perfectly with Justice.

He amazed her with his ability to improvise and invent the best story to tell at the right time. Only with his direct delivery and ingenuous expressions, half-truths and tall tales sounded like the whole truth and nothing but.

A fact that should have made Therese nervous as hell, but it didn't because she trusted him.

And God knew why she trusted this strange genie-man when her common sense told her he was hiding essential things from her, that he had had something to do with her husband's death.

She had every reason to mistrust him, to suspect his sincerity. Every reason except...

_I'm falling in love with him._

Someone knocked on the doorframe and Therese started, looking up to see Justice popping his head into the room around the half-opened door.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here!"

"All of them?"

"Jamilah just drove up with her two. I'm guessing the rest will soon follow."

Therese turned to glance at her bedside clock, nodding as she dabbed her eyes before turning back to Justice.

"Can't ever say Milah ain't prompt. You said two and, she's here at two." He stepped into the room and paused. "You okay?"

"Of course. And raring to go." Therese stood, smoothed her palms first over her hair then down her black unitard
before she struck a pose and purred Eartha Kitt style, "How do I look?"
 "Yo, kinda slick, girl. If you weren't my sister..."
 "Yeah, yeah, save it for one of your freaks." Therese looped an arm through one of his before he could protest and led him out into the corridor. She caught herself waiting a beat for the sound of paw-steps behind her and when she tilted her head back to look at Justice, she saw he knew what she was doing.
 "He's really gone, Terre."
 "I know," she murmured. "Takes some getting used to. And I still haven't figured out what I'm going to tell those kids, much more my brothers."
 "Tell 'em the truth. They'll understand. These things happen every day."
 Therese had to fight not to burst out in half-hysterical laughter.
 Yeah, dogs ran loose and got clobbered by hit-and-run-drivers every day. Which was what Kane had managed to convince Justice had happened to Marsh.
 But dogs certainly didn't get attacked in attics by cobras in suburban Mount Vernon every day.
 The speed and accuracy with which Kane had choreographed and explained Marsh's demise still amazed her, even now. She guessed if he could pull the wool over Justice's eyes, the least she could do was play out the sham to its logical conclusion with the kids. As much as the idea disgusted her.
 "So, what are you supposed to be, anyway?"
Justice produced a latex mask from his back pocket, pulled it down over his face.
"Jar-Jar!"
"I fit right in with, Zee. She's..."
"Shh." Therese put a finger over Justice's lips. Jamilah hadn't spilled and Therese didn't know what either of her rugrats was coming as. She wanted to be surprised.

She was due at least one other already, as she hadn't seen Kane since earlier in the day and had no idea as to what he was going to attend the party dressed as.

As long as he wasn't suited up as a marine, she figured her mental stability would remain intact for the evening.

"Wait'll you get a load of your exchange student," Justice said as if reading her mind.

Therese swallowed hard, didn't know if she would ever be ready to "get a load of" Kane as anything ... ever.

She didn't know if he'd been avoiding her since Marsh's death, or she'd been avoiding him, just that she hadn't seen very much of him in the last seven days.

Her genie-man had been spending much of his time mentoring Justice—helping the younger man study for his GED, and pushing him to lend a hand around his sister's-in-law house.

He'd even encouraged Justice in his job search, assisting her brother-in-law in snaring a part-time position with one of the new Old Navy stores in Manhattan—all this while under the guise of sightseeing in the 34th Street area like two visiting tourists.
Justice was flourishing and moving in areas to where he had never before aspired. More than just miraculous, Therese told herself, it was ironic that a strange, centuries old genie-man could effect such a turnaround when Justice's own older brother, mother and sister-in-law hadn't been able to.

These were all good things and though she was delighted with the positive results, Therese didn't think for a minute that her reprieve would last for much longer.

She knew that Kane would be ready soon to recommence his search for this elusive kahin responsible for his long imprisonment. Even though they hadn't spent much time together, she'd felt his restlessness, recognized it as something as palpable and intense as her own.

*Like we're both sitting on a live grenade.*

Therese froze at the living room threshold, watching Kane—in full Saudi Arabian regalia—hold court with Jamilah and her two kids.

Lawrence of Arabia was the first description that flashed through her mind, but it didn't really do her genie-man justice. Lawrence had never looked as striking riding camelback across the sweeping desert sand dunes as Kane looked standing in a living room in Mount Vernon.

Therese licked her suddenly dry lips as he turned and noticed her standing at the doorframe with Justice.

"Auntie!" Jabari and Aziza chorused as they followed Kane's gaze before racing towards Therese's outstretched arms.

She held them tight, her eleven-year-old nephew standing a mere inch shorter than her 5'2. Her eight-year-old niece,
several inches shorter, buried her face against Therese's chest.

"Thanks for the party, Aunt Terre," Aziza whispered.

"My pleasure Princess Amidala, but it hasn't even started yet. You can wait until later and after you've really gotten your party on, sweetie." Therese winked.

"That's what I told her," Jabari put in.

"I'm expressing my appreciation, Bari." Zee said and pushed her face at her big brother's, jumping bad. "Whether the party's the bomb or not, Auntie didn't have to throw it you know." Therese laughed as she pulled her niece and nephew apart.

God, they were so outspoken and grown!

Jamilah made her way over, rolling her eyes and sighing in exasperation. "God bless you, chile." She hugged her sister-in-law and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Better you than me."

"I have a ball with your kids."
"I'm just glad you're taking 'em off my hands for a while."
"You and Rafe have any plans?"
"Hmm, not yet, but we'll figure something out." Jamilah winked, elbowed Therese in the shoulder before she reached up and pinched Justice's cheek beneath his mask. "You been behaving yourself, Bink?"
"You know me."
"I know. That's why I'm asking."
Justice chuckled, rubbing his belly as his stomach grumbled.
"Does that garbage disposal ever get full?" Therese asked.
"I'm hungry too," Bari piped up.
"Speaking of garbage disposals..."
"I'll take the kids in the kitchen for a couple of snacks before the rest of the gang gets here."
"Bet!" the kids exclaimed.
"Which reminds me. You are coming to my place for Thanksgiving dinner, aren't you?" Jamilah asked.
"Hey, long as I'm invited, I'm in there."
Jamilah nodded and turned to Kane as Justice left the room trailing the kids. "That goes for you too, Mr. Chambers, if you're still here in the country that is?"
Kane inclined his head as he made his way over to Therese and Jamilah standing in the middle of the living room.
"Oh, uh ... I see you met Kane?"
"He was gracious enough to introduce himself while you and that crazy brother-in-law of yours were occupied putting on your get-ups." Jamilah stepped back and gave her sister-in-law the once over and a thumb's up before meowing.
Therese giggled, felt blood rushing to her cheeks quicker than if Kane had touched her.
"I see there's no special theme to this shindig, huh?"
"Just be what you want to be."
"Works for me." Jamilah gave Kane the once-over too.
"Lawrence of Arabia and Cats. Curious coupling."
Therese grinned, wished her sister-in-law hadn't put it quite that way.
"Ladies, I will take my leave now..." Kane broke the heavy silence, took one of Therese's hands and lightly squeezed.
"It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Chambers."
"And I you, but please, you may call me Kane."
Jamilah nodded, offered her hand and Kane gave it a gentle shake before turning to go.
"Uh, Kane?"
He paused at the dining room threshold, turned to Therese and arched a brow. "Yes, wali?"
"I'll, uh ... I'll see you later?"
"Of course."
Therese held her breath until he had disappeared through the kitchen door behind Justice and the kids. And when she turned back to Jamilah, she was faced with a reminiscent arched-brow look.
"Is there something you need to tell me, chile?"
Therese knew exactly what she meant, but decided the details about Kane's residency could wait.
God she had never wanted to share distressing news more than she did right now.
"Actually, I have some bad news about ... about..."
"Kane told us what happened to Marsh."
Therese gawked. "He did?"
Jamilah closed her eyes and silently nodded as she reached out to squeeze Therese's arm. "Very tactfully too. The kids took it well anyway."
"Oh, that's ... that's good."
Jamilah opened her eyes and pinned her with a look. "Why didn't you tell us, girl? You know how Rafe and Riano feel about that dog."
"Believe me, I know. That's why I didn't say anything. I wasn't ready to tell you guys. Didn't know how, Milah. I just ... I just..."

Jamilah pulled her into an one-armed embrace. "As long as you're doing okay." She pulled away to search Therese's face. "And you are girl, aren't you?"

Therese shrugged. "Yes. I'm ... I'm okay..." She followed Jamilah's gaze to the kitchen door behind where Kane had disappeared. His scent, spicy and male, lingered, swirling in the air around her and insinuating itself into her nostrils like a living thing. She wondered if Jamilah could smell him too, or if she was just so attuned.

"I'd say you're doing more than okay."
"Milah..."
"Don't whine to me, chile. You're entitled."
"You sound like Justice."
"Now what did that freeloader-but-I-still-love-him-anyway have to say?"

Therese giggled, glad that she still could.

But then she was rapping with Jamilah. And she had known that this is exactly how it would have been had she followed her initial instinct and visited with her sister-in-law early on in this adventure.

With a simultaneous gentle and rough touch and the most open of hearts, Jamilah Lopez could elicit secrets from the most hardened and tight-lipped enemy, or the most reticent and flustered sister-in-law.

"Justice was just being his usual blunt self," Therese finally said.
"Doesn't do it nearly as tastefully as I do."
"No, not at all."
Jamilah elbowed her in the shoulder, leaned in to whisper,
"He's gorgeous, chile."
"So was Jury."
"He was. But him not here now. You are."
Therese warmed all over, heart swelling commensurate with Jamilah's gentle Guyanese accent. "You ... you don't think it's too soon?"
"It's never too soon for friendship. And if it grows into something more..." Jamilah shrugged. "The rules of grief aren't written in stone. We all mourn in our own time, in our own way."

* * * *

Kane was at a loss as to what more he could do to entertain mawla's niece and nephew besides what he had been doing for the last hour since they had arrived. Which was plain sitting, listening and answering their very astute questions while their friends reveled and indulged in childhood frivolities and the multitude food and sweets that mawla and Justice had prepared and provided for the Halloween festivities.

The female, Aziza—or Zee as the young lady preferred—was as perceptive and inquisitive as her aunt, almost to a fault.
However, looking upon her angelic painted face framed by unruly brown curls escaping from two long ponytails, Kane could find no fault at all. Only beauty and a strong physical resemblance to her mother—albeit a miniature with long hair where her mother had a very short cap of tight black curls.

The boy, Jabari feigned detachment, distancing himself in a corner of the kitchen, arms folded across his slim chest as he slouched against a wall, smirked behind a pair of dark sunglasses, a black cowboy hat riding low on his head, almost obscuring the whole upper half of his face.

A sweet little boy buried under a brave grown façade, Kane told himself.

*Two beautiful children that make me long for my own. My two in the tree house and tire swing. Mine and Teh-reese...*

But he had much to clear up and settle before any of these wishes and visions could ever come to pass.

Kane grinned and tried to keep up his guard as Aziza deposited herself on her knees in a chair adjacent, leaned her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in both palms. She made it rather difficult to keep up any pretense of aloofness when she gave him a pointed look to do his *mawla* proud.

"Mr. Kane, has our auntie taken you to her museum yet?" she blurted.

"It's not auntie's museum," Bari put in as he made his way over to the dining room table and sat on Kane's opposite side across from his sister. "She's got people to answer to."

Kane experienced an instant of déjà vu that made his mouth dry as a sand dune in the Empty Quarter, would have
never considered the possibility that two mundane minors could cause him such discomfort.

"And a lot of people answer to Aunt Terre..." Zee leaned in as if she were about to impart crucial data. "She's the curator, so it's like her museum," she explained to Kane. He nodded. "She indeed holds an important position."

"Very. So, have you been?"

"Not as yet. But it is on my itinerary. And have you?"

"Oh lotsa times." Zee sat up to wave at him.

Kane chuckled as she leaned back in, his entire being warming to this human child, as precious as her name implied, easing his tension and eliciting his trust and patience in ways that only her aunt had succeeded. "And you enjoy yourself with your..." Kane cleared his throat to try the word out, thought his mawla deserved so much more. "...auntie?"

"Oh yes! Auntie's a great teacher. She took my class on several field trips and everything last year."

"And you were not bored?"

"Oh never. Aunt Terre makes even going to a museum and learning about Islam fun. Right Bari?"

"Yeah, she's cool," Bari murmured then brightened suddenly. "I like the numismatic exhibits the most though."

Aziza rolled her eyes, looking so like her aunt that Kane laughed.

"He is so enamored of money. Daddy's always reminding him money is the root of evil."

"A wise man, your father."

"You talk funny. Are you really from Saudi Arabia?"

"Yes." Kane nodded.
"I've never met anyone from so far away before."
"Yes you have stoopid. Mommy's from Guyana."
"That doesn't count." Aziza sighed and did that rolling thing with her eyes again before she fixed Kane with another stare.
"Mommy said it's rude to stare," Bari reminded her.
"You don't look like the way the Saudi Arabians look on the TV and in the movies," Zee said, ignoring her brother. "Your hair and skin are so light."

Kane wondered how she could tell about his hair since a Tagiyah covered most of his head then he realized she was staring at his eyes and eyebrows.
"Were you born and raised over there?" Bari asked.
"Yes. The desert is my birthplace," Kane said and had never felt more homesick for its serenity as he felt that moment.

He had not realized until now just how strong his ties to the desert were, that he saw so much beauty in it, not emptiness.

He missed living where the land was made of mountains of soft fine yellow-reddish sand with no distractions. He missed nightfall where his ceiling was a big beautiful clear sky with thousands of stars—a guide to deep soul searching.

Will I ever experience any of that again?
"You look sad, Mr. Kane. Are you okay?" Zee asked.
So perceptive, this child.

Kane reached out a hand and would have touched her cheek before he remembered himself and deposited his hand in his lap.
He had broken so many customs since he had been released into his mawla's custody. How many more barriers would he be tempted to cross before this pursuit came to an end?

"I ... I am well," he whispered finally. "And you? Are you both from here?"

"Yep, we were born in America, but like Bari said—"
"Our mom is from Guyana."
"And our Dad—"
"Auntie's brother is Puerto Rican and African American."
"Mom says variety is the spice of life," Zee finished.
"Your mother is a sage woman."
"Sage?" Bari giggled.
"It's another word for 'wise', dumb-dumb."
"I know. And you're a dumb-dumb." Bari reached over to punch his sister's shoulder and Kane caught his wrist.
"You must never strike a female."
Jabari gawked, quickly nodded. "We were only playing."
Kane frowned, released his hold.
"It's okay, Mr. Kane." As if to emphasize her point, Zee reached across the table to return her brother's blow. "I can take care of myself."
"I can see that you can." Kane chuckled, reminded again of her spirited aunt.
"We always play like this."
"Hmmm. You and wali would make excellent mujahid."
"What's a mu-ja-heed?"
"I'm interested to know that myself."
Kane turned to see mawla leaning against the doorframe behind him—arms folded across her breasts, mimicking her nephew's earlier posture—and his heart caught in his chest.

Never, in all his centuries of life, had he harbored such powerful and intense feelings for a female—not female kahin, magus, or djinni—most assuredly not a mundane from an alien culture.

Would she always affect him thus? Stimulating his senses with just her appearance? Overwhelming until he thought his own reactions would consume him?

"It is a Muslim fighter," Kane said finally.

"I swear, I've learned more about Muslims in the last week since you've been here than I learned during all my semesters of studying Islam in college." Therese laughed and made her way over to their group and put a hand on each child's head. "You guys about ready to hit the road for home?"

"Aw man..."

"Not now..."

Only minutes ago he had longed for home. But Kane knew had mawla asked him to "hit the road for home," his reaction would have been the same as the children's.

He did not think he could ever leave this mundane willingly or without a fight to the death.

And despite their serene and common surroundings now, something told him the circumstances might escalate to just that point.
CHAPTER 12

Therese peered at the road ahead, SUV's headlights illuminating her way, her other senses so in synch with Kane dozing beside her, that even his quiet steady breathing sounded like deep-throated snores in the confines of the Trooper.

She peeked at him from the corner of an eye and he subtly angled his body in her direction as if in response, reached out a hand and rested the palm against her abdomen. She felt naked beneath his gentle fingers, as if his skin was touching hers flush. She didn't know whether or not the Lycra material of her outfit intensified her sensations, only that a familiar current came from Kane, instantly heating the area he stroked.

So light, Therese thought, almost as if he weren't touching her at all. But he was, both purposeful and firm in his contact.

He seemed to have a particular fetish about her stomach area, familiar and cozy with caressing her here. And she knew she probably should have worried, he was a man after all, but he was such a study in contrasts, her genie-man. One moment chaste and monastic, the next responsive and encouraging her to maul him in an attic, that his intimacy didn't seem out of place or improper, just strangely comforting. Comforting and distracting.

Therese tried to divert her attentions, recalling an earlier moment before they had set out to carpool Bari and Zee and a couple of their friends home when Kane had gotten into the
front seat and she had reached across him to pull shut his door.

She smiled now at the memory of her usually calm and collected genie-man freaking out when she power-locked the doors and how he had lamented about "rolling tin tombs" and there not being "enough oxygen circulating in this vehicle to feed a spark".

"Please, open something!" Kane had begged, panicking when he couldn't get the door open on his side.

Therese had hit her power panel and lowered the windows. "What's the problem?"

Kane shrugged and stuck his head out the window panting like a fish out of water as the kids made their way outside. "I don't understand. You took the train to Manhattan with Justice. You didn't get into the city on a flying carpet."

He turned and gave her a dirty look that made her laugh. "Well, you didn't did you?"

Kane mumbled something about that having been different, although she couldn't see how. But she guessed he was entitled. She didn't think she would act much differently if she had been locked inside a ewer for hundreds of years.

He calmed down after the windows had slid down, fascinated with the technology behind it and enraptured as he watched Therese go through the motions of putting the SUV into gear.

"The vehicle seemed so dark and airless when the windows were closed."

Oh, so that was the problem? He couldn't see enough through the tinted windows and he was suffocating.
Centuries-old genie-man had good old-fashioned claustrophobia. "So, how was it on the train?"

Kane shrugged again. "The same but more light ... more people with which to interact. Different humans and sights in which to focus my attentions."

If she didn't understand where he was coming from, she might have been jealous or insulted, but how could she entertain such pettiness in light of such naked honesty? Sometimes the man's sincerity frightened her. But then there were the other times, just below and to the left of that full story that he wasn't giving her...

*A study in contrasts.*

Therese actually could see where a train ride full of people would fascinate and stimulate him enough to divert his fear of being closed in. And Justice being the inimitable company as he was prone to be, Kane probably hadn't had time to be afraid.

He was so like a child in his curiosity and innocence, she told herself now, seeing everything new, from a child's point of view and reacting in kind.

*A 6'2, 190 pound child with wondrous and magical powers.*

Therese grinned as she reached over to wipe a sticky smudge of blue from the corner of his mouth.

"The children said it is how one must consume this cotton candy delicacy ... Messily?"

Therese nodded and pictured Bari and Zee telling him just this, tee-heeing between serious looks.

*Little monsters.*
"I bet they told you it tastes better when you get some on your clothes and face too."

"As a matter of fact..."

Therese giggled as she made a left turn at the next lamppost.

They were only a couple of minutes away from her house, and she had never wished more that the ride from her brother and sister's-in-law place in Orange County was a little shorter.

Justice was scheduled out, doing some overdue, "grown-up" partying and hanging with his crew.

All evening Therese had been figuring her brother's-in-law absence into the equation of her plus Kane. She wasn't sure whether she was anxious to get home because they were going to be alone—really alone—for the first time in several long days, or whether she was just plain out of her mind.

*Go with the latter. It fits with everything else.*

Therese slowed the SUV to a stop at an intersection where several miniature ghouls, goblins and their chaperones crossed the street in front of the Trooper.

She thought about what a quick study Kane was and how he had more than likely absorbed enough information from her to start and competently drive the Trooper. But unlike most males she knew, he showed absolutely no interest in driving.

He seemed to enjoy being a passenger, much like Marsh, wallowing in the luxury that unoccupied hands and eyes afforded, whipping his head back and forth at every
pedestrian that passed, eyes absorbing house after decorated house as if he were a real estate appraiser.

Therese felt rather than saw Kane lean forward in his seat, as she eased the Trooper forward, glanced at him from her peripheral vision to take pleasure from his open expressions of amusement and wonder as he peered at all the children's colorful and creative outfits like a costume designer.

"I like Jamilah and Raphael," he blurted.

"I think the feeling's mutual," Therese said then held her breath as she snatched a look at him. God, even it was the truth, she told herself, the man did not need to have his head blown up any larger.

"He is worried about you."

"And who would we be talking about?"

"We would be talking about your brother."

"Hmph, that's interesting. Seems like everyone and Adam's housecat think they have a right to tell me how to live my life, who I'm allowed to have in it..."

"You are upset."

Therese shook her head, strangled the steering wheel with both hands as she counted to ten. "Why would you assume that?"

"You are grumbling like an overburdened camel."

"So, how did we come across our information? Did Rafe tell you he's worried or is this a man thing osmotically transmitted between testicle bearers?"

"A man thing?"

"Never mind."

"We were talking—"
"Like two hens. And they call us gossips..."
"You are still grumb—"
"I'll grumble if I damn well please."
"Why are you angry?"
"Who said I was?" She glanced at him, saw the familiar frown and had to stop herself from chuckling.

_Damn him. It was a ridiculous idea to think that I could be friends or anything else with this man. Especially anything else. Jamilah is crazy and so am I to have thought otherwise._

"Is that why you two were in the kitchen so long? You were talking about the helpless and deluded widow behind her back?"

"Why do you speak of yourself thus?"

"I think I should mention to you, that the kitchen is woman's domain," she said, ignoring the calm tone of his question.

"I thought you were a modern female who prefers not to be herded into a traditional role."

Did he have to remember everything she'd ever said to him since they'd met and use it against her?

"I would never use anything against you."

Therese gasped and gritted her teeth. She did not think she would ever get used to this man tooling around in her head at will and odd moments of the day, as much as he denied that this is what he was doing. She knew better.

"So you say," she mumbled.

"Your brother is a good man."
"Though I happen to agree, it doesn't mean he's not a meddler." Therese cut Kane a dirty look of her own. "So, what did he have to say about all this?"

"All this?"

"You know. You and me and Marsh and..."

"He was upset about your pet, of course. But he came to terms after I explained what happened to Marshmallow."

"You mean after you lied."

"Attacking me will not change what has happened."

No it wouldn't, she thought. But she needed to attack something, and he was the closest thing.

"I understand your grief. I feel your pain."

Therese smirked, shaking her head in disbelief. Coming from him, the statements didn't even sound like clichés. Especially since she knew how genuine were his words.

She sighed, closed her eyes for the briefest second. At least she thought it was brief until she saw the canine specter suddenly appear in front of the Trooper's front bumper.

"Marsh!" Therese slammed on the brakes and Kane braced his hands against the dashboard beside her as the SUV screeched to an abrupt stop.

She gasped as the seatbelt pressed tight across her chest and abdomen.

Kane quickly unbuckled himself and reached over to unlatch the driver's harness and she took a deep painful breath and closed her eyes tight as he palmed her face with both hands.

"Teh-reese?"
She licked her lips slowly, opened her eyes and gawked at him. "I saw him. I saw my dog."
"I saw him also."
"You did?" She pierced him with a look, saw the truth as he nodded, but still had to ask. "You're not just saying that to make me feel less crazy?"
Kane shook his head. "I saw him." He took his hands away and Therese turned to stare out the windshield.
The street ahead was empty. Not a dog or anything in sight.
"Then I guess we're both crazy."
"Perhaps."
Therese glanced at her house several yards away and there, standing behind the outside gate, was Marsh.
"I do not believe he is your pet."
"Well he damn sure looks like him."
"Yes."
Therese started the SUV, eased her foot on the gas and slowly steered towards her house.
"Mawla ... ?"
"I'm not going to let whatever that is perched in front of my property scare me away from my home." She pulled the Trooper into the driveway and cut the engine.
The dog stood his ground at her front doorstep, showed no signs of leaving.
*We'll see about this.*
Therese snatched her keys out of the ignition, opened the door, bolted out of the SUV and marched up the walkway.
"Mawla! That is not a good idea!"
She barely heard him, moving so fast that she was through the gate and face-to-face with the animal before Kane could get out of the Trooper.

Therese hunkered down feet away from the dog, peered into his dark-chocolate eyes as he tilted his head to one side and returned her scrutiny. "M-Marsh?"

The dog shuffled back and bared his teeth.

Therese grimaced, standing as she vaguely heard footsteps bearing down behind her.

The Marsh-thing retreated several more feet, growled an instant before he charged at her like an angry rhino.

Kane leaped over the underbrush and tackled Therese beyond the path of the charging animal.

Therese tumbled back into the bed of fallen leaves piled nearby, felt herself enveloped by Kane's body heat and the billowy *thoub* of his costume.

"Are you unharmed, Teh-reese?"

She gulped, and had only a second to nod before Kane dismounted her to chase after the dog.

Therese leaned up on her elbows and what she saw next made her wish for the ignorance and innocence she'd known before this genie-man had come into her life with his ancient wisdom and power and usurped everything that had been her reality.

Kane came up short as the Marsh-thing leaped over the hood of the Trooper and disappeared from view for several beats before he reappeared again, soaring over the roof.
Therese heard the animal's paws scrape against metal with a resounding thud as he pushed off of the roof and flew at Kane, muzzle pulled back over his sharp canines.

"Kane!"

He crouched, threw up an arm as if to protect his face, but pulled the *thoub* over his head like Dracula's cape instead, enwrapping his entire body in a swirl of white.

The dog landed in the pile of garments, tried to disentangle from the soft wool before Therese herself realized that Kane had disappeared.

The Marsh-thing tilted his face toward the night sky and howled until his lament sounded like hearty laughter.

Therese gawked and swallowed hard as he turned to her, snarled and stalked in her direction.

She yelped an instant before the dog lunged and vanished mid-flight in a surge of dying embers that rained down over her like warm orange rain.

"Oh God, oh God..." Therese turned her face into the bed of dry leaves and whimpered, thankful for her brother's-in-law terminal procrastination. If he had bundled the leaves into a garbage bag the way she had asked him, there would have been only the hard dirt beneath a shallow bed of grass to break her and Kane's fall.

