

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



*Lust
Eternal*

SABRINA YORK

Lust Eternal

Sabrina York

For thousands of years, Keeshan has waited. A curse put him in the lamp, damning him to an eternity of pleasing the women who find it. Each time, the women enter the lamp, ensnared in a web of lust and love. And each time, just as he grows to care, the women leave.

But Aimalee is different somehow. With her, Keeshan's desire knows no bounds—he needs

to be with her, inside her, every second she's there, like an addict who just can't get enough. Eventually she'll leave just like the others but until then, Keeshan plans to indulge her every sinful urge. And maybe, just maybe, she's the key to breaking the curse.

Inside Scoop: This paranormal romance features a plus-size heroine and a hero who worships her curves.

*A Romantica® paranormal erotic
romance from Ellora's Cave*

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Celeste Deveney, who refused to let me give up on Keeshan and Aimalee.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Carrie Jackson for her editing genius, making this book the best it could be, and to the Ellora's Cave art department for an awesome cover. To all the Ellora's Cave staff who work so hard to make these books shine, you are all amazing!

My heartfelt appreciation to my fellow writers for their support. Especially Sidney Bristol, Monica Britt, Carmen Cook, Wendy Delaney, Delilah Devlin, Cerise DeLand, Tina Donahue, Natalie French, Desiree Holt, Kathy Klein, Gina Lamm and Chantilly White.

To all my friends in the Greater Seattle Romance Writers of America, Passionate Ink and Rose City Romance Writers groups, thank you for all your support and encouragement.

Chapter One

Aimalee gazed at the ancient artifacts arranged on the worktable and twin slashes of pleasure and pride washed through her. The depth of the stories these remnants embodied fascinated her. It was her charge to bring this mystery to the world, to make it live again.

And tonight it would all happen. Tonight was the culmination of many years of research and hard work. This revelation would make her name in the antiquities world.

Discovering a lost civilization tended to impress even the most jaded historian.

These particular objects had been found on a dig in a desolate rocky valley in what once had been the great empire of Persia, mingled with typical remnants of the day. But these items were unlike anything she had seen before. Clearly not Persian, their style was far more exotic and the symbols were utterly unfamiliar. They sparked her curiosity and sent her fantasies running rampant. They were moldy old historical fantasies but fantasies nonetheless.

She gently repositioned an exquisite ceremonial bowl, her gloved hand lovingly tracing the mysterious carvings on its lip. Lord. What she wouldn't give to be able to decipher those symbols. While they weren't cuneiform—at least any adaptations she had studied—they carried hints of Median and Assyrian influences. The odd thing was they also incorporated Sumerian cryptograms.

Civilizations five thousand years apart on the timeline.

Even so, what really caught her attention was the way the etchings seemed to shimmer, shift on the

metal surface. She was sure it was simply an illusion but couldn't keep herself from staring at them. Every item in her display was stamped with the delicate, enigmatic scrawl.

Of all them, the lamp was her favorite. Something about it spoke to her. She picked it up, cradling it. She loved the weight, the breadth, the warmth of it. While it was not a particularly ornate creation—except for the whimsical dance of the spout—the design, the inscrutable inscriptions on the gleaming gold face, caught and held the eye. When she rubbed at a tiny smudge with her thumb, she

could have sworn the lamp glowed in appreciation.

But then she had always been a fey and fanciful creature.

“There you are.”

Aimalee tried not to cringe as a sharp voice, akin to a fireplace poker on a chalkboard, sliced through her sanctuary. It was difficult not to cringe. *Sorcha*. Lovely.

“I should’ve known I’d find you here.”

Aimalee set the ancient lamp onto the worktable and meticulously drew off her gloves before she turned. She needed to

gird her loins before an interaction with Sorcha. She usually did.

It wasn't that she didn't like the museum's public relations director. But Sorcha had an uncanny ability to make Aimalee feel uncomfortable in her own skin. Inadequate.

Sorcha was everything Aimalee had always wanted to be but wasn't. Tall, willowy and sophisticated. She wore only the highest fashion. Her shoes were sleek with impossible heels. Her hair and makeup were always flawless. Like a mannequin's.

Aimalee couldn't tame her

wayward curls if her life depended on it. And rare was the day she didn't have three-thousand-year-old dust smudged across her cheek.

She rubbed her palms on her faded, stained jeans and cleared her throat. "I'm always here." Sometimes it seemed as though she lived in this musty basement. Then again, this was the only place she felt at home. And frankly she resented this intrusion, especially today.

But she didn't let it show. She never let it show. Never let anything show.

Sorcha wrinkled a perfect

button nose and scanned the cluttered room with a moue of distaste. "I don't know how you can stand it. No windows. And...it *smells.*" Yes. It did smell. It smelled like history. It happened to be an aroma Aimalee loved. "I would hate being stuck down here."

Aimalee rubbed at the pulse throbbing in her temple. "Did you want something?"

"Ah, yes." Sorcha switched on her most brilliant gee-I-want-something-from-you smile. "Carter can't find the appendix for your dissertation."

Aimalee frowned. "Why does he

want that?" For heaven's sake. Carter had never shown much interest in Aimalee's research. In fact, for a museum director he exhibited a surprising indifference to history. Then again, when they were together he usually had other things on his mind.

Sorcha shrugged one shoulder. She fiddled with a hair that had somehow come undone from her elaborately curled coif. "He's meeting with the board, I guess. He probably wants to mention you."

That made sense. Naturally the board of directors would be interested in her recent discovery.

When the findings were released to the journals there would be a huge hoopla in the antiquities community. And hoopla meant moola. The board was all about moola.

“I have it on my computer.”

“Hmm. And what’s the password?”

Aimalee sighed. “Sorcha, I am not giving you my password.”

“It’s for *Carter*.”

As though that would make a difference. Aimalee’s computer was her life. Everything was on there. Everything that mattered anyway. “I can give it to him later.”

“He wants it now.”

Typical. Carter was always impulsive and impatient. Aimalee didn't mind so much when they were in bed but the rest of the time his impetuosity was just annoying. Like now. Aimalee tolerated it because...well, because he was Carter. He was quite the catch. For someone like her. Handsome. Successful. And as the great-grandson of the famous Egyptologist Howard Carter—several times removed—he had a certain cachet in their world.

Aimalee sighed. “I have a copy in my files.” She bent down to

unlock her lateral files but didn't miss Sorcha's grimace. She riffled through her meticulously arranged documents and pulled out a thick folder. "Here it is." The result of five years of intensive study.

Sorcha hesitated before holding out an exquisitely manicured hand. "He wanted a soft copy."

"I can get that to him later."

"Really, Aimalee. What do you have to do that is so important you can't just go up to your office and save it on a thumb drive?" Ah. Now the real Sorcha began to emerge. That sweet bow-shaped lip curled into a nasty snarl and sharp

green eyes snapped with annoyance. At any second, Aimalee expected several more heads to sprout from her neck and begin whipping around with slavering, snarling zeal. Like the Hydra.

“I’m finishing up the Arabian Nights display. Remember? For tonight? Kinda important.” Aimalee glanced back at the table impatiently. She wanted to get back to work.

Sorcha snorted and stuffed the precious sheaf of papers carelessly under her arm. Aimalee tried not to wince. “Sometimes I think you care more about these dusty old artifacts

than you do about your boyfriend.”

Aimalee froze, trying not to let her shock show. “My *boyfriend*?”

Caught out, Sorcha flushed. Carter had insisted they keep their relationship secret because he was the museum director and she was a curator. Aimalee had always quietly resented the fact she could never stand by his side in the bright light of day – but she’d understood. She’d never told a soul.

That meant only one thing.

He had.

And he’d told *Sorcha*.

Acid churned in her gut.

“W-what makes you think he’s my boyfriend?”

“Oh please.” Sorcha arched a supercilious brow. “I notice everything.”

Everything?

There was nothing to notice. Carter was always careful about that. Meticulously careful. Painfully careful. He went out of his way to appear indifferent to her whenever they were in public. And sometimes when they weren’t.

Aimalee picked up a clipboard and pretended to scan the sheet on top. “I have to get back to work. Did you want anything else?”

“There was one other thing. Carter asked if you could, you know, not come tonight.”

“Not come tonight?” Aimalee whirled around and gaped at Sorcha. She’d been working on this display for months, utterly devoted to this project for years. She’d been so looking forward to showing off her work, presenting her findings. She’d even bought a new dress for heaven’s sake.

That happened, maybe, once a decade or so.

“It’s going to be quite a crush. All the big benefactors will be there. And you are...” Sorcha made

a scornful little flourish with slender fingers. Her expression said it all — *mousy*. Aimalee knew it to be true. She knew what she was. But having Sorcha point it out rankled.

“This is *my* display.”

“Sure. Do what you need to set it up but then make yourself scarce. Be out of there by seven. ‘Kay?” Sorcha pinned on a dazzling smile. “I told him you’d understand.”

With that she spun on her Jimmy Choos and waltzed from the room, elegantly swinging between boxes and crates and piles of books, leaving Aimalee sitting at her worktable, reeling with shock and

repressed rage.

Make yourself scarce.

The mandate of her entire existence.

The fuck she wasn't coming tonight. She'd worked far too long, far too hard on her dissertation, on this presentation, to simply fade into the background now when it was all coming to fruition. This was her baby. Oh, she'd be there. Come hell or high water.

Without thinking, without redonning her protective gloves—a monumental no-no in the museum world—Aimalee picked up the lamp and a cleaning cloth and

began to polish her treasure. A deep sense of satisfaction and pleasure spiked through her, assuaging her annoyance.

Okay, so her love life was more than a little disappointing and frustrating. And yes, her professional prospects were limited but at least she loved her work. Really loved her work...

She renewed her invigorated scrubbing on that one smudge that just wouldn't wipe away.

Imagine the gall. Asking her to miss the night of her life so Sorcha could stand in the limelight at Carter's side and reap the rewards.

Aimalee rubbed harder and faster, fury rising like a chained beast in her belly. A red tide descended, blurring her vision. Everything beyond the lamp faded. The world beyond her passion, her work, dissolved.

She'd had enough of this.

Enough hiding her relationship.

Enough elicited, hurried trysts.

Enough secrets.

Enough —

Her movements slowed as a strange sensation crawled down her spine from her neck to her solar plexus. It pooled in her womb. Her

fingers and toes began to tingle. Throb. Prickles of excitement and anticipation skittered over her skin. Her body warmed, softened, dampened.

Her hand flew to her nape where gentle tendrils caressed her —like a lover's whisper. The tingling increased and contracted and wafted inward to settle just below her pounding heart. Her essence condensed, coalesced, as light as smoke, wafting and roiling. A strange sense of unreality, of disengagement, overcame her. She closed her eyes and the dizzy sensation increased. She tried to

open them again but couldn't. She twisted, curled, floated in the ether. A great whooshing sensation rocked her consciousness, sucking her into a smaller and smaller space. A dark place.

And then an eerie silence, a supreme stillness, descended.

* * * * *

Slowly, she came to herself. She glanced around in a befuddled daze and stilled. She was no longer in her familiar workroom but in a lavish boudoir, a seraglio swathed in gauzy, flowing drapes. Glowing braziers wreathed in aromatic

smoke lit the room with a dim, somnambulant light. The velvet cushions she reclined upon teased her sensitive skin. With a start, she realized she was utterly naked. A shiver coursed through her. What on earth had happened? Where was she?

But before she could work it out, a billow of iridescent fog roiled before her. Aimalee stared, transfixed as the cloud slowly coalesced into human form. A man.

A very large man.

She tipped back her head and their gazes met, clashed. His eyes glowed with a scorching fervor. A

bolt of electricity shot through her.

His features were stark, a savage beauty etched with a desperate hunger—high, striking cheekbones and wide, sensuous lips. Dark hair curled gently about his face and neck. A sudden desire to comb those silky skeins skittered through her.

Aimalee swallowed heavily. Her avaricious attention trailed down across brown shoulders and powerful arms. His chest was bare and broad and ridged. It rippled at the mere touch of her gaze.

He stood, legs slightly apart, bunching thighs taut as though he

were about to spring forward but was holding himself back with great effort. Strength, power and passion rolled off him in waves.

But for metal cuffs about his wrists and neck, he was naked.

Oh. And he was aroused. Magnificently and tremendously aroused.

The sight of his jutting, throbbing member made her heart clench. A strange heat pooled in her womb when she noticed the pearlescent drop glistening at the tip of his cock.

He was, in a word, ready.

Then again, so was she.

And then he spoke—a deep, mellifluous voice that resonated straight through to her soul.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Aimalee,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for you a very long time.”

Chapter Two

Aimalee leapt to her feet and grabbed one of the oversized cushions to cover her nakedness. She gaped at the enormous man in confusion. His words made no sense at all. At the same time, those words, that tone, their timbre, moved her in a way she couldn't quite comprehend.

They bespoke a sense of hunger, of passion, of desire – for *her*.

In a world wreathed in apathy, she had never known the like. She had secretly yearned for a man to

look at her like *that*. To speak to her with such leashed passion.

But it had never happened.

Not ever.

This must be a dream, a hallucination brought on by the stress of the past months. Perhaps she'd finally snapped.

How could this man have been waiting for her to come to him? She'd never seen him before in her life. And she'd never been so certain of anything. This was a man one remembered, cloaked as he was in an aura of power, of *presence*.

He was taller and broader than

any man she'd ever met and his body was corded with rippling muscles. His intensity should have frightened her—that of a warrior determined to conquer.

An unexpected thrill trilled through her at the realization he was determined to conquer *her*. It made her feel small, fragile and inexplicably aroused.

Aimalee had never been the kind of woman who wilted before a commanding man. She was independent and strong—she'd had to be. But this was different. This *felt* different. There was something about this man, something about

this place that changed everything.

Somehow she knew she could be strong with him and he would still want her.

Nothing was more compelling to a woman than a desirable man who wanted her as she was. Passion like this was a powerful aphrodisiac. And oh how she felt it.

He felt it too.

“Touch me.” His whispered words echoed through the room, through her.

Their gazes met and everything else melted away.

He stared at her, trembling,

teeth clenched, fists tight as though he longed to reach for her but couldn't.

Aimalee shivered as an unfamiliar inclination struck her. She wanted to drop the pillow and press her body against him. Rub against him. His body was so beautiful. So perfect. She longed to touch him.

Of its own volition, her hand rose. At the last instant, just before their flesh connected, she curled her fingers.

He winced as she withdrew, winced as though she'd slapped him. Tiny tears clung to his lashes.

“Please, Aimalee.” His voice was ragged. “Please touch me.”

She stepped away, ignoring the desolation that swept across his countenance. It cost her but she forced those primal urges down, back into her subconscious where they belonged. Something wasn't right here. Women didn't just suddenly transport into sumptuous bowers. Gorgeous men with smoldering eyes didn't simply appear from thin air. And most importantly, Aimalee didn't have thoughts like this.

She never had.

She couldn't give in to these

cravings. Not until she understood what was happening to her. Her analytical mind wouldn't allow it.

As though he could read her thoughts, a frown marred his sculpted brow in fascinating furrows. He stepped closer and closer still—though not close enough to touch. His breath was warm on her cheek. “Don't fight it, Aimalee. You cannot resist. Please don't try.” He bent closer and his nostrils flared like a stallion catching the scent of a filly in season. He licked his lips.

My but they were beautiful lips.

And my oh my. He smelled of

sandalwood and sin. The combination made her head spin. She shook her head to rid it of these errant thoughts. "Where am I? What happened?" More questions swirled but this was a good place to start.

"Please." Beads of sweat dimpled his upper lip. Heat roiled from his broad chest. Everything about him was hard. "Not now. No questions now." He whirled away with a growl, showing her his back, frustration clear in every rigid line. As he moved, the dim light glinted off the metal encircling his neck. Aimalee realized it was hewn of

the same strange iridescent metal of the lamp.

Certainty dawned and with it a sense of incredulity. "I'm inside the lamp."

He shot a glance at her over his hunched shoulder, a wounded animal. "Y-you touched it."

"I've touched it many times before."

"Many times." A shudder racked him. He began to shiver, to shake. "But never with...never with..." *Never with...what?* He didn't complete the thought, as though the words were too painful to utter. He moaned in agony and

stumbled into the shadows.

She followed, racked with worry –he looked as though he were dying–and lightly touched his shoulder. He froze at the contact, sucking in a deep gasp of air, exhaling it on a small whimper. As their flesh connected, a sizzle shot up her arm, rocketing to her core. Something tight within her released.

And then she realized...the release hadn't come from within her.

It had come from within him.

Invisible chains binding him shattered and fell away.

He straightened and stood. Sublime relief descended upon him like a cloud. "Thank you," he gasped. "Thank you, Aimalee." He drew his knuckles along the curve of her shoulder then trailed down her arm, sending riots of sensation through her. "You touched it with your bare hands, you see. And the lamp brought you to me," he said, answering her earlier—long forgotten—question. He caressed her hand, lifted it to his lips then drew her thumb into his mouth and gently sucked.

Molten lava, deep in her core, churned and spat.

She knew she should not allow this. She knew she should pull away. The voice of sanity within her whispered as much. Trouble was, that voice of sanity was starting to recede. "W-why?" It was the only word she could manage. The only thought she could conjure.

He kissed her knuckles, one by one. "You are here for me, Aimalee. For this." His scalding touch trailed back up her arm. She jerked in reaction but didn't protest. Her body was heavy, drugged with desire. Her mind befuddled, rapt in it. Enthralled.

He tugged gently at the pillow

she held before her. She watched in mute dismay as he tossed her armor carelessly aside. “God, Aimalee. You are even more beautiful in the flesh.”

Reverently, he cupped her breast. And then his head descended and those lips—those delicious lips—wrapped around a coral crest. Sucked. Spiking sensation rocked her. Exquisite trills danced along her spine. Tremors rippled through her womb.

But still...she resisted. As difficult as it was to fight against the alluring enchantment he was weaving—and it was difficult—she

lurched back and gasped, “Who are you?”

Instead of answering, he scraped her nipple—sending spirals of delight snarling up her spine. Oh! It was getting harder and harder to resist him. Harder to focus on her outrage as he enticed her deeper into his web.

But she was not the only one besieged by temptation. His body was taut as a bowstring—he fairly hummed with the tension.

He pulled her into his arms. The shock of his hot skin against hers from chest to groin made her lightheaded. He traced the line of

her back from her buttocks to her shoulder blades.

“I am sorry, Aimalee,” he murmured, his tone limned with remorse. “But I cannot answer your questions anymore. I cannot wait. It has been far too long.” He lifted her hair and bent to place a gentle kiss on her nape. With his tongue, his velvet, drugging tongue, he traced a strange and sinuous symbol there.

A peculiar warmth blossomed there and drifted down her arms, across her chest, infused her body and soul. Her nipples tightened. Her body liquefied. A hot rush of arousal seeped from her womb. Her

clitoris throbbed and a scorching hunger snarled and snapped like a long-caged beast.

She wanted him.

She wanted him like she had never wanted a man before.

She ached to fist her fingers in his hair and drag him down on top of her. To take his lips with her own. Suck on his tongue. Consume him. Grind against that magnificent cock and torment him until he whimpered with need. Until he took her. Fucked her. Impaled her.

Her mind reeled with pleasure and passion...and confusion.

What *was* this?

This was not like her.

Not like her at all.

Hadn't Carter told her repeatedly that she was frigid?

She had never *wanted* like this. Ached like this. Needed like this.

“What are you doing to me?” Even to her own ears, the cry was laced with pleasure, desire, delirium. She placed her palm flat on his chest to push him away but at that touch, passion swelled—the passion in her and the passion in him, tangling, twining. His skin was smooth but his hard muscles bunched at her touch.

He threw his head back and

groaned in ecstasy. Or perhaps agony.

“I can’t. I need... I want to...” He hissed through his teeth. “But I cannot wait. I cannot.”

Easing her down onto the cushions, he covered her. The sensation of his hot, sweat-dampened skin against hers sent a shock wave through her. He nudged her legs apart. Nearer. She writhed beneath him, eager, wanton, lost in wonder. Ravenous for him. Impatient.

He did not make her wait.

He slid inside with no preamble but she didn’t care. She wanted

this. Needed this. Her body was ready for him. Eager for it. He filled her with one slick stroke. Possessed her. She cried out a garbled plea, a benediction of bliss. So perfect. So right. So complete.

He rested there, buried deep and exhaling harshly, gritting his teeth. And then he began to move. Slowly at first—a long, deliberate withdrawal followed by an agonizing, measured thrust.

She clutched at him, clasped at him in desperation, holding him tighter and tighter until she thought for sure she would explode from the rising tension that twisted

and writhed and howled inside her. But she could not keep him in.

He withdrew and she howled in frustration. Then the howl became a sigh as he sank deep again.

And again.

And again.

Each foray accompanied by his bestial grunt, her desperate, fruitless clenches to keep him.

It was a long battle, an endless dance of retreat and advance. A tormenting hunger, the delight of fleeting fulfillment and then roiling anguish again as he once more pulled out, leaving her empty, desolate, abandoned.

Tension rose, ratcheting up notch by notch. Bliss, abandon, hunger heightened with each perfectly placed thrust. Impatience, anticipation, need beset her.

Still he pummeled her with those slow, deliberate incursions. He could not keep it up forever though clearly he tried. Before long, he succumbed. His thrusts became shorter, harder, deeper.