*Kane...*

"I am here, *mawla.*"

She watched him step towards her from the fence as if he were emerging from a deep blue cloud, relieved that he was whole and alive and wondering how much or even if he had had anything to do with the disintegration of the Marsh-thing.
Had the dog actually disintegrated? Had the animal been there in her front yard at all? Or had he been just a figment of her imagination?

*Our imagination.*

Kane knelt at her side, pulled her into his arms and she moaned as he rocked her against his chest.

"Oh, my *mawla* ... " He pulled back to look at her, his eyes sharp and penetrating as they frisked her. "You are well."

Therese could not find her voice, silently nodded.

"Come." Kane slid his hand down her arms, clasped her fingers and pulled her to her feet. He slid an arm around her waist as he led her to the front door.

She snatched a peek over a shoulder at the pile of cinders dying amidst the leaves and grass, ready to sprint if the ashes reanimated or showed any indication that they were anything other than extinguished.

Kane opened the door before Therese had time to pull out her keys or wonder how he had gotten the door unlocked. She moved beside him as if in a dream, her genie-man leading her around as if she was a punch-drunk child who had had a full day.

"Ifreet?"

"I would hazard to guess, yes." Kane nodded as he followed her down the corridor to the living room. "Great dogs are some of their favorite forms to appropriate."

Therese collapsed into a corner of the sectional, leaned forward and buried her face in her hands.

She was sick to death of hearing about this damn Ifreet-Djinn thing, this cowardly being who only showed himself in
the dark and secret places of her life, her house—in front of her Marsh—and killed poor defenseless animals and not-so-defenseless husbands of museum curators. She was sick to death of this whole business with Kane and his rivals and tormentors.

"Dammit..." Therese felt the tears instantly, gathering and stinging her eyes. She held them, throat tight and painful as she forced them back and swallowed them down.

*Not this time. I'm not crying about this, in front of him or anyone else, anymore.*

She took several deep breaths, sniffled a bit and pressed her thumbs to her eyes until she thought she was ready to face the world and any genie-men in the vicinity, then she dragged her face out of her hands and glared at Kane.

He stood only a couple of feet away, an expectant look on his face that he did nothing to hide as he took a seat close beside her.

"Do you want me to bring you anything?"
"Can you bring me my husband?" she blurted.
"If it were within my power, I would,"

God, that had been a cheap shot, and she'd known it before Kane had answered her with his now-famous injured look.

*Okay, let's get ourselves together, really together. Hurting him isn't going to help matters, not one bit.*

Therese chuckled as she realized the more she wanted to hide her thoughts, or at least keep them to herself, the less she was able to. She wondered if her failure had anything to
do with being around someone who could almost effortlessly catch her musings and detect her shifting moods. Was she doomed to living a self-fulfilling prophecy? "Kane..." She paused as he looked at her and moved closer. His aroma—a pure mix of sandalwood and soap—engulfed her and she closed her eyes to get a grip as she wondered from where he had acquired sandalwood scent. Had he magically procured it or gotten it by more conventional means with Justice? "Mawla?" Therese shook her head as if to rid herself of the olfactory spell his nearness wove. She cleared her throat and stared at him. "What's up with this Ifreet-Djinn?" "What is up?" "Yes. What's his game?" "This is his game. He enjoys toying with people, exhibiting his superior strength, intelligence and skill." "Sounds to me as if he has an inferiority complex." "That is a possibility. It does not, however, make him any less formidable." "You beat him." "Once. Yes."
"Then it can be done again." Therese sprang to her feet and paced the carpeted floor, punching one fist into the opposite palm.
She was not only tired of this Ifreet, she was sick to death of being on the losing end of this "game," of not knowing the rules.
This wasn't a game for her. This was her life. And she didn't like having it manipulated by strange genie-men—protective and altruistic or otherwise.

"Mawla?"

She paused and grinned at him, took great satisfaction in watching him frown.

Good. He not only needed to frown in confusion; it was beyond time for him to do a little squirming.

Nevertheless, his concerned look made her anger melt, slowly and surely away.

And dammit, she didn't want it to melt. She wanted to hold on to it, to remember how this impotence felt, remember that she didn't enjoy it.

"It's time for me to get back control of my life."

"You wish to—"

"I have to go back to work."
CHAPTER 13

Ifreet glances out at the city from his corrupted domain, wallowing in the unpredictable energy and potential of his adopted home.

From his lavish vantage he sees all he needs to see in order to plan and wield his power over the unsuspecting. He is God and king, master of all he surveys—djinni and mundanes alike—his minions for the millennium.

He smiles in the darkness, enjoying his superior sense of drama and attention to artistic detail, taking pleasure in the memory of the boundless and unfounded courage exhibited by the human female.

Ifreet admires these traits in worthy opponents, but especially admires such bravery and strength in musad'a'fin like his rival's mawla—one so unwilling to own her weakness and oppression, one who confronts a superior being without any thought to inevitable defeat.

When he initially set the stage for this current game, he never considered the participants would amuse and entertain him so. But the peri and his mawla are proving to be both and more—commendable servant and protector, spirited and willful—whetting his appetite for prolonged sport.

Ifreet prowls his confines, visually and tactually luxuriating in the colorful pile of his Persian carpet, eager to begin the next phase of the contest and engage his two favorite vassals.
They are so alike, he thinks, the human and djinn. It will almost be a shame to dispose of them. But dispose of them he will, when the time comes. As it had come with her mate. As it had come with the canine.

Of the two entities he has been forced to kill in the last month, Ifreet regrets disposing of the pet the most.

In his station, opportunities for emotional bonds were not only few and far between, but unacceptable hindrances to his lofty aspirations. He is surprised he has been enthralled by his current contenders for so long. He has little use for humans—other than as chattel and diversions. But the female's dog ... he had grown fond of the beast, a great animal with potential. He would have been useful, an excellent familiar.

The mate, however, had been useless for anything but food, a necessary sacrifice.

Grinning, he recollects his encounter with the male musad'afin in The Village—the haunt of the bohemian humans—where he had set up his peddler's stand and persuaded the female's mate to purchase the talisman, the vehicle to the human male's own demise and Kane's release.

Humans, he thinks, at once so complex, yet so simplistic and malleable, so easily read that he uses their weaknesses and even their strengths against them.

And the female mundane ... now she is the most complex of all, richly textured with so many emotional layers in which to sink his teeth.

Visiting when she sleeps, invading her dreams and even her waking moments, is so satisfying, like dining on fine
Arabic cuisine. Perhaps succulent and tahina-laced Baba Ghanoush followed up with honeyed Baklava.

Ahh, just thinking about the female makes Ifreet hungry for a taste of her forbidden essence.

He hasn't been this stimulated in more than a century and the last female to put him in such a state had been one of his own.

Disloyal and perfidious kahin!

He will make sure that she dies first—slowly and painfully in front of the other two; he will give the lovers a taste of his supremacy, yet show his mercy by sparing them ... for a short time. And when their time is finally upon them, he will take them out, as deliberately as he will take out the kahin.

Ifreet glances at the half-moon rising over the tops of the buildings in the distance and senses the time drawing near for a social call.

His body hums in anticipation of experiencing the human again. It has been too long.

* * * *

Therese looks out over the infinite horizon above which the golden Arabian sun languidly rises, a growing splinter of bright light. She is on camelback, led across sweeping desert sand dunes by the dark orange-eyed Bedouin on horseback.

She is not sure why she knows the Bedouin is the strange being from her earlier dreams, only that he is.

And she is not afraid. Not yet. But she knows that she should be, and that he will give her reason to be; though she doesn't know exactly when.
He stops suddenly and turns his horse around, frozen in his tracks as he faces her with white teeth gleaming from his mouth like a beacon.

A shiver runs down her spine, as if something has just walked over her grave, then she sees the other rider beyond her guide, this one on horseback too, an impressive white Arabian.

They are striking, horse and rider, a harmonious blend of animal and man, sleek hide and cotton disdashah reflecting the sun—a stark contrast to the tawny sands.

Therese sits rigid in her perch, fixed like a statue, the only organs that move are her eyes as she gawks at the approaching rider and catches a glimpse of the scowl that falls over the features of the strange Bedouin.

They are enemies, she tells herself, fearing what will happen when the rider reaches her and her desert guide. Fearing that she will lose another she loves ... her new mate?

And who would that be except the green-eyed rider?

She is torn, has forgotten how to be anything else since these two beings have entered her life. She wants to hate each of them for what they have taken from her, the pain they have caused, but she has gained as much as she has lost, perhaps more, in the last two months.

Dare she be ungrateful for these gifts even though they have come with the greatest price tags attached?

"He will never have you as I do."

She hears her guide, but she sees that his lips have not moved, and as before she is immersed in the power and beauty of this ability he brandishes at will. At her.
"Mawla!"

She jerks her gaze past the guide, hazel eyes meeting the green gems shining out of the disquietingly handsome face of the approaching rider, sees those eyes widen with alarm, the full lips opening to produce a warning she cannot hear.

Is he as afraid of the guide as I am? Does this mean we will not defeat him? Cannot defeat him?

"Yes and no, musad'afin."

The guide smiles at her once again—surely and cruelly as his eyes ignite, pulling her.

Now the fear comes alive, full blown and fluttering in her stomach like an angry hive. But she kicks her camel into gear and the animal's undulating gait takes her closer to the guide, closer to the burning eyes as hypnotic and calming as the rolling motion of her desert ship.

"Mawla ... Teh-reese, no! Stop!"

I am so tired of running. I am so tired of being alone and afraid and I will not stop. I will not run from either of them again.

I will not.

* * * *

Therese made fists, felt them swing out and solidly impact skin and bone—head, jaw, shoulders and chest.

She listened to the sound of her punches, heard several muffled grunts and curses as they landed before someone caught her wrists and restrained her.

"It is all right, mawla ... Please, do not fight me. I will not hurt you. I will never hurt you..."
She squeezed her eyes tight, did not want to open them and confirm who was her captor, see who forced her arms down behind her back, straining her nipples against the soft flannel material of her pajama top as he pulled her forward until her breasts touched hard chest.

God, she couldn't decide which was more painful, the pressure on her shoulders, or the naked wall of flesh whispering against her nipples through the Tasmanian Devil emblem.

She took a deep breath, inhaled his scent, nostrils flaring in recognition and something else ... pleasure.

Yes, she enjoyed the aroma, welcomed the warmth and security the scent represented, wanted the male behind it.

"Mawla?"

Therese opened her eyes, slowly taking in his face inches from hers—the tousled tawny locks spiraling around his subtly pointed ears, the curly golden lashes framing intense green eyes. She released the breath she hadn't known she'd been holding, leaned her head forward and rested her face against his shoulder, immersing herself in his essence.

His skin was at once smooth and firm against hers, and she wanted to freeze the moment in time, feel him against her, atop her, inside her from now until....

It seemed her genie-man felt the same for he did not move for a long while, only the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest as he inhaled and exhaled giving Therese any indication that he had not died and left her.
"Teh-reese..." Kane released her hands as he pulled back to stroke her hair with a palm. "You are safe. I am here. Just I and no one else."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" She glared at him, a grin teasing her lips, belying the sarcasm and doubt behind her question.

Kane chuckled, holding her face in both hands as he lowered his lips to hers. He plunged his tongue into her mouth, both tentative and demanding, sliding it over teeth and sampling her.

Therese remembered that she had functioning arms and put her palms against his chest in a half-hearted effort to make him stop. But she didn't want him to stop, not really. She never wanted him to stop, thought that if he did stop, she would stop ... stop existing. Everything she was and wanted to be lay beneath his fingers, within his arms, within his heart and...

Oh God, I miss him. I miss him so much!

"I know you do, Teh-reese..." He drew her against him, held her so close she felt his heart pounding in synch with hers, beating so hard and fast she thought that maybe both organs would burst through and touch each other flush.

"I know so much more than you think I do. So much, and so little," he whispered, caressing her back, circular motion of his hand so insistent and gentle, reminding her of the way he encircled her stomach on so many different occasions.

So many occasions. Like we've been together forever. "We have, mawla. We have..."
He said it as if the realization were just occurring to him as it was occurring to her. As if he was as shocked as her.

"Kane..."

He quieted her with another kiss, his lips both tender and resolute as he guided her back against the pile of pillows.

Therese closed her eyes as softness and hardness engulfed her—cushioned feathers surrounding her head, Kane's body encompassing and firm as he straddled her.

How long had he been in the room with her? How long had he watched her sleeping and fighting a nightmare? Had she cried out and he'd heard her? Or had he been here from the beginning, anticipating that she would be in distress and need him?

"I have been with you forever, Teh-reese. Forever." He leaned in for another kiss, both hands at the back of her head as he pulled her near and she followed willingly before he paused, his lips a breath away from hers.

Kane slid one hand from her head to her shoulder, dragged his fingers down an arm then back up again, easing his hand inside her top, never once taking his eyes from hers.

Therese felt his fingers touch her, rolling the nipple of one breast until it hardened against his palm. She arched her back and groaned as a jeans-clad knee spread her thighs and his fingers glided beneath her shorts and cupped her.

"You are so warm, Teh-reese..." He slid up her top and lowered his mouth to her breasts in one fluid motion, circled each aureole with his tongue, nipping and stroking his way down to her belly before he hesitated, warm breath hovering over her navel, making her tremble.
Therese buried her fingers in his hair, caught rich waves and tried to urge him forward; wanted him so fiercely her entire center superheated and ached with need. But he was firm, poised at her stomach for an endless moment.

She opened her eyes and met his staring at her intently. Questioningly. She knew right away something was wrong and tried to ease his sudden tension with a taste of her humor. "Forgot your rubbers back in the ewer?"

Kane frowned, as she had known he would, but there was a different quality behind it this time, not just the usual amused confusion but anxiety.

"Genie-man?" Therese cupped his face, searching his eyes as she drew him forward. "It's okay. You don't have to worry about me getting pregnant. Really," she said, still half-joking.

Kane didn't crack a smile. "I do not understand."

Therese shrugged, gave him a sad grin. "You know. I can't ... I can't get pregnant. Not anymore."

The sheepish expression this elicited from him made her decidedly nervous. The man was up to something and she had a feeling she wasn't going to like what it was. "Kane?"

"But ... you can, Teh-reese."

"Now I don't understand. What are you talking about?" But she knew exactly what he meant, knew before he opened his mouth to reply and she didn't know whether to feel joy or resentment.

"I ... I repaired the damage. I—"

"What?"

"I healed you."
Therese frowned, still not wanting to go down the road he was taking her. "You **healed** me?"

Kane nodded in that half-imperious, half-subservient way that she found so infuriating. "I restored your ability to procreate, yes."

"You did what!"

"You are not pleased, **mawla**?"

"No ... yes ... n—" Dammit, how could he do this to her without getting her permission or consulting her? How could he just take it upon himself to tamper with her insides? "Fix" her like she was a damn cat or a dog, some animal without the ability to make logical decisions for herself. Except he'd reversed the process and **given** her the ability to conceive instead of taken it away.

**Damn him!**

"You are upset."

"Yes, dammit. I—" Tears sprang, hot and frustrating, blurring her vision. She turned away her head, buried her face in the stack of pillows, and when Kane dismounted her, she jerked away, giving him her back.

Would her life ever be her own again? Would she ever have the freedom to make decisions for herself without some well-intentioned person giving her advice, some medical man ripping out her insides, some mother-in-law snatching away her husband, some genie-man pulling her strings behind the scenes?

Now she understood why he was so fascinated with her stomach, why he caressed her here so much. He'd been ... working on her. And her ankle too!
She remembered going to bed that first night, rotating the ankle she had badly twisted and feeling no pain at all; not the pain that used to hit her now and again from an old injury; not the pain from the new injury. Nothing.

*I healed you*...

She glared at Kane over a shoulder, saw the open confusion, the guileless look that never failed to melt away her anger.

How *could* she be angry with him? More importantly, how could she stay angry when he had wrought a miracle?

Kane spooned his body to hers, encircled her waist with an arm as he cradled his chin against her shoulder. "If I have done something to offend you, *mawla*, I am sorry," he whispered.

Therese blinked back more tears as he pulled her closer, his breath hot in her ear.

"Perhaps I should have told you what I was doing but I ... I wanted to give back to you..."

She felt him nibbling her earlobe as his arm tightened around her, possessive and gentle.

"I wanted to give you something to equal what you have given me. I ... wanted to surprise you."

*If you're going to start with the waterworks, then I'm not going to give you your surprise*...

Therese shook her head against the memory of her husband—her Jury's last few words to her, her Jury's last day with her.

He had been so healthy and alive and smiling at her over breakfast on their anniversary.
Had that only been several weeks ago and not a lifetime? Therese turned in Kane's embrace and he took the opportunity to wrap both arms around her. She wrapped her arms around him too, searching his face. For what, she didn't know, only that the unwavering heat of his cat eyes called her, held her.

She reached out a hand to push a stray curl away from his face, surprised by the softness of the strand when everything else about him was so hard and predatory and ... Gentle.

...I will never hurt you...

Therese took a deep breath, released it on a long sigh as she hugged him to her. "Kane?"

"Yes, mawla?"
"Thank y—"
"Eeh-yo! What up, what up, what uuup...?"
Therese groaned and pressed her forehead to his chest. God, not now, not now.
"I must leave you."
"You don't have t—"
Kane firmly nodded his head before she could finish. He chucked her under the chin with a hand and grinned. "It is best if I return to my room."

Damn. Therese didn't know whether to be thankful for or irritated with her brother-in-law's impeccable sense of timing. Why couldn't he have stayed out hanging all night like he'd been doing?

Kane extricated himself from their clinch, and she watched him pad over to the door like a ... like a—

_Nefarious interloper._
Therese quickly covered her mouth to smother a bubble of laughter and Kane froze in front of the door, hand on the knob as he turned back at the sound of her muffled snicker.

He gawked, put a finger over his lips before slowly turning the knob, pulling the door open a crack and peeking out into the corridor.

"Coast clear?"

Kane turned back and nodded then did something so out of character, so minor but totally evocative and reminiscent of Jury, Therese had to fight not to pass out from emotion where she lay.

He snapped to attention, saluted and whispered, "All clear, madam." Then he blew her a kiss and tiptoed out into the hall, pulling the door closed behind him.
CHAPTER 14

"So, how was the club-hopping last night?"

Justice shrugged, head bent over a plate piled high with a stack of pancakes, strips of bacon and scrambled cheese and eggs, all compliments of her and Kane's earlier joint efforts to prepare a hearty breakfast on which to send everyone off to work.

"Pickings slim? No hotties and freaks?" Therese continued her teasing and froze with a forkful of eggs to her mouth when Justice pinned her with a look.

"So what'd you two do while I was out?"
"Usual. Why?"

Justice jerked a thumb at Kane sitting to his right. "I saw Mr. Exchange Student here coming out of your room this morning."

Kane didn't flinch, continued quietly eating his eggs and jelly-smothered pancakes.

"And?"
"And? I want to know what was going on."
"That's none of your damn business." Therese threw down her napkin and pushed back from the table, glared down at her brother-in-law.

"I'm asking a question that deserves an answer. And it is my business."

"So is that why you came in the house all rowdy last night? You were giving us a chance to get ourselves together before you caught us in the act or something?"
"I don't know. You tell me. Would I have caught you in the act or something?"

"You know what, I don't like your snide tone, besides which ... that's none of your business either." Therese slammed her hands on her hips as Justice stood and caught one of her wrists.

"What is my business then?"

"Nothing to do with my relationship with Mr. Exchange Student, or anyone else for that matter." She glared down at Kane, indignant that he seemed so unaffected and was letting Justice get away with practically calling her a whore!

Kane must have felt her anger, the heat from her stare, for he glanced up at her. Briefly. Then he went right back to eating his breakfast.

Therese almost reached out to cuff him but remembered herself. Remembered her brother-in-law.

She jerked her arm out of his grasp. "I don't believe you're coming at me with your double standard bullshit," she mumbled.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"You go out and hang with your homeboys, sniffing for pussy all night, and when it comes to me I'm not allowed to ... to—"

"To what, Sis? To what?"

"None of your business!" Her hands shook with the need to wrap them around something but Therese made them into fists instead and slammed them back on her hips.

God, she couldn't believe she was letting this kid get to her, letting him make her feel like she had done something
wrong. Even if she had, it wasn't his place to accuse her of whatever the hell he was accusing her! "If you're so smart and think you know what's going on between us, then you should also figure into your grown-ass equation that a) it's none of your business and b) I'm a grown woman who happens to not need your permission to do what the hell I want."

"You're my sister-in-law."

"So that's what this is all about? I'm not supposed to sleep around so soon on your brother's memory?"

"Is that what you're doing?"

"Justice..." Kane cleared his throat and stood beside the younger man and all Therese could think was, It's about damn time! "You should stop now before you say something you will regret."

"You need to chill homeboy, cuz this doesn't concern you. This is a family matter."

Kane solemnly grinned, caught Justice by an arm. Justice tried to pull his arm free, but Kane held tight, made him wince.

"Kane...?" Therese took a couple of steps around the table, stopped when he gave her a warning look. He didn't seem to be hurting Justice, just frustrating him by keeping him still.

"It concerns you that wali and I were in her sleeping quarters together?"

Justice threw up his free hand. "Yo, whatever. I ain't got nothing to do with what you two do behind closed doors."

"That's not what you seemed to be saying a couple of minutes ago," Therese piped up.
Justice gritted his teeth, ignoring her as he tried to stare Kane down and couldn't. He glared over at Therese instead. "You're wrong, Terre. You know you are..."

"Leave us, wali."

"Wha—?" Therese stopped as Kane gave her a look that plainly said this is a man thing. If she hadn't been so relieved he was finally taking charge she would have been more pissed than Justice had already made her.

Banished. Banished from my own damn dining room!

She threw up her hands. "Fine. Fine!" Therese stomped away from the table and slammed into the living room like a little kid who'd been sent to her room without supper.

Hell, if they were going to treat her like a child, she'd act like one, dammit.

Therese was so blinded by indignation she didn't realize until she had been gone several minutes and had immersed herself in some mindless morning news show that she hadn't thought twice about leaving Kane alone with Justice. Hadn't thought twice or worried about what they would discuss.

* * * *

Now that he was alone with Justice Hunter, Kane did not know what to say, how to broach what he knew was bothering mawla's brother-in-law and make what was wrong right again.

He had known a couple of minutes ago, in the heat of the moment when emotions had been raging all around him.

But now sitting across from the sullen younger man, alone, he was at a loss for the right words.
"Yo homeboy check it, you ain't got nothing to say to me," Justice muttered as he pointed a hand in front of Kane's face. Kane recognized the tough pose for what it was and decided to try and diffuse Justice's hostility as much as possible without compromising his own principles. "You dislike me now."

"I don't have nothing against you."
"It would appear otherwise."
"What's up with you and Terre?"
"What is up?"
"Don't play dumb with me. I saw you."
Kane nodded, felt his face redden at the memory of mawla in his arms. He would have given anything if he had had something to feel guilty about. "Nothing happened."
"This time." Justice smirked. "What about next time?"
"We will handle next time when next time comes."
"I don't think I like your supercilious attitude."
"In this, you are much like your sister-in-law."
Justice chuckled, gave Kane a grudging grin. "You ain't right homeboy. You know you ain't."
"You miss your brother."
Justice scowled, holding Kane's placid look with his heated one for a long moment before he swallowed hard, finally nodding.
"Teh-reese misses him as much. If not more."
"She doesn't act like it."
"Because she is reaching out to another?"
"Is that what she was doing? Reaching out to you?"
"We were..." Kane sighed, thought how like a dog with a bone Justice acted. For an instant, he was reminded of mawla's tenacious pet. "We were reaching out to each other."

Justice frowned, gave him a long silent look.
"I was ... helping her through a difficult time last night."
"Difficult time."

Kane heard the incredulous note, and he also heard other unsaid. The young man's remorse at not being there for his sister-in-law last night when Kane had. The regret at not being there for his sister-in-law when she had needed him the most—after her mate's death, or when his own mother had taken his brother's remains and disposed of them as she had seen fit.

Kane felt all of this and so much more that it filled his own chest with grief, much more grief than he thought any living thing should be brought to bear.

He did not know how humans had the strength to endure these states of affairs—mortality and the pain of losing a loved one. Especially when these circumstances seemed to occur so frequently, had to occur as human existence was so temporal.

Could he handle the loss of longevity that would follow if he mated with mawla? But more importantly, could he handle losing her?
"Kane?" Justice reached across the table to grip his hand.
"Are you ... are you in love with Terre?"

He nodded his head before he knew what he was doing; a large lump embedded in his throat, impeding his ability to speak.
"Does she love you?"
"I ... I do not know."
Justice shook his head, chuckling. "Yo, that's just like Terre ... keep you guessing, on your toes..."
Kane grimaced. "You are amused?"
"I'm not laughing at you, Kane. Just with y—" Justice burst out laughing in earnest now, patted Kane on a shoulder as he stood to leave.
"I do not think I am seeing the humor in the situation."
Justice wiped the tears from his eyes as he caught his breath. "I'm sorry, man. I just..." He pinned Kane with a semi-serious look, obviously struggling not to smile. "I wish you all the luck in the world, homeboy. Cuz if you plan on courting my sister-in-law, you're going to need it."

* * * *

Kane did not know whether to admire this strength and resiliency of the human spirit, or to resent the very existence of this phenomenon. A phenomenon that would have sister and brother biting off each other's heads in grief and anger one minute, then the next minute have them with their heads pressed together as they snickered behind his back at some secret joke.

A joke of which he was beginning to think he was the butt, if not the core of the entire jest.

Such unpredictable and ... maddening beings, these humans.
And I am one of them.
At least half, Kane told himself, not as disturbed as he used to be by the thought, but instead inspired.

Kane watched Therese as she bade Justice farewell at the front door and headed down the path toward the driveway.

How could beings that were capable of such glorious metamorphoses as Therese and Justice Hunter not inspire him?

But as inspiring as his mawla was, as much as she tried to deny her nervousness about today's expedition, Kane could see right through her. He knew that mawla wasn't as eager to get back to work as she had initially convinced him; knew that the appearance of weakness or fear upset Therese much more than their actual existence.

Kane remembered his own anxiety as well, the anxiety that had been plaguing him since the incident a week ago, the incident that had made his long life flash before his eyes, almost as if he were experiencing the entire disturbing episode all over again.

He had never felt as fearful and helpless in his life than he had in those few seconds when Therese had, once again, caught him unaware with her reactions and erratic behavior upon thinking she had seen her animal.

He smiled at the recollection of her boldness in jumping out of the vehicle to confront Ifreet.

Brave stupid mundane in her finest moment!

He had wanted to throttle her once Ifreet had made his dramatic exit, but had had to settle for holding her, touching her body to make certain all her beautiful parts were intact.

By Allah, she had scared him towards several deaths!
Therese unlocked and opened the driver's side door now and slid behind the wheel.

Not until she had closed the door behind her and stuck her key in the ignition to start the engine did Kane realize he had been in the sealed and locked vehicle without thought to an open window or door. His mind had been so totally preoccupied with thoughts of his *mawla* he hadn't been thinking coherently.

Or had he?

He reached out a hand now to the power panel and lowered the passenger side window. He had gotten away with his insanity this once, but he did not want to push his fortune.

"You all right over there?" Therese turned and smiled at him as she put the car into reverse.

"Yes." *No.*

His *mawla* frowned at him as if she had heard his thoughts and Kane believed that they were so tightly bound now, she very well might have.

He shifted in his seat, tried to find comfort and, not for the first time, missing the baggy form of his clothes.

By Allah, if not for their comfort then he needed them at least for their ability to conceal the evidence of his desire since the jeans—even the loose-fit variety—these humans seemed to favor left very little to the imagination of the observant or sensitive. In fact, his new clothes only served to enhance his guilt over the growing specter of *mawla's* dead mate, stressing the many disadvantages at which he daily found himself.
He would have to do something to assuage these unhealthy sensations.

"You're sure you're okay?" Therese asked again as she pulled the vehicle to the mouth of the driveway and checked her mirrors before backing into the street.

"I might ask you the same."

"We've already discussed this, Kane."

Yes they had, and he was surprised he had convinced her to agree to delay her return to work for a week, much more two; surprised he had actually gotten her to see the logic in not going back full-time, at least not initially. Particularly after he had expressed his wishes for her not to return to the scene of her husband's demise so soon. Because once mawla got an idea in her head to do something—especially something that she knew he did not want her to do, something that displeased him—well, Allah and all the angels be damned, she would do it.

"Waiting won't change what happened there, or make me anymore ready," she had reasoned. "Besides, the sooner we get this out of the way, the sooner I can get you out of mine."

Kane smiled now; did not believe for a minute that she had meant her conclusion literally.

He could just hear her echoing her brother's-in-law earlier sentiments to call him "supercilious" if she could have read his thoughts.

And you are almost sure that she can, aren't you?

Kane tried to divert his mind from such unpleasant probabilities. Unfortunate enough for him the woman could read his body.
He had to admit that as much as he did not want *mawla* to return to her business prematurely, he was feeling a certain amount of exhilaration at the prospect of visiting the site of his release and rebirth, and a certain amount of dread at the prospect of coming face-to-face with his *kahin*.

"So, are we finally starting to look forward to this trip?"

Kane stopped himself from gaping, had to remind himself that she could not read his mind, that she was just in synch with him the way any connected couple, or bound *mawla* and djinn, would be in synch. "I gather it will be a nice change of scenery."

"Change of scenery." Therese smirked. "It's a little more than that."

"Perhaps."

She rolled her eyes at his monosyllabic response and made a left turn at the next light.

Ahead was a long stretch of open road leading to, Kane surmised, the artery to this Brooklyn borough.

Kane mentally ticked off relevant facts he had discovered in the last several weeks: Home of the old Brooklyn Dodgers, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Biggest Little City and Do or Die Bedstuy....

Perhaps he should be a little more worried about this trip for more than just what his own mission involved.

"Bari and Zee spoke to you about *TIHAM*?" Therese asked.

Kane nodded. "They expressed particular enjoyment at their visits to the museum with you."
Therese blushed. "They did not!" As if to emphasize her point, she reached out a hand to gently cuff him without once taking her eyes off the road.

He chuckled at her single-minded accuracy. "They did," Kane assured. "They seem to get a lot of pleasure spending time with you."

"Well..." Therese faltered. "I ... I get a lot of enjoyment spending time with them. I feel like ... well, I feel as if they're my own."

"They are your blood."

"Yeah, but you know what I mean. It's not the same."

"In time."

She glanced at him from the corner of an eye as she pulled the vehicle onto the turnpike and merged into the light afternoon traffic. "You're so certain."

"Yes."

"And it's not possible that you..." Therese shrugged and Kane felt her hope and doubt warring. "You couldn't have made a mistake?"

"By healing you?"

"If you did." She cut him another look.

Kane grinned, understood her unwillingness to believe in a miracle, especially when her fiercest desire was at stake.

"I do not know how to prove this ... fulfillment to you, mawla." By Allah, he was becoming too adept at fabricating, for he knew exactly how to prove it, and was only too eager to be the one to put the facts to a test.
Therese turned to him and graced him with her most teasing smile as she eased the SUV to a stop behind another vehicle.

"Oh, but I'm sure you do, genie-man," she murmured. Did she know what she did to his insides when she looked at him thus? Kane wondered. When she bantered with that edge of irony and sarcasm?

By Allah, he would not be able to take this much longer. Kane squirmed in his seat, stuck his head out the window and hoped a tour through her museum would bring some much-needed relief.

But he doubted it.

* * * *

From the first moment when they entered TIHAM, Therese trailing behind Kane like a mother following an excited boy on his first trip to the amusement park, she regretted that she hadn't brought him to the museum sooner.

Her genie-man's wide-eyed eagerness and reverence made the trip worth more than the price of admission, made her forget she was at her place of business and not actually at an amusement park or playground.

A kid in a candy store.

Therese smiled when Kane paused in the middle of the inlaid marble first floor that exactly reproduced the design of a Mughal carpet. Agog and head tilted back, he slowly turned and admired the decorative architecture of the main hall's ribbed dome—a precise replica of the arch in front of the mihrab in the 10th century mosque of Cordoba.
"By Allah, it is beautiful!" Kane twirled then hurried over to a Plexiglas showcase several feet away that housed one of the museum's popular Bedouin jewelry collections.

She followed, giggling as she sidled behind him and peeked over his shoulder while he silently read the classification card, lips moving a mile a second.

He finally turned to her and asked, "How were you able to stay away from this for so long?"

Therese grinned. "You took the words right out of my mouth." She caught his arm, pulled him to the side of the exhibit. "But there's plenty more to see and cover and..."

"Yes?"

"And I want to introduce you around and give you a feel for the staff—"

"And test your junior docent story?"

Therese nodded, suddenly serious, although she probably needn't have been worried.

She had contacted Sahir as soon as she had decided to return to work. Along with her own intentions to start slow, she had thrown out Kane's name and "credentials" as a candidate to fill one of the docent positions for which TIHAM had been recruiting for the last couple of months. Therese had spread testimonials on thick for her protégé—counting on her genie-man's intrinsic talent and knowledge to support her yarn—and Sahir had jumped on the opportunity to welcome aboard someone with Kane's background and qualifications.

"Therese, darling, I trust your judgment implicitly and if you say he is up to snuff, as they say, then I'll work out the
nasty paperwork details here. But as far as I'm concerned, he is the perfect candidate...."
She was glad of her director's unwavering advocacy and faith in her endorsement. Therese needed all the support she could get, especially now.
"Hey Therese!"
She turned from Kane to see Amber Brown waving and making her way across the main floor.
Amber did not hesitate to pull Therese into a snug embrace when she reached her boss, and hold her long enough to make Therese's eyes water before Amber pulled away slightly to whisper, "We missed you, boss."
"Oh stop brown-nosing, Brown." Therese playfully slapped the younger woman's arm, chest filling with nostalgia.
God, she had missed this place and the people too!
Therese motioned to Kane and he took a step forward but did not offer his hand until Amber did.
"I'm Amber Brown, one of the interns here at this charming institution and you must be Mr. Chambers?"
Kane inclined his head. "That is correct." He shook Amber's hand and smiled. "It is a pleasure to meet you."
"Gawd, so formal. You're going to get over that real quick around here. We're one big happy family."
"I suppose that is a good thing."
"Works for us." Amber elbowed Therese and stage-whispered, "He's a cutie."
"Please, you'll swell his head." And that was the last thing genie-man needed,
Therese decided.
Out of curiosity, she glanced at Kane from her peripheral vision to gauge his reaction to Amber and her flattery.

She had never before contemplated the intern's looks one way or another before now, but guessed that the younger woman was attractive in a perky blond sort of way.

Especially if Mr. Genie-Man's reaction was any indication, Therese told herself.

Sheesh, he was staring at the girl so hard, she expected Amber's head to any second do a three-sixty on her shoulders.

Unless, of course he is checking her out for other reasons, like suspicion instead of appreciation?

Therese remembered Kane's admission, that he might not be able to recognize Ifreet in another form. And though the thought—that a being with his superior perception and ability could be wanting in this vital area, that he might no more recognize Ifreet than her—was disconcerting, she still felt great comfort having him nearby. Kane's presence, more than any family member or trusted confidant in the recent past, gave her a warm sense of well-being and security she hadn't experience since she'd married Jury.

"Well, I'll leave you to your tour, Mr. Chambers..." Amber retreated a couple of steps from Kane's intense stare, blushing and folding her arms across her breasts.

Therese wondered if it was just the normal reaction of a young girl with her heart set aflutter by the attentions of a handsome "cutie," or something else. Like guilt?

God, what was wrong with her? She was looking askew and seeing murder suspects in people she knew.
Used to know. Nothing is as it seems. Not anymore ...
Trust no one ... God, she was living an X-Files episode.
"Therese, it's really good to see you back." Amber leaned in, gave her a peck on the cheek and squeezed her shoulders reassuringly before turning to go. "I'll see you guys later?" she called over a shoulder.
"We'll be around," Therese said and glanced at Kane. "I hope you're not going to be so rude with the rest of the staff."
"Was I rude?"
"You haven't taken your eyes off her yet. I expect the back of her shirt to go up into a ball of flames any second now."
"I apologize. I was only endeavoring to get a feel for the staff, as you put it."
Oh yeah, she had said that, hadn't she? And never let it be said that Mr. Genie-man didn't take everything she said literally. She guessed she should be thankful. "All right, smart aleck. Touché."
Kane chuckled just as someone else shouted Therese's name from across the floor.
"Great, you can meet one of the big kahunas." She grabbed his closest hand and dragged him toward another exhibit.
"Big ... kahuna?"
"It's just an expression. Actually, she's my boss," Therese whispered to Kane right before coming face-to-face with TIHAM's incomparable director. "We were just on our way up to your office."
"I heard you were here and decided to meet you halfway."
"Hey, you saved me a trip." Therese smiled and turned to present Kane to the museum's director. "Well Sahir, this is the gentleman I spoke so highly—"

"Of course." Sahir advanced and smiled brightly as she proffered a hand and turned on the thousand-watt charm as only she could. "Kane, it is so nice to finally meet you."
CHAPTER 15

From the first moment when he realized to whom *mawla* was leading him—this "big kahuna," this boss person—Kane had to remind himself that he was in a public place, that murder was not only a sin and frowned upon by the masses, but a crime within this place and time where he now dwelled.

And even with these internal admonitions, he found restraining himself a difficult task when not more than five feet away stood the individual responsible for taking away the one thing in the world he held almost as sacred as Allah, the one thing in the world he valued more than knowledge: Freedom.

For more than a century, thoughts of this woman, this *kahin*, had haunted his every waking and sleeping moment. She was one of the only beings on earth he wanted to throttle into a helpless bloody mass more than he wanted to draw air into his lungs.

"The pleasure is mine," Kane finally responded, putting his hand in Sahir's, feeling himself engulfed by the familiar smooth warmth of her skin.

By Allah, if he could get her alone, he thought he would wrap his hands around her throat and crush her windpipe. He would extinguish her, reduce her to a pile of ashes resembling Ifreet's illusion in *mawla*'s front yard. Only he wanted Sahir's end to be much more slow and torturous.

Or so he had thought. For if he were so anxious to see this female destroyed, would he not have attacked her on sight,
regardless of the consequences? Had he not promised himself thus more than a thousand times during his captivity?

So many years of hating this woman, of wishing all the wrath and plagues of the world upon her head and now that she confronted him, all Kane could do was gape like the tongue-tied and untried young djinn he had been when this *magus* had first taken him under her protection.

*And betrayed me.*

"...Kane?"

*Mawla's* voice infiltrated his senses and he blinked several times before turning to focus his gaze upon her lovely face, anchoring himself in her reality. "I am sorry. You were saying?"

Therese grimaced and shook her head. "*Sahir* asked how you were enjoying the tour?"

"Oh, very well, thank you." Kane returned Sahir's glance, clenched his teeth against the wave of recognition that swept through his lower regions as those familiar, lush red lips curved in a smile. Even after all this time, after the transgression she had committed against him, he still desired her.

And why should he not? He wondered. She was the first and only being he had ever known in the biblical sense, the only female before Therese that he had wanted and needed.

Sahir had been his mentor in every way, not only acting as intermediary between members of his tribe and humans but also teaching him about his human side and the ways of the mundanes.

*Before she betrayed and imprisoned me!*
"Come. We shall walk and you can absorb the ambiance of our organization while we get acquainted." Sahir slid one of her hands into one of Kane's, shocking him with her audacity as she strolled and led him and Therese passed a pair of exhibits before settling in front of one showcase. "Therese has told me so much about you I feel as if I know you already."

Kane gritted his teeth; seething and not surprised she was able to keep up the artifice better than he was and with so straight a face as she mocked him.

Still he could not seem to get his motor functions to cooperate with what his heart had been yearning for so long. Did he fear for Therese's safety or his own sanity and salvation?

He ruminated over this dilemma for several long moments before coming up with the most suitable, neutral response to Sahir's taunt. "I ... I feel as if I know you."

"I can't tell you how much I look forward to breaking you in and showing you the ropes around our wonderful institution."

"What I have seen of it so far is most impressive."
"We're very proud of our collections here. And Therese has been instrumental in elevating TIHAM's exhibits to their current high level of quality." Sahir beamed at her invaluable curator in a way that made Kane take a mental step back.

...You can meet one of the big kahunas ... Kahuna.

Kahin...

It had never occurred to him that Therese might be aware of Sahir's true nature. And as he considered the likelihood, a sense of dread and shock mixed with the betrayal and
insinuated into his system so quickly that Kane consciously forced himself not to gasp.

Had _mawla_ been leading him on all along? Had she led him today into a trap?

Would it be so beyond the realm of possibilities that she was keeping secrets? That she was sharing only half-truths with him the way he was sharing half-truths with her? Was it so unfathomable that another being valued his or her privacy and interests enough to commit the ultimate treachery and sin?

By Allah, it _could_ not be!

_Mawla’s_ grief over the loss of her mate was genuine. Kane refused to believe otherwise or that she had intentionally, maliciously summoned him to bring about her own mate's death.

But the possibility...

Kane noticed the showcase in front of where they had paused and exclaimed in horror, "What in the name of Allah!"

Several museum patrons on the main floor started and jerked their glances to the exhibit in dismay.

Sahir barely batted an eye.

Therese gawked and caught Kane by an arm. "Are you all right? What is it?"

"Sacrilege!"

The musical lilt of Sahir's giggle echoing in the confines of the first floor was almost enough to send Kane over the edge when her mere unexpected reintroduction into his life had not.
She stepped close to slide an arm around his waist and he stiffened as she gave mawla a conspiratorial wink. "I would gather that our Kane is offended by the miniature representation of the Al Jenadriyah festival."

"This rendition is profanation," he stated.

"Oh Kane, I wouldn't go that far. Perhaps a little unorthodo—"

"You desecrate the essence behind the theory of Islamic art by having this figural sculpture on display."

"Kane, you're overreacting and being impolite."

"It's quite all right, Therese. I rather like dissentient views. As long as it is understood in the end that mine are the only ones that hold weight." Sahir gave him the same cold gleaming-eyed expression she had right before banishing him to the ewer. "Actually, Therese also objected to this particular exhibit. But it is such an exquisite example of Islamic craftsmanship I could not pass on acquiring it for TIHAM."

Kane wondered what else she had not been able to pass on. His abode for the last century, the Blacas, perhaps? This would certainly explain how the ewer had conveniently come to be in the place of mawla's business.

But what about the talisman mawla wore? And why had Sahir waited so long to orchestrate his release? Why here in this particular place and time with this particular mawla? And most importantly, how?

So many questions. Kane peered at Sahir's complacent countenance as if he could find the answers there, but all he perceived was false sincerity. False to him, only because he knew her so well. To an outsider, a stranger, Sahir's
motivations would appear purely philanthropic, honorable even.

Not to him.

Kane examined the exhibit briefly, did not want to get immersed in the nostalgic detail. He read the classification card instead: *Saudi men performing a folk dance at the annual culture festival* ... The miniatures were so finely carved; seemed so alive he could see where one would be drawn into the beauty of the sculpture. And Kane had to remind himself it was for this very reason—the reality and vitality of the miniatures—that there were strict injunctions against such depictions of humans.

The creation of such things belonged to Allah, and not to an irreverent and spiteful kahin.

Sahir and Ifreet were much the same when it came to their level of arrogance, Kane told himself.

*And what of you, djinni? What of you?*

Sahir had often accused him of such arrogance and pride. Had assured him that this idiosyncrasy was what made him unique and charming, had assured him that it made them a perfect match. And much later, towards the end, she had insisted that it was this same unique and charming attribute that had helped her defeat him in their contest.

Up until that point, Kane had never seen his pride as a particular cross or impediment to being a good Muslim. On the contrary, he thought of it as the essential trait that contributed to his devotion. But he supposed pride was a sin
and could be carried too far, could blind and debilitate a man more than strengthen him.

"You said Teh-reese had objections," Kane blurted. "Yet you procured this piece nonetheless?"

Sahir slowly nodded, seemed solemn and contrite for the first time since Kane had been reunited with her. "That is correct. Therese had several reservations, much like your own. But this was one of the few times I simply had to override her acumen and facilitate procurement." She caressed the exhibit's Plexiglas covering as if it were a lover.

Kane cringed, felt horrible for his doubts about mawla. How could he have suspected her of the kind of treachery to which Sahir owned? Especially when Therese was the one who had every reason and more to doubt him for his relationship with Sahir?

He realized he could not explain his involvement without sounding like he had been directly responsible for mawla's mate's death, without seeming more involved than Therese had first suspected. Revealing his relationship with Sahir would most certainly condemn him in his mawla's eyes.

Wrongly—as he was as much a pawn in Sahir's unknown game as Therese—but condemn him nonetheless.

"...you to any of the staff?"

Kane blinked, realized he had tuned out again when he focused on Therese's grimace and tumultuous ruminations: *What is wrong with you?* "I'm sorry. I was lost in thought."

"That's quite all right, and understandable under the circumstances. This place can be emotionally draining for one with your background."
"Yes. It is rather overwhelming to be surrounded by so many items to remind me of ... of home."

"Actually, I had asked if Therese had introduced you to any of the staff."

"I have met only one intern so far. A Miss Brown."

"Dear sweet girl." Sahir nodded. "I gather you were sufficiently enthralled?"

Kane did not know at what point she was driving, or to what she wanted him to admit, only that he would not accommodate her current scheme. "She seemed a quaint young woman."

"She is that. Epitomizes the bohemian charm and adventurous nature of this country." Sahir smiled. "By the way, how are you finding your stay in the States so far?"

"Very eye-opening."

"Well, we finally agree on something." Sahir chuckled, squeezed the biceps of one of Kane's arms as she leaned in to give him a peck on the cheek.

In the name of Allah, she was being impertinent, defiling all that he believed in with her outrageous behavior, goading him to the same: Public displays of emotion, figural art ... What would the female do next?

"It was so nice to finally meet my trusted curator's protégé. I dare say, you two are going to make a stimulating team and I so look forward to working with you, Kane." Sahir gave him one last smile before turning to bid Therese farewell and finally leaving in a waft of amoral and alluring female.
Kane watched her go, felt the electricity in the immediate area growing instead of fading, and wondered why until he glanced at Therese glaring up at him.

She did not have a chance to give him a piece of her astute mind or question him about his strange behavior, and Kane did not know whether to be thankful or not for the circumstance that brought his mawla's next co-worker bearing enthusiastic welcomes and well wishes.

By Allah his mawla was well-loved, and rightfully so, Kane told himself, but who was the little fellow fawning all over her and addressing her so familiarly? What was all this "sweet" nonsense?

As if she had heard his thoughts, Therese turned to Kane—arm linked in an arm of the strange man—and performed the introductions.

"Kane Chambers, this is my invaluable assistant, my right hand man, my..." Therese paused, frowned prettily and did something Kane had never noticed her do before, at least not with him. She wiggled her nose, looked like a cute little bunny as she glanced over at this fellow with the wickedest twinkle. A twinkle full of shared secrets and pasts, a twinkle meant for more than a friend...

*My twinkle!*

"Actually, I guess you could call Darius my hero."

The "hero" stepped forward, proffering a hand. "I am Darius Avatar and Therese is too kind."

"You're too modest."

There it was again, Kane thought, that look of adoration.
He did not believe he could survive too much more of this obscene flirting. It was tearing him apart to watch his *mawla* behave so ... unseemly.

If they had been alone in the privacy of her abode, he would have apprised her of just how inappropriate was her behavior, Kane told himself.

In the name of Allah, could she not see the effect she had on this Darius Avatar? For it was certainly obvious to *him*. "In what manner do you consider Dar-Mr. Avatar your *hero*?" He regretted the scorn in his tone as soon as his words were out, but there was nothing to be done for it by then.

The entire situation infuriated him for he could do nothing to remedy it, lest he expose a side of himself his *mawla* had never had the misfortune of witnessing. Lest he destroy all the trust and goodwill he had built with Therese over the last several weeks.

"Well, if you must know..." Therese linked her arm through Mr. Avatar's just a little firmer and glowered at Kane. "Darius saved my life."

Kane did not miss the accusation in *mawla*’s tone and flushed, immediately contrite.

"Really, it was nothing. I am just glad I was in the right place at the right time. I would never have forgiven myself had I lost my Sweet."

Therese chuckled, gripped Mr. Avatar's biceps and Kane tasted bile at the back of his throat.

By Allah did she *have* to let the man paw and ogle her thus?
Kane could not touch Therese in the manner he wished, yet he had to stand idly by and watch this strange little man handle her? It was intolerable and Mr. Avatar, unlike Lundquist, the crass American to whom Therese had previously alluded, should have known better.

He did not know whether it was the man's name or appearance that alerted him to Avatar's being a countryman, only that he did indeed know and did indeed resent the man's very existence and closeness to mawla.

"It is good to see you well, Sweet," Darius said, gazing directly into mawla’s eyes in a most unacceptable fashion. Kane wanted to rip out the man's eyes for their insolent ogling.

By Allah, he had not harbored such violent and hateful thoughts since ... since Sahir.

Kane suddenly bowed at the waist to Therese.

Surprised, she took a step back and grimaced. "What ... what is it, Kane?"

"You will excuse me, wali? I must ... I must take my leave and wait for you outside. If that will be all right with you, of course."

"Well..." She furrowed her brows in that way that made him worry about her, then she looked to Mr. Avatar—who inclined his head to indicate that Kane's departure was of no particular consequence—before she turned back to Kane to respond. "Of course it's okay, but—"

"Yes?"

"Are you all right?"
"I am well. I ... I need a change of scenery." He proffered a hand to mawla's co-worker. "It was a pleasure making your acquaintance, Mr. Avatar. We will chat at a later date perhaps."

Mr. Avatar firmly shook Kane's hand and leered. "I am looking forward to it."

* * * *

Therese watched Kane's back as he left and shook her head before turning back to Darius, bemused. "He seemed upset."

"I think the earlier meeting with Sahir might have shaken him a bit."

"She can certainly do that to an individual. Especially one unprepared for her, shall we say, irreverence?"

"Yes, I think that sums it up."

"And did you not prepare him, Sweet?" Darius teased. "It must have slipped my mind."

They both shared a comfortable laugh over this then Darius asked, "I take it I just missed her?"

"By a few seconds. She left right before you got here."

"Leaving quite an impression in her wake, I gather."

"Oh, you know Sahir. She's capable of nothing less."

Therese grinned, contemplating the impression Kane and Sahir's meeting had left on her.

Genie-man and her boss had been all over each other from the moment Therese had introduced them.

_Has he no shame? Christ!_

"So Sweet, how have things been with you?"
"Oh, well as to be expected."

"And this Chambers? How are you dealing with the arrangements? Is he treating you well? Properly?"

If properly meant driving her mad and frustrating her every time he opened his mouth or filled a room with his dominating and excruciatingly hunky male presence then, yes, Kane had been treating her more than "properly" and "well."

"The arrangements have taken some getting used to. He takes some getting used to."

"I would gather." Darius chuckled. "He seems like quite a ... character."

"You got that from just a few minutes, huh?"

"He has a very forceful personality."

"He does that."

"One that lends itself to instant ... exertion, for lack of a better word."

Therese nodded, couldn't help thinking that Darius had accurately summed up her complicated and maddening genie-man in less than twenty words, in less time than it had taken her to lose the most important man in the world to her...

Darius stepped back and folded his arms across his slim chest to better observe her and Therese smiled, nervous of what was coming, even though she wasn't quite sure what "it" was.

"So, how is your canine companion, Marshmallow?"

She gasped, thought he couldn't have surprised her more had he slugged her full-force in the stomach with a sledgehammer.
Therese forgot she hadn't spoken to or shared the news of Marsh's death with anyone but her immediate family, not even in passing.

Darius touched her arm. "Is everything all right, Sweet?"

For only the second time since the incident, Therese felt her grief come down on her, resonating through her entire body as if she had just clamped down on a piece of aluminum foil with a filled tooth. Tears instantly followed, blurring her vision and she blinked to bring Darius back into focus.

For someone who was so tough, who could face down an alien genie-man in her kitchen and a wild Marsh-thing in her front yard with only bare hands and an adrenaline rush of ignorance, she was certainly turning out to be a world-class wimp.

"Sweet, what is wrong?" Darius wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close.

Therese rested her head on his shoulder. Usually this would have been enough, comfort from her trusted associate and co-worker, but not after having Kane hold her in the attic; not after feeling the gentle strength of genie-man's arms; not after experiencing the endurance of his shoulders. After knowing even these limited wonders of Kane's body, all other shoulders and embraces paled in comparison.

"Sweet, what troubles you so?"