Frantic.

Aimalee, adrift in a swirling sea of sensation, nearly insensate from incomprehensible pleasure, tucked her head into the curve of his shoulder. He found a place,

touched a spot at her core that sent rivulets of teasing elation cascading through her. *More. More. More.* Frantic, crazed, delirious with a thirst for that illusive peak, she nipped at his neck.

He growled in response and pounded faster, relentlessly sending shimmering shards of delight along every singing nerve. The thick ridge of his cock found her again and again, skewering her with sizzling sensation.

Her body tightened. The hovering dawn of something magnificent haunted her, teased. And then his cock swelled,

lengthened in preparation for the coming eruption. The increased fullness coupled with his pounding fervor sent her over the edge.

She quivered around him, lost, clenching at his cock with utter, helpless abandon. The glow blossomed and spread like a flower in her womb. A scalding tide washed through her, taking her, transporting her, liberating her from every worry, every care, every thought.

A long, glorious release.

With a cry, she launched into ecstasy, mindless and—for that sip of eternity—utterly, magnificently,

superbly complete.

And then he collapsed at her side, panting and shuddering. They lay there in a tangle of sweat-soaked limbs, shaking, quaking, reveling in the mutual glow of utter and complete bliss.

Chapter Three

Aimalee awoke in the tendrils of a delicious dream, visions of a strong, sensual man mingled with scents of spice and sandalwood. With a small, sleepy smile, she nestled deeper under the covers.

And then she froze.

She was not, in fact, at home in her bed.

For one thing, her sheets weren't velvet.

For another, she didn't sleep in the nude.

Her eyes flew open and she

glanced around, gaping in shock at the sumptuous seraglio from her dream.

But it hadn't been a dream. She was here. In the lamp.

It was inconceivable. Her mind reeled with the implications.

Had the pressures of the past weeks finally sent her around the bend? Was she hallucinating?

Could one hallucinate bliss?

Well for heaven's sake. Of course she was imagining all this. The only other possibility was that she had been somehow magically transported to another place, another world.

A world where exquisitely handsome men wanted utterly unremarkable women like her.

She snorted. That particular probability was even more inconceivable than the prospect of being magically transported to another world.

But still...here she was.

She sat up, clutching a thick fur blanket to her chest, and peered through the dimly lit shadows. The room was silent, still. She was alone. *He* wasn't there. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she let it out in a great whoosh. A strange combination of

relief and disappointment assailed her.

Before she could process these conflicting emotions, another unbidden thought arose. What if he had left her? Left her here alone? How would she get back home? Could she get back home?

Good heavens. What would she eat?

Panic rose in her breast and she scrambled to her feet, scanning the space about her intently, searching for clues. Searching for *something*.

The chamber was spacious and unburdened by excess furnishings. Aside from the nest of cushions in

the corner, there was a small divan placed between two columns on one end of the room. A set of twin columns adorned the other end. The only other items were the braziers, set about at intervals, glowing like stars in a dark sky.

She noticed a splash of white against the dark bulk of the divan. She padded across the room to investigate and discovered the splash of white was an exquisite lace-and-ribbon robe.

Self-conscious of her naked state, she slipped it on. It fit like a glove, clinging to her curves like a lover's caress. She tied it closed

with the band of ribbons. With every move, the rough ruches of lace rubbed against still sensitive nipples.

Thusly girded, she resumed her exploration. It was amazing what a beautiful gown could do for one's bravado.

Pity there was nothing she could do about her hair. Without a brush she would never be able to tame her unruly curls.

Aimalee decided to take a methodical course in her investigation, following the contours of the room in search of a door. There had to be a way out.

She found it between the columns on the far side of the room, opposite the divan. It was easy to see why she'd missed it. The door was recessed, hidden in an alcove swathed in shadows. Likely this had been done on purpose to give the inhabitants the illusion they were sequestered and utterly private.

But things were often not as they appeared. At least that had been Aimalee's experience.

Cautiously, she opened the door and peered out at a U-shaped atrium hewn of gleaming, moon-splashed marble.

The cool nighttime breeze teased the tendrils of her hair as she catalogued her surroundings. Seven doors, evenly spaced, marked the curve of the building. She could only assume each door led to a room like this one. On the far end of the atrium, a marble balustrade framed a vista of the sparkling sea in the distance.

Of her captor, there was no trace.

Aimalee stepped out, into the atrium, glorying in the whisper of the night air on her skin, the cool marble beneath her feet. She made her way across the broad expanse to

stand at the railing at the far end and stared at the most beautiful vision. The moonlight skipped across the water in a sparkling band as a hint of dawn nudged at the horizon. The scimitar curve of a sandy beach was visible between the lacy fingers of dark palms. The air carried hints of citrus and mint.

It seemed, to Aimalee, to be the most perfect spot in all of creation.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, being trapped here for eternity.

At least if there was cheesecake.

With that thought, she headed back to the atrium and studied the seven doors thoughtfully. If he was

still here, he would be behind one of those doors.

Now, Aimalee had read a lot as a lonely, studious child. And one of her favorite genres had been myth and fantasy. *The Adventures of Sinbad* had been a particular favorite. So she knew the danger of indiscriminately opening doors in enchanted palaces. There could be a tiger behind one. Or a pit of vipers.

Probably not cheesecake.

Her belly growled. How long had it been since she had eaten anyway? And how did time work in an enchanted palace?

Noticing a tiny sliver of light

arrowing out from beneath one of the doors, she headed in that direction, for some reason arching up on her tiptoes. If there was a tiger behind the door, surely he would have sprung out by now. She sidled up to the small crack and peeped inside.

Her heart leapt.

Oh. There was a tiger inside all right.

The man.

That man.

He was here.

Thank God he hadn't abandoned her.

He sat in an ornate king's chair before a large gilt-edged mirror, his elbow braced on the thickly padded arm, his face buried in one hand. He sighed and rubbed at his eyes with the pad of his palm, like a boy. Then he sniffled and cleared his throat and sat up straighter, gripping the arms of the chair with white-knuckle intensity, steeling himself. For something.

“Again.” His voice was choked, cloaked. Aimalee barely heard the command but the reaction was immediate. The mirror began to shimmer. It was a muted glow at first. Clouds swirled on the surface.

But then a scene began to coalesce.

A girl. Lovely, spirited and carefree. Smiling at some secret thought as she confidently plucked berries from a bountiful bush, now and again popping one into her mouth, staining her lips an even richer red. She was dressed in a long, flowing skirt, wrapped with an apron—clearly the mode of centuries past. Aimalee would guess early first century. Her hair was a dark mass, intricately curled and braided and festooned with jewels. Whoever she was, there was wealth in her family. And beauty.

There was a familiarity about

her but Aimalee just couldn't place it. It nagged at her as the scene unfolded.

The girl spoke to a friend and then she laughed at the response, tossing her head back with elegant abandon. Aimalee's gaze shifted to the man in the chair, called there by a sudden tightness. He trembled, this big, strong mountain of a man. Trembled with tension.

Her attention snapped back to the mirror as a thundering sound shook the sylvan scene. The girl glanced over her shoulder. Her expression clouded. A hint of fear blossomed. Her eyes widened as

she saw...*something* approach.

And then she screamed. She wheeled away and fled, dropping her basket. Plump, juicy berries tumbled to the ground, crushed to red pulp beneath her feet.

But what was to happen next, what horrible fate was to befall the entrancing, innocent beauty, would remain a mystery. Because just then the mirror misted over, gradually obscuring the vision.

“No!” Her captor slammed his fist against the carved arm of the chair. And then, more softly, desperately, “No.”

Aimalee allowed him his

privacy, stepping back, away from this display of desolation. But even as she moved, he stiffened as though he sensed her presence.

Slowly, he turned.

“Aimalee.” He wiped his cheeks quickly but she still saw them, the tears.

Caught out, she stepped forward, into the room. “Who was she?”

A muscle in his cheek bunched. “No one.”

That, she reflected, was a little hard to believe. But she let it go, as he was still shaking with reaction. She didn't exactly understand what

she'd seen but she knew it was something significant. And personal. Private and painful.

She'd had plenty of those moments herself.

He stood and she was struck again by his sheer magnificence, the pure power of his presence. Even fully clothed as he was now.

And thank God for that. Rippling naked warriors had a tendency to distract her thoughts. Though his clothing—also evocative of a time long past—did little to cloak the magnificence of his form. The buff breeches clung to the lines of his calves and thighs

and his tunic stretched at the seams across his broad chest. With laudable determination, she swallowed the drool pooling in her mouth and wrenched her gaze to his face.

Oh dear.

A mistake.

His appraisal flicked over her and warmed. Warmed her. Warmed him. His cloak of pain melted away and a new, familiar tension rose. Aimalee realized with a mortified start that even though she was fully wrapped in the robe, every aspect of her body, from the swollen coral peaks to the downy

nest at the juncture of her thighs, was completely visible through the lace. Made more conspicuous by the illusion of a veil.

She pulled the robe more tightly around her, wincing as the lace scraped against suddenly throbbing nipples.

What was it about him, she wondered, that could make her ache like this, with naught but a glance?

“You look...” His voice went ragged and he paused, letting his focus linger on shadowed recesses. “You look astounding. Did you sleep well?”

She flushed. "Yes."

He cleared his throat and shuffled his feet then shoved his fists into the pockets of his breeches...which drew her attention to his lower body.

Oh dear. Another mistake. For there, between the twin lumps of his fists, was that other lump. Even as she stared, it grew. A sinuous snake eased its way up his stomach.

It took some effort but she managed to fix her gaze elsewhere. Where that was, she couldn't have said because the vision of him was burned on her brain.

"I'm sorry about last night,

Aimalee," he said.

Her gaze snapped back to his. Remorse etched his features. Aimalee frowned. He was *sorry*?

She wasn't sure what to think about that.

As strange and unfamiliar and mindboggling as their coupling had been, it had been, without a doubt, the most amazing experience of her life.

And he was sorry.

She tendered a small, noncommittal nod, recoiling as she always did to some safe, scarred place within. But his next words arrested her headlong retreat.

“I’m usually able to show more restraint. Don’t leap upon a woman the first instant I see her. But you are so...so...” He gestured at her, caressing her from afar. Thick lashes flickered with some deep, inexplicable emotion. “And it’s been so long.” His expression shuttered but she caught a glimpse of the pain, the passion, haunting him.

Aimalee swallowed. “How-how long has it been?”

“A long time. Longer than you can imagine.” He took her arm and led her back to the atrium, carefully closing the door of the mirror room

behind him. "Next time it will be better. I promise."

Better? Aimalee gaped at him.

Was that even possible?

"Now that the worst of it has been released, I'll be more patient. Next time I will take care of your needs first."

Aimalee yanked her arm from his grasp and whirled on him. A multitude of conflicting thoughts and emotions warred within her. Delight, anticipation, indignation, confusion, the ghosts of bone-deep disappointments past and so many more.

Indignation won.

“Okay, hold on, buster.” She propped her fists on her hips and glared at him. “What makes you think there will even *be* a next time? Damn it all, I don’t even know your name.”

He put his broad palm to his chest and gave a formal bow. “I am Keeshan.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and struggled not to be charmed by the gesture or his smile, which released an explosion of dimples on his cheek. Or the lazy droop of long-lashed lids over velvet brown eyes. Really. It was hardly fair that a man should have

such long lashes *and* those glorious dimples.

“That was hardly my point. I don’t know where you come from, K-Keeshan.” Heavens. His name was like honey on her tongue. “But where I come from, women don’t just leap into bed with every...” she gestured in his general direction and bit her lip to keep from saying gorgeous or handsome or delicious or any of a hundred other adjectives that leapt to mind. “With every man who shows a modicum of interest.”

“Oh, I have more than a modicum.” He arched a brow. “I

assure you.”

Aimalee snorted. “Again, not the point. Women like me just... We just don’t.”

He shot her a sympathetic glance and shook his head. “You won’t be able to help it, Aimalee. The magic is too strong. It has a hold of both of us.”

Magic?

Ridiculous. Aimalee didn’t believe in magic. She was a scientist. The only things that mattered were things she could touch and feel and... Her logic stuttered at the fact that she could touch and feel *him*.

No. This had to be a dream. As real as it felt, it had to be a construct of her imagination. Nothing more.

It was unnatural to want like this.

Unnatural to ache like this.

Unnatural to lose every vestige of control like this.

At least for her.

But the magic—or whatever it was—was at work again. Already, after mere minutes in his presence, an uncontrollable hunger began to stir in her womb. A hunger that liquefied her, rode her. Sparked little fires within that fizzled and

popped and snapped like fireworks along her nerve endings.

His innocent touch on her arm made her burn. Fantasies of what she would like to do with him, to him, filtered into her muddled brain. Quite independently of conscious thought, she reached for him...

“But that has to wait. You must be hungry.”

Oh. Why that wash of disappointment?

Then again... She was hungry.

He opened one of the other doors, next to the room with the mirror. It was lit, like the other,

with an unseen, unearthly source. In the center sat a low, long table, laden with food. The aroma rose to greet her and she nearly swooned. Every food she could imagine lay spread out before her. A sumptuous feast.

Oh, it was definitely a dream.

“Oh my,” she gushed, spotting one tantalizing dish after the other, all her favorites. Shrimp scampi and medallions of beef in a steaming, savory sauce. A huge chunk of blue cheese sat on a platter with crackers and a wide variety of plump fruits. A carafe of chilled champagne stood in the

center of the table next to a pitcher of ice water, beaded with sweat.

Oh. And there was *cheesecake*.

“Whatever you desire.” He swept out an arm in invitation.

Honestly. She didn't know where to start.

She figured it out though and in the end she took a little of everything.

He sat beside her on the cushions as she ate, a large, looming presence, amused by her enthusiasm. He didn't touch the food. He tried a bit of this and a bit of that but insisted she feed him. When she asked why she had to

place each morsel in his mouth, he merely said that was the way it was.

At first the intimacy was a bit uncomfortable for Aimalee but she quickly warmed to it, to him. For as her belly filled, another hunger swelled within her.

Time seemed to slow. The lighting dimmed. Muted music, ancient tunes in zither and lute, drifted through the intimate chamber. The touch of his lips dampened her fingers, the curl of his tongue tickled her palm.

And the meal became a seduction.

The only question was— who was seducing whom?

Chapter Four

Keeshan watched, entranced as Aimalee explored the banquet table laden with all manner of strange delicacies conjured by the lamp.

He'd spent a lot of time before the mirror, watching the world change without him, studying the nuances and the trends...and the food. But it was difficult to assimilate without real experience. His visitors allowed him to explore some of it. A glimpse of the new tastes, the flavor of an era, but it wasn't the same as living it. He longed to be free. To live his life in

real time. To *know*.

Through the millennia, he'd learned to enjoy the slivers the lamp allowed. And yes, he relished them. Each and every minute.

He bit his lip when she discovered yet another one of her favorite treats and gave a little cry of delight. He shifted on the satin pillow as a shaft of unadulterated lust snaked through him. Ah, that she would cry like that for a taste of him.

And what was it about this woman?

He was always beset with mind-numbing arousal when the lamp

brought him a new consort—what man would not be inflamed after a hundred years of abstinence?—but this excitement, this sense of *connection* was something new.

And it wasn't just that she had all the physical attributes he preferred—long, silky blonde hair, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, lush, tempting curves. No, there was more. She had an aura of innocence about her he found irresistible.

When she perched up on her knees and stretched across the table for a small bowl of fluffy white froth, it was all he could do to keep

his hands fisted in his lap and not reach for the exquisite globes of her rounded bottom. She had no idea how alluring she was. He wasn't sure if this delighted him or frustrated him. Perhaps a little of both.

He wanted her. He wanted her with an intensity that frightened him.

Annoyance that she was devoted to another man roiled in his gut. Such jealousy had never plagued him before. Not like this. Knowing Aimalee loved Carter—that tormented him to the depths of his being.

Especially since he knew the truth about Carter.

A truth Aimalee didn't know.

He toyed with the idea of revealing what he had seen in the mirror but then thrust the thought away. He didn't want to distract her with the world outside this bower. And he didn't want to hurt her. He didn't want to see her cry.

The truth about Carter would make her cry.

"Whipped cream!" She flashed him a disarming grin. "You have to try this." And then, by all the gods, she dipped her finger into the bowl, scooped out some of the froth and

lifted it to his lips.

Keeshan stilled. Every ert of his being. Slowly, he parted his lips and licked. Taste exploded on his tongue. The delicious cream, to be sure, but the captivating essence of Aimalee as well. He held her gaze and suckled gently, savoring the feel of her in his mouth, her tang, her spice. There was something about her that called him on a deep and primal level. Something about this passion that transcended the tawdry spell compelling him to want every woman the lamp brought to him.

It was as though the voice of his

own true soul—so long enchained
—was speaking to him.
Recognizing a kindred spirit.

He knew it, felt it, when his
desire, his ache, took her too. He
saw it in the shadow of her eyes.
They widened as he nibbled upon
her flesh. Her pupils dilated.
Nostrils flared. Lips parted. Skin
dewed.

By all the gods.

Keeshan had had hundreds of
women in his life. He'd lost count
long ago. But he hadn't known a
desire like this, a movement like
this since...

In far, far too long.

The thought alarmed him because he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that when it was her time to leave, when the lamp so commanded, she would be gone in an instant.

If he were a sane man, a free man, he would walk away now and be done with her. He would not allow himself to touch her and warm to her. He would not allow these sentiments for her to sprout and grow.

But it was a moot point. He was not a free man. And many days, he doubted he was sane. He was stuck here in this damn lamp for all

eternity, doomed to a life of endless, meaningless seductions. And she was stuck here right beside him until the lamp was done with her.

And then she would leave.

She would stay with him until he fell irrevocably in love with her. Then she would stay a little longer just to torment him. And then she would leave.

They always did.

It always happened that way.

It might take a month. Sometimes six. But they always left.

He didn't know how much

more his soul, his heart could take.

The first one, the lovely Desiree, had by far been the worst. He hadn't known. He hadn't suspected the torment in store for him.

He'd resisted falling in love with her, swamped with guilt. For how could he love her? How could he care for Desiree when another held his heart – and always would?

But the enchantment had not allowed him to be distant. He'd been compelled to be with her, be in her. And as time had passed, he'd slowly allowed himself to be drawn to her beauty, her aura, her laugh. He'd allowed himself to fall

for her.

And then she'd left.

He'd been devastated. Utterly alone.

It had been like losing Circe all over again.

For two thousand years, each visit had been the same. Each woman, as different as they had been, had eventually conquered his heart. Eventually left him.

Oh, he'd tried to resist. Made vows to himself to remain distant and cold. Tried desperately to not use the incantation. But it had never worked. He always failed.

He always succumbed to the allure of the incantation.

He always came to love them... and then been shuttled into a cold, empty agony when they left. Bereft and swamped with shame for his weakness. His faithlessness.

And now here was Aimalee.

He suspected, deep in his soul, she would be the most difficult loss of all.

Still, he could not stop himself.

The enchantment rode him mercilessly, swirled through his body, pooling in his loins.

Even though he knew she held

his destruction in the palm of her hand, he tugged her closer and took her lips.

So supple. So delectable.

Hunger growing, he nudged them wider and dabbed with his questing tongue. Her mouth was a cavern of velvet delight. He explored her teeth and her inner lip, danced inside her cheek.

She resisted at first but then relaxed into the kiss and a shaft of bone-deep satisfaction lashed him. It was only the enchantment—he knew this to be true—but she did want him. At least a little. He could be satisfied with that.

His lips left her mouth and followed the curve of her cheek to her earlobe. When he sucked it into his mouth, she arched into him with a warbled cry. So he did it again with similar results. He growled in pleasure and nestled his nose in her neck. He nibbled at the tender flesh there, delighting in the moans his kisses elicited.

With a supreme effort, he resisted the growing urge to inscribe the incantation on her neck. It was heaven to be like this, with her in his arms, writhing in passion, wanting him.

Wanting him for him.

It was a foolish whim but he desperately wanted her to make love with him because *she* wanted to. Not because she was compelled to do so. And while the sortilege of the lamp might cause desire to run rampant, it was the incantation that compelled her to have him.

Without the incantation, she had a choice.

And he wanted her to choose him.

He stared at her, beguiled by her beauty, the curve of her cheek. His heart ached with wanting. He had watched her through the mirror, wanted her from afar for so long.

And now here she was. And she was so much more than he had ever imagined.

He pressed her back on the cushions, delighted that she allowed it, settling himself against her body, glorying in her warmth, her welcome. Cupping her glorious breast, he teased her nipple. She moaned and he slipped beneath the lace, desperate to feel her skin. She didn't stop him, thank the gods, so he yanked at the ribbon holding the robe closed and eased the filmy garment out of his way to bare one side.

And ah. Ah!

Her creamy breast rose above her rib like a satin mountain. He stroked the silky flesh in circles, coming closer and closer, tighter, zeroing in on that budding crest. She whimpered, a wild, throaty sound, which unleashed the ferocious beast inside him.

He could wait no longer and bent his head, sucking her rucked nipple into his mouth. She gasped and her hand drifted up to rest at his nape. When he sucked again, her nails dug deep, pinned him, held him there. She wriggled against him, pressing into his throbbing cock. A blinding snarl of

need raced through him. Scorched him.