Therese snuffled and tried to get herself together before Darius started to think she was crazy; she steeled herself to tell the story Kane had concocted. "Darius, Marsh was killed in ... A hit-and-run driver killed my dog."
He gasped as if he had just received news of a dear friend's death and not just a pet.

Therese smiled at the thought, remembered Darius and Marsh's first and only meeting and how they had instantly clicked.

Unlike Marsh and genie-man.

*Will you stop thinking about the man!*

"I am so sorry for your loss, Therese. I know how fond of this pet you were."

"Yeah; Marsh was my cut buddy."

"You should have called me. I might have been able to help you through it."

Therese silently shrugged, and Darius pulled away, squeezed her arms and smiled.

"Well, I have something to tell you that, though it won't replace your Marsh, may cheer you a bit."

"Really?" Therese wiped her eyes, brightening already, eager at the prospect of "cheering." "What plots have you been up to in my absence?"

"Oh, the usual. World dominance, revolution, anarchy..." She giggled, playfully slapped one of his arms. "Trying to take *my* job are you?"

"Never." Darius turned suddenly serious. "Don't you know you are completely irreplaceable?"

"And you said I am too kind."

"You are, but nonetheless, I am on the trail of a very rare piece for our metalwork collection."

"Ooh, this sounds good." Therese rubbed together her hands like a kid anticipating a treat. "Gimme details."
"Not a chance."
"A little hint?"
"Not even a tiny one. I do not wish to raise your hopes unnecessarily. But rest assured I am diligently working on this acquisition."
"Oh, I know you are or you wouldn't have mentioned it."
"So, this does cheer you a little."
"Very much." Therese smiled, looking forward to this acquisition as much as Darius was, as much as Darius knew she would. She touched his arm, strangely bereft when she didn't experience the answering jolt she had grown accustomed to over the last several weeks. "Keep me posted on your progress?"
"Of course. But come..." Darius caught her arm and led her toward the exit.
"I will walk you out."
"Gosh, Aren't you showing just a little too much enthusiasm in trying to get rid of irreplaceable me?" Therese teased.
"You should go see about him."
"How did you...?" She gaped. Was she that obvious?
"You have never been very good at hiding your feelings, Sweet. And it is apparent your Mr. Chambers has not been out of your thoughts since he left us." Darius paused several feet away from the front doors, Therese at his side. "Besides, he was looking rather piqued."
Like she should care? She was piqued too and with good reason, Therese decided. God, when she thought about how he had behaved towards Darius. With Sahir!
"So Sweet, I will see you tomorrow, perhaps?"
She nodded. "If not later today." She leaned in for a hug and kissed her friend's cheek. "Thanks for everything."
"It is always a pleasure, Therese. Always." Darius pushed her toward the door. "Now go see about him."
She chuckled, shook her head as she left.
She guessed she did need to make sure he was okay and hadn't been shanghaied by TIHAM's female contingent, a likely circumstance considering the way Amber had been eyeballing him.

But when Therese made it out to the SUV, Kane was nowhere in sight, and all good humor disappeared from her demeanor.

She stood at the curb and scratched her head for a long moment, looking like a confused driver who'd misplaced her keys, before it dawned on her from nowhere just where he might be and with whom.

He just couldn't wait, huh? Damn him!
"I wondered what was taking you so long to track me down," Sahir murmured, put aside the papers she had been perusing, leaned back in her big executive leather chair and rested her clasped hands on her flat belly as she met Kane's gaze.

Kane took several threatening steps across the plush pile carpeting. Sahir didn't flinch. He had not expected her to. Grinning, as he stopped in front of her desk, he leaned his palms against its expensive shellacked surface.

"Before you kill me, Kane, I think you should hear what I have to say."

"There is nothing you have to say that I am interested in hearing."

"On the contrary..." Sahir stood, floated from behind her desk on a tide of piquant female musk that Kane had to consciously fight not to enjoy.

He stood straight, eyeing her warily as she approached, and could not understand what was keeping him from reaching out his hands to wring her neck. She was right here, not a yard away from him. He could have done her in and disposed of her body without anyone ever becoming the wiser. Not her employers, not her co-workers, not ... mawla—

*By Allah, what am I contemplating? What have I become?*

"I will tell you the same thing you used to tell me, Kane Djinn." Sahir smiled knowingly, ever in his mind. "*Their Lord*
Allah knows best about them.' Is that not what you used to say to me whenever I was a bad little girl?"

"Do not remind me, or dare to quote religious doctrine to me, you miserable heretic!"

"Touchy, touchy." She reached out to rub his arm.

Kane flinched and glared at her. "You do not value your life very much, kahin, to approach me thus."

"I value my life very much. And yours."

Kane smirked, caught himself rolling his eyes the way Therese did so often to express her displeasure with him. Thinking of his mawla here gave him the strength to retreat several steps before he was anymore tempted to do something with his hands he would later regret.

"You are in love with this mundane, are you not?"

"That is none of your concern. You will remember never to make reference to her in my presence again. You are not worthy."

Sahir chuckled, shaking her head but coming no closer to him. Instead, she folded her arms across her pert lush breasts as she leaned her perfect derriere against the edge of her desk.

Kane closed his eyes against the wave of desire that washed over him as he remembered how deliciously firm and soft her body was, how nicely it used to fit against him.

A long time ago, he reminded himself. A lifetime and thousands of wasted months of imprisonment ago.

"You have not changed, Kane."

He opened his eyes to scowl at her. "In what way are you referring?"
She shook her head, grimaced. "You are still so intense, so … stubborn, djinn. Did not your time in the ewer teach you anything?"

Kane closed the space between them in several long strides, moving with such sudden angry speed that even Sahir shrank from his closeness, finally showed a little fear as he leaned over her, his breath warm on her face. "You dare chastise me now when I am this close to ending your existence?"

"You never liked hearing the truth," she murmured. "Your truth?"

"What difference the source? Truth is truth. A lesson well-taught, a lesson well-learned."

"Ah yes..." Kane nodded, stood straight to give her a little room to breathe as he glared down at her. "Lest we forget this is why you betrayed me. To teach me a lesson."

"I did not betray y—"

"Enough! I will hear no more of your falsehoods." He caught her arm and she gasped when he pulled her forward until her breasts touched his chest.

"Kane..."

"Yes, traitorous kahin?" He stared at her parted lips—so shiny and ripe, winking up at him—felt the familiar tightness in his groin and gritted his teeth against it.

"You will need this."

He frowned at the thick metal bar she wielded. "You provide me the weapon with which to destroy you?"

"I provide you protection against your enemy."

"You are my enemy."
Slowly she shook her head, her gaze unwavering as she tilted her head. "It is not me you want or need to destroy."

Kane hissed through his teeth as he felt the metal touch him just beneath his ribcage. "By Allah..." He peered down at the bar, angry with himself for allowing her to surprise him. "I do this for your own sake, to make you see," she whispered, pressing further.

It was not sharpened to a point, but he realized that had she plunged with enough force, she very well could have broken skin and worse.

"You will listen to me now?"
"I am all ears, Sahir."

She stared at him for a long moment, reduced the pressure slightly but did not remove the bar from beneath his ribcage.

He lowered his head, paused a hair's breadth away from her lips. "This metal ... Is it copper?"
"You insult me. I do not wish to harm you. I never ha—"
"No?"
"It is iron, special and concentrated. For your enemy."
"That is you."

Sahir slowly shook her head. "I am not."

He lowered his face further, nipped her full bottom lip and gained much satisfaction at the sound of her moan as he reached down with his free hand, grabbed her wrist and wrested the bar from her grip. "You dare threaten me?" he growled.

"Kane, n—" She gasped as he twisted her arm up behind her back and bent her over the desk at an impossible angle.
"I did not threaten you, Kane. You are not harmed. Do you not see that?"

He did not feel weak or ill from his encounter with her metal bar. However, it had been a brief blow...

"Kane, you're hurting me," Sahir murmured below him.

"You are fortunate I do not finish the job for which I came in here."

He straightened enough to allow her a little upward mobility and she took full advantage, her lips only an inch from his as her woman's scent flooded his senses.

Sahir licked her lips and leered. "You want me, Kane?"

"I want no part of y—"

"From where I'm standing, it appears otherwise."

_In the name of Allah, no!_

Kane shut his eyes tight when he realized Therese was in the room standing behind him at Sahir's office door.

He released Sahir, stood and turned slowly to see _mawla's_ look of shock and outrage.

"So this is why you had to rush away so suddenly? You couldn't wait to get your hands on ... on your new boss?"

Sahir giggled behind him and Kane flung her a dirty look over a shoulder as she straightened her matching silk blouse and short skirt.

"Mawla, this is not what it appears to be."

"Tell me something I haven't heard before."

"Teh-reese, please..." Kane took several steps towards her and his heart lurched when she retreated in aversion and threw up her hands.

"God, I don't know who I find more disgusting right now."
"Teh-reese—"
"Don't come near me!" She whirled and ran out into the corridor.
"Kane!"
He pivoted, torn between his desire to murder Sahir or run out to catch up with his mawla.
"I know you do not trust or even like me very much right now but—"
"You are growing most wise in your old age."
Sahir smirked and continued as if he had not interrupted.
"Take a couple of pieces of advice from an old acquaintance."
"And what might these be?"
"Let her calm down. There is nothing you can say to her now that will make her change her mind about you or I."
"You are suggesting I let what she has seen here fester and poison her?"
"I am suggesting that you give her some time to come to terms with what she has seen."
Kane glowered. "And the rest? Your other advice?"
She flounced over, graceful and statuesque in the tasteful suede lime-green heels that accentuated her shapely legs, Kane swallowed hard to fight off another flood of lust. "This other advice, Kane Djinn, is the most important of all."
"Out with it, Sahir. I have not the desire nor the time to put up with anymore of your nonsense."
She caught one of his wrists, raised his hand—within where he still clasped the iron bar—to her lips and laid a gentle kiss upon his fist. "Do not lose the bar. I acquired it especially for you ... for what you need to do."
He stared at her, silent, teeth clenched.
"It is up to you to fashion it, but I am sure you will come
up with something useful. You were always a talented artisan,
Kane." She smiled, leaned close and softly caressed his
mouth with hers. "Go with Allah, Djinn…"

* * * *

The last thing in the world she had wanted to do was send
her djinn off into the arms of another woman—a mundane, no
less. But send him off she had. As she had had to do, now
and then.

Releasing him did not get any easier with time, Sahir
realized. She had mistakenly thought that it would, that
seeing him after all this time—alive and well and, by Allah, in
love—would not be as painful as when she had first lost the
Blacas out in the middle of the Empty Quarter during the
worse sandstorm she had ever experienced.

Sahir had known that sand dunes could reach a thousand
feet, had experienced this phenomenon in her youth and from
a safe distance, marveling in a supreme being who could
cause such beauty and destruction in a simultaneous breath.

Fortuitously, she had escaped serious injury, gaining
shelter before the sand dunes had reached dangerous
heights. Several in her caravan had not been as fortunate.
She'd lost a handful of men, camels and ... the ewer.

She had kicked herself for days after the sandstorm,
grieving for her men most assuredly, but grieving the
dispossession of the ewer even more and hating her own
weakness and stupidity that had allowed the tempest and
dunes to claim and confiscate it.

Sahir sauntered to her corner-office window, glanced out
across the street where Therese Hunter's Trooper was
parked.

Her curator emerged from the building as if conjured by
Sahir's ruminations, and recklessly dashed across the street,
missed being hit by at least two vehicles before she reached
the safety of her SUV.

Kane ran out several seconds later, too late to stop
Therese from screeching away though he had made it
downstairs from Sahir's office to the street in record time,
and by decidedly non-magical, conventional methods.

*Ignoring everything I told him.*

As if she had been anymore reasonable at his age? If this
were true, she would not have lost the ewer.

Pride and even a little spite had been at play there, she
thought now, pride and faith in a fatal charm that had served
her so well over the years. And spite at the being that would,
as far as she was concerned, have her pervert her gifts,
pervert her very purpose—protecting her djinn.

Sahir closed the eggshell vertical blinds and walked back
to collapse within the confines of her chair.

He would learn eventually, she told herself. He would learn
as she had or lose his life and that of his love if he did not.

*He is in love with her.*

She knew it as surely as he had been standing in her
office, so close but yet so far, just a few minutes ago.
She had known Kane longer than any djinn or magi had ever had the pleasure, as long as some in his tribe had. And with this length and knowledge came certain insight and ... burdens.

Sahir had barely been able to watch Kane and her curator's synergy and jesting in the lobby of the museum—the sun inside his smile as he'd looked upon the mundane's face, her expression alight with wonder and adoration as she'd looked up at him.

By Allah, how would she bear their consummation of the binding that inevitably had to occur? She did not think that she could, had only been able to tolerate their earlier almost—couplings by the biggest coincidences and exertions of willpower imaginable.

*Love. They are in love.*

Sahir tried the word, the sentiment on for size again, and did not like the fit now any more than she had centuries ago when she had divined her djinn's fate ... and her own.

Allah had ordained that Kane would find his life mate in the modern world—in America—and Sahir had been assigned the task, rightfully or wrongly, to see that he survived long enough to fulfill his destiny.

She had not been too happy upon initially discovering these prophecies, had been even less enamored of her chosen role. As Kane had often deemed her—"irreverent heretic"—she indeed did not think herself worthy or up to the chore. Nor did she enjoy the idea of saving her djinn from Ifreet, only in order to hand him over to another woman. But
someone else had had other ideas, and what she wanted or did not want was of no consequence.

Were that she had been as aware and complacent about these facts then as she had learned to be over the last hundred years. The transition from lover to staunch and selfless protector would have been a lot smoother. As circumstances now stood, she was just barely holding on to her faith. By Allah, she might have been able to avoid the earlier scene with Therese and Kane had she been a little more devoted, but old habits and passions were hard to break.

Even now, after so many years, she thought, her ego had asserted itself and allowed weaknesses like jealousy and bitterness to rear their ugly heads and interfere with His master plan.

Sahir only hoped that some of what she had told Kane had stuck and that he would keep a level head long enough to see His plan through. She had worked too hard and under what sometimes seemed insurmountable peccadilloes in order to see this saga to fruition. She did not want to see it ruined by a moment of female pique and male arrogance.

Slowly she stood and sauntered back over to the window, hands clasped behind her back as she contemplated an essential question that had been evading her for the last few months.

*How and when had the Blacas turned up at TIHAM?*

* * *
Therese charged into the house seething and itching for a fight as she tossed her key ring toward the wooden holder behind the front door and missed, keys resoundingly jangling to the floor.

If Justice was in the vicinity, she thought, he'd do well to keep his distance for she wouldn't be responsible for her actions if he approached her with any of his infamous, asinine accusations.

She couldn't believe what she had seen earlier, what she had caught her genie-man up to. Mr. Not-in-the-living-room-or-any-of-your-bedrooms Muslim-man.

*How dare he!*

Therese smacked the swinging doors to the kitchen open, heard a muffled thud on the other side and jumped back as the doors bounced toward her.

"What the...?" She slowly approached the doors again, eased them inward and immediately saw the problem standing in the middle of the floor, glowering at her. "Oh, it's you." Therese smirked and stomped by him on her way to the kitchen counter. She snatched the cover off the Pooh cookie jar and dipped in her hand for a bunch of apple-flavored Fig Newtons.

"Are you not curious as to how I made it back?"
"I don't care. And frankly, I wish you hadn't."
"I believe you mean that."
"Good. Because I do."
"You were going to leave me stranded in the middle of your dangerous crime-ridden city?"
Therese glared at Kane as he made his way over to the counter and sat on the stool beside her. She lurched to her feet and headed through the kitchen doors out to the living room.

Kane was right on her heels, caught her by an arm and swung her around.

"Get off me!" Therese flung the Fig Newtons at his head, watched them bounce off his face and onto the carpeted floor, leaving a trail of fig and cookie crumbs on his chin and shirtfront. She fought not to smile at the sight he made, and Kane reached up a hand to rub the bridge of his nose.

"Does it hurt?"

"I do not believe anything is broken, if that is what you are asking."

"Too bad. I'll try harder next time."

"Your anger is misplaced, mawla."

"Unfortunately, the only other person to direct it at isn't here, otherwise, my boss might be getting an earful too and I'd be out of a job."

"It is not her to whom I was referring."

"Oh really? Who could you have meant?" Therese arched a brow and instantly took a fighting stance, fists poised, as Kane approached, shaking his head.

"Violence is not the answer, mawla."

"Yeah, but hitting you again might make me feel a little better. I'm willing to give it a try."

"You are being totally unreasonable, Teh-reese. Especially when one considers how improper was your behavior."
She gawked, blinked several times and did a double take. "Excuse me?"
"I did not mumble. I said your behavior was improper."
"This from the man who was mauling his new bo—"
"I was not mauling."
"I'm sure the Department of Labor would be very interested to know how you behaved on your first day on the job."
"And why would my behavior be of interest to this department?"
"Oh, I don't know, sexual harassment issues, stuff like that. Americans tend to frown on the appearance of impropriety." Therese leaned forward as if she were about to impart a grave secret. "Bill would be able to tell you all about it, I'm sure. Next time you want to have her under the desk instead of on top of it. That way, if anyone walks in on you, you could try to play it off like she's not even in the room polishing your kno—"
"Stop this at once!" Kane chopped the air with a hand in his famous I've-had-enough-of-this-nonsense motion and Therese bristled.
"No, you stop it!" She pushed out with both palms as hard as she could and Kane caught her wrists and pulled her close. "What's the matter? You don't want me to besmirch her name?" She jerked her hands and he released her.
"It is your virtue about which I worry."
"Mine?"
"The way you conducted yourself with Mr. Avatar."
"Oh, so that's what this is all about? I'm not supposed to be friendly with my co-worker, but you can ogle my boss like a blind man newly sighted and fondle her in the privacy of her office, is that it?"

"I do not know to what you are referring."

"You damn well do." She gaped, wanted to knock the smug look off his face. "You were all over her from the first moment I introduced you two in the lobby. You couldn't have been more obvious if you'd been a married man contemplating a rendezvous at a cheap motel. But I guess that's all right, since you're a man."

"It is not acceptable for either sex to behave thus. And if I am guilty of this impropriety as you believe, then I must apologize."

"If you're guilty? You most certainly are. I'm not blind. So don't you stand there and accuse me of anything after what I saw you doing, you self-righteous pig!"

"You will not speak to me thus, Teh-reese."

"I'm not supposed to express my opinion or speak out against inequity because I'm a woman? Well you've got another thing coming, buster. As I've told you several times, this is America, a free country, and I'll speak to you any way I damn well please."

Kane frowned. "Why are you bothered by what you saw?"

He had switched gears and blurted out his question so suddenly and sincerely that Therese did another double take before responding.

"Why?"
"Yes. Why?"

God, she couldn't believe she was standing there calmly discussing his ... his transgression as if it weren't tearing her apart from the inside.

Therese stared at him for a long moment trying to come up with the most reasonable response, finally murmured; "I'm not bothered by what I saw as much as I'm bothered by your complacent attitude about what you did."

"I did not do anything."

"That's because I came in and interrupted you."

"There was nothing to interrupt."

"Look, you can double-talk and circle the issue all you want, Kane. I know what I saw."

"As do I."

"Oh that's right. You have a problem with my friendliness towards a male co-worker."

"Friendly is one thing. What I saw at the museum was something entirely different. There is something ... not right about Mr. Avatar's behavior towards you."

"Oh don't be ridiculous. We're friends and that's all you saw. That's all there is."

"Do not let his good deed blind you."

"Our relationship is based on more than just a good deed."

"How much more?"

Therese stared at him, tried to decide if he was teasing her or just plain jealous but she couldn't get past the poker face. And oh how she wanted to, the idea of his jealousy inexplicably encouraging her, stimulating her curiosity. "What
difference does it make, Kane? The point is, we're friends and I owe him."
    "You are only as obligated as you allow yourself to be, mawla."
    "And you would know all about that wouldn't you, Mr. We-Are-Bound Genie-Man?"
    Therese smirked. "This is just rich, the pot calling the kettle black."
    "I do not understand this reference."
    "It means, Mr. testy-bearer, that it takes one to know one. You accusing Mr. Avatar of your own desires ... It's rich!"
    "Is this paragon of virtue so above reproach that you will not allow yourself to see his true nature?" Kane sneered. "Do you not understand that he is a man and you are a woman?"
    "As well as I understand that so are you and Sahir."
    "Sahir and I are not at issue."
    "The hell you aren't."
    "Teh-reese..." Kane grasped her wrist and drew her close as he peered down at her.
    "What now? You're going to try and hypnotize me and wipe out the memory of what I saw?"
    "You are mistaken about what you saw," he whispered. "Mistaken? You couldn't keep your hands off of her."
    "Sahir and I had ... We had things to discuss."
    "Things to discuss?" Therese smirked. "Yeah, sure. You didn't look like you were doing much discussing to me ... Things to discu—" She gawked. "You ... you know her."
    "She is from my time, yes."
He said it as if it were a well-established fact of which she should have been aware when the very opposite was so! Her mouth dropped as more realization dawned. "You must be pretty damn proud of yourself, huh? Think I'm so stupid, that you could pull a fast one on the bereft widow?"

Kane frowned. "Far from this, Teh-reese."

"I can't believe I trusted you!" She tried to jerk her wrist free and came up against a vice. "Let me go."

"I will not. We must talk."

"We have nothing to talk about." Therese pulled again, harder this time and Kane released her simultaneously, sent her sprawling back into a corner of the sectional. She glowered up at him as she righted herself. "You killed my husband. Maybe you both did. Want to talk about that?"

"No." Kane shook his head, slowly approached and sat down beside her. "I did not kill your mate."

"Who did? Sahir? I suppose you're going to tell me she's this Ifreet and you were what? Patting her down for evidence? Or perhaps he changed into a little tiny being that crawled down her cleavage and you were only trying to retrieve it?"

He glared at her, unamused. "I do not believe that Sahir is Ifreet. I am certain she is not."

"Wow, a first. You're certain about that why? Because she's your lover?"

"It is not I who was working with the enemy."

"You're not going to turn this around on me. She's you're enemy, not mine. I had no idea who she was or wha—"

Therese gulped when she grasped that she had been working
for a ... with a ... some non-human, centuries old kahin all these years, some genie-woman.

"Sahir is not exactly a djinn, although I am certain she has djinn blood."

"Well whoop-dee-doo, for Sahir!" Therese leaped to her feet shaken, covering her shock as she slammed her fists on her hips to confront him. "You know what? I don't give a good kitty who or what she is or what you two have or had together. I'm sick and tired of all the lies and I'm getting out of your sight before I say something I'm going to regret..." She threw up her hands and turned on her heels to go.

She didn't have time for these games and it seemed these djinns as a race were pretty big on "games." Horrible, mind- and life-altering games!

Well, he can just take this all and shove it!

Kane caught her by an arm and pulled her close. "Please wait, mawla."

"Wait nothing! I don't like the accusations you've made. And I don't like the things that have happened in my life since you showed up. And as it seems I can't beat you or get rid of you, I'm leaving before I say anything else inciting that might get me killed."

"You will not."

"Say anything inciting or get killed?"

"You may incite me all you wish, mawla. I told you I would never hurt you."

She wanted to believe him, especially when she noticed his eyes—so warm and peaceful a green that they were as far from predatory as a kitten's.
He lowered his face to hers and Therese's lips parted automatically—betraying her need, betraying her want. Betraying her.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head to one side, did not have to wait long to feel the soft pressure of his lips, full and sweet against hers as his tongue teased hers. She felt the familiar tingle in the pit of her stomach when he cupped her head with both hands—entangling his fingers in her hair, massaging her scalp—as he drew her close.

*Give me strength to walk away, God. Please, give me strength to pull away and say no. Because if he doesn't, I won't and ... I can't do this. I can't!*

Kane slowly withdrew as if he'd heard her—so in tune with his *mawla*, painfully in touch with her thoughts and feelings—silently held her in his arms.

After a long moment, Therese opened her eyes to find him watching her with an expression that went passed buckling her knees to curl her toes.

God, if he could do this outside of the bedroom, fully clothed and after enraging her to near violence, what chance did she have against him? And how much longer would she be able to fend him off?

*Fend off myself. "This ... this is happening too fast."*

"Yes. I suppose that it is."

Therese didn't know if she were disappointed or thankful for his acquiescence, but she took the opportunity to hightail it out of the living room as fast as she could before he could help her change her mind back and not leave him.
CHAPTER 17

Kane dismounted his stool, felt Justice's eyes on his back as he left mawla and her brother-in-law at the Formica counter and sauntered to the kitchen sink with dinner plate and silverware in hand.

He did not know what to say to the younger man to allay his concern, indeed did not know how to allay his own, and fervently hoped that mawla's brother-in-law did not decide to interrogate him in the way for which he seemed to be so famous. He would not be able to guarantee his composure if he were pushed into a corner regarding his emotions and loyalties for Therese, for he simply did not know.

He did not know anything the way he once had, was not sure of his feelings. His belief system and faith had been threatened beyond repair since Therese Hunter had come into his life ... since he had invaded hers.

He did not know what was more maddening about this unstable situation: his ignorance and doubt or his feelings for this female mundane who had insinuated her being into his every fiber like a rival djinn's most potent spell.

Kane sauntered back to the counter where Justice and Therese still sat, ready to retrieve their plates before he realized theirs were more full than his had been. From the looks of it, he was not the only one who did not have much of an appetite.

"Don't worry about the dishes, Kane. I'll get them."

"You are sure, wali?“
"Yes, thanks."

"Very well." Kane inclined his head, wasted no time in retreating from the kitchen through the back door.

In the last week avoiding his mawla the way he needed to had been impossible.

They ate breakfast together every morning, usually before Justice even dreamed of rising. They left for work together, driving to TIHAM where they spent most of the day working in close quarters, usually with mawla showing him the ropes of acquisition, collection and cataloguing, when he was not wandering the halls and relishing the varied exhibits.

For hours at a time, they were never out of each other's sight. But for the emotional walls, each of them existed in separate cubbyholes of reflection and regret. It was usually all Kane could do to keep from drawing her into his arms and holding her close until noon when they would finally head for home, a midday meal and the barest and most basic of conversation.

He did not know any longer if she was punishing him or he was punishing her, only that the absence of her voice raised in laughter and curiosity or, by Allah, even in ire rocked him to the core of his hungry nature.

Kane looked forward to the few moments of solitude when he escaped to mawla's cellar each day to create and work on his project. He looked forward to using his hands tooling more than he wanted to, more than was healthy to look forward to anything except being with her. But since he could not be with her the way he wanted to and still keep his sanity,
making the one thing that would protect her when the time came and keep them both safe would have to do.

Cool darkness engulfed Kane as he pulled the cellar door closed behind him, reached out and flipped up the wall switch to turn on the lights before he descended the concrete steps.

The first time he had ventured down here a couple of weeks ago, he'd had to push cobwebs away from his face, the dust of disuse kicking up around him wherever he stepped or placed his hands.

Once he had reached the bottom and had come face to face with the two enormous pieces of equipment that dominated the floor of the room, he had understood why this place had been forgotten and abandoned: it belonged to mawla's mate.

Kane could feel the human male's essence—still vibrant and palpable—emanating from every corner and wall, suffusing the air and the furnishings all around him.

He roamed aimlessly during that initial visit, unfamiliar with the mechanical contrivances, and fearful of touching the two largest tools in opposite corners of the room.

During subsequent visits to study and peruse the glossy machinist periodicals stacked and scattered throughout the cellar however, Kane learned that one of the devices was a "lathe" and the other a "pedestal grinder". More than easing his anxiety about the large equipment taking up space in the cellar, his discoveries had better prepared him to receive Sahir's special gift of the iron bar.

*It is up to you to fashion it ... You were always a talented artisan, Kane.*
He realized from the first that it would take more than his "artisan" skills to make a useful weapon. But having mawla's mate's machinery available to him encouraged him about his prospects. He had at least this work and equipment to occupy his mind and keep his hands busy.

No small task, he thought as he smoothed his fingers along the plane cool surface of the bar and thought of the warm soft curves over which he would rather run his fingers.

By Allah, he must stop this at once!

He had important business to attend, none of which included touching or thinking about the one person in the world for whom his body craved and ached, the one person in the world for whom he existed and did all this.

_The one person in the world who most assuredly loathes every magical bone in my body._

Kane smiled grimly at the thought as he pressed the metal bar against the wheel and began grinding.

Today he would work on sharpening. With a little fortune and a lot of sweat, he would have a serviceable sword ready for battle by the end of the week.

Repairing his relationship with mawla, he decided, would take a little more sweat than preparing for Ifreet.

* * * *

"So, what's going on between you two?"

Therese placed the last of the dinner dishes in the washer, closed the door and started the cycle before making her way back to the counter like a doomed woman preparing to face
the firing squad. Slowly she took a seat on the stool beside Justice. "I don't know what you mean."

He stared at her for a long silent moment before saying, "You and Kane."

"Look Justi—"

"I know you think it's none of my business, and believe me, I don't want to interfere but..." He paused when Therese raised her eyebrows. "But, as long as I'm staying here I'm not going to let what's going on go on and not speak on it."

"If you'd put as much effort into a career as you did minding other people's business, you'd be the CEO of a Fortune 500 Company by now, you know that?"

"You're probably right."

Therese cuffed Justice as he nodded, complacent and grinning like a bandit. She just couldn't stay mad at the guy for any length of time, especially when she knew he meant well and was only looking out for her welfare. Problem was, his "meaning well" usually meant him sticking his nose in her business, which was something she could do without, especially now.

"Terre..." Justice put a hand over one of hers resting on the Formica counter, gently clasped her fingers. "You and Kane are like the coziest in-synch couple I've known since ... since you and my brother."

"And that bothers you?"

"Actually, it doesn't. Not like it used to anyway."

"Wow, that's like a blessing from you."

"Sarcasm won't solve anything."

"Remind me again. What do I need to solve, Einstein?"
"This cold war between you and Kane."
"I wouldn't exactly call it that." God, how were they usually? Did they come across as a "cozy in-synch" couple? Had they crossed the bounds to *that* degree, so obviously that even her usually self-involved brother-in-law knew that something was going on between them? Had she crossed *her own* bounds?

Therese held Justice's gaze, swallowing hard, at a loss for an answer because she didn't know what to tell him, didn't know what he was waiting to hear. "What do you want me to say, Just? You want assurances that we're not sleeping together? You want to make sure I'm being true to Jury?"

Justice was shaking his head before she finished. "I don't want anything at all except to know that you're happy, Sis."
"Happy?"
"As happy as you can be under the circumstances."
"So now you're giving me permission to mess around?"
"You're purposely misconstruing my meaning to throw me off of the track."
"And what track is that exactly?"
"Are you in love with him?"

Therese snatched her hand out of his grasp and lurched to her feet. "That's none of your business."
"You can huff and puff all you want, Terre. But you'd better straighten things out between you and him before this goes too far and you can't anymore."
"What kinda cryptic crap are you dishing?" She gawked. Justice stood, put an arm around her shoulder and graced her with one of Kane's know-it-all serene looks. "Don't ask
me how I know, but he needs somebody to talk to and I think that somebody is you."
    "What are you talking about?"
    "I'm talking about two people who care about each other and neither is willing to admit it."
    "Has he said something to you?"
    Justice sadly shook his head. "I'm not blind, Terre. Unlike some other people around here."
    "What would you know about it, huh?"
    "I know, little ol' me who goes through women like Air Jordan's, right."
    Therese laughed in spite of herself. He was such a damn smart-ass.
    "He hasn't said anything. It's just a feeling."
    "A man thing?"
    "Maybe. But that doesn't mean he needs you any less."
    "Justice, you don't understa—"
    "I bet you don't even know where he is right now or what he's doing."
    She frowned, heart drumming at the possibilities. She was curious, sure, had been for the last week whenever Kane would disappear by himself for hours at a time. It had never occurred to her to go out looking for him since he always came back, since...
    She knew he always would.
    "I'll give you a hint. He's pretty good with tools. The same way Jury used to be..." Justice squeezed her shoulder before leaving her alone in the middle of the kitchen to figure out exactly where her genie-man was.
Therese had just always assumed Kane was off performing one of his five-time-daily prayers or some other such pillar of Islam when he'd disappear. He was so solitary and secretive a being—except for the time he spent at work with her and at home during meals—she just figured that he wanted to be alone, preferred his own company whenever he could enjoy it as opposed to always being around two strange and troublesome humans.

She had convinced herself that Kane was probably eager to be away from her bossy and opinionated persona, that he deemed her unworthy of his head-trips and ultimately an uncooperative and unsatisfactory gamester.

She had been counting herself lucky to fall from his good graces and favor, glad to exist beyond the range of his special attention. Until she realized that she had been missing him these last several days—missed his confused frowns, his innocent curiosity and his arrogant smiles.

Therese gulped at the implications, heart hammering with each step until she finally reached the bottom of the staircase and stood admiring the gentle way burnished gold waves shimmered beneath the cellar's fluorescent lights.

Therese wasn't sure if it was Justice's advice or his allusions to Kane's vulnerability and need, or maybe it was a little of both. But something kept her calm and unoffended at the sight of her genie-man with headset in place over his ears as he diligently worked at Jury's grinder.
She stood for a long breathless moment, enjoying the view—his broad back almost blocking sight of the grinder, the lithe movement of his shoulders and biceps as he pressed some metal bar against the wheel, so able and sure in his firm tawny serenity.

They were so alike in temperament, her husband and this strange genie-man, that their differences—size, coloring, age—meant very little to Therese this moment, only served to make her more nostalgic instead of less as she watched Kane work.

So reminiscent of my Jury.

Therese swallowed again as she took a couple of faltering steps forward. Kane did not stir from his toil, his unawareness giving her more opportunity to observe him and appreciate the smooth way relaxed-fit Levi’s hugged the lean-muscled contours of his thighs and calves.

So inviting inches from her fingertips.

She itched for him to cut off the grinder. She would sidle up, ease her palms into his back pockets and squeeze his butt to see if it was as tight and delicious as it looked beneath his jeans. She'd press her breasts against him, lean a cheek on his hard back and feel his heartbeat next to her face right before he'd turn to take her in his arms and hold her.

Therese blinked and licked her lips as she glanced up at his face. She knew right away that her face was red, felt the warmth of blood rushing to her cheeks as she realized she was standing right in front of him and he was frowning at her.

What had she been thinking, coming down here, sneaking up on him in her own house? Wanting him, aching for him
and planning to have him—another woman's possession—in a place where she and her own husband once loved.

Because she knew—despite all his denials, despite his arguments against any involvement with the "traitorous kahin"—Therese knew there was something going on between Kane and Sahir, knew he most assuredly belonged to Sahir—that they belonged to each other—in some way, shape or form.

And could she really fault him for wanting Sahir Binte? He was, after all, a genie-man. And Sahir was an exotic and beautiful countrywoman, a genie-woman.

Who was she to compete against such odds, such deeply rooted alliances and bonds? Therese wondered. Except a plain old, over-sexed, garden-variety American widow with too much time and energy on her hands to scheme on things she didn't have, things she would never have again no matter how much seducing and wanting she did.

"Are you well, mawla?"

She cleared her throat and nodded as she stepped around him to get a peek at what he had been working on, but Kane was quicker and snatched the metal object off of the wheel. "Hmm, some top secret project, I gather?"

"It is ... nothing." He averted his gaze like a guilty boy trying to hide the pieces of a vase he had broken after his mother had told him not to play basketball in the house.

Therese smiled at the everyday image, comforted and emboldened by it. "Lemme peek?" She grinned, advancing until she was standing an inch away, her breasts pressing just below his chest. Kane did not flinch, held her gaze with the
most serious look she had ever seen from him. It only made her feel more playful. She reached behind him but he retreated, grimacing as he switched the object from one hand to the other, evading her wandering hands.

"Mawla...

"C'mon, genie-man. Let me see what devilment you were up to in my cellar."

"I do not know to what you are—"

"Referring. Yeah, yeah, I've heard your song and dance before, genie-man. Just give up the goods and show me the bomb you were making." Therese tried to catch a wrist as she two-stepped him back against a far wall. He never lost his somber expression and she decided to put a stop to that. If there were a ticklish bone in his mystical body, she would find it. "Okay, I'm through playing nice. This is war." Therese poked his ribcage, once, twice, three times before one of his eyebrows shot up and he tried to smother a chuckle. "Ah-ha! I knew you had a weakness." She eased her fingertips over his ribcage up to his armpits, felt his entire body vibrating with silent laughter as she pounced.

"Mawla, wai—"

"I've got you now."

He pushed off of the wall and backed away from her, to no avail. Therese quickly went in for the kill, mercilessly attacking him from both sides, back and front, his deep laughter reverberating off of the walls as the metal object he had been holding clanked to the floor behind him.
"Ahhh, now let's see what we have here." Therese abandoned her prey to retrieve the metal, but Kane grasped her around the waist and drew her back to him.

"Not so fast, Teh-reese," he whispered. She turned in his arms, saw the sly smile and slowly returned it with her own. "What have you been up to, genie-man?"

He arched a brow. "You do not trust me to make good use of your mate's equipment?"

"What were you making?"

"So curious, mawla. In time."

"How about now?" She grinned and reached out to restart her assault but he pinned her arms to her sides and pulled her close.

Therese's play-fighting instincts took over and she threw one of her legs behind one of Kane's to trip him over before she registered that the floor was concrete and not well cushioned.

His arms instantly went around her, held tight. She closed her eyes and braced for impact as he lost his balance and tumbled backwards.

She felt herself falling ... falling and falling in slow-motion. Spinning around and flipping over and over like an astronaut in space until finally she was...

*Oh God, oh God ... What—?*

Therese opened one eye to peek at Kane smiling beneath her, knew something wasn't quite right and gasped when she realized what that something was.
Weightlessness, not just because he was holding her, but because he was holding her aloft and they were both.... Oh God, the ceiling was only inches away from her head!

The color must have drained from her face because Kane stopped smiling and furrowed his brows.

"You are unwell, _mawla_?" He held her snug, rubbing her back in that gentle familiar way of his.

Therese couldn't even enjoy it the way she wanted to, too engrossed by their precarious location. She looked down at the ground several feet below her then brought her glance back to Kane's inordinately relaxed features. "I'm going to be sick all over you if you don't let me down from here," she warned.

"Sick?"

"I'm afraid of heights." She squeezed her eyes shut and immediately felt the rumble of Kane's laughter against her face when she leaned her forehead on his chest. "It's not funny."

"On the contrary. It is most humorous."

"Pig." She ventured out a fist to punch his chest, only made him laugh harder. "Will you stop that."

"I apologize, _mawla_," he said, becoming serious as he caught his breath. "But it is so refreshing to hear you admit you are afraid of anything."

"Well, I'm so glad you're refreshed and amused."

"Most. I find your torturing techniques rather pleasurable also, by the way."

"So glad to entertain you. And now that you've gotten your rocks off and punished me for my folly in thinking I could take
you on, you might want to consider getting us down from here before I puke!" She glared at him, her look instantly softening when she saw the desire glimmering in his green eyes. "Kane...?"

"You are right. I will get us back to safer ground."

Therese closed her eyes and luxuriated in the feel of being in his arms as they slowly drifted back to earth. It was a dream and a nightmare all at once. One she needed to end but by no means wanted to.

"Better?" Kane chucked her under the chin and she nodded, averting her gaze because if she looked at him, she didn't know what she would do. So she lost herself in the object on the floor instead—a gleaming miniature sword—before peering up at him. "Dueling at dawn?"

Kane shook his head as he bent to recover his weapon. "May I?" Therese put out a palm as he approached, surprised when he relinquished his creation to her handle first. She grasped it, fingers curving around the silver and brass inlay, shocked by the sword's solid heaviness since it looked so petite and lightweight. She peered at him; a question lodged in her throat that she couldn't bring herself to ask right away so she silently handed him back his sword.

"It is for Ifreet."

"I thought as much but..."

"Yes?"

"Will this be enough to defeat him? I mean ... he's so powerful, so—"

"Indestructible?" Kane grinned.

"He certainly seems that way to me so far."
"As he would to anyone of your race."
"But you're Mr. Big Bad Genie Man, huh?"
"I make no such claim. I know my limitations."

Therese nodded, wished she could say the same. Because right now all she could think about was touching him and kissing him, despite being fully aware of how off-limits he should have been to her. But he just seemed so accessible and tempting standing there before her—no outside distractions, no inside distractions except her conscience and his—that all she wanted to do was hold him and be held by him and...

He cupped her chin with his free hand and she closed her eyes as he leaned in and kissed her forehead. "When you are ready, mawla."

"But Kane, I—"

He gently pressed a finger to her lips. "Unless you come to me fully willing and able, we must not. In the meantime I will wait for you."
CHAPTER 18

...Fully willing and able...

Kane rolled the words over and over in his mind.

He did not know what had come over his senses to force him to say such a thing to her—a human female so recalcitrant and volatile that she would probably do everything within her power to make him regret the day of his birth before this was all over. If only to prove to him that she did not need or want him as much as he needed and wanted her.

By Allah, he had as much as challenged the stubborn woman!

Duel indeed. She would make it a point to stay away from him, if only out of spite. And if his struggles with her continued as they were going, he would not survive long enough to make it to a confrontation, indeed would not have the needed strength and enthusiasm when the time finally came for him to face Ifreet in battle. He would be too drained from frustration.

Was it possible for her to have been more ready than she had been last night? Or any of the moments, days and nights of their other almost couplings?

But he knew, deep in his heart, that she was not ready, despite her protests to the contrary. She was as affected by the pheromones in the air and the bizarreness of the situation as was he and he refused to have her under such
circumstances, when both of their judgment was so unreliable and clouded by lust.

Until the situation changed and he could be sure of her decision, that she was coming to him willingly and fully aware of her feelings for him and his for her, then he would not have her at all.

Easier said than done, Kane thought, as he looked at his reflection in the mirror and wished that he felt as solid and firm about his decision as he looked.

He was on his way over to Jamilah and Raphael's where he would have to mingle and share mawla with her family and friends and other strangers and pretend that derobing Therese and flinging her upon a bed to mate was the furthest thing from his mind when in fact it was the only thing on his mind.

In the name of Allah, how was he supposed to survive the rest of the evening?

Kane turned on the tap, bent his head and splashed cold water on his face before glancing at his reflection again. It was not nearly enough cold water to be effective, but it would have to do until he had a chance to indulge in another heart-lurching soak beneath the powerful jets of mawla's shower.

Someone knocked on the door and Kane quickly pulled a hand towel from the rack, patted dry his face, and took a deep breath to pull himself together before he heard Therese's voice on the other side of the door.

"You about ready in there, genie-man?"
He replaced the towel, using the few seconds to take several more deep breaths before he smiled and opened the door on his mawla's impish grin. "I apologize for the delay."

"No prob. It's a nice change of pace to see a man take his time getting ready."

Kane stood in the corridor and arched a brow as Therese circled him like a slave-master sizing up chattel. His temperature rose so much, the tips of his ears felt like they were on fire.

Had he not taken special enough care choosing a suitable outfit? Not too dressy and not too dressed-down, as mawla had put it. "Something casual," she had told him. He had conjured up the blue and white stripe button-down shirt, navy-blue chinos and black suede shoes he now wore, borrowing the image from another photo of mawla's mate at some family function "circa 1996". He had assumed this outfit would be appropriate for an evening out at the in-laws. The last thing he wanted to do was offend anyone; he did not need another matter over which to fret for the night.

Kane cleared his throat and finally questioned, "There is a problem with my attire?"

"Hmm ... Not at all."

He stared at his mawla when she came around and stopped in front of him, hands folded behind her back as she gave him the once-over. He wondered if she was aware of what she was doing to him with that look, then decided that she was more than aware of it when he noticed her growing wicked smile.

Was she getting back at him for rejecting her?
By Allah, he would gladly take back that deed if it meant that she would stop torturing him thus. If it meant that things would change between them or improve. But theirs was not a circumstance to be altered by simple amiability and agreement. Were that it could be.

"Will Justice be joining us?" Kane asked more for something to say than out of curiosity. He shivered when Therese looped an arm through one of his and led him to the vestibule.

"Don't you remember?" She frowned and reached for her keys at the top of the wooden holder. "He left way early to take the kids to the parade."

Kane glanced through the door's mullion panes, out onto the dreary day. "In this weather?"

"Hey, those guys are like mailmen when it comes to parades. Through, sleet, snow, pouring rain ... They're in there."

"I see." He nodded.

"Good. Now can we go?"

"Most assuredly." Kane opened the door, let her out in front of him and tried to avoid looking at the pleasant sway of her shapely hips beneath the short leather jacket she wore.

In the name of Allah, he was on his way to Jahannam!

* * * *

"Auntie! Mr. Kane!" Bari and Zee chorused and stepped aside after they opened the front door to allow the two new arrivals entrance.
"Hey guys! How was the parade?" Therese bent to hug her niece and reached over to ruffle her nephew's short curly fade.

"Wet." Bari scoffed.

"For the wet blanket." Zee rolled her eyes, gave her brother a dismissive wave and leaned close to her aunt. "He's such a spoilsport," she stage-whispered then reached behind Therese to grab one of Kane's hands and dragged him down the hall to the living room.

Bari fell in step beside his aunt and jammed his hands in the side pockets of his slacks as he indulgently smiled and shook his head. "Kids."

Therese slid an arm around his shoulder. "Who can figure 'em, huh?"

"You know what I'm saying." Bari nodded, glanced both ways then leaned in as his sister had before him as if to impart a big secret. "You know she's got a crush on your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend?" Therese arched a brow; promised herself she would kill Justice if he had been shooting off his mouth. "Are you talking about Mr. Chambers, perchance?"

"He said we could call him Mr. Kane." Bari looped an arm through his aunt's. "But anyway, yeah. Zee just yapped and yapped about him all morning at the parade. Couldn't wait to get back here and change for dinner so she would look nice for our 'guests.' But she really meant Mr. Kane. No offense, Aunt Terre."
"Oh, none taken." Therese grinned and held in a laugh at her nephew's very perceptive and probably very accurate observations.

It seemed genie-man's appeal transcended generations and cultures of Lopez women.

*Speaking of...*

Therese came up short on the threshold beside Bari, took in the cozy scene of her sister-in-law Candida trapping Kane in a corner of Jamilah's wheat twill sectional.

God, the woman was almost sitting in his lap!

Kane glanced up and stared at her as if he'd heard her internal scream, a desperate look reminiscent of one of Marsh's famous in-the-waiting-room-at-the-vet's looks comprising his features.

"Looks like you've got comp tonight, Auntie," Bari whispered and eased an arm around her shoulders to hug her. "I still love you though."

Therese returned his one-armed embrace, squeezed his shoulder. "Good to know I still got it like that."

Bari gave her a quick peck on the cheek before running off toward the family room.

Probably to play some bloody virtual video game with Justice, she thought, the little deserter.

But this was okay, since Therese figured she had more than enough to keep her occupied. Not the least of which was watching her sister-in-law play Carmen Jones. At least this was who came to Therese's mind as she slowly made her way across the floor and followed the path of the long colorfully
decorated fingernail Candida trailed from the small gold hoop in Kane's left earlobe down to his clean-shaven chin.

Therese cleared her throat. "Shouldn't you be in the kitchen with the rest of the ladies?"

Candida barely flinched. "Too many cooks and all that, girlfriend." She smiled as she stood and pulled down her tight mini.

No mean feat with those talons, Therese thought, but it barely made a difference. The skirt still clung several inches above her knees.

"Besides, I was just introducing myself to your exchange student houseguest I've been hearing so much about." Candida winked and glanced back at Kane.

Kane stood and sidled behind Therese as if for protection and Therese asked, "And what exactly have you been hearing?"

"Oh, this and that." Candida waved a dismissive hand.
"This and that, huh."
"All the way from sizzling hot Arabia."
"We all have to be from somewhere," Therese drawled.
"It's just so exotic and far away."

Therese thought she'd like to exotic her sister's-in-law far away but said nothing, and Candida must have taken her silence as permission to maul Kane since she reached out one of those claws to playfully poke him in the chest.

"So, how are you liking your stay here so far, Kane?"
"Mount Vernon is very quaint and amiable."
"Mmm-hmm...?"
"Teh-reese is an excellent hostess."
"I'll just bet she is."

"Where's Riano?" Therese blurted. She knew there was no way in hell Candida would play her slut-bitch role to this level if he were anywhere in the vicinity. The girl was loose, but she wasn't crazy.

Candida sucked her teeth. "Oh please girl..." She paused to swing her long black curls away from her face, reminded Therese of Diana Ross or Cher. "That caveman brother of yours and I had another knock-down-drag-out."

Kane's eyebrows shot up. "He struck you?"

And why did he have to react so outraged? Therese wondered. Just give Ms. Thang an excuse to bat her eyes, reach out and squeeze the biceps of his closest arm, playing the damsel in distress to maximum effect.

She had not wanted to scratch out someone's eyes this bad since she had walked in on Kane and Sahir at the museum.

"Aye, no poppy. We just had a difference of opinion. But thanks for asking," Candida purred.

God, I'm going to be sick.

"I think I'm going to see what's cooking in the kitchen."

"I'll keep Kane company while you're gone."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Teh-reese..."

She barely heard or saw anything, she was so overwhelmed with indignity. Not until she had slammed down the long hallway and made it to the kitchen where Milah and Marilyn were bustling over pots and pans at the sink was Therese able to find a modicum of composure.
"Chile, what's up with you?" Milah asked when she saw her standing by the doorjamb.

"Oh nothing. I just came back to see if I could give you guys a hand." Therese sauntered to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair. "Aren't you supposed to be taking a break?" she asked as her mother came over drying her hands on the apron she wore before taking a seat adjacent.

"I tried to get her to take a seat and relax, but you know how hard-headed she is." Milah pulled out the chair opposite Therese and plopped down.

"All I did was the stuffing, rice and gravy. That's not all that much cooking," Marilyn protested.

Milah sniffed. "All? Please woman..." She stared across the table at her sister-in-law. "She made a lot more than that. The proof is in the pot and when you partake, you shall taste the evidence of her greatness."

"Stuck her toes in it." Therese chuckled. "So, where's my big brother?"

"He's probably off with Justice and my rugrats playing video games."

"Rafe?"

"You better believe, Rafe." Milah laughed. "He's as addicted as the next guy when it comes to anything to do with electronics and sports. Deadly combination."

Therese grinned, thought of Kane's fascination with the television his first night at her house. God that seemed like ages ago!

"Speaking of..." Milah reached across the table to tap her hand. "Where's Kane? He did make it right?"
Therese nodded. "I left him out in the living room with Candi—"
"You left him alone with that woman?" Milah gawked.
Therese giggled. "He can take care of himself," she said, nonetheless growing uncertain as she took in the doubtful expressions of her mother and Milah.
Maybe they had a point. The woman could be a barracuda.
"From what I hear about this young man, Candy might eat him up before the first course and I'll never have a chance to meet my bambina's famous apprentice," Marilyn teased and gave Milah a low-five as the two of them had a good laugh.
Well by golly, everyone was just a' talking and gossiping about her and Kane. Seemed they were bound to be the cynosure this here evening whether they wanted to be or not.
"I'm glad you two are having so much fun with this."
Therese scowled.
"Oh, bambina, we're not laughing at you." Marilyn reached over to pat her daughter's hand.
"Yeah, yeah, you're laughing with me."
"We are."
"Well, it sure feels like I'm the butt of somebody's joke."
Marilyn turned in her seat to give her daughter a searching look. "What I want to know is, are you happy?"
Everyone was so concerned with her happiness. All well and good, but who had time to be happy while worrying about a crazy Ifreet Djinn on the loose and another djinni living under her roof with a bounty on his head? And not to forget assorted cobras roaming her attic and canine apparitions attacking her in her front yard!
"Terre?"

Therese peered at her mother. She knew better than to expect a dressing down or even mushy pampering scenes. Her mother wasn't the type, had always walked a fine line between tough-love peer and overprotective nurturer, basically raising her three kids to be independent and self-sufficient individuals free to choose their own way and make their own mistakes.

Therese had always thrived beneath this calm hands-off parenting, loved her mother just as much if not more than she might have had the woman been the over-protective interfering type. But right now, she thought, she wouldn't have minded a little maternal presumption.

Milah stood and gave one of Therese's arms a warm squeeze as she passed her sister-in-law on the way out of the kitchen. "I'm going to check on the kids—big and small—and see about gathering everyone for dinner," she threw over a shoulder as she left the kitchen.

"Now bambina ... " Marilyn grasped both of Therese's hands.

Therese took a deep breath and sighed. "Mommy—"

"I haven't heard that since you were eleven years old and had a crush on your older brother's friend..."