“Ah, Aimalee. Aimalee,” he murmured. “I was hoping it would be you.”

Beneath him, she stilled. He felt it, the wall that came slamming down.

Ah hell.

She drew back—creating a terrible chill between them—and frowned at him. Her lips quivered as she searched for words. “W-what do you mean?” When he didn’t respond she punched him on the shoulder, the mere bat of a kitten’s paw against a stone. “What do you

mean, you were hoping it would be me?"

His pulse skittered. He should have kept his mouth shut. He toyed with the idea of quickly scrawling the incantation against her neck to distract her from his blunder but he thought better of the idea.

He'd already used the incantation once with her. It was easy to rationalize after decades of abstinence. But it was impossible to rationalize now.

But gods, he ached for her.

In body and in soul.

He forced himself to meet her glare. It seared right through him.

The flicker of confusion was bad enough. But then there was the wounded mien. As though he had betrayed her. Lied to her. Tricked her.

Which he had.

Heat prickled at his nape.

“I knew it would be one of you.” He had to look away. Her gaze was way too sharp. “I hoped it would be you.”

“One of us?”

“You and the other one.” He made a swirling motion over his head. “The one with the hair?”

“Sorcha?” Aimalee’s adorable

nose wrinkled. "You could *see* us? How could you see us?"

"Through the mirror. It is a window to the outer world. It shows me the women who are destined to come to me."

"To...come to you?" Was that a drowsy, aroused expression on her face? Or horror? Her swanlike throat undulated as she swallowed. "How many women have...come to you like this?"

Keeshan shrugged. Really, he didn't remember. Didn't want to. Didn't want to talk about this at all. He kissed her instead, luxuriating in the taste of her lush lips. "I am

glad it was you.”

But her response was cold. Distant. She ducked away and huffed as though she didn't believe him.

How on earth could she not believe him?

He combed the silky skeins of her hair, traced his way down her shoulder, her arm, to the tips of her fingers, captivated by the creamy velvet of her skin.

She shivered, her beautiful eyes limned with doubt and a lifetime of pain. “Sorcha is much prettier.”

Sorcha? His brow furrowed. Was she serious? Sorcha was cold.

Brittle. Hard. Whereas Aimalee... He cupped an ample breast. So smooth. So supple. Gods! Her nipple was hard, swollen. He could practically taste her arousal. "She does not compare. You are..."

Much to his consternation, she scooted even farther from him on the pillows. "I am...what? What? You can say it. Fat?"

Fat? He stared at her in astonishment. Did she really think she was fat? She was just right. "What's the word they use?" He searched his mind, trying to remember the woman who had come to him in the seventeenth

century. "Rubenesque?"

"No." Aimalee crossed her arms over her chest. "The word they use is fat."

"I think you are perfect." Delicious. Divine.

"I'm hardly a fashion plate. Not in today's world. Chunky is definitely not in style."

Keeshan laughed. "What do I care about what is in style? I have lived in this lamp for thousands of years. Styles come and go like a leaf on the wind. All I care about is what I like. And this," he punctuated his comment with a squeeze to her delightfully curved

buttocks, “is what I like.”

She huffed again. A pout. “Why don’t I believe you?”

He grinned. “Because you’re not paying attention?” Gently, he took her hand and set it upon his cock. He was hard. Then again, all he needed was a glimpse of her and he was hard.

It was partly the enchantment— he never had much of a choice about his arousal or his ability to perform. That was his punishment, after all. But this time, with Aimalee, it was different. This time he really wanted to.

He wanted to *be* with her.

More than that, he wanted her
to want to him too.

Without the damn spell.

Chapter Five

Oh. She was tempted.

This was the most delicious dream. As difficult as it was for her to release her logical mind, Aimalee tried. Here was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen, splayed out before her on velvet pillows like a pasha. And he wanted her.

He beckoned her with his eyes and his words and his talented touch.

Perhaps it was the magic he had mentioned or perhaps it was the champagne—she'd already had

several delicious glasses—but her resistance was melting away. She wanted nothing more than to explore that ridged chest with her tongue, test his thick thighs against her palms, explore that tantalizing bulge...

Their auras tangled and she felt the tug. His soul, pulling hers closer.

Whether it was magic or a dream or a hallucination, why resist?

She glanced down at the breeches barely covering his groin and was gratified to see the thick log of his cock engorged and

throbbing beneath the thin fabric. Excitement shot through her at the thought that a man like him, a man like Keeshan, could want her.

Men had never ardently pursued her—she was hardly the type to enflame passions. But then she'd never really been mindless with lust herself. Every man she'd ever met had somehow been lacking. Wrong. Even Carter.

She flushed as the thought percolated through her brain.

No. Not Carter.

She was in love with Carter. He was perfect. Wonderful. Clearly if anyone was lacking in that

relationship it was she.

And what kind of girlfriend was she anyway, to be lusting after another man—fantasy or not?

“What are you thinking about?” Keeshan’s voice rumbled around her, sending shivers over her skin. But wait. No. It was a finger, trailing torment from the tender flesh of her neck down her arm. He placed a gentle kiss on the blue veins of her inner wrist. All thoughts of Carter scuttled.

Aimalee stifled a shudder and looked away.

Keeshan captured her chin and brought her gaze back to his. It

burned through her like fire. “What are you thinking about? Why does it make you sad?”

“I’m not sad.”

His thumb dabbed at the downturned corners of her mouth then traced her lower lip as though he couldn’t resist. He tipped his head to the side and studied her. His words, though unspoken, were clear.

“I’m not sad. Just confused.”

“About what?”

Aimalee shrugged one shoulder and gestured to the room with the enchanted table that was never empty, the light source no scientific

observation could identify, the man, the beautiful man lounging on the plush cushions, wanting—for some reason—her. “This. All this. Is this a dream?”

His smile was a halfhearted attempt. “If you want it to be.”

Aimalee frowned. That was hardly an answer. Though she had eaten all she desired and was pleasantly full, a deeper hunger, an ache, a vague annoyance, gnawed at her. With a start, she realized what that deeper hunger was.

Savage animal lust was a new sensation for her and she wasn't sure what to do about it.

On the one hand, Keeshan was splayed before her ready, willing and able to give her what she wanted. On the other hand there was Carter.

Her boyfriend.

Whom she loved.

But if this was nothing but a fantasy, could guilt truly hold sway?

Apparently it could.

She cleared her throat and cast about for a change of subject. Something, anything to derail her errant thoughts. "So tell me..."

"Yes?" His voice was a low

rumble, a seduction in itself. It sent sheets of fire racing through her body, ignited a bubbling volcano within her, making logical thought impossible.

“Um. Tell me about this magic.”

He groaned and rested his forehead on hers. Lord, he was hot. So hot and vibrant. Smelled of sandalwood and cloves. A swell of desire and comfort and...rightness washed over her.

“Can you feel it?” he whispered.

“I don’t know what I feel.” But she did. Without conscious intent, she swayed toward him.

His nostrils flared. He licked his

lips. "Please, Aimalee."

"Please what?"

"Kiss me."

"Tell me, Keeshan. Is this a dream?"

"A dream come true." His tone ensorcelled her.

The room was warm and aromatic. The pillows were plush and inviting. And the man...the man was big and hard and hot. She wanted nothing more in that moment than to sink into him, to consume him, to explore. So she did.

It was only a dream. And she

was hungry for him. And he seemed to burn with passion for her.

So she did.

She tasted his surprise as her lips brushed against his, then his elation and his growing passion as those lips firmed and opened, welcoming her in. He made a move to rise above her but she pressed him back down on the pillows.

This was her dream. For once she wanted to be in control.

Before he could protest, she knelt up and angled a leg over his waist.

Dear heavens, he was broad. She

could barely straddle his breadth. But she did. And oh. Oh.

She settled herself down and pushed up his tunic to reveal his chest then nudged back at the hard length pressing against her buttocks. He hissed at the contact but she ignored him and lifted herself up, just an inch or two, and she scooted back. When she came down again, it was on his ridge, riding him, rubbing him against her slit. She hadn't realized how tender her clit had become but she realized it now when she rocked forward and flattened it against his hardness.

He moaned and twitched impatiently beneath her but she could tell he was trying to hold still, let her have her way with him. A muscle twitched in his cheek. His expression smoldered.

“Do you like this?” she asked, trying to be playful when what she really wanted was to eat him up.

“No.” His voice was guttered, strained.

She stilled, suddenly self-conscious. But her embarrassment lasted only a second. It took that long for her to realize he did in fact like this. But he didn't want to like it. She pretended a pout and

undulated her hips slowly, making a torturous circuit, rubbing herself to bliss against his rod. “How about this?”

He whimpered.

She bent down and kissed his abdomen, just beside the straining head of his cock, which was now peeping out from beneath the band of his breeches. She didn't touch it but she did breathe upon it. It jerked in response and the beading drop of cum at the tip oozed larger. She longed to lap at it with her tongue but she knew, somehow she knew, it would be his undoing.

Instead she let her kisses travel

up his chest, nibbling, licking and sucking every fascinating bulge and ripple. All the while she rubbed herself against him like a cat, dampening his breeches with each pass.

“Please, Aimalee.” He winced as she nipped at his nipple.

She raised her head and met his tortured gaze. She was stretched across him, his blanket, grinding her clit against his cock. It was so good she simply couldn't stop. She could feast upon him, ride him, all day. “Please what?”

“Please.” His neck and shoulders bunched with strain. Errant tears

spiked his lashes.

Suddenly comprehension dawned. The man was suffering. Truly suffering. It took everything in him to give her the reins, to let her control their passion. And naughty girl that she was, she was teasing him.

He was close to breaking.

“Ah.” She made a few minor adjustments in their clothing and rose up above him. He greedily tracked her movements and a welter of relief washed over his tight features when she took him, hard and thick and throbbing, into her hand. “Is this what you want?”

She nudged her hips forward and rubbed the sticky tip of his cock against her slit.

He thrust up but it wasn't a predatory thrust. It was a reflexive, desperate lurch.

Aimalee loved that he had allowed, nay, encouraged, her to be the aggressor. But while she'd wholly enjoyed her exploration of his body, enough was enough.

She was wet and aching and needy.

Slowly, carefully, she fitted his cock into the mouth of her pussy and eased down upon him. His groan shook the room.

“God! Yes!” He released his death grip on the pillows and took hold of her hips instead. He blew out a hiss as he guided her all the way down.

His thickness filled her, expanded her. She quivered against the orgasm stalking her. With one final upward lunge, Keeshan finished the act, sealing them together, sending shudders of delight lancing her. Then he lowered his hips back down to the pillows, taking her with him, looking up at her in awe.

“Good,” he grunted. “So good.”

Aimalee tightened around him

and delighted in his responding jerk. She had never done this before, ridden a man. She rather liked it. But...

“What do I do now?”

A wicked grin tweaked his lips. “Just follow my lead,” he said, repositioning his grip on her hips. When he moved her in tiny circles, she nearly fainted at the sensation. But she got the point and once she recovered from the nerve-tingling orgasm, began to undulate and rotate on his enormous cock.

As delightful as it was for her, it was torment for him. She soon had him writhing beneath her, panting

and groaning and pleading. She paused in her ministrations to gaze down at him, so noble and strong, so taut with desire. She had to kiss him.

His lips were damp, restless. A wildness skirted his eyes.

“Tell me what you need,” she whispered. “Let me please you.”

“I want to fuck you.”

Aimalee laughed. Her breasts, beneath the lace, bobbed. “We are fucking, aren’t we?”

“I want to fuck *you*.”

Her heart lurched at his intensity. “All right—”

Before the words were past her lips, he'd lifted them both off the pillows and turned over without breaking their connection. Now he rose above her, seated within her, and stared at her like a wild animal sighting its prey.

He nudged her legs farther apart and bent to take her aching nipple in his mouth. He sucked and sucked hard. Aimalee arched into him as lightning shot through her but there was nowhere to go as he was flush against her, delving deep. His hot length kissed her womb and she trembled. A strange, keening ache enveloped her. An

orgasm unlike anything she had ever known rose up within her. It was wild. Wanton. Ravaged her, body and soul.

When he began to withdraw, she groaned but he continued to pull out. She wrapped her legs around his waist and tried to hold him in, whimpering when she couldn't.

Just when he was about to slip out, he reversed direction and eased back in, slowly, unerringly finding his way to her core once more.

In the throes of yet another wash of bliss, she clenched at him

again. He jerked his cock back out and before she had time to complain thrust it home again. And again. And again.

Aimalee shivered and thrashed beneath him, begging and pleading and nipping at his flesh like a savage.

And then it happened.

Keeshan rose up, went stiff. Deep within her, his cock swelled, filling her, dominating her every thought.

He moved just a tiny bit and her swollen folds contracted.

Aimalee, unable to bear the sensation, fractured. Rapture came

and took her and carried her off. But she wasn't alone.

His body, tight as a bowstring, erupted. Hot and hard, jets of cream flooded her as Keeshan came along with her.

Long after the passion had receded, they lay there on the pillows, wrapped in each other's arms, breath tangling. Aimalee held him close and laid her head on his chest, listening to his heart, steady and strong. His skin warmed her cheek.

She had never experienced anything quite so wonderful and she didn't want it to ever, ever end.

If this was a dream, it was the best dream she'd ever had.

Chapter Six

When they recovered from that delightful interlude, Keeshan took Aimalee on the tour of the palace. It was a brief tour. In truth there was not much to show — the mirror room, the sleep chamber and the banquet hall she had already seen — but it always calmed his visitors, knowing the lay of the land.

“This,” he said, opening the fourth door, “is the library.”

She poked her head in and gasped. It was a long room, flanked with row upon row of bookcases,

jammed with all manner of reading material. There was a long divan against one wall and a roughhewn table at the center, piled with books.

Her nose twitched and she leaned in farther. "May I come in here and read? When there's time?"

He nodded. "Certainly." But there wouldn't be time. He knew her visit here would be short. Like the blink of an eye. He knew once she left, another century of loneliness gaped before him like an abyss. He planned to keep her occupied, to take full advantage of her while he could.

The thought annoyed him so he quickly guided her out of the room and closed the door, moving on to the next. He opened the door and stepped back. "The playroom."

She shot him a cynical glance. "The playroom? Really?" And then she peeped inside and chuckled. "It's a workout room." It was filled with weights and resistance machines, all fashioned after modern accoutrements he'd seen in the mirror.

"This is where I exercise, yes."

There was no need for her to study him the way she did. Certainly no call for her to murmur

with that hint of hesitation, “Y-you work out?”

He resisted the urge to flex for her. Surely it was obvious. He did, after all, have a lot of time on his hands. “You are welcome to watch, should you so desire.”

He enjoyed the slow creep of red up her cheeks. Enjoyed even more the knowledge that he could make her blush.

She fidgeted for a bit as though tempted to take him up on the offer and then stepped out of the room, back into the sweeping atrium. She scanned the row of doors. “And where do you...” Her flush

deepened and she wiggled a little.

He was entranced by the movement but managed to respond. "Where do I what?"

She edged closer and licked her lips several times in succession as though that would help the words slip out. "Where do you...pee?"

He blinked. Not having normal human needs, he'd forgotten. She'd been here for several hours now. Had several glasses of champagne. "Over here." As he opened the door, a waft of roiling steam rolled out. "This is the bathing room. There is a—I think you call it a toilet—there off the main

chamber.” He pointed.

“Oh, sweet Jesus, thank you.” She half ran, half skipped to the recessed alcove at the far end of the pool.

He stood at the door, waiting for her, staring at the alcove in which she'd disappeared and annoyed at himself for that. He was hardly a love-addled pup to moon after a consort.

But Aimalee was so different. He had been stunned by her enthusiasm, the way she had embraced their love, taken charge. He had to admit he'd liked it.

Oh, he always liked sex but this

was different. He liked this more.

A lot had happened in the past one hundred years. The mirror had shown him more changes in that short time than all the other centuries combined. And one of the things that had shifted significantly was the role of women in society. With few exceptions, the women who had come to him in the past had been tentative, a little submissive. They had certainly expected him take the lead in bed.

Aimalee brought a whole new flavor to the enterprise. Though shy, she was more adventurous than his past consorts. Not afraid to

say what she thought, take what she wanted. Not afraid of him.

He *really* liked that.

Maybe a little too much.

She emerged from the alcove, wreathed in relief. Her mood was definitely lifted.

His was not.

“Are there any other rooms?” she asked.

He bit his lip. “Just one. But I cannot show you that room yet.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

He took her arm and led her from the humid bathing room. The breezy atrium was cool in

comparison. "It is the fantasy room. It remains locked until the lamp decides to open it."

"That's odd."

It was not odd. Not odd at all. The lamp would not open the fantasy room until they were both ready to explore her deepest, darkest sexual desires. Not until there was trust and acceptance... and love. But this was not something he could tell her. He certainly couldn't tell her that at that point their journey together would be at an end.

"The lamp is ever inscrutable." He could tell from her expression

she was annoyed by his ambiguous response. But really, he didn't care. Couldn't care. There were things about the lamp Aimalee did not need to know. And despite her curiosity, things she should not be allowed to discover.

He led her over to the balustrade and gestured toward the stone stairs curling down the cliff. "In addition to the seven rooms, there is the garden tier below and farther down, the beach. You are welcome to make yourself at home here. However you wish. If there is anything you desire, you need only ask and the lamp will provide."

“And if I ask to go home?”

He merely smiled sadly in response. That was one request the lamp would not grant. The gods knew he had asked often enough.

* * * * *

The next morning, Keeshan emerged from the mirror room after another frustrating session to find Aimalee had awoken and was no longer in the sleep chamber.

Though he'd only been away from her a few hours, a great hunger for her presence stirred within him. Oddly enough it

wasn't a physical desire. No, this was a longing seated deep in his soul. To hear her voice, her laugh. To see her smile.

Anxiously, anticipation trilling within him, he set out on a hunt for her. There were only a few places she could be. He poked his head into the bathing room, the playroom and the library to no avail so he headed for the garden.

He found her there, in the lovely lace dress, sitting by the fountain, trailing her fingers in the sparkling water. Her back was to him but that didn't mitigate the snarl of attraction rumbling through him.

Everything about her fascinated him, entranced him. The way she held her head, the elegant drift of her hand through the fountain's waterfall, the way the tendrils of her hair fluttered in the breeze—threads of gold, lifting and dancing in the sunlight.

Her entire being, her aura, her soul, captivated him.

He watched her in silence, emotions waffling between desire and guilt for that desire. Neither were new to him, nor was the conflict they engendered. The magic of the lamp, the nature of his curse made certain he wanted

every woman who came to him. Made certain he could not resist her allure.

The guilt, however, was his own. He carried it with him always.

He'd suffered this conflict for nearly two thousand years, fresh in his heart with every woman, with every visit.

But why now, why this time, why, with Aimalee was this familiar tension so much more intense?

Could it be that attraction to her was real and not a construct of the Dark Djinn's sortilege? He brushed the thought away. The implications

were far too disturbing.

“Aimalee.”

At the sound of his voice, she stilled then slowly turned. His heart clenched at the sight of tears on her cheeks. Damn it all. She'd been crying. Pain twanged in his chest.

He ignored it.

He hunkered down beside her and dabbed away the dampness with a thumb. “Why are you crying?”

She shrugged. “It's nothing.”

“It's not.” He sat on the lip of the fountain next to her, drew her

into his arms and cradled her. Together they watched the play of sunlight dance through the burbling waters. She felt so good in his arms. That was, until she began to sob. Her entire body rocked with it. "Aimalee. It's not nothing. Tell me."

She peeped up at him and his heart contracted at her expression. So beautiful. So sad. "It's just... This isn't a dream, is it?"

He pulled her closer. "No. It's not." How he wished it were something other than what it was.

"I thought I could pretend this was all a hallucination but I can't.

It's too...real."

"Did you enjoy our lovemaking?" Why he awaited her answer so, heart in his throat, he could not explain.

"Yes," she said but this confession triggered a new wash of tears.

Keeshan snorted a laugh but there was no humor in it. Exasperation perhaps. Befuddlement. Frustration. "Why does that make you cry?"

"I'm not crying."

Even as she spoke the words, fresh tears puddled and streamed down her cheeks. Keeshan knew

enough about women to suspend logic in such times. Instead he cuddled her and reveled in the press of her body against his, her lingering scent. Unbidden, his arousal stirred. "Tell me what you're thinking."

She buried her face in his shoulder. "I want to go home."

Keeshan stilled. Forced himself to relax.

He reminded himself that she could not go home on a whim. That she could not leave him now. She would have to wait until the lamp released her. He pressed that sudden, irrational panic away and

buried his nose in her hair. Silken. Fragrant.

“It’s just not right, Keeshan, being here with you. Wanting this.”

“Ah.” Yes. He recognized her struggle. He’d known it himself. He propped his chin on the top of her head and let the silence enrobe them. Then, “He’s not worthy of you, Aimalee.”

She went rigid in his arms. “He?”

“Carter.”

Was it possible for a woman to bristle like a hedgehog? She did. Then she disentangled from his embrace, scooted a foot or so away

and stared at him, astonishment and a hint of trepidation in her eyes. "You know about him?"

He nodded. "The mirror showed me much to prepare me for your coming. I know about him. I know everything. He is not worthy of you."

Aimalee snorted a laugh. "Why am I not surprised to hear you say that?"

"Because it's true."

She bristled. "He is a wonderful man. And a great lover."

"He is not."

She flushed. Her lips trembled.

“You didn’t...watch...that? Did you? Oh my God. How mortifying.”

Keeshan chuckled. “Indeed not.” That would have been true torture.

“Then how do you know what kind of lover he is?”

“The measure of a man, of a lover, is not only what happens in the bedroom, Aimalee. Carter was distant and apathetic about your relationship in public. How could he be any different in private? And —” Keeshan bit his tongue. Yes. There was more. But he would not tell her.

Fortunately, Aimalee didn't notice his hesitation. She fashioned the long strands of her hair into a loose braid. "That's hardly the point." She glared at him. "I dislike being your sexual slave."

He arched a brow. "You are hardly my slave."

"I am if you can make me want you. Against my will."

Keeshan's brows came together. He did not care for that thought in the least. "It was hardly against your will."

"I didn't *want* to want you. You made me."

A creeping discomfort edged its

way into his gut. He knew the incantation made a woman helpless to resist him. He'd never thought of it as forcing her to want him. How many times had he done that over the millennia? Without thought? Without reflection? Heat prickled at the back of his neck.

"I'm sorry."

What else was there to say? He was powerless, unmanned. All at sea.

"But it's not just Carter. I miss my home, my friends and, oh, I miss my work. I was 'thisclose' to presenting my dissertation." She held her fingers up a tiny bit apart.

“I worked on that paper, on that research for years. It’s always been my dream to get my doctorate in antiquities and just when that dream is about to come true, I get snatched away. Do you know how hard it is to be ripped away from everything that’s familiar? Everything you’ve worked for? Everything you’ve built?”

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

“Oh.” Her brow wrinkled. She cupped his cheek. It took everything in him not to melt into her. He needed to be strong. For her. For him. For his own sanity. “Of course you do. You lost her. I’m

so sorry.”

His heart gave a little hiccup and his strength failed. He pressed a kiss on her palm then snaked an arm around her waist. She was too difficult to resist. Impossible to resist. “Not to worry. I am used to it. I have been here for a very long time. But Aimalee, please know *I* cannot release you. I cannot send you home.”

“You can’t?”

“No.”

“Have you ever wanted to release a woman?” She peered up at him through a curtain of golden hair.

He laughed. "No."

"So you've never tried?"

"Aimalee, the lamp will release you when it is time."

She frowned, a pout. "And when will it be time?"

But he did not answer.

He could not.

For he did not know how long he would have her.

Chapter Seven

Aimalee settled back, back into Keeshan's arms, delighting in the power of those bands of steel wrapped around her, strong and warm and gentle all at the same time. She closed her eyes and drew in the perfume of his garden, listened to the drone of bees as they flitted from flower to flower.

Yes, there was guilt. First of all for being here, for not being there to do her job, for letting everyone down at the most important phase of her career. And probably most significantly, there was her guilt

over enjoying this time with Keeshan. She hadn't always enjoyed being with Carter. He made her feel unworthy somehow. Unattractive but functional, like a cog in his grand machine. Whereas Keeshan made her feel important. At home, comfortable in her skin. Happy to be who she was.

And he made her feel other things too.

Perhaps it was the magic of this realm – wherever it was – or perhaps it was simply the magic of this man, but when she was with him, Aimalee felt desired and protected and as though everything

was simply right with the world.

Besides, according to Keeshan she was here until the lamp—some inscrutable cosmic decision maker—decided she could go. She might as well make the best of it.

She would think of it as a vacation. Yes. A lovely vacation in a tranquil resort with the most delicious, seductive lover at her every beck and call. She giggled and his arms tightened a bit. She snuggled deeper, enjoying the lick of the sun on her skin, the thrum of his heart against her cheek.

“Tell me about this place.”

He stiffened at her request but

then he sighed and the tightness dissolved. "It is my prison."

Aimalee glanced up at him. Dear heavens. What a handsome face. Though pain etched every line. "Your prison?" She offered a smile but he didn't respond in kind. Her heart contracted and she nestled her head back into his shoulder. "What did you do to deserve prison?"

He pressed his lips tight. At long last he sighed and said, "I angered a very powerful man."

"So he sent you here?"

"He condemned me to this place, yes."

She grinned. "It is rather lavish for a prison."

Keeshan's laugh was harsh. "There are many kinds of torment. The least of them is austerity. In truth, I would have preferred a short stay in a wretched dungeon or a quick end to a miserable life."

"Have you been here very long?"

He made a little sound in his throat, a growl perhaps, and bent his head to capture the sensitive flesh of her neck between his lips. He sucked and a twang of arousal shot through her. She wriggled against him in protest—which was

really something less than an objection—so he made his way up her abdomen to cup her breast, thumb a nipple. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

She captured his hand with her own. “I do. How long have you been here?”

He buried his nose in her hair and breathed deeply. “Too long.” His lips trailed over her shoulder to the back of her neck. Shivers of delight skittered down her spine.

“How long?”

“Aimalee. Please do not ask about this.”

She could sense his resolve, see

it in his lips, his eyes. Still, she scooted out of reach and frowned at him determinedly. "I want to know."

He followed. "Aimalee, I want you. I need you. I've been without a woman for far too long."

She blew out a laugh and edged away again. "You just had a woman. Just a little while ago. Remember?"

"Oh, I remember." Again he followed her, pursuing her around the fountain. "But the spell...it rides me. As long as you are near, I am compelled to want you."

A sudden hard and heavy ball

dropped into her gut and the game lost all its appeal. Aimalee stood, stepped away and glared at him.

Why did he have to be so handsome? Why did she have to want him like this? All his enticing words and tempting seductions served but one purpose.

His release.

Nothing more.

Nothing romantic or meaningful or lasting. They certainly didn't spring from some soul-deep connection. She was an idiot for even imagining that.

His brow, that beautiful brow, furrowed. He stood as well and

stepped closer.

She placed a palm on his chest — ignoring the wicked warmth of his slick skin — and pushed. He was far stronger than she, could easily have overpowered her pathetic resistance. But he didn't. He stepped back the length of her arm but only that far.

She choked back something suspiciously like a sob.

“Aimalee? What is it?”

“It's not really me you want, Keeshan.” The truth of the matter was — no matter how *wanted* he managed to make her feel — he didn't really want *her*. It was all the

damn spell. He just needed a female to ease his hunger. Any female would do. She should have known. She should have seen it.

“What?”

“You said as much yourself. The spell makes you want me. I could be any woman.” She strolled to the balustrade but it was more to create distance than to enjoy the view. He trailed in her wake. “You would want any woman so long as she was here.”

“Not like this!” His frown darkened. “I have never wanted a woman like this.”

“Liar.”

He reeled back as though she'd slapped him. "I've done many things in my life, Aimalee, of which I am ashamed. But I have never lied. Not to you. Not to anyone."

She rounded on him, arms crossed over her chest, quivering with outrage and, to be truthful, not a small amount of pain. "You always tell the truth?"

"Yes!"

"Then tell me what you did that angered that powerful man."

Keeshan paled.

"Who was he?"

His lips worked as though he

needed to build up the fortitude to utter the name hovering on his tongue. At long last, he said, "Duvalli. The Dark Djinn."

Aimalee gasped. "The Dark Djinn? From the Ashkahnary Fable?" It was a famous tale from ancient Arkett, of a poor and humble man who had unwittingly discovered the scrolls of the Great Ashkahnary Wizard in the desert. He had sacrificed all—even his family—to become the most powerful magician of his time. According to the fable, the power had corrupted his soul. He had become dark. Evil. Irredeemable.

Keeshan scrubbed his face with a palm. "It is no fable."

Aimalee stepped closer, suddenly fascinated. The study of ancient Arkett was her passion. Like the mythic Atlantis, archeologists and historians enjoyed debating the existence of the desert country that had ruled the pre-ancient world. And since little evidence other than anecdotal scrolls had been found, most assumed it was merely a myth.

But in a recent dig, Aimalee had found the site, excavated and recovered key artifacts proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that

Arkett had existed. She'd written a dissertation to prove it. The myth of the Dark Djinn—the man who ruled the empire with an iron fist and whose wrath over an unforgivable betrayal had caused the great sandstorm that consumed the entire civilization in minutes—had not been included.

“Have you met him? This Dark Djinn?”

Keeshan scowled. “Why are you so fascinated?”

Aimalee shrugged. “I've studied him. He is interesting.”

He paled. Right down to his lips. “He is evil, Aimalee. Do not even

think about him.”

She threw back her head and laughed. “I’m not afraid of him.”

“You should be.”

“Does he ever come here?”

“No. I am far too insignificant.”

“Not so insignificant that he forgot about your transgression. What was it that you did again?”

He glowered. “No. He has not forgotten about me. He never will. And while he doesn’t come here, I am occasionally called to have an audience with him.”

“Really?” She tipped her head to the side. “What’s he like?”

“You do not want to meet him.”

“I kind of do.”

Keeshan lurched forward and grabbed her by both shoulders, yanking her closer. Heavens. Was that panic in his eyes? “Don’t say that. Please. You do not want to come to his attention. He would destroy you.”

His intensity gave her pause. If the Dark Djinn did exist—as Keeshan claimed—and if he had the power to destroy a civilization within minutes, he was a force to be reckoned with.

She knew she was allowing the image of this fanciful creature to

overshadow the bald truth. The Dark Djinn had way too much power and he was not a nice guy. She probably didn't want to meet him.

“Is he truly all-powerful?”

“No one is all-powerful. Even the Dark Djinn answers to someone.”

“And who does he answer to?”

Keeshan shrugged and glanced away.

“Who?”

“The Great Djinn.”

“The Great Djinn of Ashkahnary?”

He nodded.

“Have you ever met him?”

His response was a barked laugh. “No one meets the Great Djinn of Ashkahnary.”

“But he is all-powerful?”

“I don’t know if he is all-powerful but he is pretty damn powerful.”

“He could send me home.”

“Yes.”

“He could send you home.”

“I no longer have a home.”

“What?”

He raked his hair. “Every person I knew died two thousand years

ago. Every building I ever stepped into has long since crumbled into sand. Coasts have washed away. Hilltops have flattened. What is home, other than that?"

She reached for him. "Oh, Keeshan. I am so sorry."

"Don't." He frowned. "Don't feel sorry for me. I cannot bear it."

"Tell me what you did."

He turned his back on her in favor of the dark shadow of his memory. His heartbeat pulsed in the silence between them. After a long pause he said in a small voice, "I don't want to tell you."

"Was it so bad?"

“Yes!” He whirled on her and she took a step back, horrified by the pain and regret in every line of his body. “Yes. I deserve every second of my incarceration. Every punishment. Every torment.”

A cold ball curled in Aimalee’s chest. “Did you kill someone?”

He winced. He didn’t answer right away. But then he didn’t have to. She could read the answer in his eyes.

At long last he muttered, “I killed lots of men. I was a warrior.”

“But that’s not why you’re here?”

He snorted a laugh. It was not a

happy sound. "No. I made the ultimate mistake." His lips worked. "I-I fell in love."

"With whom?"

His Adam's apple made the torturous journey up and down his neck. "His sister."

"He had a sister?" Somehow she'd never expected that. But then the Dark Djinn had been a man. Once.

"It was beyond betrayal. He was my teacher. My friend. He welcomed me into his home, gave me a seat at his feet, taught me, trusted me. And I...seduced her."

"Was she pretty?"

“Beautiful,” he whispered.
“Straight down to the soul.”

“And you loved her?”

“Beyond sanity.”

“Did she love you?”

A flicker of longing flitted through his eyes. “I think so. I hope so.”

“You don’t know?”

“I... When Duvalli found out about us, he banished me, ripped us apart. I tried to get back into the palace but his magic was too strong. I never saw her again. I never... never got the chance to tell her...”

“What happened to her?”

His features turned to stone. His shoulders shook. His aura vibrated with tightly held energy, agony, pain. He blew out a great breath, whispering on the cusp of it, "She died."

The words cut through the air like a knife. Aimalee cringed at the import. He stood before her, this great hulking bear of a man, utterly bereft and there was nothing she could do to ease his pain. She placed a hand on his shoulder nonetheless. His flesh rippled in response.

He swung around, fury flaring. "Loving me, he told me, ended her

life. So you see? His punishment for me? See how fitting it is? Century after century he sends me a woman, a woman I am compelled to want. Compelled to seduce. But never really have. Each one a reminder of what I did to him. What I took from him." He stilled, stared out at the shushing sea. "It is a punishment that shall never end."

Aimalee enfolded him in her arms, hoping, somehow, to soothe his soul. No one deserved to suffer like this. Not for a day. Not for a year. Not for centuries upon centuries without end. Forever.

So she held him. And he wept.

Once he recovered from his outburst, Keeshan sat still in Aimalee's arms, more than a little mortified.

What was wrong with him? He'd never shared his story. Not with anyone.

He'd certainly never broken down and cried like a child. Could it be he was becoming addled in his old age? That this interment was beginning to break him down, destroy him, drive him mad, as the Dark Djinn had always taunted would be his destiny?

Keeshan did not care for this

prospect.

Sometimes his strength of spirit was the only thing he had left in this shell of a life. He couldn't bear to lose that.

And the tangled wash of emotion he had whenever he thought of Aimalee—he didn't like that at all. Despite his vow to keep his distance from this woman—his emotional distance at least—he was sinking and sinking fast, wavering between his tattered guilt, the sharp edge of the lamp's lust and something else entirely. Something tender and tempting and utterly terrifying. She was a threat to his

sanity, a threat to his guarded heart. He was an idiot to creep closer.

But somehow he was unable to resist that slow slide.

There had to be something he could do. Something he could try.

If only he did not have the option of the damn incantation, that tiny little spell that could force her into his arms. The gods knew he didn't have the strength to resist the temptation. But if she could, if *she* could walk away, if *she* could remain distant. Maybe that would make life bearable when she finally left.

How he could manage that, he had no clue.

But Duvalli would know.

Keeshan stilled at the thought. The Dark Djinn could remove the temptation. Duvalli could release her from the power of the incantation. A flicker of hope kindled in his heart and then died.

Duvalli could. But would he?

“Are you hungry?” he asked and was relieved when her expression shifted.

She put a hand on her belly. “I am.”

Yes, he was relieved when she

allowed him to distract her, to lead her back to the banquet hall and tempt her with a dizzying array of delights.

He was especially relieved when she forgot all her questions and allowed him to kiss her again. Allowed him to seduce her again.

He shouldn't have. He shouldn't have done it. But he couldn't resist. Not when she was near and willing. And the magic of the lamp was working away on him, eroding his resistance.

He made love to her on the pillows surrounding the banquet table. And then he made love to her

on the banquet table. He made love to her until they were both exhausted. She, too exhausted to think of any more ridiculous, annoying questions. He, too exhausted to contemplate the fate awaiting him should he allow himself to fall in love. Again.

It was, in all likelihood, inevitable. If nothing else, the past two thousand years had taught him that.

There was only one answer. Only one way to escape that doom. He had to ask—demand—that Duvalli release her from the incantation.

And refuse to take no for an answer.

Chapter Eight

Keeshan stepped out of the mist into a cold, dark chamber. Flaming urns on either side of the great hall cast the only light, along with ominous, flickering shadows. But he knew there was nothing much to see. The Dark Djinn's audience chamber was a tomb, inaccessible except through magical means.

And the devil who reigned here lounged, in all his malevolent glory, on the throne, flanked by his two slaving hellhounds. He was a large man, made larger by the import of his sortilege. His dark-

hooded cloak only added to his ominous appearance. His features had changed little over the years but his dark eyes were harder, colder and glittered with familiar malice. His nose was a proud, bold slash. An elegant tangle of magical tattoos swirled over one side of his visage.

The Dark Djinn had been a powerful man two thousand years ago. Keeshan could only imagine how strong his magic was now, after centuries of ceaseless study and practice.

He had tried and failed to thwart the spell that bound him. It

became stronger with every attempt.

Duvalli glanced up as he sensed the disturbance, this emergence of familiar energy. His gaze lit on Keeshan and a smirk tugged at one side of his stark mouth. "So. A new dove has come. Has it been a hundred years already? My how time flies." Keeshan growled in response and Duvalli chuckled. "What's wrong, *Sir* Keeshan?" He used the appellation Keeshan hated, one that reminded him of the man he'd once been. The knight he'd once been. And never would be again. It was the Dark Djinn's

way of mocking what he had become. “Is she not a beauty? Did the lamp finally bring you an ugly woman?”

“She is beautiful. They all are.”

“They are all beautiful to *you*.”

The amusement melted away. Keeshan knew he was thinking of his sister. Duvalli never forgot about Circe. Then again, neither did Keeshan.

How he hated these audiences. Even though he could visit Duvalli’s demesnes whenever he wished—and he never wished—he was only called into the Dark Djinn’s presence once a century. He

always dreaded the audience.

“So.” Duvalli peered at Keeshan down the length of his arrogant beak of a nose. “Have you fucked her yet?”

Keeshan bristled. “That is none of your business.”

“You’ve fucked her.” Duvalli affected a sigh. “You never could control yourself. You are one horny son of a bitch, Sir Keeshan. Did she like it? Beg for more? Oh wait. Of course she did. You used the incantation.” This was not a question but when a red tide rose on Keeshan’s cheeks, Duvalli laughed, a harsh cackle. “Let me

guess. She appears in your chamber and less than a minute later you're drawing your lust spell all over her body." He spat onto the stones at his feet. "The little whore was probably crawling all over you—"

"Do not call her a whore." Keeshan's nails etched his palm. It was all he could do to keep from slamming his fist in Duvalli's stony face.

A dark brow rose. "My. What a tone. If I didn't know better, I would think you were challenging me."

Annoyance, impatience, desperation riffled through him.

Keeshan opened his mouth and a command just...slipped out. "Release her from the incantation."

Duvalli blinked. Keeshan had never dared command anything of him before. Ever. "*What?*"

A cold trickle of fear dribbled through his bowels but Keeshan ignored it. What could Duvalli do to him that he had not already done? How much worse could it be? He steeled his spine and snapped, "You heard me."

The Dark Djinn stared at him for an echoing eternity and then barked a harsh laugh. "Never say you are going soft, Sir Keeshan."

“I want you to release her from the incantation.”

“Ridiculous. Why would you want to free her? That spell guarantees she cannot resist you.”

“I don’t want her like that.”

“It’s never stopped you before,” the Dark Djinn scoffed.

“Things are different now. I want it to be her choice.”

Duvalli studied him in silence, tapping his lips. “Don’t be an idiot. If the incantation is broken, it will be broken forever.”

“Good.” Keeshan’s response was not far from a sneer. He was weary

to the bone of his life in the lamp. Weary to the bone of sex that meant nothing and never could.

Duvalli's lips curled into a travesty of a smile, a mockery of nonchalance. His entire body was taut, vibrating like a bowstring. "Imagine it. Eternity trapped in the lamp with no way to make the women accept you. Constant, infinite lust. And no release."

"Release her," Keeshan snapped. Anguish clawed at him and the true reason for his roiling fear slipped out. "Every woman who has given me her heart under that incantation spent the rest of her life

in misery.”

His nemesis smirked. “You ruined them for other men.”

“That was hardly my fault. You are the one who sent them to me. You carry this onus.”

“Technically, I had nothing to do with it.”

“You wove the spell!”

“But the Great Djinn chooses your consorts. We can only assume there are reasons for each choice. But do not fret about them.” The Dark Djinn forced a grin. It was not a pleasant sight. “No doubt when they moved on, into other incarnations, all your women were

able to find a modicum of happiness with other men.”

Keeshan’s heart stuttered. “And your sister? Did she ever find happiness in other lives?”

Duvalli’s complexion mottled. His tattoos glowed a furious crimson. “You know damn well the mirror will not show her to me.”

Keeshan rocked back on his heels. He could tell he was making no progress with the Dark Djinn. He rarely did. But he still had one argument left. “So tell me, Duvalli. What is the difference between your sister and these women the lamp brings me?”

“What?”

“Would you condemn Circe to Aimalee’s fate? To be sent to the lamp? To be compelled to want me?”

Duvalli stood in a rush, his cloak swirling around his body. He fairly hummed with rage. He stormed down the stairs of the dais, stopping short just inches away. He glowered down upon his captive, drawing back his shoulders and thrusting out his chest. Keeshan refused to be intimidated by such petty theatrics. He had been a prisoner of this Djinn for far too long. If Duvalli could harm him, he

would have done so long ago.

He firmed his chin. "Release her from the incantation."

Apparently Duvalli found his lack of trepidation annoying. "Stop saying that," he spat, spinning around to pace across the chamber. The dogs tracked him with leaden eyes, their heads moving as one. "I cannot remove that enchantment. You should know better than to ask."

"Then ask the Great Djinn."

Silence, cold and hard, settled over the room. The stark fury on Duvalli's visage stunned Keeshan. Not because it was fury—he'd seen

plenty of that from this man. But because it was laced with something else. Something that looked like...fear. Tension crackled and spit between them.

“No one asks anything of the Great Djinn.”

“He’s the one in charge. He’s the one who controls this realm.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know enough. I know he’s your master.”

“I am the Great Djinn’s agent.”

“Agent?” Keeshan laughed. “You became his slave the day you cast your spell on me and we both

know it. You became entombed here, right along with me.”

“A price I would gladly pay a thousand times over to make you suffer,” Duvalli said.