"Freddie Perez!" Therese exclaimed, smiling as she remembered how she used to try and impress Rafe's tightest cut-buddy Wilfredo whenever he hung out at their house, which had been often.

To Freddie she had been like a kid sister. He'd barely known she existed beyond the shadow of her older brother.
Until her fourteenth summer when her breasts and other curves started to swell and round out nicely enough to make the boys sit up and take notice. But by then, eighteen-year-old Freddie had all but lost his chance, had to take a number behind all the seventh-graders at Therese's Catholic school clamoring for a date to the prom—a date to anywhere—with "Rafe's fo'in sistah."

"I swear, I think that's the year your brother got his first gray hairs," Marilyn said now as if reading her daughter's mind and Therese laughed, remembering Rafe's daily threats to all his homeboys to "break some legs if you even peek at my baby sistah sideways."

What would Raphael think if he knew all the sordid little details of how wanton his newly widowed "baby sistah" had been acting with Kane?

"Bambina, I haven't met this young man of yours..."

Therese smiled at her mother's opening. The woman made the 200+-year-old Kane sound like one of Therese's teenage suitors from back when.

"...Milah and Rafe and the kids and that devil Justice seem to adore him. Their tastes have always been good enough for me."

"So, if he were running for office...?"

"He'd have my vote." Marilyn grasped her daughter in an one-armed embrace as they both shared a laugh. "What matters is that you're—"

"Happy."

"At least reasonably content."
Therese decided she was at least this. She'd be happy if she could keep the barracudas and sharks off of her genie-man.

Marilyn stood, in her daughter's head again. "Come. Before Candy gives that hot-headed brother of yours a reason..."

The front doorbell rang as if on cue.

Therese heard the loud commotion spread from the vestibule down the long corridor to the living room, seconds after the door was answered and thought too late, the caveman is here as she made her way to the front several seconds ahead of her mother.

Above Candida's high-pitched Rosie Perez-like whine, Riano's angry bass rumbled throughout the house.

Therese paused on the living room threshold as before, but this time to the sight of Candida holding her husband at bay, palms against his chest, pump-clad feet set but losing ground on the plush carpeting as Riano tried to push by her.

Kane silently stood his ground behind Candy, legs spread and firmly planted, fists at his sides, teeth clenched and jaw working.

Only an observant witness or someone like Justice who had previously seen Kane in action would recognize his I'm-going-to-turn-him-into-a-club-footed-dromedary stance.

Therese could see Candy had her work cut out for her, left her mother standing at the doorframe to lend a hand and mimicked Candy's pose with Riano, planting her palms in Kane's chest.

She needn't have bothered for all the good it did, Therese thought, since it seemed like her genie-man had some kind of
Ghandi-King passive resistance thing happening. Only the pounding of his heart against her hands gave away his increasing agitation.

"Kane, it's all right. He's Candy's husband."
"I am well aware of who he is," Kane murmured.
"Yo Terre, I don't need you to explain things or protect me from your Mohammed-Haganda boyfriend."
"Oh Riano, stop acting like such an asshole."

For once they were in agreement, Therese thought as Candy eased her hold on her husband's chest and Riano took the opportunity to charge across the carpet toward Kane.

Therese turned from Kane, stepped in front of her brother and shoved him in the chest as hard as she could. She did it more for his protection than out of any righteous indignation.

She didn't know how long Kane would keep playing Mr. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate behind her.

"Why don't you go to a neutral corner, Camacho, before you get beat down."
"By him?" Riano sneered. "I don't think so."
"Better think again."
"Why don't you let pretty-boy-blondie speak for himself?"
"You are behaving quite disrespectfully and should apologize to everyone for your offensive behavior," Kane stated just as Rafe and Milah made it in from the family room trailing the kids and Justice.

"Our guest is right, Adriano," Rafe said.
"Yo, forget that guest bullsh—"
"Eh-eh!" Jamilah clapped her hands over her head two times like thunder, glared at her brother-in-law during the
ensuing seconds of silence. "You know better than to talk *that* nonsense in this house around my kids or anyone else."

"All right, yo. *Fine.*" Riano threw up his hands then pointed at Kane. "But I don't know how homeboy's going to talk about me dissing somebody when he's up in my little sister's face not six months after her husband..."

Oh boy, the last straw on the camel's back, Therese thought before her brother had gotten half of the sentence out. She knew she wouldn't be able to hold Kane off any longer, was sure she didn't want to. She merely stepped aside and watched him lunge by her in a blur.

The entire room broke out into hysterical shouts and cries as Kane grabbed Riano by the scruff of the neck and dragged him, kicking and bellowing to no avail, out of the room.

Everyone froze in the middle of the living room, gaping at one another as the dust cleared until Justice piped up.

"Well, that certainly worked up my appetite."

* * * *

Kane sat for a while in the den by himself after he and Adriano Lopez had had a nice heart to heart, took several minutes to gather himself and prepare for his *mawla*'s certain curiosity.

He decided he understood her well enough to expect she would want to know how he had managed to calm her "caveman" brother down enough to share laughs and enjoy several great plays of a college football game on the boob tube before rejoining the family and festivities.
Naturally, he was not surprised when Therese grabbed him by an arm and dragged him to the nearest corner as soon as was feasible when he finally followed Adriano out into the living room a half-hour after leading the younger man into the den.

As the rest of her family filed into the dining room for dinner *mawla* confirmed Kane's speculations with an anxious expression that boldly said: *you did something to my brother!*

He grinned as she gathered enough courage to verbalize her concerns and interrogate him.

"Kane, you didn't...?"
"Yes, wali?"
"Did you ... *do* anything to him?"
"Anything like what?"
"You *know.*"
"You mean did I physically harm him?"
"Physically, mentally..." Therese paused, leaned in and spoke through clenched teeth. "You know damn well what I *mean*, genie-man."

Kane smothered a chuckle, decided to let her off the hook as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I did not harm him. I only talked to him."

She opened her eyes to stare. "Talked?"

He nodded. "I simply pointed out the flaws in his logic and the error of his behavior."

"Like you showed the punkers, huh?" Therese instantly threw a palm up to his face in a stop sign and closed her eyes again. "Never mind. I don't want to know."
"It was not as difficult as you may think. Your brother is a very intelligent and reasonable young man once one gets passed the callow veneer."

"Riano? Reasonable?"
Kane solemnly nodded. "Indeed, yes."
Therese shook her head wonderingly. "Boy, I sure would have liked to have been a fly on the wall."

"I do not understand." But when mawla looped an arm through his, Kane thought he would forfeit any understanding and knowledge, have a thousand sit-downs with all of her male relatives if it meant that she would grace him with the dazzling smile she was now bestowing upon him.

"You're some kind of miracle worker."
"I ... I ... I am not!" he sputtered and Therese chuckled just as Zee popped her head into the room.

"Auntie, everyone's starving and Gramma wants Mr. Kane to come grace the table. She said it's fitting since he's our honored guest."

"Oh he is, is he?"
"That's what Gramma said."
"Well you tell the starving gang we'll be there in a jiff."
"Bet!" Zee bobbed her head up and down before disappearing back into the dining room.

"It appears your services are required again."
Kane arched a brow. "What will I say?"
"You?" Therese smiled, reached for one of his hands and Kane never felt more at home and intimate in that moment as when she clasped his fingers in hers and said, "Oh, I'm sure you'll think of something appropriate. You always do."
CHAPTER 19

All evening Therese surreptitiously observed her genie-man as he interacted with each member of her little multicultural family on one level or another, in some multifaceted form or another. During dinner when he knowledgeably debated western politics and religion with Rafe; after dinner in the family room when he argued the overall athletic superiority of basketball players over football players with Justice and Riano; in the kitchen when he traded exotic Arabian recipes with Jamilah and Marilyn for their African and Spanish dishes as he helped them clean the kitchen; later still when he expounded on the merits of school uniformity and dress codes to Bari and Zee over a game of Monopoly while lavishing compliments on his partner Candida for her fashion sense.

The last Therese could have definitely done without, but through all her scrutiny, several glaring and disconcerting facts about Kane the man kept hitting her between the eyes. One fact she realized she'd been aware of from the beginning of their association was that Kane was a wondrous study in contrasts.

He was a natural diplomat and mediator, a faithful disciple and an inventive teacher, an old-fashioned chauvinist and a progressive liberal.

Packed within this wholly perfect and flawed intuitive being was also a gentle and passionate man who knew when to be silent and listen with more than just his ears. And when he
chose to speak *his* mind he made every word count and spoke with enough authority to force even the loudest skeptic and rabble-rouser to sit up and take notice, making them feel that if they didn't, they would miss out on something special and important about the meaning of life and, more importantly, their own existence.

Therese had sat back in whatever piece of furniture she happened to be in whenever her genie-man had been in the middle of laying down the Law According to Kane, and caught herself gaping and flabbergasted at the man's insight and patience.

She shivered now as she thought about the most essential and frightening realities burgeoning in her head and heart: she was in love with this weird mystical being named Kane. He was her destiny and soul-mate.

"...it's your go. You guys got the last book."

Therese shook her head as Riano's aggravated tone drifted into her consciousness. She glanced at Kane sitting across from her at the card table.

"It is your turn, Teh-reese."

Candy smirked in the seat adjacent her as she addressed her husband across the table. "I don't know why she's trying to front. It ain't like they're not *creaming* us."

"If I didn't know you any better, and Kane wasn't your partner, I would say there's some serious cheating going on here," Riano teased.

"You're the only cheater I see at this here table." Therese smiled as she laid down her Little Joker to the delight of Kane and the cheering section behind her consisting of her usual
partner Rafe—who had decided to beg off this go-round—Milah, Zee and Marilyn.

"Come wid it, Uncle Riano. You know you got the Big one!"

Therese knew he didn't, since Kane did, and if anyone at the table had asked her how she knew her partner, and not the other two players at the table had the Big Joker, she wouldn't have been able to tell them, not even to save her life.

Riano gave her a brief moment of pause, bluffing and smiling across at Candy, playing to his two-man cheering section of Justice and Bari before he finally and with much ceremony slammed down his Deuce of Spades.

Therese released her breath, knew her brother must not have had any other spades in his hand or he would have played them instead of wasting the deuce; she figured it had just killed him to waste such a high spade. But he hadn't had a choice unless he and his partner wanted to renege on another hand.

Kane had seen to their reneging on the first deal of the game when he had remembered Riano had cut a Diamond early in the hand and much later during the same deal had thrown out a Jack of Diamonds to beat Kane's Ten, which to that point had been walking with the hand.

Therese smiled now as she remembered the look on her brother's face when Kane had called him on his error.

So polite and calm about it too, almost made reneging a pleasant experience.

"C'mon Candy-baby. I know you have the Big J. C'mon..." Riano teased his wife but when she shrugged and laid down
the Deuce of Diamonds, Therese realized that some wires had
gotten crossed between the pair. Nothing else could explain
their butting heads and canceling each other out so badly.
"Candy!"
"Whaat?"
"You were trumped heavy, baby. What were you thinking
when you bid?"
Candy pouted, embarrassed as Kane flipped over a spade
and swept the book to his and Therese's growing stack.
"I believe we have exceeded our quota," Kane stated and
flipped over the Big Joker to the delight of his partner and the
lament of Riano and Candy. "And I believe you are in the
hole?"
"Yeah, yeah, yeah, by two books." Riano gathered all the
cards as Therese unnecessarily tallied the two team's points
in one of the kids' spiral notebooks. "'Nother go-round, guys?
Give us a chance at the title?"
Therese yawned and stretched. "I think we better start
calling it a night. How about you?" She peered at Kane and he
nodded, seemed more eager than she had expected him to
be.
"I think it's about time for all of us to call it a night." Jamilah mimicked her sister-in-law, yawning and stretching
as she ruffled each of her children's hair.
Therese helped Kane clear off the table and waited in the
living room with everyone as he restored it in the closet from
where the kids had retrieved it earlier.
"Well, which one of you, bambinos are going to be driving me home tonight?" Marilyn asked as she stood from the love seat.

"I got you tonight, Mom." Riano preceded Kane from the closet and helped his mother on with her trench. "You're on our way." He said his good nights to his brother and Milah, thanked his sister-in-law for hosting a "slamming Thanksgiving dinner" and made his apologies to everyone else before leading Candy to the front door.

Kane followed suit, brought Therese her leather and helped her into it as Marilyn gave her grandkids, kids and daughter-in-law resounding kisses and hugs before she approached the evening's special guest.

Therese was surprised when her mother pulled Kane into a firm embrace and held him for a long quiet moment.

Marilyn finally pulled away, eyes moist as she grasped one of Kane's hands. "You take care of my bambina."

Kane nodded. "I will do this, Mrs. Lopez."

Therese swallowed over the lump in her throat, leaned in to kiss her mom before Marilyn ran out and joined Riano and Candida at their red Cherokee in the driveway to catch her ride.

"Well guys, it's been quite a ride but I'm beat and..."

"Don't tell me you're going into the office tomorrow?" Therese interrupted Rafe.

"Guilty as charged." Milah raised a hand beside him.

"You two..." Therese shook her head, leaned in to squeeze her sister-in-law in a warm hug. "Dinner was delicious and you know I had a great time."
"Well, we had Kane and your hot-headed brother to thank for the entertainment." Milah cut Kane a humorous look and he ducked his head like a little boy preparing to be reprimanded. Milah's smile only grew.

"I must apologize for that earlier scene," he said

"Puh-lease. You did what needed to be done."

"Amen to that." Rafe proffered a hand to Kane and bade him and Therese a good night before escaping down the corridor to the master bedroom as the kids followed Therese, Milah and Kane down the vestibule to the front door.

Milah paused and glanced passed Therese and Kane at her two giggling kids. "Okay, spill it. What's the joke?"

Zee's shoulders convulsed as she covered her mouth with both hands to smother a chuckle. "Tell her," she muttered, elbowing her brother in an arm.

"You tell her." Bari laughed and shoved her back.

"What are you two scheming, huh?" Therese asked, dreaded the answer a second before Bari piped up.

"Are you still going to be around Christmas, Mr. Kane?"

He solemnly nodded. "If it is Allah's will, yes."

"So you're coming to dinner then too?" Aziza grilled. "Cuz Mommy said you're invited."

"If that is true..." Kane looked to Jamilah who gave him an indulgent grin and nodded. "Then yes, I suppose I will come to your Christmas dinner."

"Goody!" Aziza clapped.

"Told you he was coming, doofus."

"You're a doofus."
Milah shooed her two rugrats to bed, giggling as she opened the door and stepped out onto the porch with Therese and Kane.

The trio stood for a moment in the cool damp night, a fine mist falling on the lawn, rich green blades glistening beneath the house's exterior lighting.

Finally, Milah leaned in to give Kane a hug.

Therese watched as he returned her sister's-in-law embrace, probably breaking all sorts of Islamic codes and social protocols, she thought, adding to his growing list of transgressions.

"It was a pleasure, Kane. I'm looking forward to having you by again, just like the kids."

"As I am looking forward to coming."

"I hope Zee didn't give you too much trouble tonight."

Kane simply grinned, reached out to squeeze one of Milah's arms. "She is a delightful child. I would not change a thing about her."

"Hey, aren't we missing someone?" Therese blurted and glanced back at the house. "Justice isn't coming back with us?"

"Oh, I thought he mentioned..."

Therese frowned. "Mentioned what?"

"He's doing Rafe and I a solid, promised to take the kids to see Toy Story II tomorrow, an early matinee."

"Justice? Early matinee? A kid's movie?" Therese realized how skeptical she must have sounded when she caught Milah's chagrined expression, but still couldn't bring herself to fall in. Justice sitting through a full-length kiddy movie—no
matter how spectacular the effects or how much he doted on Bari and Zee—was about as likely as a pathological liar telling the truth. Which meant her busybody brother-in-law—or even her well-intentioned sister-in-law—was up to something.

"So, we're not going to be taking home extra baggage tonight then, huh?" Therese joked.

"Chile, tonight you're off the hook."

Therese glanced at Kane standing beside her, caught the enigmatic expression in his eyes and felt her insides melting from his heat.

She wasn't off the hook by a long shot.

* * * *

Kane had never been more attuned to a human body—to any body—than he was attuned to his mawla's in the first few moments after he had entered her silent and empty house in front of her and stood in the vestibule helping her off with her jacket.

Every brush of his hand against the celery silk top she wore, every waft of her subtle musk fragrance sent his emotions spiraling to a pinnacle of restraint and back again.

By Allah, he could not go any longer under the same roof like this without touching her!

"That was some dinner, huh?"

Kane cleared his throat with much difficulty as he hung her leather jacket on a hanger in the hall closet beside his own. "It was a most enjoyable and enlightening experience."

She turned to him and smiled. "Everyone loves you, Kane."
And what about you? Do you love me, Teh-reese?
In the name of Allah, how was it he could know the cards she was holding in her hands as she sat across from him at a table, but he could not know this, the most important knowledge for which he hungered?
"I am most smitten with your family also."
"Smitten? You're so cute." She turned from him, chuckling as she headed to the living room.
Kane followed several deliberate feet behind, tried to give himself room to breathe, time to clear his head. It worked for only the few seconds that she was out of his sight. As soon as he reached the threshold and saw her lounging on the sectional, kicking off her small suede dove-gray Mary Jane's before folding her legs beneath her, he was struck again by her delicate beauty. And his overwhelming desire.
"Kane?"
He blinked, peered at her across the room, made no move to go closer but Therese silently patted the place beside her and he could do no less than her bidding, sauntering across the velvety Oriental carpet in a daze. He sat a few feet away from his mawla, watched her raise soft questioning eyebrows before she shrugged, reclined against the sectional's arm, stretched out her legs and placed her stocking feet firmly in his lap.
"Mind giving me a massage, genie-man?"
"Your wish is my command."
"Now that's one I haven't heard since ... since never!" She gawked and made him chuckle when she gave him her famous impish grin. "Why's that?"
"You do not have to hear it, to know that it is so."
"Ah, Djinn Philosophy 101." Therese slid down further until most of her legs were in Kane's lap, her head supported by the sectional arm; she closed her eyes and moaned as he silently rubbed the sole of her right foot. "Oh that feels good. I think you must have taken the advanced courses when it came to pleasing your mawlas."
"Actually, there have not been that many."
"That's what they all say." Therese grinned, opened an eye to peek at him, heart accelerating when she saw his solemn look. "There weren't that many mawlas or that many..."
"Females."
"Any males?" she joked but immediately saw that Kane was far from getting it when his eyebrows almost flew off his face.
"What?"
"I was kidding, Kane." Therese took a deep breath, carefully formulated her next question but he beat her to the punch, surprising her with his next words.
"Sahir was my only ... my only mate."
"And she was your mawla?"
"More a mentor than my mawla. Before she betrayed me."
"She's the one who imprisoned you?"
Kane silently nodded and Therese digested this new intelligence.
They had not discussed the museum incident at length, at all, until now. And there were so many things she wanted and needed to know, she suddenly realized. "You're positive she isn't this Ifreet Djinn?"
"Almost 100% certain."
"It's that almost part that worries m—Hey!" Therese gasped as Kane tweaked her big toe.
"Let us not speak of her now," he murmured.
"As you wish," Therese teased, inclining her head as she mimicked his move and made him laugh even though she wanted to get down to business and grill him more than anything in the world except play footsies. Cuz he did have quite the magic touch, especially when it came to his thumbs fondling that spot right under the ball of her ... "Ahhhh, Kane you are so good with your hands." She jerked her eyes to his when she heard what had come out of her mouth, saw her genie-man's hot look and tried to change the subject. "You, uh ... you were really something else the way you handled my brother tonight."
"Not I. 'Twas you who was something else." Kane grinned.
"I never had a woman defend me so staunchly."
"Oh, puh-lease. It was nothing any self-respecting mawla wouldn't have done for her genie-man."
"However, you were rather negligent when it came to protecting me from the female of your species."
Therese chuckled; shocked he would bring up Candida. But she thought if he hadn't she probably would have. "Oh, that..." She rolled her eyes and waved at him. "I figured you could handle yourself."
"Such faith."
"In you? Indubitably."
"Nevertheless, I did not properly thank you for your protection." Kane reached out a hand to caress a long
cinnamon tendril that had escaped her upsweep and grasped her hand when she tried to tuck the hair behind an ear. He leaned in, brought the hand to his mouth and gently touched his lips to each finger in turn, lingering for a brief moment at her naked ring finger.

He slowly raised his eyes to hers, curiosity radiating bright from his green gaze, burning her with its intensity.

"It was time," she whispered.

Kane silently nodded, caressed a cheek with the back of his hand as Therese sat up and flung her legs off of his lap. He turned his hand to cup her face and she leaned into his palm, purring like a lion cub as she pressed her lips to the center of his hand.

"Is it improper to tell you that I want you, Kane? Because if it is, I'm going to have to be improper and tell y—"

He silenced her with a kiss, firmly melding his mouth to hers and plunging in his tongue, elated when hers eagerly greeted his. He slid his hands down her body, luxuriating in the soft silk that whispered against his skin, enjoyed it almost as much as the feel of her smooth cheek beneath his palm. He wanted to feel so much more of her, needed to feel her naked and flush against him, softer and more real than her silk covering.

Therese obliged, thrust her body forward and groaned when he cupped a breast and fondled her with a thumb through the sheer material of her blouse. "Kane..."

"Yes Teh-reese..." He worked at her buttons with one hand, thankful there were so few, even more grateful when the top fell open to expose shimmering caramel skin. He slid
his palms across the silken warmth of her abdomen, brought his arms around to her back and drew her forward.

He held her for a long silent moment—delighted in the feel of her heart beating next to his, enjoyed the fluffy waves tickling his face, marveled at how seemly she felt in his arms.

But Therese could take no more inactivity, eased her arms around to his front and worked at the tiny buttons on his shirt. She reached an annoyingly snug one midway down, fought with it for several seconds before she lost her patience, popped it and the next few buttons off as she stared at him. "Couldn't you just, you know ... poof, and get out of these clothes?"

He chuckled, shook his head and lifted her into his arms as he stood from the sectional. "I have waited too long to rush this." He buried his face in her neck, drank at her throat as he carried her to the master bedroom.

Therese cuddled deep, his tangy male aroma strong and heady like love, the feel of his muscled chest against her face stirring embers deep in her gut as he bent to carefully place her on the bed like the last playing card atop a 51-deck house.

She licked her lips, watched him as he stalked across the mattress. "How long have you been waiting?"
"Since long before you released me."
"I think I've been waiting for you even longer."
"Impossible." He slid her top off and went to work on the front clasp of her lacy bra as Therese reached for his belt.

She slowly unbuckled, returned his soul kiss as he dipped his head and dined on her mouth.
Kane brushed her nipples with his palms and she gasped, felt each bloom hard and tender beneath his touch. She reached for him, locking his hips between her thighs as she drew him close and finished removing his shirt.

He flung the garment across the room as soon as she was done, eagerly lowered his mouth to one full breast, taunted the nipple with his teeth and made lazy circles on her belly with his thumbs. Therese arched her back as he encircled her waist with his hands before moving to loosen the drawstrings of her pants. He fumbled with the knot for several seconds, finally just jerked the pants past her hips, removing her stockings and panties with them, all pretenses at taking his time gone.

Or so Therese thought before a needle scratched across a 45 in her mind as she noticed Kane's grimace when he kneeled astride her.

"Now, about this rubber of which you previously spoke?"
"Oh sweet Jesus..." She sighed and pressed her forehead against his bare, chiseled abdomen. He would have to remember that when all she wanted was to have him inside her. Now. "Condom," she mumbled.
"Con-dum?"
"I was teasing you, Kane."
"Nonetheless, you obviously had a reason for bringing up its usage?"
"Well..."
"It is something humans employ to make the experience more pleasurable?"
"Uh, sorta..." How could she go into the thousand-and-one modern uses for a condom with this eighteenth century genie-man? Did she even need to?

She knew she was negative and she was damn certain Kane was. The only thing they needed a condom for was to prevent something she wanted to happen more than anything in life.

"It's for protection."

"Oh, I believe I see now."

*Good, now let's get on with this.*

Therese helped him out of his pants, fingers trembling, stomach somersaulting, hands lingering on his firm derriere a moment longer than was wise before she started imagining how the muscles would work and tighten when he pumped inside her.

She brought her arms around him, felt resistance as she tried to draw him near.

"Would this condom or rubber increase your pleasure?"

Therese frowned. "*What?*

"I will do whatever you require of me to please y—"

Therese put a finger to his full lips. "Having you inside would please me greatly."

A growl of raw need issued from deep in his throat as he drew her to him, kissed and licked his way down her shoulders to her belly, not missing a spot in between.

Therese writhed beneath his wandering hands, her entire being primed for his touch—his mouth, his tongue, his manhood—as he hovered at her center long enough to make her ache with growing need and anticipation.
She dragged her hands through his hair to the back of his head, urged him forward, almost sorry she did when he thrust his tongue at her core then pressed his mouth to her in an intimate kiss that sent the most violent tingles firing through her lower regions.

He braced her hips as she bucked beneath him and Therese blindly reached out, arms coiling around his broad shoulders, legs twining around his waist. She crossed her ankles behind his back, heard Kane gasp as she pulled him forward.

"As you wish." He grinned, left a languid trail of nips and kisses from her lips to her lightly freckled chest, probing each dot and wondrous globe with his tongue as she loosened her hold and planted her feet on his calves.

She raised her eyes to meet his hungry gaze with her own. He planted a palm at each side of her head and she bit back a cry of surprise when he immersed his tumescence between her folds, plunging inch by bittersweet inch until he buried himself to the hilt, surrounded by her heat.

He cradled his face in her shoulder, motionless inside her as he moaned. "You are so warm and moist, Teh-reese."

She became warmer and moister at his words, wriggling beneath him as she tightened her pelvic muscles around his arousal. He gasped, supported himself on an elbow and reached up with his other hand to unclasp the pin holding her hair.

"So impatient, my mawla." He drew his fingers through long tendrils and smiled as he watched cinnamon waves tumble down around her face. "That is more like it."
She squeezed him again, sucked in a breath and almost screamed in protest when he raised up on his palms and withdrew so far he almost pulled completely out of her. "Why are you torturing me like this?"

"I torture myself as much." He eased back inside her, eloquent and sensual as he slid his hands beneath her backside and pulled her against him. She flung back her head and arched her hips, whimpering when he countered with a powerful thrust that rolled through her—insinuating, pulsing warmth.

Therese clasped the horse and rider pendant dangling around his neck, felt another surge shoot through her body. "Kane ... Oh God, Kane!"