“Circe is gone.”

“Don’t you dare say her name.”

“She was released to the great wheel of incarnation two thousand years ago. How many lives has she lived since then? How many were happy lives?”

The Djinn snarled. “How many great loves has she had since you?”

If this was an attempt to strike at Keeshan’s heart, it missed the

mark. "I do not care if she has loved other men."

"Because you never loved her."

"Because I love her still. I want nothing, nothing but her happiness."

"You killed her!" His bellow rocked the room.

"I did not kill her."

"Your love killed her."

"I did not kill her." Silence seethed around them like a nest of hissing vipers. And then, "How did she die?"

"Go to hell."

"I am already there."

“You are only getting what you deserve.”

Keeshan steeled his spine. “Perhaps you are right. I deserve this torment.” He glanced up and caught Duvalli’s gaze. “But *she* does not. Release her from the damn incantation.”

The Dark Djinn went pale. “I cannot,” he said through bloodless lips. “Stop asking!”

“Release her! Re —”

Duvalli held up his hand, cutting him off mid-word. “Do not say it again. If you don’t want that woman to be compelled to fuck you, then don’t draw the damn

incantation.”

Keeshan’s gut dropped. Not draw the incantation? When the lust claimed him, he did not have the strength to resist. He never did. “You’re the one who wove the spell in the first place. You know that’s not possible. Release Aimalee from that damn incantation and do it now!”

Duvalli seemed to deflate then, that great hulking creature. His face fell and his shoulders crumpled. He walked slowly back to his throne and sat with a boneless thud. He wiped his palm over his brow and muttered an invective to himself.

“You are the most stubborn man I have ever known.” He shrugged, his countenance suddenly a moue of supreme disinterest. “You make me weary, Sir Keeshan. Be gone.”

With a flick of the Dark Djinn’s fingers, his prisoner was drawn back to his cell.

Duvalli was, once again, alone.

He glared for a long while at the place Sir Keeshan had been standing, brooding over their exchange. Did the bastard have any idea what he’d done? Judging from Keeshan’s anger when he left, Duvalli thought not. Hopefully the

good knight had forgotten his lessons. Forgotten about the Power of Sevens.

He probably had. Two thousand years was a really long time.

He would realize soon enough, when he tried to draw the incantation on his latest little concubine. He would realize that part of the spell, at least, was broken.

Served him right for being so damn insistent. By simply repeating his request seven times, Keeshan had lost the one tool he needed to battle the lust of the lamp.

How long would it take him to

figure out the rest?

Duvalli's mind roiled.

Irritation and...some other emotion swirled in his gut. He needed a release.

At his gesture, the curtain to the antechamber rose.

"Come," he commanded. And obediently, *she* entered the great hall. Duvalli allowed himself a self-satisfied smirk as he watched her cross the chamber, her head down, hands folded demurely at her waist, the way women held themselves in her time. She would not be so demure in a moment, he resolved.

She stopped before him and lifted her eyes to his. They were brown and beautiful and lushly lashed...and absolutely indifferent as she surveyed him. "You summoned me, my master?" The words, from her lush, berry-ripened lips, in her husky voice, sent a shudder down his spine.

In response he spread his legs and opened the flap of his breeches.

She knew what he wanted, what he needed, just as he knew she would comply.

She always did.

She had for centuries.

Chapter Nine

Keeshan returned to the lamp to find Aimalee in the sleep chamber, curled in a ball and weeping. He fell to his knees and wrapped her in his arms and held her until the racking sobs stilled. "What is it?" he asked, kissing her temple.

It took her a minute to catch her breath, to be able to form words. "It's-it's Carter."

Keeshan's brow furrowed. Damn Carter. How he wished Aimalee had never met the bastard. But then if she'd never met Carter,

she wouldn't have found the lamp. And he would never have found her.

But still. Carter was an ass.

“What about him?”

She gazed up at him, her lashes bedewed with tears. He had the not-so-fleeting urge to wring Carter's scrawny ascot-swathed neck. “I saw him.”

Keeshan's heart lurched. Surely she hadn't—

“I asked the mirror.”

Oh hell. She had.

“I asked the mirror to show me Carter and-and...”

He pulled her closer, rocked her back and forth. "What did you see?" He had to ask though he did not want to know.

"I'm not sure. It fogged over before I could see everything."

Keeshan sighed. "It does that." Damn mirror. If he did not know the mirror was a soul as enslaved as he was, as ensorcelled and entombed, he would smash it into smithereens. But the mirror had no choice. Like all of them, it had to dance to the piper's tune. Had to obey. "The mirror is obliged to show what is asked and compelled to fog over just as emotions begin to

rise.”

“That sucks.”

His lips quirked in a tiny smile. “Yes. The only way you can watch is by remaining dispassionate. Which is virtually impossible.”

“Can you help me?” Damn. She was so beautiful, her soul so pure, shining through.

He cleared his throat in a rumble and steeled his spine. “What do you need?”

She shifted around on his lap, suddenly enthused. “I was thinking... If it’s the emotion of the *asker* clouding the vision, maybe you could ask the mirror to show

you Carter. I could sit beside you in the room and watch. Then maybe my emotions won't cloud things up."

Keeshan stared at her, unsure how to respond. Damn it all anyway. Magic didn't act like that. It wasn't situational. There were no cheats, no tricks that could outwit a spell.

But she was so hopeful, he hated to refuse outright.

It was probably for the best. Let her see how fruitless this quest was. Maybe then she would stop trying to catch a glimpse of the man she should never have loved. But...

What if it worked? What if she saw Carter in all his selfish, misogynistic, faithless glory?

Could she bear it?

Could he?

“Aimalee, I don’t think that is a good idea.”

Her hope crumbled.

Why did that send a shard through his heart?

He was supposed to be heartless.

“Can we try, Keeshan? Please?”

He buried his face in her shoulder. What was it about this woman that he could not resist her slightest demand? He knew he

could distract her. He knew all he had to do was draw the incantation on her flesh and she would be so overcome with lust she would forget about Carter and her brilliant idea and become obsessed with only him. And he wanted that. He wanted that so badly he could taste it on his tongue, even as he tasted her.

But he was determined to resist the temptation. He had to. He cared too much to force her to want him. He cared too damn much. And that frightened him to death.

She must have sensed his weakness, his consent, because she

wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him, splattering kisses over his cheeks. "Oh thank you! Thank you. I just want to see him again. I just want to see him."

"I know."

Damn. With all his heart, Keeshan hoped the mirror would behave. Show her something innocuous. Something mundane. Carter shaving. Carter on the toilet. Carter watching the television box. Anything but... Anything but *that*.

He stood and helped her to her feet. As they walked to the mirror room, Keeshan had the strangest sensation they were walking to

their doom.

She must have felt it too. "Will you hold me?" she asked.

Keeshan raised her hand to his lips. "Certainly."

He settled himself on the wide chair, arranging her on his lap. She settled in, wriggling until she got comfortable, which only made him more uncomfortable. He was cursed with a near constant hard-on whenever she was around and having her warming his lap was a torment beyond words. But for her, he could tolerate it. At least for a while.

The lust was beginning to rise

again. Clawing trails of arousal snaked through him, bubbled and spat, heightened his tension. He bit his lip against it and hardened his resolve.

But honestly, he did not know how long he would last. It had been hours since he'd been inside her.

“Shall we?”

His brain seized and then he realized what she meant was, “Shall we ask the mirror?” In the depths of his imagination, she was asking for something else entirely.

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “Mirror. Show me Carter.”

There was a brief of hesitation as

though he had surprised the mirror with this unfamiliar request. Keeshan almost always asked to see Circe or Lisette. But the mirror could not refuse the request. The dark glass faded and a scene began to coalesce.

“Hold me,” she said in a small voice.

Keeshan wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. She snuggled closer, her focus trained on the mirror. She shivered so he rubbed her back until she relaxed.

“Here it comes...”

A windowed room appeared. A large desk. Orderly shelves filled

with pristine, untouched books.

Aimalee bent forward. “That is Carter’s office. But...”

The door opened and Carter entered, followed by Sorcha.

Keeshan cringed. *Damn.*

Carter crossed to the desk and extracted a bottle of Scotch out of the bottom drawer. He poured two generous glasses and handed one to Sorcha. “Do you think she suspects?”

Sorcha snorted. “She thinks you walk on water.”

“Still...”

“She doesn’t have a clue.”

Aimalee tensed. Keeshan resumed his stroking.

Carter threw back his drink and poured another. "She didn't show up last night. I mean, I expected she'd be put out. Asked to miss the opening and all. But she didn't even finish the display."

Sorcha ran a long-nailed finger around the lip of her glass. "She's pouting. Let it go."

"She didn't come in this morning. She never misses work."

"She'll get over it.

Aimalee sighed. "See. He misses me. He's worried."

Keeshan merely grunted in response because now Sorcha was moving closer to Carter. And she had *that* look in her eye. Keeshan had seen it more than once.

But Aimalee never had.

It didn't take long for her to realize things weren't as they seemed. Her body tightened as she caught the furtive move Sorcha made with her hand. Keeshan nearly cursed out loud. The bitch was stoking Carter. Right there in broad daylight.

Carter grabbed Sorcha's wrist. "Not here," he hissed.

"Yes, here, lover," she

whispered in his ear. She moved closer still, close enough to dart her tongue around his ear. Carter, the weak bastard, threw his head back and groaned.

Keeshan cleared his throat. "I think we've seen enough."

"No!" Aimalee clutched his tunic. "I want to see it all."

"No. You don't."

She frowned at him, filled with resolve. "I must."

Together, they turned back to the mirror. To the vision of Sorcha unbuttoning Carter's shirt and scoring his bared chest with her nails.

Carter whimpered. “Someone could come in.”

“Fucking let them,” Sorcha snarled. “I want you. On your knees. Now.”

Whether or not Carter complied – Keeshan rather suspected he did – they never discovered because Aimalee leapt from his lap with a cry and the mirror fogged over.

“What happened?” She shook the mirror a little to try to get the image back.

“Don’t bother,” Keeshan said. “Emotion has clouded the vision.” He couldn’t tell her it was his fault. His emotion, his anger, his pain the

mirror had sensed. Because when Aimalee hurt, somehow he hurt too.

She spun on him, lips in a pout. “Did that really happen or did that stupid mirror just make it up?”

“The mirror tells only the truth.”

“How do you know?”

“It is compelled to do so.” He stepped closer and wrapped her in his arms. “Are you all right?”

She wrenched away with a growled no and his heart stuttered. Damn it. He should never have let her watch this. He should have known...

“I am so *angry*.”

Keeshan stilled.

She was angry? Anger was good. It was a hell of a lot better than heartbreak. He almost felt relieved. Almost.

“Can you believe that-that bitch?”

“That bastard!” Keeshan felt the urge to add.

“Can you believe they...? Oh my God.” She raked her fingers through her hair and paced the room. “They’re having an affair. Right behind my back.”

It was all Keeshan could do to

hold back a snort. Behind her back but just barely. There had been many times when Aimalee had nearly walked in on them. They had not been terribly discreet.

“He is not good enough for you. He never was.” He tried once more to pull her into his arms. She allowed it but only for a short while. Again, she twisted away to resume her furious pacing.

“And there I was feeling so guilty. So damn guilty for wanting you.” Oh, how she spat the words. “And annoyed at wanting you. At being made to want you by that damn spell. And all along he was

fucking her. I'm so mad I could spit." She glared at the mirror. "I should smash that damn thing."

"It's not the mirror's fault." Keeshan had to bite back a smile. This wasn't the time for a self-satisfied smirk but her words made him want to grin like a monkey. *She wanted him.* His mood, and other things, began to lift. He took her arm. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Still muttering, she allowed him to lead her onto the sweeping patio. The moon had risen, splashing pale light across the panoply.

He wrapped his arm around her

shoulder as they strolled into the night. It was time to distract her, he thought.

Well past time.

But he did not draw the incantation. He had another, better plan in mind. "Beautiful night," he murmured.

She started. "Huh? What?" She glanced around. Infinitesimally, she relaxed. "Yes, it is."

"Far too beautiful for such a dark mood."

She frowned at him but he could see her natural humor bubbling to the fore. "It's never too beautiful for a fit of pique."

“Well,” he chuckled. “If anyone deserves a fit of pique, it is you, my dear.” He gestured at the vases in the alcoves along the wall. “Would you like me to stand aside while you smash something?”

She tried to swallow a laugh but failed. It came out suspiciously like a snort. “Don’t amuse me. I am trying to be annoyed.”

“As you should be.”

She fell silent as they came to the balustrade. She leaned against the cool stone and gazed out at the shimmering sea. “Should I be angrier, do you think?”

Keeshan quirked a brow. “Are

you not angry?"

"I am." Her teeth nibbled at her lower lip in a way that captured his imagination. "But not as angry as I should be, I think." She propped her chin in her palms and contemplated the peaceful vista. He was loath to interrupt her thoughts. She was working it through. She needed to work it through.

But he could not keep from touching her, providing at least some comfort. He teased her nape and she sighed.

When she glanced at him there were tiny tears on her lashes. "Do you suppose I really loved him?"

“Only you can answer that.”

She shrugged and looked back at the sea shushing silently in the distance. “I wonder. He was the first man who paid me any attention. Maybe that was it. Maybe I was in love with love. It was so exciting and...I was lonely.”

“I find that mind-boggling. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever known. And I’ve known many.”

Aimalee fixed him with a wry stare. “Now *that* I find mind-boggling. Besides, you don’t really *want me* want me. I could be ninety with boobs down to here and you’d

still want me. Remember the enchantment? The one that makes me utterly irresistible to you?"

He bristled. "I have been resisting you."

She snorted a laugh. "And thank you so much for that."

"I didn't say it was easy." He yanked her closer and kissed her. Her mouth was like nectar. He let himself linger, tasting and nibbling and feasting on her essence. He knew, just knew, when the passion snared her too. Her body warmed in his arms and she made tiny tormenting movements, nudging her hips against his. His cock grew

harder—it always was hard—but the throbbing became steadily more intense.

Keeshan eased away. He had to. They still had something important to discuss. And he wanted to make something crystal clear to this little minx.

“Aimalee, earlier you said you were feeling guilty for wanting me.”

“Yes.” She went up on her tiptoes and kissed him again. “I don’t feel guilty now.” This she proved by boldly running her nails up his chest and scraping a hard nipple.

Keeshan cringed. Damn. She was making it hard to focus.

She always made it hard.

He captured her wrist. Needed to stop this torment so he could focus. Think. "You said you were annoyed the incantation made you want me."

"Yes." She guided his head down and nibbled on his neck. "I'm not annoyed now."

She bit him. Gently, but still... All logic flew from his head. Lust rushed in to fill the space. He wanted nothing more than to bend her back over the balustrade, lift her leg and slide inside...but there

was something he needed to say.

What was it again?

Oh. Yes. "It wasn't the spell."

She found his length and squeezed. Keeshan's thin control began to dissolve. But at his words, she froze. He placed his hand over hers and resumed the delicious motion.

His gut lurched, his soul howled when she stepped away. The cool breeze went suddenly cold as an abyss between them opened.

She crossed her arms and glowered at him. "What do you mean, it wasn't the spell?"

With great effort, he searched for his train of thought. Which was...

Ah yes. The spell.

"I only used the incantation on you one time. The first time."

Aimalee shook her head. Her brow puckered into a frown. "No. You must have used it again."

"I did not."

"Then why do I still want you?" She stepped even farther away. He longed to follow but didn't. "I mean, really want you. I think about you, about your body, about the way you feel inside me. Your taste. Your scent. I ache for you

when you're gone. That is not natural."

Keeshan grinned. He couldn't help it. "It is very natural."

"Not for me. I never felt like that."

"Not even for Carter?" A thrill snaked through him at the thought.

She opened her mouth to answer but no words came out. Her thoughts, however, were stamped on her delicate features. Shock. Horror. Surprise. "Oh my God." She put her palms to her flaming cheeks. "Oh my God. No. It was never like this with him. Never."

"Aimalee." He stepped forward.

He could not stop himself. Not now. He had his confirmation. She wanted him without the damn spell. And she had never loved Carter, not really. She had probably never even *wanted* Carter. Perhaps she'd been in love with the idea of love. And that was fine with him. So long as it was Keeshan she wanted.

Because, may all the gods help him, he wanted her. With every fiber of his being.

Chapter Ten

He tugged her into his arms and she melted against him. "Aimalee. It's all right. I feel it too."

She buried her face in his chest. "But..." She glanced up. Tears again. Damn.

"But what?"

She cupped his cheek. "But for you it *is* the spell. It could be any woman and you would want her. It could be Sorcha, for God's sake."

He choked back a mortified laugh. "Never say it."

His expression must have been

pretty horrified because she laughed as well. And then she sobered. "You know it's true. This passion you feel for me—it's been the same with all the other women the lamp has brought to you."

"No. Not really." The emotions Aimalee evoked went far deeper. For instance, before he met her he would never have bothered to resist seducing a woman simply because she was upset. Not when the enchantment was upon him. He would have drawn the incantation upon her and taken what he wanted, needed.

With Aimalee, he could resist. It

nearly killed him but could resist. Hell, with Aimalee, he wanted to try.

Blind, mindless sex simply didn't have the same allure as holding her tight in his arms, knowing that alone gave her pleasure.

Clearly, she did not believe him. She skewered him with a suspicious frown. "How? How is it different?"

He stared down at her beautiful visage, her perfect features, the crinkles at the corners of her eyes, the wry quirk of those lovely lips. And he couldn't help but kiss her.

It was a delightful kiss though a short one. Because she eased away.

“How is it different?” She was damn insistent.

He shrugged. It was so difficult to put into words. “I...care.”

Her brow furrowed. “Didn’t you care before?”

“Yes. I cared about finding release. But that was all. With you, I care about so much more. I care about your happiness. I care about your safety. I care...” He swallowed. “I care what you think of me.”

She smiled then and somehow all was right with the world. “I do

think well of you," she said. "I do."

He suddenly no longer cursed his internment in the lamp.

Because it had brought her to him.

"Ah, Aimalee."

He wanted her so much. Wanted to kiss her, hold her, sink into her and make her come but he hesitated. She had just gone through something terrible. Discovered Carter's perfidy. He should give her space. Give her time. It was wrong of him to want to leap upon her now. It was—

He stilled.

Was that her hand? On his thigh?

She shot him an impish grin paired with a naughty wink and his heart hitched. "Aimalee?"

"Keeshan?"

Bone-deep relief bubbled through him and he let go a little laugh. "Are you asking me for permission?"

She peeped up at him in the most enchanting way, the minx. He loved this playful side of her. "Do I need to ask permission?"

Never! "My lady, you can have me any time you wish. Any way you wish."

“Truly? Because there is something I have been thinking about.”

“Really?” His heart hitched. “What is that?”

“You remember when you showed me the bathing room?”

“Yes.” His pulse thrummed. Everywhere.

“Ummm.” She rubbed against him. “I would love a bath.” But the way she said it, he knew it was not the bath that was on her mind. Or his.

“Come along.”

She laughed when he grasped

her elbow and ushered her, posthaste, back along the balustrade to the third door. It opened for them and a coil of steam roiled out. He steered her inside.

But once there, she hesitated. Doubt flickered across her features.

With an instinctual knowledge, Keeshan read her uncertainty. He pulled her into his embrace. Into his kiss. He soothed her with his lips and tongue. And only then, only when she was warm and willing and pliant, did he nudge the sleeves of her lace dress from her shoulders.

When she would have stopped

him, he lowered his mouth and feasted his way along the neckline, seducing the dress from her body one tiny increment at a time. She lost all sensibility when he found her nipples—thank all the gods—and allowed the dress to fall, unheeded, to a pile on the floor. Keeshan, however, continued his work.

It was very serious work. He'd had yet to explore her so completely and he relished it. He tasted her breasts, like ripe fruit, sucking and nibbling. He worshiped at the small of her back, licking and dabbing the two

entrancing dimples there. Tasted the cream between her legs, laving her again and again, filling himself with her taste, her essence until she clutched at his shoulders, trembling with strain.

“My. That was selfish of me.” He stood before her, holding out his arms. “It is your turn, my lady, to disrobe me.”

It delighted him the way she stared at him. Like a child offered a multitude of treats and unsure which to taste first. He decided to help and removed his belt. Then he placed her hands at the hem of his tunic and helped her lift it off.

She made a feral little grunt as his chest was revealed. He couldn't help the lash of pride her admiration engendered. But then he forgot about all of that because, just then, she began to explore. From his collarbone down to his pectorals, swirling around a nipple until he thought he would expire and then down again, lower, to ripple over his abs.

A shudder shot through him, tightening his cock, sending a tingle through his balls, as her attention drifted lower.

He shifted impatiently as she neared the target and then drifted

away. "Aimalee," he groaned. And then he lost all capacity for speech, because she knelt—knelt—before him and hooked her thumbs in the waistband of his breeches and eased them down.

His cock, not shy in the least, bounded forward.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. His knees went weak at the sight but then they almost failed him when she touched him.

Ah, the bliss. The superb bliss of her fingertips. He thrust his hips forward, unable to stop himself. He wanted this, needed this, ached for this.

When she fisted him, stroked him, he nearly lost consciousness. He was glad he did not, for the next heartbeat her breath wafted over the throbbing head of his cock like a zephyr straight from heaven.

He pressed forward again and—bless her—she took the hint and drew him into her mouth. Her tiny tongue dabbed at the sensitive slit and her lips came around him and she sucked ever so slightly. He held himself as still as he could, wanting to prolong this agony, prolong this bliss.

But when her nails scored his length, he knew he could tarry no

longer. An instant more and he would be finished.

So he stepped back.

It was the most difficult thing he'd ever done.

But he stepped back and helped her to her feet.

They were both naked now so he led her step by step into the water. The pool was heated, the water a delight. She moaned as it lapped at her thighs and then, with another step, at her clit. Tiny bumps rose on her skin, screaming her delight.

He led her deeper.

And deeper still.

He brought her to a little stone seat that had been built into the pool. It was a place where one could relax and enjoy the caress of the waters or the caress of another. He settled her and then sat beside her.

She opened her mouth to speak but he kissed the words away, sucking gently on her tongue and nibbling at her lips, teasing her much as she had teased him. And with similar effect. Soon she was quivering and cooing in his arms, clutching him as he found her slit and delved within.

It did not take much to rouse her. What a relief. Rising arousal, twined with desperation, played over her features as he traced her crease, circled her clit then slipped lower and deeper and in.

His heart stalled at what he found. She was slick and hot and ready.

He slid his finger out—much to her chagrin—and then slid it back in with another beside it. And he groaned. That easily, he filled her, so tight was her cunt.

The ripples of sensations battering his body dissolved into manic shivers as need crept higher

and higher. His balls tightened into little nuts. His cock wept. Saliva pooled in his mouth at the thought of sliding into her. Taking her. Having her.

He had promised to please her. To see to her pleasure. And he was determined to do so. He wanted to bring her to bliss before he entered her.

But he did not know if he had the strength.

Fortunately, she had other thoughts.

She took control, bless her. She grabbed a hold of his shoulders and lifted herself in the water, turning

to straddle his lap and – all the gods – to straddle *him*.

She took his cock in her hands again and eased down on him. He hissed, throwing his head back. She was hot. Hot and tight and slick. One stroke might do him in.

His balls throbbed. The insistent little pulse at the base of his cock went wild. Pressure, insistent and intense, built. It was all he could do to hold himself still.

She rose above him, disimpaling herself, clutching at his captured cock with the walls of her taut cunt, massaging him with that slick, velvet glove. Her fingers, fisted in

his hair, distracted him, but deliciously so. When she bent her head and nibbled at his nipple, he could not resist a thrust of his own. She liked that and wiggled a little, clenched his cock until he thought he might lose his sanity.

And then he did.

She did something with her internal muscles—he had no idea what it was—but she did it and fire ran riot through his body and he lost his mind.

He stood and, holding her in his arms, flattened her against the tile of the pool and impaled her. She cried out and threw back her head,

arching into the thrust, sending him even deeper. He thrust again. And again. And then a mindless series of rapid lunges.

The water slowed him, frustrated him, but its resistance enhanced the sensation. As he moved more and more frantically, little waves lapped at him, lapped at her. They washed over her straining breasts and when he lifted her lapped at the tight button of her clit. Fascinated at the sight, he circled that nub and was rewarded when she came around him.

She was tight. So tight. The sucking sensation of her spasm

nearly unmanned him but he gritted his teeth and clenched his ass and forced himself to hold back.

He wanted more. Needed more. More for her.

She wept and writhed. Each thrust into her engorged flesh sent spirals of hellish shivers dancing through her. Through him. The sensation traveled down his cock to nest in his balls. A heavy weight descended, a tightening, an increasing tension that delighted and tormented him.

His cock swelled, strained inside her.

Her eyes flew open. Their gazes

met, melded. And he surrendered. Cum thundered from him to her in jet after jet of aching, burning bliss. Even when he was empty, he continued to thrust, because with each plunge she came around him, gripping, sucking, massaging the life from him.

Eventually he slowed.

Eventually he stopped.

He lifted her from the water in a boneless mass, wrapped her in a toasty towel and curled up with her on the plush divan. And he held her in his arms as she sobbed and moaned against him, until she drifted into a peaceful sleep.

And as she slept, he held her.
And stared at her beautiful face.

And ached.

After the transforming passion in the bathing room, they were both somewhat subdued. When she awoke, they went to the banquet hall and had a simple meal of cheese and bread and wine. Each feeding the other.

And then they took a walk along the balustrade and Keeshan led Aimalee along the path that snaked its way down the hill to the beach.

They walked in the surf and splashed each other and laughed

until he kissed her again. Then they made love in the cool sand with the glowing moon as their only witness.

Chapter Eleven

She fell asleep in his arms when her passion was sated and he held her and watched her. He wasn't sure why she fascinated him so, but she did. Everything about her drew him.

It was like a drug, watching her sleep. The way her lashes fluttered just so, the way her lips twitched. The peaceful rise and fall of her chest as she lolled in the arms of Morpheus. She was lovely in her release and he envied her.

Sleep was a pleasure he

remembered though had not enjoyed for centuries.

He tenderly tracked the line of her lips and then, because he could not resist, the slender column of her neck. The simple touch soothed him.

There was something about Aimalee that did that, relieved his tension, fed him, spoke to his soul. She was generous and kind and compassionate. She was a woman who deserved love, the very best of it. But there was something more in her. A warmth. An affinity. A familiarity.

And she deserved to be treated

with respect.

She deserved better than being sentenced to this hell with him.

She deserved better than being ensnared by a cheap and tawdry trick like the passion incantation.

Keeshan rested his head on her shoulder. He shouldn't use it on her. He knew he shouldn't. And fortunately, up until now—with the exception of the first desperate time—he hadn't had to. But he knew a time would come when he would need to. When the magic of the lamp would ensnare him and ride him and he would ache to his toes with desire for her—and she

would refuse him.

Could he resist temptation then?

The pain was excruciating and grew like a roiling sandstorm when he didn't touch her. When that happened, could he maintain the control to simply say no? To refrain from using the spell that would release him from his torment?

Now, with her tucked into his embrace, he imagined he could be strong.

Experience taught him differently.

Experience taught him that at his core, he was weak. He hated that about himself. Hated that the

spell could ride him, control him.

But if he could do it, if he could resist using the incantation, it could be his little rebellion against the Dark Djinn. If he could bear it.

And he vowed that he would. Vowed that he could.

But somewhere deep inside, a little devil laughed.

Because he had never been able to resist before.

He cupped her cheek, stroked her with his thumb. Like a kitten, she nuzzled into his embrace.

Damn it all. He was going to hate it when she left.

But in the meantime, no matter what it took he would not use the incantation.

He would not.

Unless he absolutely had to.

He knew immediately when she began to stir. Her breathing changed, her body tightened, her presence...returned.

“Are you hungry?” he murmured into her hair.

She nodded. “A little.”

He sat up and waved a hand. A platter of fruit and bread and cheese appeared before them.

Aimalee laughed, wrapping

herself in the blanket he had conjured as their bed. "That's a useful little trick."

"It's a long walk back up the hill."

"Mmm." She plucked a grape and popped it into her mouth. He watched with a hunger of his own. She stared out at the sea, tapping her lip. "You said you were a student of the Dark Djinn?"

"Yes. But he wasn't the Dark Djinn then."

"What did he teach you? Magic?"

Keeshan nodded. "Of a sort. But looking back, the spells were little

more than cheap tricks to bend space and time. Nothing really astounding.”

“I find the ability to conjure up food out of thin air rather astounding.”

“Yes, but it is nothing you could not do on your own with a little more effort. This kind of magic is little more than shortcuts.”

“Still... It’s impressive.”

“I am so gratified that you are impressed.” Truly, his power was so insignificant in the scheme of things it was barely worth mentioning.

“Is the Dark Djinn so much more

powerful than you?"

"He was much more powerful than I two thousand years ago. Surely now that he has had all this time to hone his craft, he is even stronger."

She shrugged. "No one is invincible. Everyone has their weakness. You simply need to discover his."

Keeshan laughed. He had to. She was so naive.

But she made him feel special and he would always remember her for that. Even after she was gone. He pulled her into his arms and held her tight.

“Keeshan?”

“Mmm?”

“There’s something I would like to ask you.”

“Anything.”

“The other day when you were watching the mirror...”

“Yes?”

She tipped her head so she could peer up at him. “Who was she?”

His heart lurched. “She?”

“The woman in the scene. You said the mirror clouds the vision when your emotion overflows. So obviously you cared about her. Who was she? What made you so

emotional?"

The pulse at his temple began to throb. He glanced away. "It was nothing."

"It was hardly nothing. Who was that girl?"

"It doesn't matter. She died a long time ago."

"Who was she, Keeshan?" Aimalee set her hand on his broad shoulder. His muscles rippled at her touch. "Was she the woman you loved?"

Her words gored him through the gut because he caught the thread of jealousy, the tinge of pain in her voice.

He swallowed the thick lump in his throat. "She was my sister. Lisette."

"You have a sister?"

"Had." One word. So difficult to choke out.

"How-how did she die?"

Keeshan scrubbed his eyes with the heel of his palm. He didn't want to talk about this. He didn't want to *think* about this. "I don't know."

"Oh, Keeshan."

"I have never been able to get that far. I always lose the vision when she screams."

“I’m so sorry.”

“No matter. That was long ago. Centuries past. Even if I wasn’t a prisoner here, there is nothing I could do to save her.”

“But it would help you, give you peace to know what happened to her. Wouldn’t it?”

It would. It would help immeasurably. One tiny shard of peace in an endless torment.

“I have tried, Aimalee. So many times.” The memory of that anguish, of disappointment upon disappointment, weighed so heavily on him, his shoulders slumped.

“What if *I* asked?”

His heart lurched. “W-what?”

“It worked when I wanted to see Carter.” Her lip curled as she spoke of the man she had loved, the man who had betrayed her. “We can sit together on the chair and I can hold you the way you held me. And I can ask. Maybe we will be able to see more. Just a little more. That’s all you need, isn’t it?”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. She was right. It had worked before. But it was almost more than he was willing to hope.

She punched him gently on the shoulder with a tiny fist. “Come on.

It wouldn't hurt to try."

She was wrong. It could hurt. But he could not pass up the chance. He had no idea how long Aimalee would be with him. If they were going to do this, there was no time to waste. "Now? Can we do it now?"

She laughed and the sound was a balm to his soul. Then she stood and reached out to him, which nearly made him laugh as well. She was such a tiny thing and here she was offering to help him stand. Funny thing was, he suspected she had the strength to do just that. And perhaps more.

He suspected she had the strength to salvage what was left of his soul.

And he wanted to let her.

And for some reason, the thought no longer frightened him.

He took her hand in his and stood. Together they made their way back up the stone steps, up the hill and back to his prison where the truth, a secret held far too long, waited to be revealed.

* * * * *

“Are you comfortable?” They sat on the throne in the mirror room,

side by side. Aimalee had her legs draped over his lap and her arms wrapped around his chest. He was so broad, her hands didn't meet.

"No." His face was a mask. His lips were pale. A pulse throbbed at his temple.

"Don't worry, Keeshan. I'm here."

He kissed her forehead. "Thank you, Aimalee. No matter what happens. Thank you."

She let herself drown in his gaze but only for a moment. The tiny tremors shivering through him told her he needed an answer. And he needed it now.

She cleared her throat. "Mirror. Show me Lisette, please."

To her surprise, Keeshan chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"I never say please."

She grinned. "Shame on you. Such bad manners. No wonder the mirror never shows you anything."

But all conversation stalled, all banter halted. Keeshan stiffened as the scene, the so familiar scene coalesced on the screen.

A girl. Lovely, spirited and carefree. Now that she knew, Aimalee could see why she had

seemed so familiar before. She had Keeshan's features. His long, slender nose, his high cheekbones, his eyes. She was so like him, yet so lovely.

Smiling at some secret thought, she plucked berries from a bountiful bush, popping them into her mouth, staining her lips an even richer red. She turned to speak to a friend, a sultry, husky voice, and then she laughed at the response, tossing her head back with elegant abandon. And then...

A thundering sound shook the sylvan scene. The girl glanced over her shoulder and her expression

clouded. A hint of fear blossomed. Her eyes widened as she saw *something* approach.

And then she screamed. She wheeled away and began to flee, dropping her basket. Plump, juicy berries tumbled to the ground and were crushed to red pulps beneath her feet.

Keeshan was so tense his entire body quivered. Aimalee could tell he was trying so hard to control his emotion. This was the point where the scene had always cut off. She stroked his cheek. "It's okay," she whispered. "Relax."

He did relax a bit but his

attention was riveted on the screen.

Because the scene continued.

A man on a large horse rode into sight. He was dark and large and looming. He wore an odd, ancient form of black armor scrolled with myriad inscriptions, his face covered by the visor of his helmet. And he followed the girl, Lisette, as she attempted to escape.

She didn't escape.

The dark knight scooped her up onto his lap and threw back his head and laughed.

Keeshan stilled. "All the gods," he whispered.

“Do you know him?” Aimalee asked, even as the enormous horse wheeled about and, trampling the basket and the berries, pounded off into the distance.

“Yes.” He hissed the response through his teeth. “The bastard.”

The scene changed again. The girl again, frightened, vulnerable. She stood in the center of an austere chamber with a large stone throne on a dais flanked by two slaving hounds. There was little light but that flickering from two flaming urns. The knight who had snatched her stood before her, watching her tremble. A sinister

smirk played on his lips.

Then he lifted off his helmet, revealing a horrifying, handsome visage. It was horrifying because those perfect features were twisted into something awful. Pure, unadulterated hate. His entire body pulsed with it.

His mouth was nothing more than a disdainful slash. "You are mine now, Lisette. You are mine forever."

"No!" Keeshan leapt from the chair and paced the room like a tethered beast, dragging his fingers through his hair and gnashing his teeth. The instant he wrenched

away from Aimalee, the image in the mirror vanished.

“Who was that man?” Aimalee followed him though she could barely keep up, aching to soothe him, somehow alleviate this new panic. She would never have offered to find Lisette had she known her fate would disturb him so.

Keeshan swung on her, his countenance a mask of rage and... helplessness. “That man,” he spat, “is none other than the Dark Djinn. And when he said he had my sister forever, he meant forever.” He slammed his fist into the wall. The

entire room shuddered. "All this time. All this time! He's had her. All this time he's been tormenting her. All this time she's been alive with him...and suffering!"

"You don't know she is suffering."

"I'll kill him. I swear. I will rip him limb from limb."

Aimalee's heart stuttered. "But he's so much stronger than you."

"He is still a man. I may not be as powerful but I can certainly do him damage. He will pay."

"Keeshan. Calm down." Panic fluttered in her breast. If anything happened to Keeshan, would she

be stuck here forever? She didn't want to be stuck here forever.

Then again, she rather desperately didn't want anything to happen to her Keeshan.

Though he wasn't *her* Keeshan. At least not technically.

"I must confront him." Still he paced, smashing his bloodied fist into his palm. "I must rescue her."

"First you have to calm down. Get control of your emotions."

He swung around and stared at her as though she had just appeared from thin air. "You don't understand. Every second, every second I delay, she remains in his

clutches.”

“As she has for two thousand years. A bit longer, while you collect yourself, will do no harm. If you confront the Djinn like this, he’ll win. I couldn’t bear it if he...”

Keeshan stilled. “If he...what?”

She blinked several times in succession and it wasn’t to fight back the tears. It wasn’t. “If he hurt you.”

“He won’t hurt me.”

“You are still a man.”

Oh. He didn’t like it when she used his own argument against him. He glowered something fierce.

“I know I am not invulnerable. But I do have some tricks up my sleeve. Stand back now. I must go.”

She threw herself against him and wrapped her arms around his neck, levering herself up for a kiss. His lips were unyielding at first but she worked at them until they molded against hers. “Be careful,” she whispered. “Be safe.”

And then once he was gone, when that roiling pillar of enchanted fog rose up to consume him...

“And come back to me, my Keeshan. Come back to me.”

Chapter Twelve

Keeshan emerged from the mist like a berserker, not stopping meekly where he usually did but powering directly over to Duvalli's dais. The hounds were so startled they didn't even snap at him. Rather they took one look at him and backed up as far as their chains would allow.

"You have her," Keeshan snarled, right into Duvalli's smug face. "You've had her all along."

The Dark Djinn, surprised by this unexpected visit, stood and

adjusted his tunic. He edged around Keeshan's looming form, sauntering to the stone table against the wall upon which his mirror sat. He poured himself a drink, pretending to ignore the fact that Keeshan had followed and was looming still. He took a nonchalant sip. "So you finally realized."

"You bastard. I ought to wring your neck."

"Of course I took your sister. You took mine." He smirked. "An eye for an eye and all that."

"I did not take your sister. She gave herself to me. Willingly."

Now Duvalli did show a flicker

of emotion. A dark emotion. “And I ought to wring your neck for *that*.”

“She loved me.”

“You broke her heart.”

“No. *You* broke her heart. You’re the one who separated us.”

“Really.” Duvalli rubbed his temple. “I don’t have time for this.”

Keeshan glared around the austere chamber. “What the hell else do you have to do?” He stepped closer, hand curled into an ominous fist. “Where is she?”

Duvalli took a step back. “She is...safe.”

“That’s not good enough. I

swear unto all this holy and all that is not, if you have hurt Lisette, I will kill you. I will hunt you down to the ends of the earth and I will make you pay.”

“Ohh. I am so frightened.” The Dark Djinn affected a shudder.

But then he shuddered for real because Keeshan slammed him into the wall. The hounds, impotent and chained, howled.

“Shut up!” both men yelled at them in tandem.

Keeshan bent closer, let Duvalli catch the stink of his rage, the certainty of his intent. “Let me see her.”

“No.”

Keeshan's fingers tightened, closing around his neck.

“You cannot see her.”

“Why the fuck not?”

Slowly, Duvalli inched away until he was free. He massaged the red marks on his throat. There would likely be bruises. “Because.”

“Not good enough.” Keeshan's vehemence mounted. Truly, if Duvalli did not give him some form of satisfaction soon, he would kill the man and damn the consequences.

The Dark Djinn sighed. “Why

are you so damn stubborn?"

"Show her to me."

"You won't like what you see."

A sneer.

"Show me."

Without another word, without another demur, Duvalli walked to the alcove and ripped open the curtain to reveal his one and only companion.

Keeshan froze at the sight of his sister. He had ached for a glimpse of Lisette throughout the millennia – but not like this. Never like this.

She was lovely as ever, as fresh and young as the last day he had

seen her. Her head was tilted as though something had amused her and she was just about to laugh. Her features were serene. At peace.

But she was still.

Utterly still.

Still as stone.

She was...a statue.

“It was the Great Djinn’s doing,” Duvalli muttered, storming up the steps to his throne, hoping perhaps to regain his dominance. Or at least the illusion of it. “When it was revealed that I had taken her, the Great Djinn was...not happy. Accused me of tinkering with the delicate balance of life or some such

twaddle.”

“The Great Djinn does not deal in twaddle.” Keeshan’s hand trembled as he lovingly stroked a familiar cheek. It was hard and cold. But he swore he felt *something* there. Some vestige of life.

“Oh. She’s not dead.” Duvalli grunted. “She is the immovable object.”

“You being the irresistible force, I presume?”

Duvalli shrugged. “In theory, I suppose. As with the mirror, when emotions run too high, she...freezes up. It’s damn aggravating.”

“She turns to stone when you

pursue her?" Keeshan rather liked that. For one thing, it meant Duvalli had not been indiscriminately tormenting her for centuries. It meant she had a retreat.

"Something like that. This was the Great Djinn's way of protecting her."

"Protecting her?"

Duvalli's lip thrust out in something of a pout. "I know. Really? Protecting her from me? I'm the one who needs protecting. From her. Why, the first time I came to her she nearly gored me in the...well, never mind."

Keeshan growled.

“Don’t get all outraged.” Duvalli took a sip from his goblet. “The only way I can...have my way with her is if she’s willing. You should be pleased to know that it took me at least a century to get a kiss.”

“She kissed you?” Every hair on Keeshan’s nape stood on end.

Duvalli held up a hand. “Of her own accord, I assure you. And unlike you, I did not have an incantation to draw on her flesh.” He shifted in his seat and readjusted his tunic. “It has been...frustrating.”

Keeshan bared his teeth. “I couldn’t be happier. But now that I

know where she is, I am taking her back with me."

"To the lamp?"

"Yes. And you will not stop me."

Duvalli shrugged with one shoulder. "No. I won't stop you... because you cannot take her."

Keeshan leapt forward. "The hell you say!"

"Back off, you mongrel." Duvalli scooted back in his chair. "It's not because I will not allow it. It's because, like the two of us, she is stuck here between worlds until the spell is broken."

“The spell *you* wove.”

Duvalli nodded. “It was more intricate than I planned. Probably on account of my rage at the time. Never cast spells when you’re angry, by the way.”

“Who are you trying to fool? You’re still angry.”

“I have not forgiven you for Circe. I never will. But I am not angry.”

“Liar.”

“Regardless.” Duvalli adopted a bored expression. “It’s a moot point. If you break the enchantment, your sister shall be freed as well.”

Keeshan's heart thudded. He had spent the last two thousand years trying to find a way to free himself and he had always failed. But before it had been only his own destiny that lay in the balance. He glanced at Lisette, her lovely face frozen. Now he had someone else counting on him. He would find a way to break the spell. He would.