He trembled above her as the current blasted back to him from her medal before spiraling out to encompass the entire bed on which they lay in a shimmering blue field of energy.

Therese peered up at him, shaken and unsure if she were alive or dead, feeling like she was more the latter than the former until Kane wrapped her in his fiery embrace and held her close and she knew that it wasn't over, not yet.

"Hold me, mawla..."

The field expanded as she returned Kane's firm hug, vibrating hot around the room, then shrunk without warning, enclosing the two of them in its radiant circle.

_Circle of life?_

Therese almost laughed until she realized how feasible the idea was.

They frightened and awed her both, the thought and the circle, until Kane drove into her and obliterated all fear and
thinking. She matched his rhythm—thrust for thrust, stroke for stroke—body superheated and slick as the circle dwindled and dwindled until it was but a tiny pinpoint of light hovering on the edges of a thundering climax.

Therese collapsed beneath him, breathless and spent as he cuddled against her, moist and warm.

He reached out and pushed stray curls from her face, kissed her eyes and nose and chin as she lay silent and gently shuddering with leftover orgasm. "Do not fear, mawla."

_He knows, he always knows._ "Kane?"

"Yes?"

"Will ... will it always be like that?"

"By Allah, I certainly hope so."
CHAPTER 20

Therese woke robbed of seeing the sun glinting off his tawny locks, a gray day dawning beyond her bedroom windows.

But the sight that greeted her as she opened her eyes to his peaceful bronze face was almost as good if not better.

She reached out to stroke a clean-shaven cheek, liked the firm sleek lines of his jaw beneath her fingers and wondered at its and his body's almost hairless state as she slid her hand down and rested the palm against his chest. But for the fine blonde cluster of curls beneath her hand, he was as smooth as the proverbial baby's bottom.

She had never before known a grown man who didn't need to shave, had never seen a man with such flawless skin.

Usually a guy's body bore some war wound or other remnant—bent noses, set breaks—attesting to years of roughhousing and misbegotten risk-taker's youth.

Especially the boys Therese had grown up with, she thought and remembered one particular incident where her mom had had to rush Riano to the emergency room at Lincoln Hospital after he'd busted himself up in a playground stunt on the swings. To this day, Riano still had the mark from the five stitches that the ER doctor had applied above his right eye.

Therese had had a couple of brushes with matless playground concrete herself, scraping up a knee after challenging and defeating Riano to the same dare-devil Apple
Turnover at which he had injured himself; loser washed dishes for a week.

Even her usually levelheaded brother Rafe had had his brush with bodily harm, earning a nice ghetto badge of courage when he'd fought off two muggers who'd wanted his Eight Ball leather jacket. For his trouble he'd been stabbed and rushed to the hospital with a collapsed lung and a lost pint of blood.

Therese shook her head now, fascinated by the gentle rise and fall of Kane's chest in repose.

Not a scar on him and she'd checked him, quite eagerly and thoroughly, every delicious, hard inch of him. She guessed there were some benefits to being an immortal genie-man after all.

Therese leaned in to watch his eyes fluttering back and forth beneath long-lashed lids, wondered what genie-men dreamed about, if they even dreamed at all or were they only dream-weavers who benefited not from the pleasures they bestowed.

She caught her breath and closed her eyes as an electric vestige of their lovemaking undulated in her belly, reminding her of how awesome and pleasurable were his gifts.

*And frightening, so very frightening and draining.*

*Will it always be like that?*

She wanted it to be but as much as she craved the experience, she didn't think her heart could take another go-round with this man, wondered whose infinite wisdom was responsible for putting them together. Because it was definitely a mismatch—physically, mentally, spiritually...
Therese glanced over a shoulder at the LED readout on her clock/radio, registered an end to the stillness very soon as she thought of Kane's early morning ritual.

He'd be up any minute, filling the corridors and rooms of her house with his musical baritone raised in prayer.

The prospect filled her chest with bliss, she realized and peered back at Kane, willing him to stir and open his eyes.

Not a blink or twitch, just motionless respite. Which she guessed she should have expected if her weary limbs and the memory of that mysterious ball of energy were any indication. He was probably as exhausted as her, if not more so.

He had a pretty reliable internal clock, she figured he'd get up when he needed to. Besides, he looked so peaceful and vulnerable sleeping, Therese didn't want to disturb him, at least not too much, but she couldn't help touching him and leaned close to rest a cheek against his chest; the strong rhythm of his heart surprised and lulled her.

She reached out a finger to trace lazy circles on his abdomen—a male underwear model's six-pack. And the resemblance didn't end there, Therese decided, smiling wickedly for Kane was definitely packing—magical genie-man or not.

She started and almost cried out when he slid a hand under her chin and gently lifted her head to meet his gaze. "I'm not going to tell you how bad you just scared me."

He leered at her, silent.

"How long have you been awake?" she asked.

"Long enough."
"Oh really?"
"What were you thinking about?"

Therese stopped just short of clutching imaginary pearls, swallowed hard instead and almost laughed when she realized what she'd done. "I'm sure you already know."
"I do not."
"Hmmmm..." She sat up and straddled him, leaned forward and balanced her palms on his shoulders. "Liar," she murmured.
"I do not lie."
"And he says it with such a straight face too."
"You are teasing me."
"Oh, very much so."

Kane grasped her hips, fondled her pelvic bone with his thumbs as he peered up at her.
"More repairs?"
"There is no need."
"That's right. I'm all fixed up and ready to make you my baby's faaaah-ther."
"You are still teasing me?"
"No, not really."
"Good," he whispered, enfolded her in his arms as he rolled or onto her back and reversed their positions. "As I would like nothing more than to be your baby's father."
"Kane—"

"Shh. Do not speak." He covered her mouth with his, slid his tongue passed her pliant lips as he insinuated his hand between her thighs.
Therese gasped against his mouth, parted her legs for him. He drove in his tongue, wrestled with hers as he eased two fingers into her wetness and wriggled them around and back and forth until she lurched against him.

She threw her arms around his shoulders and clung as he held tight to her with one arm, working destructive miracles between her legs with his other hand.

He flicked her bud with his thumb, pumped his two fingers in and out, working her into a frenzied rhythm against his hand, her soft sobs filling the air before he replaced his fingers with rock-hard arousal and entered her with such subtle and furious speed she came almost instantly.

"My mawla ... my sweet, beautiful mawla ... " Kane cooed and kissed her clammy face, holding her snug, the most excruciating ecstasy exploding through his groin as he slid down her quivering body and her hard nipples raked across his chest.

He watched her face as she dragged her eyes open, knew what she wanted to see, knew what she wanted to hear. He wanted to hear the same, watch the words as they floated up from her luscious mouth, merciful and sweet.

And then he opened his mouth and Therese opened hers and their words tumbled together, bold and soft, entwining like their bodies, but distinct and separate enough to discern where his words began and her words ended and that they uttered the same sentence from the same heart.

"I love you..."
Kane moaned and buried himself deep inside her; rotating his hips several long moments before one final thrust brought him release and sent him home.

* * * *

Sahir had never cursed her telepathic abilities before, certainly not as much as she had in the last twenty-fours hours of living through her djinn and his mawla's numerous couplings.

Blasphemy indeed!

She had not known their completion would be so joyous and tormenting to her. To experience every thrust and caress, to hear every whispered and wordless profession of love as if she had been the one Kane had straddled, the one he had entered ... Her heart and soul still ached and tingled from knowing, yet not knowing, him thus.

Such care and tenderness for this woman, this mundane. Had he ever touched her thus? Had there ever been a time when he had looked upon her face with a full heart and love spilling like lava from the depths of his green eyes? Had there ever been a time when he had not looked upon her with anything but tolerant lust?

Sahir swallowed passed the knot in her throat when she realized that there had never been a time for her like these with Kane. He had never felt for her the way he felt for Therese Hunter. He had never loved her.

Her body slumped with the knowledge as she closed the blinds to her office window and folded her hands behind her back. She stood silently contemplating her choices, her
feelings, ill-used heart hammering as she pounded the carpet in search of counsel or relief.

The loudness of her own thoughts in the placid office finally drove her out into the corridor.

She leaned over the mahogany balustrade, took several deep breaths of the outside air that wafted up from the open front entrance, and gathered herself.

Several patrons and students of the arts congregated on the main floor—not quite as deserted as her office but empty by *TIHAM* standards—and Sahir instantly pinpointed the tawny-gold waves among the stragglers around one of the figural showcases.

Kane glanced up as if he felt her, searing her with his green-eyed gaze as he sauntered across the floor to the lobby elevators.

Sahir turned from the railing and pressed a fist to her mouth as she dashed for the elevators. She didn't know if she were running from him or to him, trying to head him off at the pass, or meet him half-way, only that seeing him thus—in the flesh and embodying all the lost desires over which she had been lamenting for the last hour—sent reason whirling.

"Ah, Sahir, just the person I wanted to s—"

"Darius!" Sahir bounced back; shocked by the density of her diminutive assistant curator. She lowered her glance to take in his face, the top of his head just barely reaching her chin as she fidgeted in her four-inch pumps.

"Do you have a moment?"

"This is not a good time, Dar—"
Kane tramped off the far elevator, came up short and grimaced when he saw them standing together.

Darius turned his gaze from Sahir to Kane and back again, smiled as he withdrew a couple of steps. "It can wait."

Desperation rose in Sahir's chest. She was not so sure she wanted to meet with Kane Djinn now, not after seeing that grave look he had flashed her from the main floor magnified ten times over as he scowled at her assistant. "Are you sure, Darius? Because if it is important..."

"Nothing I can not take up with Therese." Darius nodded as Kane approached. "She is all yours." He bowed, retreating toward the elevators.

Sahir watched him, stomach churning with hopelessness, as if the rescue ship had left the deserted island without her.

"We must talk." Kane caught her by an arm, led her down the hall to her office and Sahir did not object until they were well inside behind closed doors.

"Get, your hands off me, djinn."

"There was a time when you wanted nothing more."

"Times change."

"Indeed."

Sahir ambled around her desk, slammed back into the leather chair and glowered at him over her pyramided fingers. "Out with it. Why have you manhandled and dragged me in here?"

"I have been thinking."

"Hmm, always a dangerous circumstance for the opposition."

"You are treating our circumstance too lightly, kahin."
She arched a brow. "Remind me what that circumstance is?"

Kane crossed the room, sat in the burgundy leather chair catty-corner to her desk and leaned in. "I am no longer willing to play games, Sahir. Yours or any others."

"Who says we are playing games?"

Kane sighed and slouched back in his chair, such a wholly human act of vulnerability and frustration, Sahir's heart hammered with nostalgia, almost weakened her resolve. She could not allow herself to falter. Grand changes of heart or not, she had to alienate him totally and completely.

Which should not be so hard to do, considering.

"So, what great epiphany has caused you to grace me with your presence today, djinn?"

"You jest, Sahir and I am not in the mood."

"You did not want to get me alone for a quickie before your mawla discovers us?"

He frowned. "I do not fully understand your reference except to know that you are being unseemly."

"Most assuredly. And how would you think she would react if she knew?"

"Knew that you are being unseemly?"

"Knew about us. That you and—"

"She already knows."

Sahir gawked. He was truly amazing, this djinn. She should have expected no less, not when Allah had deemed this so and showed her his destiny. And hers.

"Did you lock the door?" she blurted.

"For what purpose? I have nothing to hide."
"Why are you here alone then?"
"I needed to speak to you privately."

Sahir leaned forward in her chair. "Yes?"
"To ... to get matters out into the open. To discover some truths..."

She smiled, had never seen her djinn so hesitant, it was a breath of fresh air she could not truly enjoy under the current circumstances for he would not be pleased with the answers she had to give him.

"Perhaps if I help you along?"

Kane raised an eyebrow, waited.

"The truth is, you owe me your life. If it were not for me, you would just be a desert memory, smoke and ashes in the sand."

"And how is it that you come to this conclusion?"

"I protected you from Ifreet."

"Your eternal fallback." He scoffed. "I did not ask for or need your protection or favor."

"That is what you believe, arrogant one." Sahir stood, strolled around her desk, poised in front of him.

He grimaced, so stunned when she spread her legs and thrust her hips at his face he stumbled from the chair.

Sahir marched him backwards; he staggered several feet before he regained his footing near the tall cherry bookshelf.

"You have no idea, Kane."

"I have several."

"Please share them with me."
He caught one of her wrists, held fast as she tried to jerk free. "Who was responsible for the death of Teh-reese's mate?"

"You know very well, wh—"

"Enough, Sahir!" Kane threw up his hands and she took the opportunity to pull her wrist free and escape across the room.

He stalked, pinned her against her desk. "Who, kahin?"

"It was not I."

"You dare to continue your pretenses?"

"Believe what you will, Kane. It is what you do best." She squeezed her eyes shut, braced her palms against the desktop as he leaned in.

"I believe what is logical from the information that is put in front of me."

"And this information makes me a murderer?"

"Or very near for I have no doubt that you were involved in some way."

"Once again, you are mistaken." Sahir saw the smile that did not reach the smoldering green eyes, knew that he was in no way amused and had reached the end of his patience.

"I have given you several chances to tell me the truth," he whispered. "That is several chances more than you deserve, traitor."

"Ka—"

"Tell me..."

* * * *
Therese heard the altercation before she reached the end of the hall—a male's deep voice raised in anger, a female's sultry voice failing to mollify.

By the time she stood in front of Sahir's ebony door, hand raised to knock, the yelling had ceased.

She swallowed hard at the possibilities, her worse misgivings blossoming with every second of silence.

Therese had been in the midst of putting out a small net for Kane when Darius had waylaid her downstairs to get her input on several acquisitions.

She hadn't talked to her genie-man since they'd arrived together more than an hour previously, missing his departure from in front of one of the exhibits where she'd last sighted him.

Therese hadn't given his disappearance much thought, did not put all that much weight in the whole bound, master-genie-three-wishes predicament.

He was a grown man and she figured he was entitled to his space and privacy, entitled to tend to his personal affairs when and if he chose.

Until Darius off-handily mentioned he'd noticed Kane and Sahir together and that Therese's "exchange student looked troubled."

She had not wanted to believe that he would betray her this way, so soon and after everything they had shared. She did not want to believe the worst. But she knew they were in the office alone, together. And she knew they had unfinished business.
Therese closed her eyes, grabbed the knob and turned, anxious and relieved when she met no resistance.

Fine, she would either catch them in the act, or not, but she needed to know whatever it was going on beyond that door.

Therese pushed the door in a couple of inches, peeked around the frame and gaped for several seconds before she reacted. "Kane, no!" She dashed across the room and grabbed him around the shoulders, feared for Sahir's life if she did not get him away from her.

"Your timing is impeccable, as always, Therese." Sahir stood, rubbing her neck with one hand and straightening her attire with the other.

Kane glared at her, chest heaving. "I believe it was you who staged the first scene."

"You give me far more credit than I deserve, djinn. It was not I who stormed in here for a *tete-à-tete*.

He went after her again.

Therese grabbed him around the waist but he slithered free and caught Sahir around the throat with one hand.

"Kane, stop it!"

"She is responsible for your mate's death."

"She wha—?"

Sahir struggled beneath Kane's grip, eyes wide with fear and denial as she tried to choke out a response.

"She killed Jury?"

"She has told me nothing to make me believe otherwise."

"But..."
Sahir shook her head as wildly as Kane's death-grip would allow, tears streaming down her cheeks.

He was strangling the woman right in front of her, Therese thought. God, she couldn't let him do this.

...*She is responsible for your mate's death.*

Not even then.

She took another stab at him, grasped the biceps of one arm and pulled as hard as she could. "Stop!" He surprised her when he relaxed his grip and turned to her in confusion.

"As ... as you wish."

Sahir sat up, slid behind her desk to put something more substantial than Therese between herself and Kane. "I did not kill your mate," she rasped.

Kane wheeled on her and it was all Therese could do to stop him from going after her again.

"You stop me from doing the world a favor."

"Why are you so intent on killing this woman, Kane?"

"Such an intelligent question. And you have not even thanked me for giving her to you."

"Excuse me?" Therese turned on Sahir now, arched a brow, her anger slowly simmering with Kane's. "You didn't give anyone to anybody, I beg your pardon."

"So spirited." Sahir smirked, looked to Kane. "Do you like your new mawla?"

"Enough of your nonsense, Sahir."

"There was a time when you worshipped me as you do her."

Worshipped? Therese frowned. Where the heck was the woman getting her information?
"That was before you enslaved me."
"I saved your life, Kane."
"I do not owe you anything, Sahir. You saw to that when you bound a djinn under your hospitality."
"I saved you."
"You are not my master. I could kill you now and not violate any tenets. Indeed, I would be performing a service."
"Yes. You very well might be." Sahir solemnly nodded, averting her eyes as if she finally realized what type of danger her life was in. "But think, djinn. What would I have to gain by killing her mate and making room for you in his stead?"

Therese and Kane grimaced right before the office door behind them flew all the way open, then slammed shut. Sahir's eyes widened as she backed against the wall behind her desk.

Therese noticed the black mist swirling around her and Kane's ankles too late.

The entity burgeoned, rising between them, catching Therese first, then Kane in its powerful hot vortex before flinging them in opposite directions.

Therese lay on her back, stunned near the cherry wood bookcase. She shook her head, instantly sorry she'd dared move so soon after that toss when spears of pain stabbed her temples. She closed her eyes for a brief moment, opened them to find Kane on the floor several feet away.

"Teh-reese!"

She dug her elbows and heels into the carpet and retreated as fast as she could.
Kane got to his knees and aimed his body in her direction. As he did, a fireball detached itself from the immense mist—like a shuttle detaching from a larger mother ship—and hissed towards Sahir.

Sahir froze behind her desk like Bambi, and the ball struck her square in the chest with a sizzling thud.

Therese watched her collapse behind her desk without uttering a cry. "Oh God, Oh God..."

"Keep your head down!" Kane dove like a runner trying to beat the throw home, knocked the air out of her as his body slammed into hers and he shielded her against the bookcase.

"Kane ... Kane, we have to go to he—"

"No! She is gone."

Therese whimpered in his arms, Kane blocking her view of Sahir's legs—well-muscled silk-stocking calves—sticking out from behind the desk. She huddled in his embrace, welcomed his strength. If she had to go, then God let it be like this, in his arms.

"Ifreet!"

Laughter eddied out of the mist, alive and separate like the fireball; amused like a master puppeteer.

"You are more entertaining than I remember, Kane." Why does that voice sound familiar? Even in its guttural evilness, I know that voice.

"Your quarrel is with me, Ifreet."

"Silence!"

Therese listened to the hissing, muffled and low as she struggled in Kane's arms trying to see what was going on beyond the wall of his chest.
"Keep your head down."
"You can not shield her forever, Kane. When I am ready, I will return for you both. Your end will be sweeter than had Sahir not robbed me of the pleasure centuries ago."

Laughter suffused the air, drifted towards them, hovered. Therese heard another thud, more sizzling. Kane caught his breath, his entire body clenching as he tightened his hold around her.

The mist wafted away, seeping under the closed office door, familiar chuckling in its wake.

"Kane..." Therese pushed against him, felt the sudden coolness of his body immediately, as if he had been sitting in a refrigerated room for too long. "Kane?" No response, just quiet inactivity.

Oh God, please don't let him be—

He sucked in a large dose of air and coughed—convulsively like a saved drowning victim—and rolled off of her to his side. Therese jumped to her knees beside him, saw the smoke rising from his back, smelled singed flesh. "You're hurt!" she reached for him but stopped when he winced.

"I ... I will be fine."

"But..."

He caught her wrist, drew the hand to his mouth and planted a cool lingering kiss on her palm. "A moment is all I need."

She waited, and it killed her to just sit and watch his suffering.

He closed his eyes and after several endless moments he took both of her hands and squeezed them between his,
rubbing the palm of each with his thumbs and Therese was shocked that the friction generated cold instead of heat. "Here. Touch me."

She frowned, heart filling as she reached for his back. The flesh was tender and red beneath the charred remains of his shirt, but already healing, Therese saw. She put her hands over the burn, felt his muscles contract beneath her palms then relax as her cool hands made contact with his skin. She guessed it had started out as a second- or maybe even a third-degree burn before Kane's body had "worked" on it. Now it was just a blistering first, yet healing as she touched it.

"I didn't know you could ... I thought you were..."
"Indestructible?" Kane leaned up on an elbow, grimaced as he pulled her close with his free arm.
"Something like that."
"I am half-human. Mortal, not a God."
"So ... so you can die?"
"Of course. My life span may be a little longer than yours, but I can certainly die."

A little, she thought and wondered how being with her affected his and her "life span." Would hers get longer and his shorter until they finally caught up with each other somewhere in the middle?

Therese glanced over her shoulder at Sahir. A prolonged life span certainly hadn't helped her any.

"Conventional human weapons are not effective. But another djinn..." He cupped her chin and turned her to face him. "...can end our existence."
"I see," she murmured.
"Do not mourn her."
"Did you hate her so much?"
"I..." He averted his glance and shook his head. "I did not hate her."
"He could have killed us too, couldn't he?"
"If that had been his choice."
She threw up her hands in disgust. "Why didn't he, then!"
"He is toying with us ... with me."
She stared at him, heard more of what he didn't say than what he did say. "I'm your weakness, aren't I?"
"You are my strength, Teh-reese."
"I won't be if we keep up what we've been doing the last couple of days."
He smiled. "It is a trade-off I willingly accept."
"Will you stop being so cavalier about this, Kane." She shook him, jerked back her hands when he grimaced. "Sorry. But you know what I mean. The more things you do to ... to drain your energy, the less chance you'll have against..."
Kane shook his head before she finished. "He caught me by surprise this time. I will not let that happen again."
CHAPTER 21

Overall it has not been a bad day. It has, actually, been one of his more enjoyable and entertaining forays into the realm of this human sport for which he had acquired such a taste.

Ifreet is quite certain, in fact, that he has not had so much fun in more than four centuries. Not since 1566 when his assassination attempt on the then-Mughal emperor, Akbar, failed.

He had succeeded only in injuring Akbar's shoulder as the fortunate emperor rode back into Delhi. After this incident, Akbar changed his methods of rule, taking the supervision of the entire administration of the empire into his own hands.

He had respected Akbar if for nothing else than for the fact the man had been an ambitious and noble commander—one who'd built the largest army ever in the history of the Mughal Empire.

Ifreet had been a young djinn then, wide-eyed, impressionable even, and new at the game, his failure almost preordained.

Though Kane is as noble and formidable as the emperor ever was, and despite the djinn's hybrid origins, Ifreet does not intend to fail. He has planned too long and carefully for the day—watching the downfall of the djinn.

No, he thought, the only thing that will thwart me will be my own impatience.
Ifreet is simultaneously invigorated and frustrated, more than he has been in the last 200 years when Kane was first denied him. By all that is unholy, the peri and his mawla are making the game worth his while to the end! Almost worth prolonging it, since it would surely be an immense waste to eliminate such worthy contenders and strip away his own and only pleasure of late.

But, he thought, eliminate them I will. In war, as in any contest of wills, certain sacrifices must be made. He decides, then and there, to take the risk. He will procure other humans as formidable to appease his thirsts.

Forging across the lush carpeting, he self-flagellates, muttering as he derides himself for restraining fate. It has been true nonsense to spare them thus far. He had been close, so close to ending them then, his appetite whetted by the kahin's assassination.

Anticipation as palpable as mortality lingers in the air, teasing his senses with a taste of just rewards that await him for so many acts of mercy.

Yes, he thinks. I will be rewarded, sweetly satiated when I force Kane to his knees. Force him to plead for his life but, more important, plead for the life of his mawla and dreading a tragic end to their newfound love more than an end to his precious freedom.

Love, he scoffs, such a useless emotion, only for weaklings and beings with no aspiration, no vision. No power.

He is not a weakling, far from it, and will never own this quality or allow another to emasculate him with foolish emotion.
Never.

* * * *

Therese thought she'd gotten over her mistrust, thought she'd overcome her doubt. But even after her brush with death, even after Kane's atonement and protection, remnants of their beginnings—his traumatic entry into her life and the ensuing death and destruction—reemerged, canceling out all the good vibes that had come since.

Sahir had died at the hands of another despite Kane's best efforts to do the job himself. Although he had not been directly responsible for his countrywoman's end, Therese knew that her genie-man was in some way responsible. She knew he was at the root of everything that had happened in that office, everything that had happened to her since she'd set eyes on that damn ewer endless weeks and months ago.

Kane opened the door and peeked around the jamb as if sensing her contemplation, as if he knew that he was being thought about.

He crossed the room pushing a wooden TV tray—holding a steaming hot bowl of some concoction looking mysteriously like oatmeal—across the smooth shellacked floor to her bed. Therese felt a rueful smile creep up the side of her face, longing and trust piercing her heart at the sight of this fantastic and perfect being performing such a parental and ordinary task as bringing his mate a meal.

God ... mate. I'm his soul mate; he's mine...

Kane parked the tray a couple of feet away from the bed as he took a seat beside her, immediately reached to touch
her hair, stroking the silken tendrils for several long silent moments, his breathing and hers the only noise filling the room.

... *You used to worship me as you do her...*

Therese recoiled, stomach instantly knotting with regret when she caught the wounded flicker in his eyes.

How could she? The man had saved her life, had taken a fiery missile in the back for her.

Yes, but *would you have to dodge fiery missiles if he weren't in your life in the first place?*

Kane rebounded with his usual speed and nonchalance. "Justice is concerned that you are not taking care of yourself."

"Hmm, Justice. My good ol' busy-body brother-in-law."

"He is looking out for your well-being."

"I don't need him or you to do that."

He ignored her pique. "I promised him before he went off to work that I would see that you ate something to keep up your strength."

*He was the one who needed to keep up his strength—The Kahin Killer, The Ifreet Slayer—not her. *I'm not hungry."

Kane raised his eyebrows. "Nonsense. You need sustenance." He pulled the tray closer to the bed. "And you have not been eating well of late. Justice is well within his rights to be concerned, as am I."

"I said I'm not hungry!" Therese shoved the tray across the room, gaped as it slammed into the vanity several feet away and overturned, sending the bowl crashing and splattering its nutritious warm contents all over the floor's wood finish. She glared at Kane and he looked at her with a
calm arched-brow expression that made her feel like a silly spoiled brat but did nothing to lessen the urge to hit him. Which she did, punching his shoulders and shoving him away from her as she shouted at him to get out and leave her alone.