A new resolve, a new hope, rose within him.

Keeshan glared at his nemesis. "When I come back, I expect to see her again. And you'd better take good care of her, you bastard."

Duvalli studied his fingernails.

“No need to be rude.”

Keeshan snorted. “No need to be civil either.”

“Will you be back soon?” It had always been at least a century between their meetings. Now they’d met twice within a matter of days.

“Now that I know you have her? You will be seeing me very soon.”

“Oh dear.” Duvalli tossed back the remainder of his drink. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

But he was talking to himself. As usual. Keeshan had already left.

The Dark Djinn stared at the gust of roiling smoke that marked his departure and sighed. He frowned at the statue in the alcove.

Damn it all. He wished Keeshan hadn't found out about her. He'd always been a stubborn bastard but now he was truly driven. And Duvalli did not want Keeshan to solve the puzzle. He did not want to give up his treasure. Lisette gave him far too much pleasure.

He poured himself another drink and took a healthy swig. No matter, he reminded himself. Keeshan would never break the enchantment. He simply didn't

have it in him to do what needed to be done.

Chapter Thirteen

It seemed like Keeshan was gone forever and to Aimalee all the light in the world dimmed. She sat on the throne and asked the mirror to show her friends, one after the other, and then once she was up to date she experimented with other requests. She discovered, to her delight, there was HBO and internet access. But sadly no email.

But even that entertainment didn't distract her thoughts for long. She couldn't help thinking that without Keeshan it just wasn't the same. Exactly when her captor

had become her companion, she wasn't sure. But he had.

She no longer constantly stressed about being away from her work—she certainly no longer worried about being separated from Carter. But other thoughts had begun seeping in. For example, what would it be like to leave this place? What would it be like to step back into a world with no Keeshan?

Standing to pace, she glanced at her watch once again—only to remember she wasn't wearing one—wondering when, if, he would return.

The Dark Djinn was such a

powerful force and Keeshan had been in such a state when he'd left. She was certain he would issue an impossible challenge, fight for his sister's honor...and possibly lose. She couldn't bear the thought of him hurt. Or worse.

She was just about to storm over to the mirror and demand to see Keeshan when a coil of mist began to coalesce in the corner. She clasped her hands over her heart, hoping, praying that it was him and not...something else.

When his large and looming familiar form took shape, she nearly wept. Instead she launched

herself into his arms. They closed around her.

“Keeshan! Oh Keeshan. I am so glad to see you.”

His face was taut. His body rigid. He kissed her briefly.

“How did it go? Did you find her? Did he have her? Is she all right?”

Keeshan didn't answer, he merely held her tighter. She allowed it—even though the vise of his arms made it difficult to breathe—because she sensed he needed her. And she loved being needed.

Clearly his audience with the Dark Djinn had been difficult...and

then some.

He buried his nose in her hair, taking in her essence as though she was his salvation.

After an eternity, he finally spoke. "He has her. He always has." He lifted his head and his gaze burned into hers, limned with a haunting darkness.

"Is she..."

"Safe? I think so. She's been ensorcelled, like us."

"Ensorcelled? How?"

"She's a statue."

Aimalee's chin dropped.

"He can only bring her to life

when his emotions are quiescent. I can only hope that means he has not been able to punish her in my place. I can only pray she has not suffered much.”

“Oh Keeshan.”

“He said if I can find a way to break the spell, she will be released as well.”

“That’s wonderful.”

He frowned. “It would be. If I had a clue how to do it.”

She chewed on her lower lip. “Do you think the answer is in the library? In one of the books?”

“Doubtful.” Her suggestion

elicited a smile. He ruffled her hair and bent to kiss her. "I've been through every book a thousand times. Besides, spells are situational. Each one is shaped to suit the needs of the caster."

"And Duvalli cast this spell?"

"Yes. In a fit of rage. It is knotted in quite a tangle."

"We just need to untangle it."

Keeshan sighed and scrubbed at his eyes. "I am so tired."

"Come." Aimalee took him by the arm and led him from the mirror room, out onto the great patio and over to the sleep chamber. "Let's rest."

“You know I cannot sleep, Aimalee.”

“Yes.” She knew. He’d told her. He hadn’t slept for two thousand years. But there were other ways to relax. “We will just rest. Try not to think about it. Sometimes that’s when the answers come.” She led him over to the divan. “Take off your tunic.”

Keeshan shook his head. “Really? Aimalee, I am not in the mood for that.”

“That’s a first.” She pressed him back on the pillows. “It may surprise you, Keeshan but I am not asking you to perform.”

“You’re not?”

She helped him remove the tunic and was temporarily stunned by the vision of his bare and brawny chest. She quickly thrust thoughts of lust away. She wanted to soothe him. Not demand her own release. “Roll over. On your stomach.”

“On my stomach?”

“Honestly. What kind of women have you had visiting you here? Has no one ever given you a massage?”

“A massage?”

“To relax you?”

He mulled it over. "I do not believe anyone ever has."

"Well." She hiked up her lace dress and straddled his hips. It was a far reach. "You are in for a treat." She set her hands on his shoulders, marveling at how tiny they were against the great brown expanse of his back. He flinched just a little at the first tentative touch. But when she did it again, he didn't flinch.

She began with a light massage, manipulating his muscles and tendons as she had learned in a class she'd taken in college. He was hot and hard. She tried to ignore her pleasure, focusing instead on

him, finding where he was tense, digging in when she found a knot.

He groaned.

“Did I hurt you?”

“You always hurt me.”

She smacked him lightly on the shoulder. “Keeshan. That’s not nice. Come on now. I am trying to help you relax.”

“I’m not very relaxed.”

“Focus.” She bent back to her work, molding, kneading his flesh all along his broad back. Over his tight arms and down his flank. He began to fidget. “Are you all right?”

“Can I...” He lifted up,

readjusted something beneath him and then settled back down. "Ah. Better."

As Aimalee realized just what he had been adjusting, excitement flickered. The mood shifted. A little demon inside her stirred.

All of a sudden, relaxing him was the last thing on her mind.

Slowly, deliberately, she wiggled around a little, grinding her crotch on his ass until he groaned and muttered and hissed imprecations. She bent forward, allowing the lace of her bodice to scrape against his sensitized skin. Then she slowly sat up again,

gently scoring her nails along his back as she rose.

He shuddered. His entire body quaked.

“Aimalee...” His voice was a deep, rumbling rasp, raking the shadows. He tried to rise.

She pressed him back down. “Not yet, Keeshan. I’m not done.” She made a halfhearted attempt on his shoulder. “Hmm. No. That’s not right.” She lifted up her skirt and scooted forward from his ass and onto his back, rubbing her damp core along his flesh. She knew the second he realized what she was doing. His entire body went rigid.

But she didn't give him a chance to think about it, didn't give him an opportunity to resist. She suckled that tender spot at his nape. "Umm. That's better. Isn't it?"

He growled in response and tried to rise once more.

"No, Keeshan. Let me. Just this once. Let me."

Her words must have had some effect on him because he subsided and lay there, quiescent and trembling as she feasted on his flesh. On his nape, his neck, the lobes of his ears. And then lower across his back, to the vertebrae along his spine and then, finally, to

the hint of a crack where his breeches began.

She was no longer on him at this point, merely crouched by his side, working him with her fingers and her lips and her tongue—occasionally with her teeth when she felt a nip was in order. So when he decided to turn over, she had no leverage, no way to stop him.

No will to stop him, for that matter.

He turned and...oh. Oh.

His cock rose like a restless dragon, creating a delicious ridge in his breeches. She had a sudden urge to taste that too.

Trembling, she traced his length. It was a light touch, a trifle teasing. He hissed and thrust his hips, seeking more. She gave him more. Two fingers, one on either side of his throbbing cock. He closed his eyes and collapsed back. "Yes. Aimalee. Yes."

This, she took as encouragement.

She tugged at the band of his breeches until his cock sprang free and...

She gasped. It was so beautiful. So full and hard. So velvety smooth. She touched him again but all delicacy, all restraint had fled.

His body tightened and quivered like a bowstring.

He muttered, growled something. Something feral.

She bent her head, allowing her hair to trail over his upper thighs. A tendril or two fell between his legs to tease the two tight orbs at the base of his cock. He flinched.

But she wasn't done yet. Not by a long shot.

She took him in her mouth. Just a bit. Just the tip. Her lips stretched around his girth and she shuddered as his essence, his scent, his taste, swamped her senses. She worshiped his cock, laving at the

tiny drop easing from the eye. He tasted wonderful.

Ignoring his moans and groans, his frantic little thrusts, she took him deeper, savoring the hard hotness under her command. Savoring the perfume of his arousal as his body heated and released beads of desperate sweat.

She sucked at him and he bobbed in her mouth. With one hand she teased his length as the other drifted up his chest in search of a pebble-hard nipple.

She worked him. Worked him until he whimpered, "Please, Aimalee. Please."

“No.” She glanced up and smiled. “This time we please Keeshan. Just relax and let me finish.”

“But...”

Whatever he planned to say went unsaid. Because she had gone back to work, determined to draw from him the release he always gave her.

She took him back between her lips and massaged him with her mouth. When she took the errant trails of her hair and dusted them over his balls, he gasped and writhed, so she did it again and again until he was panting.

And then her finger slipped lower, deeper.

He stilled. Even his breath ceased at the direction of her exploration. And ah, she found it. That sensitive spot between his balls and his ass. Something she'd read about in a biology tome and certainly never tried.

He roared, thrusting his hips up, sinking his cock deep down her throat then jerking out and thrusting again and again.

Hot jets of cum exploded in her mouth. Aimalee gobbled it up, licking and sucking and slurping, desperate to get every tiny drop.

He was salty. He was sweet. He had a flavor unlike anything she had ever tasted and she couldn't get enough.

It came and came but she didn't mind. She nursed him and milked him until there was nothing left but tiny aftershocks of his bliss. He was boneless in his release, near oblivion, but he reached for her and pulled her up, tucked her into his embrace. And together they closed their eyes and rested.

Chapter Fourteen

He hadn't slept.

Surely he hadn't slept.

He never slept.

But when Keeshan opened his eyes, returned from that blissful oblivion Aimalee had forced on him—and yes, he shuddered a little at the memory as yet another thrilling aftershock rode him—she was gone.

He knew better than to panic. There were only a few places she could be. But when he came to himself, he was oddly disoriented.

As though he had awoken from a dream and was tormented by the tantalizing trails of heaven.

But it couldn't have been a dream. He never slept.

Slowly he rose, redonned his tunic and went in search of her.

He found her in the library, surrounded by stacks of books and piles of ancient scrolls. He should have known.

She glanced up when he entered but he could tell she was distracted. She flicked a page and ran her finger lovingly down the text. "This is fascinating." Without looking up, gestured to the cluttered bookcases

behind her. "Where did you get all this?"

"Alexandria, the Library of Congress...Wikipedia."

She grinned. "Library of Congress. I didn't realize you had a card."

He propped himself against the bookcase. "I have access to any book ever written. Anything." And plenty of time to read.

"Oh my." She gaped at him. "That sounds like a dream come true."

He stepped closer. "Have you always loved books?"

“Always. When I was a kid, they were my best friends.” She cocked her head to the side. “Come to think of it, they were my best friends when I became an adult too.” She grinned. A tiny dimple blossomed on her cheek.

He sat on the bench beside her, reveling in her warmth. Her presence. There was something about a woman wrapped in her passion that stoked a passion of another kind.

Odd. The angle of his desire was different than the magic-engendered lust of the lamp—not as sharp or cloying. The subtle

undertone had always been there with Aimalee, hovering, but overshadowed by the louder, more insistent cacophony the lamp created. This felt very much like real attraction. It was milder, deeper and had a pleasant aftertaste.

He rather liked it.

He bent to kiss her. Lightly. Testing. Her lips beneath his were plush and pliant. Her mouth, a lush fruit. It brought to mind the aching memory of her sucking the sanity from him and then swallowing him whole.

It was difficult to disengage but

he did. There would be time for more later. He tucked an errant strand behind her shell-like ear. "What was your childhood like?"

She stared at him, probably discomfited by his abrupt change of tack. When he began kissing her, he usually continued. At least up until now.

"Um. Wonderful?"

"Is that a question?"

She laughed. "No. No. It was wonderful. Just not typical. I lived with my father. We traveled the world."

He took her hand in his and idly traced the veins on her wrist. "That

does sound wonderful. What did he do?’

“He was an archeologist. We lived in tents at dig sites, in hotels, on boats off the coasts of tiny ancient villages. It was fun.”

“He was an archeologist. Like you?”

“Yes. Only better, I think.” She tipped her head to the side as though she was thinking deeply and needed more thoughts to fall to the left. “The apple and the tree and all that.”

His brow wrinkled. “The apple and the tree? I’ve heard that before in the mirror. What does it mean?”

“It’s a saying. It just means that children are often much like their parents.”

“Ah. So why do you think he was better than you?”

She laughed. “I don’t know. I guess you always see your father as bigger than life. He never did anything wrong. Always got it right and everyone respected him.”

Keeshan tightened his grip. “And people don’t respect you?”

She shrugged.

“If it counts for anything, you are one of the most talented, intelligent women I’ve ever met.”

Their gazes met. Hers singed through him. "It counts."

"And Carter is an ass."

"I wasn't thinking about Carter."

"He is still an ass." Keeshan grinned.

"Well, he gave me my first real job so I guess I owe him that."

Keeshan snorted. "From what I saw, he owes you for that. If it hadn't been for your meticulous work, the museum would have gone under two years ago."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I asked the mirror."

“You asked the mirror? The mirror can show you probabilities?”

“Sure.” He winked. “You just have to know how to ask. You have certainly noticed how careless Carter is in his work.” She nibbled her lip and nodded. “He doesn’t give a fig about the particulars. In this scenario—the scenario where he did not hire you—he fudged on some details and got caught. He was fired, drummed out of the archaeological community and had to leave the country. He’s backpacking around Europe, bedding aging Italian widows for dinners.”

Her nose wrinkled as she considered this bit of fluff. "Surely you aren't serious?"

"It is merely one probability. But I enjoyed it."

"Do you often ask the mirror to make up stories to entertain you?"

He shrugged. "I have a lot of time to fill."

She glanced around. "With all these books to read? Look at this." She pulled out one scroll. "The resting place of the Arc of the Covenant." And another. "A rubbing of the complete Rosetta Stone. Complete!"

He tipped his head to survey the

rubbing and nodded. "It's not what they thought, is it?"

"And over here, the original books of the Bible. All of them."

"Again. Not what they thought."

"The Precambrian Spheres, Dropa Stones, Nazca Lines..." She flipped through a pile of files. "Lost civilizations, ancient ruins, sacred writings, unexplained artifacts... It's all here."

He shrugged. "What can I say? I have eclectic taste."

"It's an archeologist's wet dream."

“Really? Would you say you find it...arousing?” He wagged a brow.

“Keeshan!” Her tone held a thread of warning but there was humor there too.

“Because I find it arousing.” He lifted her to his lap. “I find...” He kissed her neck. “A woman...” Nibbled her ear. “Who finds my library fascinating...” Thumbed a nipple. “Arousing.”

Oh. And the way she rubbed against him when he repeated all three, he found that arousing as well.

To say he made wild, passionate love to her in the library would be

an understatement.

They did not emerge for several hours.

* * * * *

“There you are.”

Keeshan paused, his arm lifted halfway through the curl, and glanced up. Aimalee stood in the doorway, limned in sunlight, her golden hair a halo about her shoulders. She stole his breath.

He'd left her sated, sleeping, and sneaked to his playroom to work off a mounting tension.

Damn. Could he really want her

again?

He could.

She sauntered inside, letting the door close at her back, shutting the sunlight out and sealing them in an intimate, sweat-laced chamber. His attention sharpened. Unbidden, his biceps flexed and a thrill shot through him when she tracked the movement and her pupils dilated.

He lifted the weight again and again.

She swallowed heavily. "What-what are you doing?"

"Working out." Dropping the weight on the floor, he crossed to the bench, straddled it and sat.

He found it gratifying that, when he dragged his towel across his chest, she licked her lips. Not that she was aware of it. He was convinced it was a completely involuntary reaction. She stared at him, dazed, oblivious to anything but his body, tracking his every move like a hungry lioness.

Then again, he was tracking hers. It was as though there was nothing in the world but the two of them...and this bench.

He hooked his feet on the bar at the end and released a lever, dropping the back end of the bench to the floor. He locked his fingers

behind his head and began pulling crunches. Her eyes never left the rippling panoply of his abdomen.

After several minutes of grueling transverse sit-ups, he paused and reached for his towel once more, making it a point to tense and flex his abs as he wiped the sweat from his chest. He adjusted his position, thrusting up his hips.

She stepped closer. "Um. How long do you do this?"

He grinned at her. "Until I'm exhausted."

"And, um, how long does that take?"

“A long time.”

She put out a lip.

“I can, however, be distracted.”

Ah. She perked up at that. She played with her hair as she contemplated this revelation. Damn, she was adorable. He wanted to bolt over there and scoop her into his arms and take her, right then and there. But he didn't. He was actually enjoying this byplay.

“What...” She cleared her throat.

“What would distract you?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. If someone were to come sit on this bench with me, that could distract me. Possibly. I am very dedicated,

you know.”

“I can see that.” She nibbled on her lower lip.

He felt a wash of desire to do the same. She stepped closer, examining the bench, then trailed two fingers along the bar at the top. Jealousy of the bench, irrational and unwarranted, flickered. He wanted her fingers trailing over *his* bar. And he wanted them now. He shifted in his seat, beset with a sudden discomfort.

“So if someone, say, did this...” She lifted her skirts and straddled the bench, legs parted. Keeshan nearly swallowed his tongue. The

lace dress, the one she'd worn all this time, was fairly see-through. And now he got an eyeful. Of her barely covered dusky triangle. At eye level.

Mouth level.

It was his turn to swallow a puddle of drool.

"Would this distract you?"

"No."

She pouted. "No?"

"Come closer." His voice cracked on the command.

"Like this?" She nudged forward, just a damn fraction of an inch. Then she tipped her head to

the side and smiled like a coquette.

He frowned. "More." He didn't mean it to come out as a growl but she seemed to appreciate the depth of his ardor. A shiver ran through her. Obediently, she edged closer. Closer. And closer still.

When she was close enough, he yanked her flush against him. Ah! She felt magnificent in his arms. She always did.

And the squirming? He rather liked that too.

"Ew!" She squealed. "You're covered in sweat." She tried to push him away but he held her close with a dark chuckle. He

wasn't ready to let her go. Not yet.

"Then lick it off." He fumbled with the clasp of her dress. When the fastening wouldn't cooperate, he gave it a little jerk. Then a big jerk. A ripping sound echoed through the room and the dress gave way. He tugged her against him, delighting in the crush of her supple breasts against his skin. Her pebbled nipples scraped at his sanity.

"Keeshan. That was my only dress."

"I'll get you another." He took her pouting lips with his, suckled, nibbled, savored until she

succumbed with a sigh. He buried his nose into the delicious curve of her neck.

And as he worked on her, kissing and laving and sucking at the tender flesh there, she edged closer and closer still, until she was nearly upon him. She draped her legs over his and pressed her cleft against his crotch. The heat of her core spread out, around him.

His cock wept with delight.

Damn, he loved the feel of her. Loved her naked enthusiasm for his body.

He cupped her naked breasts. A delightful weight. He squeezed

them gently, reverently. "You are so beautiful."

"No. You are," she chuckled, mimicking him, suckling his throbbing nipple. He jumped when her sharp teeth closed down on it and then he groaned as ribbons of sheer delight, shards of passion lashed him.

He did not remember enjoying the other women quite this much but he must have. He must have.

He teased his way down to her bare thigh. The dress was pooled in her lap. He foraged beneath the frothy material to find her core. She hissed as he came closer. When he

found her, when he touched her steaming clit, she threw back her head and groaned. A strained melody.

“Do you like that?” he hissed.

“Yes. Ah! Yes.”

He didn't need her response. He could tell she liked it. The cream oozed from her at his touch. Unable to wait any longer, he rocked her back just a tad and slid a finger into her weeping body.

She was so ready. She was so wet.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and levered herself higher so he could go deeper. He did.

“That’s so good. Yes. Like that.”

He withdrew but before she could complain he filled her again. She shuddered around him and rested her forehead onto his chest. Though she was trembling with the strain, she stayed aloft, thrusting her hips forward, demanding more. And more.

He gave it to her. Three fingers barely fit, she was so tight, but he was a determined man. He worked at her slowly, rotating inside her and glorying in the dueling expressions of bliss and frustration playing over her features. When he pulled out, he was slick with her

cream. He could not resist a taste. But a taste was not enough.

She watched through drooping lids, her lips working, desperate to form words.

But then she apparently decided she didn't need any words. She needed action.

And now.

She found the band of his breeches and yanked. His cock sprang free but it was a liberty that did not last long. For she encased him.

He threw his head back and howled. It felt so good. So tight. She clasped him mercilessly. Tiny

little quivers, minute twitches, brain-rattling suction.

She moved over him and around him, working her way down his shaft. His toes curled as she reached the base, as the wiry hairs of her groin meshed with his.

He arranged her more fully upon him, shifting, searching...and found it. Rubbed against it, that tender spot so deep within her, and she came.