Kane remained where he sat, silent as he stared at her and waited for her tirade to subside; when it did, he said, "You are troubled."
"Understatement of the century."
He reached out and spread his fingers wide through her hair, seemed to luxuriate in the soft texture and smell as he closed his eyes and slid his hands through to her nape.
He drew her forward until her forehead kissed his. "You do not know if it is all right to trust me and are feeling guilty that you do. I understand this."
"Well, you understand a lot more than I do, buster."
He grinned. "However, I do not know what I can say to make you feel less guilty or better about ... about your feelings."
"That's a surprise. You seem to know and have an answer for everything else. Even if it's a half-assed wrong answer."
"You are being mean."
Therese gawked, had to smother a hysterical laugh lest he think she was laughing at him and she wasn't. She was laughing at her "mean" self.
"Do you plan to stay in bed for the rest of your life?"
"What rest of my life? I need a little time to recuperate that's all. I don't see anything wrong with taking a few days off from work, especially after what I've been through."
He inclined his head in that familiar serene way she knew so well. "There is nothing at all wrong with taking time off. If this is what you really wish to do. I do not believe it is."

"What would you know about it?"
"You can not hide out here forever."
"I'm not hiding."
Kane grimaced. "Yes, you are."
"What did you do with ... about ... Kane, what did you do with Sahir?" Therese had been afraid to ask before now, but curiosity was a pair of pliers that had unlocked her jaws and made her blurt out a question that had been weighing on her mind for more than a week.

Whatever magic he'd woven, whatever spell he'd cast, whatever tale he'd spun, they had to have been whoppers. No one at TIHAM had asked or whispered a word about Sahir's sudden absence. It was business as usual between staff and administration at the museum, as if the woman had never existed or impacted on their everyday operations.

"Do?" Kane frowned. "I do not underst—"
"You damn well do." Therese sneered. "She wasn't exactly a dog you could make a hit-and-run story up for to cover her disappearance, now was she?" She watched Kane wince and wanted to take back her words and slap her own self silly. But she refused to be cowed by her own fear and tactlessness. "I want to know what happened," she murmured.

"It is better that you do not know the details."
"What if I think it's not better?"
"I did what needed to be done, Teh-reese. I handled it. This is all you need to know."
God, the arrogance, Therese thought. They were right back at square one when he'd first infringed upon her existence telling her what she could and could not do, what she needed and did not need to know!

The really crappy thing was that she didn't want to know, was just being contrary and pushing him to give her information she knew he would, on his general principal, never give her, no matter how much she pushed him.

Therese could barely remember how he had gotten her out of TIHAM past all the spectators she'd heard milling about in the corridors outside Sahir's office. And she didn't want to remember any of this anymore than she wanted to know how Kane had handled it. She didn't want to remember anything that had happened to her since Jury's death. None of it!

And if she were to get her wish, where would this leave her if Kane ... if he were to be taken away from her too? Where would she be without the memories of his lovemaking, his love?

She'd be nowhere, with nothing and no one to show for all the pain she'd endured after her husband had been snatched from her. She'd be alone again, without even her memories to fall back on and keep her going.

"Kane, I think we should part company now, before we get in so deep that we can't anymore..." Therese smothered another laugh, didn't know how she had gotten that entire sentence out and still kept a straight face.

He flashed her another wounded look. "I do not understand."
"Kane..." She grabbed one of his hands, drew it to her breast, held it there and closed her eyes as she took a couple of deep breaths.

"Teh-reese?" He palmed her face and she opened her eyes to stare at him, could say nothing for several long moments.

"I mean, if there's a way to release you from this binding, your servitude to me, and I know there is, then I ... I'm granting you your freedom, Kane."

"I refuse."

*Can he do that? "You ... you refuse?"*

"I do not wish to be free of you, mawla. I am here now because I want to be, not because I am bound."

"But Kane..."

He slid his hand out of her grasp, cupped her face and drew her near. "I wish to be here. I am bound to you now not by any spell or talisman. But by this..." He put both his hands over his own chest, peering at her so hard until she thought she would burst into a ball of flames.

She lowered her head, averting her gaze. "This ... this can't be good for you. *I* can't be good for you."

"Why do you speak thus? You are good for me. You are everything that is good *in* me."

"Kane, I can't..." Therese swallowed over the nugget in her throat, overwhelmed with feeling. If he touched her, really touched her, she would disintegrate, she just knew it. She couldn't be what he wanted her to be, what he needed her to be. She wasn't that woman, the female of his dreams, worthy of idolatry. "I'm not what—"
"I need you, Teh-reese," he whispered, lifting and cupping her face again. "I have never said that to anyone before. I will never say it again, unless it is to you."

"Stop it, Kane. Please."

"I will not."

She smirked. If arrogance and obstinacy alone could defeat Ifreet Djinn, then she had been worrying for nothing all along because her genie-man would defeat Ifreet hands down.

He reached out and stroked her closest arm as he stood and sauntered over to retrieve the tray before he glanced over a shoulder. "I will fix you some more."

"Don't." She stood and made her way across the floor to where he was crouched over the bowl.

"We have gone over this before. You must e—"

Therese stooped beside him, caressed his neck and felt his body shiver beneath her touch. She snickered. "I know it's good for me and all, but I've never been very fond of oatmeal."

"Oh."

"C'mon." She caught him by an arm, led him back to the bed, feeling incredibly aroused and powerful as she sensed his muscles tense beneath her fingers and realized that even an all-knowing, mind-reading genie-man still had a lot to learn about her when it came to the simple things. And she was looking forward to every minute of teaching him. "Let's work up an appetite, and give you a reason to make me eat a healthy breakfast, other than oatmeal that is..."
This place used to be a refuge, so peaceful and thought inducing, especially after rough waters with Jury. She used to escape here particularly after, as Candy liked to put it, some of her and Jury's worst knock-down-drag-outs. Sometimes even on her days off—which had been rare and far between, one of Jury's many arguments against her job—she'd drop by and roam the corridors, lingering in some of the more deserted exhibit halls and absorbing the serene and wise history of the dead—dead people, but far from dead cultures. Dead people with no more troubles; dead people who no longer had to worry about offending or pleasing anyone; dead people resting in peace.

Therese actually used to wake up in the mornings looking forward to coming here—digging in her heels, rolling up her sleeves and getting to work.

But what once was a safe haven, her home away from home, had, in the last several weeks, become the bane of her existence.

Every office that she entered, every exhibit she passed was a glaring reminder of what she'd lost within the confines of these walls, the people who had died because of her curiosity and misplaced dedication—her husband, her baby, her ... her boss.

Therese raised her eyes from her agenda notes, tried to recover her place as she took in the expectant expressions of her staff—a small array of collection managers and curatorial
assistants, everyone under her supervision except the interns and volunteers who she'd be meeting with later in the day.

Everyone except Darius.

She missed him more than any of her assistants, more than she wanted to admit, even more than she missed Kane, who represented a different assault on her nerves altogether from the one represented by the museum. But she knew that had Darius been in the vicinity, his mere presence would calm her and take the edge off of her jittery nerves.

She'd been a wreck since the beginning of the day, jumping at the creak of every door opening, the squeak of every unoiled chair hinge beneath the weight of a body.

She'd appeared so obviously unsettled that even the usually self-absorbed Lundquist had commented on her nerves and asked after her welfare.

Exhibiting uncertainty and vulnerability to one's staff was never a good idea, but letting one's guard slip in front of the avaricious likes if Jakob was a definite professional infraction Therese never wanted to commit.

Someone knocked at the conference room door and Therese jerked her eyes toward the back of the room expecting to see a large black haze insinuating itself into the room, relieved when she saw Amber's blonde head peeking around the doorjamb.

"All right, gang..." Therese tucked her agenda notes into her pocket folder as she glanced at the clock on the wall above Amber's head and decided to adjourn the meeting a little early. She'd been repeating herself and losing her train of thought for the last ten minutes anyway. Might as well call
it a morning. "Let's wrap this up. Questions...?" She glanced around the conference table, touched every face with her gaze, not anticipating any problems. Her staff was reliable and independent self-starters. And if they had any questions, they knew where to track her down; her door was always open.

"Like Sahir's ..." Therese shook off that vibe, gathered up and tapped her stack of folders against the sleek tabletop. "Well, if there's nothing, let's get to managing and acquiring, shall we." She watched her staff of fifteen quietly file out past Amber. Once everyone had left the room, the intern made her way over to the chair adjacent Therese, flopped down and threw her legs up on the table.

"Such irreverence," Therese teased, sat back in her own chair. "Anything on the burner?"

"Oh, a little birdie named Darius called to check in..." Amber blew on the fingernails of one hand and rubbed them against her shirtfront.

Therese leaned forward in her chair. "Fine time for him to call, after I've had most of my staff meetings for the day."

"He had news about some acquisition he had mentioned to you a few weeks ago...?"

"Now we're talking." Therese rubbed her palms together. "What's the status?"

"Seems to be some big secret of which I am not worthy. He wouldn't give me any details. Said you were the only one he could share initial fine points with, the first one he wanted to show it to. Well, I, of course, was quite affronted."
She watched as Amber batted her long lashes, retiring southern belle style, and laughed. The kid was so melodramatic.

"Did he say where I could reach him?"
"I thought you knew. He's at home."

Therese frowned, although this wasn't that unorthodox, especially at TIHAM. Several of the curatorial staff worked out of their homes; sometimes it was the most beneficial place for them to conduct preservation and classification tests. In fact, some staff preferred it, especially when their reputation was on the line and tied to the protection and maintenance of a particular object.

"Anyway, he wants you to hightail it over there as soon as possible. Needs you to sign off and approve some things before he makes the arrangements to have it shipped over." Amber stood and languidly stretched as she ambled toward the exit.

Therese stood and followed. "I'm on my way. And Am..." She caught the younger woman by a shoulder with one hand as she opened the conference room closet and retrieved her micro-fiber trench with the other. "Can you do me a favor?"

The intern's eyes lit. Girl was always down for some intrigue and excitement.

"Name it."

"No rush, but when you catch up with Kane just let him know I had to go check on a piece..."

"You want me to tell him where?"

Therese slid on her coat as she led Amber out of the conference room, ruminating. If she could have avoided
leaving a message altogether, she thought, she would have. There was no love lost between Kane and Darius and the prospect of them occupying the same place and time did not fill her up with the warmest and fuzziest of feelings. But she also knew genie-man had been worrying about her inordinately for the last week, and didn't want her too far out of his sight. Fairness and consideration only dictated she let him know.

"Therese? You want me to?"
"Only if he asks."
"Gotcha."

Therese rushed for the open elevator at the end of the bank, Amber on her heels. "Where is he, by the way?"
"Oh, that paragon of virtue and patience is busy taking a bunch of fourth graders on a tour of the figural exhibits, God bless him."

Therese shook her head and chuckled as she hurried off the elevator, told herself God bless the fourth graders. "I'll be back as soon as I can," she called over a shoulder.

"See you then." Amber saluted and watched her supervisor dash out the front entrance.

* * * *

Kane had been uneasy since rising at his usual early hour to perform morning Salah. At issue had not been the fact that the previous day he had begun fasting for Ramadan—though this occasion did weigh heavy on his thoughts and upon his very human anatomy. No, it was the fact that Therese would
be returning to the place where so many of her bad memories and latest traumas dwelled.

It was not enough that she slept under the same roof with the enemy every night and enjoyed it, if her reactions were any indication, but that the living embodiment of all her emotional woes had insisted she return to the inanimate source and face her demons.

Were that he could have found an easier way for her to overcome this chapter of her life, but he could not. He would have surrendered to Ifreet and renounced his own freedom this very moment if it would have meant sparing his mawla.

Ifreet Djinn, however, had other plans, as Kane well knew. He would not accept his enemy's surrender, would not quit the game until it had reached its logical conclusion—the death and defeat of his prey—pushed by his hand.

Kane caressed the scabbard tucked into the front of the khakis he wore, comforted by its weight against his groin. He would be ready for Ifreet this time, come Jahannam or Jannah, this he vowed.

"Mr. Chambers! Mr. Chambers!"

Kane glanced to the back of the line where a young girl had her hand raised, eagerly waving for his attention. She was so reminiscent of Aziza with her dark-chocolate complexion and wild curls bouncing around her oval face that his heart caught as he needlessly squinted at her badge as if trying to read her name. He already knew more about her than her name, which was Shaniqua; knew more than her own parents knew about her or than she knew about herself. He had communed with and touched her and each of the
other children as soon as their teacher Miss Benson had introduced him to the class and he had begun his tour.

They were a sharp group of children. A few rogues in the gathering—mostly of the male variety—but good intelligent children nonetheless.

"She's about to ask you a real dumb question, Mr. Chambers," one of the "rogues" spoke up as he pulled one of Shaniqua's pony tails and giggled behind a hand right before she turned and punched his shoulder the way Aziza slugged her older brother.

Kane could tell from the way the boy looked at Shaniqua—the same way he often looked upon Therese—that the boy adored the ground his young counterpart walked on. "You're dumb!" Shaniqua shouted.

Kane clapped his hands over his head twice, instantly netting attention. "Let us not fight amongst ourselves." Fourteen pairs of young female eyes followed his every move. Eleven young males gave their grudging attention. "Remember, no question is dumb. Give your fellow students their share of respect." He chuckled as Shaniqua stuck her tongue out at her harasser. "Now, what was it you wanted to ask?"

"This figural art here on display..." Shaniqua began then referred to the pamphlet that had been distributed to each student before the tour had begun. "I was reading here that in most Islamic circles it is forbidden..."

Kane smiled and nodded. "That is correct." Finally, a subject into which he could sink his teeth.
"Does that mean it's against the law? And does that mean that the museum is breaking the law, by having these exhibits?"

The children huddled close, backing him against the nearest display, excitedly chattering and alert, as if he was about to reveal to them secrets of the universe.

"Actually, what it means in Islam is that..." Kane trailed off when Amber sidled up to his left, barely missing a beat as he leaned in to hear her whisper.

His heart throbbed as everything suddenly fell into place with her message. He swallowed hard as he turned to her. "Amber, I must leave. Would you please take over the tour for me?"

"Sure, Kane, no biggy. But she said she'd be back as soon as she could."

*Not likely if I don't get to her first.*

Kane sprinted for the closest exit.

* * * *

Therese snuggled into a corner of Darius's sofa, feeling more comfortable and at ease than she ever could have believed possible, especially after what had happened to her the last time she'd been here. Although, she reminded herself, that had not been Darius's fault.

"Are you sure you will not have another glass of champagne, Sweet?" Darius smiled and took a seat in the love seat adjacent the sofa.
"Not yet, Dar." Therese shook her head. "I think it's a bit premature of me to start celebrating when I haven't even seen the piece yet."

"You do not trust my judgment?"

"Of course I do." She chuckled, feeling light-headed, certainly more light-headed than one glass of champagne warranted. "I'd just like to get a look at the reason I'm celebrating with my bestest assistant curator." Therese hiccuped and chuckled against a quickly raised palm.

Why was she feeling so giddy?

"All right then, Sweet. Come." Darius sprang to his feet and caught her by a hand. "It is time for the unveiling..." He led her to a covered object beside the horse-and-rider sculpture and turned back to her, lush eyebrows arched over bright honey eyes, prompting.

"Was this..." She frowned at him. "I don't remember seeing this here when I arrived."

"You were probably preoccupied."

"I suppose..."

"Here." He grasped her hand and placed it on the covering. "I give you the honor. Unveil away."

Therese smiled; heart thudding with the same type of excitement she'd experienced at her first successful exhibit at TIHAM. "Here goes." She pulled the tarpaulin off of the object and gawked at the piece atop the pedestal for a long time, turned to see Darius smiling.

"Are you not pleased?"
“What…? Where did you…? How did you…?” She shook her head. This couldn't be the same one. This couldn't be what she thought it was. "A Blacas…"

"Not just a Blacas, Sweet. But the Blacas."

"No…" Therese stepped back, shaking her head as she bumped solidly into the wall of Darius's chest. She pivoted, almost keeled over from the sight of him growing—incremental inches at best—but sprouting before her eyes nonetheless, 5'6" and still growing.

*Oh God, this … this isn't happening. I've had too much champagne. Too much…*

He grasped one of her hands and urged her back to the pedestal. "Touch it, Sweet. And you will see what you already know to be the truth."

She touched it, couldn't not touch it, drawn to it as she had been in the basement, as she had been in the attic.

As she touched it, made first contact, her mind's eye was blinded by a brilliant flash, causing her to curl her fingers around the handle as if for support.

She saw them as clearly as if they were in a film running across her memory.

Sahir smiling as she banishes Kane to the ewer, forcing him inside, settling the stopper in the mouth and tucking it home.

*God, oh God … He's trapped, closed in and trapped and … and so afraid.*

Therese feels his fear as sharply as if it is hers. She had never known he was capable of fear, especially this kind—suffocating and overwhelming—had only had a small hint in
the Trooper that first time she'd closed the windows and doors and he'd turned green.

How had she been so heartless as to have laughed at his terror?

She didn't even have time to contemplate this further before another display assailed her mental vision, this one so vivid and powerful it knocked the wind out of her.

Therese gasped and closed her eyes tight, clutching the handgrip, sees Darius—not sure how she recognizes the street peddler as her assistant, but she does—as he stops Jury on a street in the Village. Houston and Prince Streets, right at the corner of the Alternative Museum where she and Jury had attended an occasional new music and jazz concert.

*Darius leads Jury to his table upon where all sorts of exotic trinkets lay. He solicits Jury's time, offers one of the trinkets at a very good price.*

"A present for your wife."

"How do you ... ?"

Darius pointed to Jury's band and Therese reflexively reached for her own, momentarily flustered when she doesn't feel it where it has been for five years.

Another vision, this of Darius planting the ewer first in the basement, then later in Therese's attic.

Sahir had been telling Kane the truth, and she had died with her knowledge.

Therese watched the final presentation, thought this one was the worst of all. Marsh, her sweet loyal Marshmallow, alone in the attic discovering something strange in the corner.
He approaches, cautious and stealthy, but not cautious enough as the cobra strikes.

*I can't watch anymore. I can't watch this.*

She jerked open her eyes to see Darius poised in front of her, leering.

"I really loathed killing that animal."

"It was you," Therese murmured, shocked and still incredulous after all she's seen. "You were the other entity. You—" She choked back a sob. "You're Ifreet? It was you?"

Darius calmly nodded, reached out a hand to caress the squat body of the ewer. "I must admit, the two of you have given me such joy going through your hoops. But regrettably, the game must end."

"Game? You killed my husband!"

"Therese my sweet, you mustn't get so worked up over this. None of this was personal. It was all sport ... a contest."

"Sport? My Jury is dead!"

"Yes, but you acquired a most wonderful replacement in the bargain, did you not?"

"You sick bastard!" Therese flew at him; more sober and drunk on rage than she'd ever been in her life, arms and legs windmilling full-tilt like a little kid fighting the biggest project bully.

Darius easily sidestepped her, grabbed her arms and restrained them at her sides as he pulled her into his arms and held her against his body.

Therese wept, struggling still, and screamed, "I'll kill you if I get out of this!"

"I suspect that you might try."
"Leggo! Let me go!"

Darius covered her mouth, held tight. "Really, Sweet, you should stop fighting me so. You cannot win."

"Perhaps not by herself."

Darius spun, holding her in his arms like a rag doll, and Therese caught sight of Kane standing inside the loft door—fists at his side, teeth clenched—and the tears flowed more freely from her eyes, angrier, hotter, tears of relief.

"Ah, your hero has finally arrived." Darius chuckled. "I knew you would be along shortly. Now everyone and everything is where they should be. The talisman, my pendant and the Blacas all in the same space and time."

Kane grimaced, took several steps forward and stopped short when Darius removed his hand from Therese's mouth and crooked an arm around her neck in a choke hold. "I don't need to apprise of you how unwise that would be, djinn. I could break her in half before you took another step."

"Please..." Kane paused, closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. "Let her go. It is me with whom you have a feud."

"You are just in time for the festivities, peri."

"Do not address me thus."

"And why shouldn't I? It is what you are. Benevolent spirit helping the humans." Darius sneered, his tone stopped only short of spitting. "You are a disgrace to your kind, Kane."

"Mawla is my kind."

"Ah, that is correct. You are that rare half-breed. Unfortunate for you."

"We shall see about unfortunate."
"You threaten me?" Darius arched a brow and grinned as he removed his arm from Therese's throat.

She grappled anew, gasping for air as she tried to elbow him. No use. She couldn't get up an arm.

"I do not threaten," Kane whispered, pierced Therese with a look that sent electricity blazing through her limbs. "But I am prepared to defend myself."

Therese took the deepest breath she could, hauled back with both feet and jammed her heels into Darius's knees as hard as she could.

He howled, his blood curdling scream suffusing the large loft space and bouncing off of the walls as he instantly dropped her to the floor.

Therese rolled across the carpet to the sofa, out of range as Kane noiselessly rushed across the plush carpeting and Darius's bellow degenerated into low laughter.

"Marvelous, Djinn!" He shouted and clapped, spreading his arms wide as he offered his chest. "Until the very end, I will remember this unmitigated spirit!"

Therese watched Kane snatch his miniature sword from the holster in his khakis, surprised at the speed with which he moved, wondering if it would be enough—if anything would be enough—when he released an Apache-like cry from his core and lunged.

Darius didn't flinch.

She gaped when he roared—laughing like a mad man—as Kane pierced his chest with the point of the sword.

Darius hauled off and backhanded Kane across the room. "You insult me, djinn, with such an ordinary weap ... on..."
Kane lay crumpled in a far corner of the room, motionless for several endless moments.

Therese grimaced as Darius reached for the sword, evidently more deeply embedded than he had thought. But she realized it was something more, something else and not the sword's penetration that was causing the Ifreet Djinn anxiety.

Darius flopped to the floor, confusion spreading across his face as Therese knelt several feet away.

"Teh-reese..." Kane panted as he crawled over and collapsed at her heels. "Finish him ... finish him!"

She didn't hesitate, closed the space between her and Ifreet writhing on the floor. She paused for the second it took her to watch the blood oozing from his wound as he slid the blade out a few inches.

Blood. If he can bleed, he can die...

"Oh yes you can..." Therese lunged, wrapped her hands around Ifreet's and the sword handle. "Die ... die!" She ignored the blood, so much blood—envisioning every vampire movie she had ever watched in the darkness and safety of her living room with her brothers—and pushed down with all her might. She plunged the blade as far as it would go, until it was no longer visible and the only thing left was the handle jutting up from Ifreet's chest.

Therese thought it was over until she noticed the vibrations beneath her, controlled concentrated tremors quickly spreading out from the area where Ifreet lay.

Kane caught her around the waist and dragged her back. "What...?"
She turned fetal in his arms as he tumbled them across the carpet, bounced back against the sofa and flipped it over them both like a tent.

Therese peeked from a small opening between the sofa and Kane's arms, wanted to, needed to see the end of Ifreet.

The area four feet around him glowed black, orange sparks spreading and dancing across the floor before shooting into the air at the ceiling then bursting like a fireworks display before slamming straight down into the being in its path.

Ifreet's body violently churned like a building caught in the middle of an earthquake, swelling and pulsing and seeping until it finally exploded like a small-contained atomic blast.

Therese cried out, ducked her face against Kane's chest, hiding her vision from the burgeoning mushroom cloud.

Kane held her tight. "It is almost over ... almost..."

She felt the warmth encompassing the room like a large electric blanket turned up high, reaching them beneath the shelter of the sofa and wondered if they were almost over.

When would the shaking stop? When would the heat subside?

"Soon, Teh-reese. Very soon..."

The room slowly cooled as if responding to Kane's words, vibrations easing, slowing...

Their immediate area stilled, finally turned motionless and silent.

Therese pulled her head from the safety of Kane's chest, glanced about her as he sat up and righted the sofa.
She stood beside him, hesitantly reached for his face, wincing more than he did at the sight of the bruise covering the entire left side of his temple and jaw.

"I will be fine."

She nodded, closed her eyes and forced down bile when she noticed the gore splattering every surface of the room.

*God, for a mystical indestructible being, he was certainly full of—*

Kane slid an arm around her waist, chuckling and shaking his head at her. "I can hear your weird sense of humor at play."

"I still have one?"

He nodded, bent to kiss the top of her head as he steered her toward the door. "But I have so much more."
EPILOGUE

Hamilton, Bermuda

One Year Later

Therese had always wanted to come back, ever since her honeymoon with Jury. Ever since they had conceived their first child on the small tranquil island.

Today's visit was bittersweet and served a dual purpose—a much needed vacation and late honeymoon for the new director of TIHAM and her assistant curator and new husband.

"Promise me if I go before you, you'll have my ashes spread over this beautiful blue water?"

"Stop talking silly."

"Promise me."

"Okay. Fine. I promise. Now can we go get our feet wet, Mr. Morbid?"

Therese heard the conversation in her head as if she had had it just yesterday. And it had been yesterday ... hundreds of sweet yesterdays ago.

She'd had to fight tooth and nail with Mrs. Hunter, but in the end it had been her remaining son Justice who had convinced her to do the right thing and turn Jury's ashes over to Therese.

So now she stood here on the deck of a pleasure boat that Kane had rented for the day, prepared to do her Jury's bidding.
Kane sidled behind her, eased an arm around her inflated belly and leaned in to kiss the back of her neck.

Therese giggled and shivered in his embrace as he wrapped both arms around her and drew her back against him.

"How are we doing?" he whispered.

"We're doing just fine." Therese smiled and rubbed his hands resting on her belly at the same instant the baby kicked. Kane gasped and she glanced back at the expression of awe on her husband's face.

"I do not think I will ever get used to this feeling, this knowing that a living breathing being dwells within."

"Think how I feel having a living breathing punter kicking within."

Kane chuckled, bent to kiss her again. "Are you ready?"

"I think so." She nodded, suddenly turning sober and Kane released her to reach for the bronze urn wherein lay Jury's remains. He proffered one of the handgrips while he held on to the other, the urn poised between them.

"There are two kinds of people," Kane opened. "The sinful and the good. Life is but a passage to another realm and in this realm, the good will find their reward." He signaled to Therese and together they tipped over the urn and watched the fine granules of Jury's leavings scatter upon the wind, out over the serene blue waters of Hamilton. "Verily, in the remembrance of Allah, does Jury Hunter's heart find rest," Kane murmured, glanced at his wife then they chorused, "In the name of Allah, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful..."

—END—
If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.