He allowed her this orgasm. He allowed her to come around him, driving him closer to insanity with every quake. And when she was finished he held her tight in his

arms and allowed her to recover. But he did not allow her long.

He rose over her and gently laid her back on the bench. And then he eased himself out. Locking gazes with her, he slowly thrust back in.

She whimpered.

He showed no mercy. As soon as he was able, he eased his length from her clutching cavern once more.

And drove back in.

She came again.

Her renewed internal shivers set him off.

He lost control.

Like a madman, he pounded into her, using the base of the bench as leverage. His strokes became shorter. Faster. Harder. Her cunt cinched tighter, wept. And then...

And then his sanity fled.

Because she came yet again.

But not like she had before. This was a bone-deep orgasm that shook her, racked her, racked him, straight to the core.

Incredibly, he felt it all. His ecstasy. Hers. He could tell by the confusion, the delight in her expression, that she felt it too.

For a long, flawless sliver of

time, they were one.

One soul.

One body.

One heart.

Then ecstasy flooded his being
as the dam broke.

Chapter Fifteen

After they had recovered from the most amazing sex of their lives, he wrapped her in a blanket and carried her out onto the patio so they could watch the sunset in each other's arms. Aimalee fell asleep and missed it. But when she awoke, he told her he didn't care, that he'd come to love holding her while she slept.

The unfamiliar concept of having someone watch over her in her slumber stirred strange cravings inside her. She'd been alone most of her life, since her father died.

There'd been no one to take care of her — until now.

And heavens, she liked it.

She snuggled closer to him, deeper into his embrace, his warmth, savoring the tantalizing scent rising from him. His heart throbbed against her cheek. She ran her hand over his chest, down his abdomen and — unable to resist — across his groin. She laughed at what she found.

“What?” he grunted.

“You're hard again.”

“Naturally.”

“But so soon?”

“I always want you.”

“Ah yes.” She tried not to let that old, familiar annoyance rise. “The spell.”

He stilled. “I cannot help it, Aimalee.”

“I know. It’s just...hard.”

He swallowed a chuckle. “Quite hard.”

She rose up and glowered at him. “I’m not joking. Do you know how difficult it is for me, knowing that you only want me because of some stupid spell?”

He tried to pull her back down. “It’s not just the spell—”

She resisted. "Of course it is, Keeshan. You are in love, deeply in love, with another woman."

"That's not fair. I lost her. A long time ago."

"But you still love her. Even now. Even after all this time."

His features tightened into a mask. "I will always love her, Aimalee. But even when I am thinking about her, I want you." He draped an arm over his eyes and sighed. "Do you know what that does to me? How it tears me up inside? She was my one true love. And my lust betrays that love every time I look at you."

Though a dagger shattered her heart, Aimalee eased back down onto his chest. She traced the line of his cheek. "I do know, Keeshan. I do. I suffered the same guilt over Carter before I...before. I didn't want to want you, when it was him I loved. But I couldn't help myself."

He lifted his arm and peeped out at her. "It's not your fault. It's the Dark Djinn's magic."

"I know. But it does not make it any easier." She threaded her fingers and nibbled on her lip. "Do you still think about her?"

"Every day." Silence surrounded them. "Does that bother you?"

She thought about it. “No. Not really. Knowing that someone else holds your heart is tough to swallow. But we cannot control who we love, can we?”

“Life would be a lot easier if we could.”

“And where’s the fun in that?”

He chuckled and they fell silent, simply enjoying the tickle of the evening breeze, the twinkling of the stars in the sky and the faint shushing of the sea in the distance. But there was something on Aimalee’s mind. And she had never been one to hold her tongue. So she blurted it out.

“How did she die?”

Keeshan tensed. “What? Who?”
But he knew to whom she referred.

“The woman you loved.”

“Circe?”

“Circe. That’s a pretty name.”

“She was beautiful.”

Her heart pinged. Just a little.
“How did she die?”

He stilled. “I don’t want to talk
about this.”

“Tough.”

“Aimalee...” Something akin to
panic flickered over his expression.
She contemplated letting the
subject drop but it had been on her

mind for days now, eating away at her. She needed, desperately needed to know everything about Circe. And she suspected he desperately needed to tell her. Tell someone.

“Just tell me. Then I’ll drop it. Never bring it up again.”

He kissed her instead. A deep and desperate kiss.

But Aimalee was determined and stubborn and had a pretty good memory for things they’d been talking about just a second ago. So when he lifted his head, all sloe-eyed and sexy, she started again. “So tell me what happened.”

With a groan, he dropped his head back on the pillow. "I really don't want to discuss this," he muttered.

"I think you need to. I think it would be good for you."

He sat up and fixed her with a dark look, as though he was making a difficult decision or fighting some inward battle. Then his expression shuttered and he drew three gentle lemniscates on her shoulder. His touch sent shards of sensation skittering through her but she ignored them.

He leaned closer and whispered, "Isn't there something else you

would rather do?”

Seriously? He was trying to seduce her out of asking questions?

Seriously?

“No.”

His head jerked back and he stared at her as though she'd just sprouted a third nipple. “What?!”

“I said no.”

He drew the shapes again and then got all dreamy again and murmured, “Are you sure?”

“Um. Yes?” She sat up and scooted back because his brow had furrowed and he was reaching for her again. “Stop that. It tickles.”

His Adam's apple bobbed several times as he gaped at her in astonishment. "You really don't want to...do...something else?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "No. I would like to talk."

"Talk?"

Was she speaking in tongues? "You know. The exchange of words some humans partake in? To share information?"

He frowned. "I know what talking is but... Don't you...want to...?"

"Have sex?"

"Yes!" Relief washed across his

face.

“No.”

He did a double take. “No?”

“Keeshan, why are you acting so strangely?”

“Strangely?”

“Come on.” She nudged him with a toe. “Fess up.”

“Aimalee...” His lips worked. “I just-just drew the incantation on you.”

She frowned. “The sex spell? The one that’s supposed to make me fall into your arms, panting with passion?”

“Yes!”

“It didn’t work.”

“I know.” He frowned.
“Aimalee, it’s never not worked. It always works.”

She bit back a grin. “And do you always use it to get out of conversations you don’t want to have?”

“Yes. No. I mean...” He shook his head, the skeins of his hair brushed against her shoulder. “I just don’t understand what happened.”

“Maybe we’re breaking the spell.”

He rubbed his lower lip with a blunt finger, deep in thought.

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe I just don’t want you anymore.” She said it in a teasing tone.

He was not amused. “Don’t even joke about that.” His voice came out in a low growl.

“Sorry. Maybe it only lasts for so many spells.”

He barked a laugh. “I’ve used it way more with other women.”

She wasn’t sure why but this comment annoyed her. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared out at the sea.

“Aimalee. Why are you

pouting?”

“I’m not sure. You used the spell *more* with the other women. Does that mean I am a slut? Or you just wanted them more?” Frankly, either option was untenable.

“Neither.” The way he sealed his lips told her he wanted to say more but thought better of it.

“Tell me.”

He sighed heavily, just like a man being forced into a conversation about feelings and emotions and all that icky girlie stuff. Aimalee smiled at the thought. But hid her smile behind her arm.

“Tell me.”

“Okay. Fine.” His square chin firmed and a muscle bunched. As though he was grinding his teeth. “I used the spell on them more because I used it whenever I wanted, while I tried not to use it on you.”

“Tried *not* to use it on me?” She wasn’t sure if she should be honored or offended.

“Damn it, Aimalee. I wanted you to want me for me. And not because of the spell. There. Are you happy?”

Her heart leapt. “Yes.” His questing gaze swung to her as

though he hadn't heard, so she said it again. "Yes."

"Did it work?" Why his voice sounded so unsure, so hopeful, she couldn't say. But that he was uncertain touched her heart. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Yes. I did want you. Without the spell. I still do."

His eyes warmed, his lips twitched and his head began to lower. Yes. She recognized the signs. He was going to kiss her. And this time she didn't know if she had it in her to stop him.

Best thing to do was to back away now. So she did.

He followed.

“No, Keeshan. I want to talk. Remember?”

“We’ve been talking.”

“I want to talk about Circe. I want to know how she died.” She wasn’t sure why it was so important to know. But it was. Until it was out in the open, Circe would always be between them.

Keeshan raked his fingers through his hair and sighed. “There’s nothing to tell.”

She suddenly wished she’d watched more *Law & Order*. “What do you mean there’s nothing to tell?”

“I simply don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I couldn’t ask. The Dark Djinn told me she was dead. He told me I had killed her but wouldn’t say more than that. I assumed she... she...”

“Took her own life?”

“Yes.”

Aimalee lay back and gazed up at the enchanted stars. It was a lovely sky. “Was she the type to do something like that?”

Keeshan stilled beside her. “No. She wasn’t. But how else could my loving her have ended her life? He

was adamant about that. The only thing that saves my sanity is the knowledge that she has moved on.”

“What do you mean?”

He glanced at her. “Moved on. The wheel of reincarnation is always turning.”

“You mean she was born again? You believe in that?”

“Certainly. She’s probably had a hundred lives by now.”

“That must be difficult for you. That she’s lived other lives without you. Been with other men. Forgotten all about you.”

“I have accepted all that. What

eats at me is not knowing if..."

"If what?"

"If she's happy. That's all I want. I want to know she found some measure of peace in the world."

"Have you ever asked the mirror?"

His eyes, suspiciously damp, glimmered in the moonlight. "I've never been able to get the mirror to reveal anything to me."

"Nothing?"

"Not even a hint."

Aimalee nibbled at her lower lip. "I could ask. Maybe it would show me."

He went absolutely silent, taut. Tiny tears beaded on his lashes. "Would you?" he whispered. "Could you?"

She cupped his cheek, wiping away the tears with her thumb. "Of course."

"Oh, Aimalee. If I could have that weight off my soul. To know what happened to her. To know she is all right—wherever she is—that would be wonderful." He kissed her forehead. "I would be forever grateful."

Aimalee tossed off the blanket. "Let's do it. Now."

But Keeshan was immovable.

“Not yet,” he said, pulling her back into his arms. “Let’s just enjoy this time.”

Aimalee understood his hesitation. She understood it completely.

He wanted to know what had happened to his beloved Circe but was scared to death to learn the truth.

Chapter Sixteen

His feet dragged slightly on the floor as he followed Aimalee to the mirror room. It wasn't that he didn't want to know what had become of Circe, of the love of his life. He did. But he dreaded the possibilities.

Had she moved on to a life of torment and loss? Had she suffered? Had the bright light of her soul dimmed? Because of him?

He did not know how he would handle such truths. He did not know if his heart could survive it.

So many tears. So many sleepless nights filled with thoughts of her. Hopes for her.

Aimalee opened the door and glanced back at him as he lingered on the threshold. She took his hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. "We can do this another time."

"No." He stepped into the room. "Let's do it now."

Together they crossed to the large stone throne, the chair in which he had spent countless hours staring at the mirror, that heartless, unforthcoming surface. He'd never had hope before.

And hope was, he was coming

to find, a frightening thing to have.

He sat on the chair and Aimalee arranged herself on his lap. He nestled her closer against him and savored his last moments of ignorance.

For who knew what he would discover?

“Are you ready?” Her voice was but a whisper in his ear, the trill of a tiny bird. But it shot through him like a bolt of lightning.

He swallowed. Nodded curtly.

“Mirror. Please show me what happened to Circe.”

There was a long pause as

though the mirror was loading a litany...or simply tormenting him. Keeshan closed his eyes but only for a second, because he didn't want to miss a thing.

The first face to come up sent shock ricocheting through his body. His gut lurched. Pulse thrummed. Brain buzzed.

Because he knew that face.

It was Desiree. The first woman who had come to visit him in the lamp. Two thousand years ago.

He was aware of Aimalee tracing soothing circles on his arm but only just, because the second image appeared, a laughing visage

with charming dimples on both cheeks. Yes. He knew this face as well. She was Minu, the Persian princess who found the lamp in her father's storeroom. Minu had enjoyed her time in the lamp, dreading the arranged marriage the king had planned for her. When it was time for her to leave, she had cried.

And then the third vision flashed onto the screen and the fourth and the fifth and his heart began to sing because he knew them all. Brígiða, a white-haired Viking with exquisite curves. Gia, Luli and Ròs, the redheaded

Scottish firebrand. Kei, a soft-spoken geisha from imperial Japan. Glenys, the Welsh warrior woman. Leah, Anna, Deborah, Natalya the Russian enchantress...he knew them all.

His pulse thudded as a mind-bending realization hit home.

Circe had come to him. In different bodies, she had come. Though her true identity had been hidden from him, she had come. Time and time again.

Every face the mirror showed him, every incarnation since she had slipped from his life. Every visitor. Every woman. Every

consort.

Circe. His love.

He looked at Aimalee and his heart swelled.

Aimalee. His Aimalee.

There was no need for guilt. No need for pain. No need for sadness or worry or loss. Because she had been with him all along.

She was with him now.

“Are you all right?”

Was he.

“I am fine.” He pulled her closer and tucked her head beneath his chin and watched as the women he had loved, had always loved,

continued to pass before him. He knew when they were coming to the end because he remembered them, each and every one.

At the time he had cursed himself for being unfaithful to Circe. Now he knew he was destined to love them. Because they *were* Circe.

All of them.

All of them.

His lips curved into a smile that bubbled into a laugh. A joy unlike anything he had ever known washed through his body, releasing two thousand years of stress and anger and pain. And it was the

most wonderful feeling he'd ever known.

When the last visage appeared on the screen, he knew who it would be. But the mirror, as always, was a trickster. Instead of showing Aimalee's face, it showed the two of them sitting on the throne, a mere reflection. And then it faded to black.

Keeshan could tell from Aimalee's posture, from the loose way she held her body, she had not realized she'd been included in the litany. But she had been.

She cuddled closer, watching him in silence as the emotion

swirled through him. The pure joy of this moment. The weight of her in his arms. Her warmth. Her breath, live and warm on his cheek.

Aimalee.

Circe.

He bent his head and for the first time in two millennia, knowingly kissed the woman he loved above life itself.

And it was divine.

She kissed him back, tender little dabs that did not take long to change into something far more fervent.

And when the passion rose in

him, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, it was passion for her. It had nothing to do with any spell, any incantation or any curse. It was the passion of a man for the woman he loved. And it was pure.

To his dismay, she pulled back. She put her palm on his cheek and held him still, held him at a distance and stared at him.

She was so beautiful. He couldn't help smiling at her. Or perhaps it was a giddy grin. He didn't know and didn't care. "What is it?" he asked.

"They were all so...lovely."

"Yes." He removed her hands

and kissed her again.

“Was Circle as lovely?”

“Lovelier. But none of them is a match for your beauty.”

She snorted. He loved how she snorted. Her bangs fluffed up in the air. “Oh please.”

“I am serious, Aimalee. You are the loveliest of them all.”

She made a sour face. “Isn’t that the mirror’s line?” And when his brow furrowed, she shook her head. “Never mind.”

“Aimalee, there is something you need to know.” He debated whether or not to tell her but only

for a heartbeat. She deserved to know the truth. It was her truth, after all.

“What?”

“Each of those women, each of Circe’s incarnations, they all came to the lamp. To me.”

She stiffened. “All of them?”

He nodded, watching her, gauging her reaction. He could tell she hadn’t figured it out yet. “They were all beautiful and I loved each one.” She tried to pull away but he pulled her right back into the circle of his arms. “They were all you.”

“Me?” She blinked. “I don’t...”

And then comprehension dawned.

“Yes. It’s you.” He kissed her forehead, her cheek, the tip of her nose. “You are Circe.”

She shook her head. Tears puddled and then eased down her alabaster cheeks. Her lips worked as though she wanted to say something but wasn’t sure what. Then she peeped, “Are you sure?”

“Certain. Absolutely certain. We’ve been together before, my love. And no matter what happens, we will be together again. Forever.” He drank her in, still reeling with the truth of it. “We never lost each

other. And we never will.”

And though the passion was riding him, though his cock was nudging against her thigh, and while she would not have put up any resistance to a kiss, he didn't kiss her.

He wanted nothing more than to sit here and hold her. Hold her in his arms and feel the blood pulse in her veins, watch the breath lift her breast, feel the hum of her incredulous murmurs as she contemplated this revelation and accepted its truth.

There would be time for passion later.

They had forever.

Chapter Seventeen

He waited until she fell asleep to visit Duvalli. For one thing, he couldn't bear to leave her when she was awake. Their time together was coming to an end and he wanted to savor each second. Each kiss. Each caress. It was going to have to last him a long, long time in a world devoid of her brightness.

The other reason he waited was he didn't want to have to explain why he was going once more to visit his greatest enemy. He certainly didn't want to share the painful decision he'd come to.

Aimalee wouldn't understand.

But Keeshan knew, to the depth of his soul, he knew. This was something he had to do.

The realization had dawned as he'd watched her eat dinner, oohing and aahing over her favorite foods and explaining each one and her passion for it, before forcing a bite into his mouth. He didn't have the heart to tell her he couldn't taste a thing.

Watching her laugh, hearing her talk about her life at home, her world, made him realize keeping her here was wrong. As much as he wanted to have her by his side

forever, he couldn't. He shouldn't.

He had to send her home.

She was his Circe. His love. She deserved a long, full life. A real life. Not this half-life in a gilded cage.

He had to send her home.

And Duvalli would know how to do that.

At least Keeshan prayed he would.

He was determined to find a way to free her.

And to hell with the consequences.

The mist lasted longer than usual and when Keeshan stepped

through into the cold stone chamber, Duvalli was just seating himself on his throne, making Keeshan wonder what he had been doing. With annoyance he noticed that the curtain to the alcove where his sister stood was swinging slightly.

He frowned.

“Gads, Sir Keeshan.” Duvalli rolled his eyes. “I pine for the days of old when I saw you but once a century.” He inspected his fingernails. Who knew a two thousand year old Djinn could have such extraordinarily fascinating fingernails? “To what do I owe the

pleasure of your company? Again?"

"How is Lisette?"

Duvalli frowned. "She's fine," he spat.

Keeshan strode over to the alcove and yanked the curtain back so he could see for himself. His sister stood there, still as always, though her arms now hung down by her sides. Her lips were bee-stung and her stony features dewy. Her gown was slightly mussed.

"Never say I interrupted something." The thought sent acid churning in his gut.

"Close the curtain. You're embarrassing her."

Keeshan stilled. That Duvalli had a care for Lisette's embarrassment meant the bastard might have a shred of feeling for her. His gaze flicked back to his sister. This was not the expression of a woman in torment. In fact, she almost looked like a woman in love.

That thought didn't sit well either.

He dropped the curtain and spun on Duvalli. "Do you use an incantation on her?"

Duvalli boggled with outrage. "What?"

"You heard me. Do you use magic to lure her into your bed?"

The Dark Djinn snorted. “You don’t understand anything, do you?”

Intrigued by the thread of desperation in Duvalli’s tone, Keeshan strolled closer to the dais and bent down to scratch one of the slobbery hellhounds behind his ear. The beast groaned in canine bliss and then, when Keeshan stopped, nudged his hand with a wet snout. “What do you mean?”

“I told you she turns to stone when my emotions are roused.”

“Your anger. Your rage.”

“Idiot.” They glared at each other and then Duvalli glanced

away. "I was never angry at her."

"Then what emotions..." Keeshan's throat closed up as realization dawned. Undoubtedly, it closed up to hold back the guffaw squirming to burst forth.

"Yes," Duvalli snarled. "You think you have been in torment for hundreds of years? Try being trapped in a chamber with a beautiful, willing woman. And every time, just when things are beginning to get interesting, just when she is perfectly primed..."

"She turns to stone." Keeshan grinned, suddenly immensely gratified.

“You needn’t smirk.”

“You’ve never, ever...” Unsure what words to use in the reference of one’s sister, Keeshan made a flourishing gesture.

“*Known* your sister? No.”

“Never once? In all this time?” His chuckle blossomed into a laugh. It threatened to burst into a howl. The lightness on his soul was delicious.

Duvalli shifted his weight to the edge of the throne, like the predator he was, and growled, “Was there a reason you came to see me? Or is this simply a social visit?”

“Yes. Indeed.” It was a struggle to keep his tone casual. “I have found her. I have found Circe.”

The Dark Djinn bolted upright. His mouth dropped open and he gaped at Keeshan. He quickly recovered himself though his skin was pale and a muscle ticked in his cheek. “Where is she?”

Keeshan smiled grimly and crossed his arms. “What makes you think I have any intention of telling you? You have tormented me and my sister for millennia. Over a crime I did not commit. I owe you nothing.”

The Dark Djinn’s cheeks

mottled. His tattoos began to glow.
“You owe me a sister.”

Keeshan gestured toward the alcove. “Not anymore.”

“You must tell me!” A thick fist slammed into the arm of the stone throne. A hairline crack tracked its way across the surface. The hissing scritch of its passage echoed in the cold silence.

“I will not. Not until you tell me how she died.”

“Oh.” Duvalli sneered.
“Wouldn’t your little mirror tell you that?”

“It would not.”

“I have to wonder why, since it is so forthcoming with everything else.”

“Perhaps you are meant to tell me. To confess your sins as well.”

“My sins? I have no complicity in this.”

“Don’t you? She loved me. I loved her. You are the one who separated us. Deny it if you will. You are the one who broke Circe’s heart.” He glowered at his nemesis and hissed, “You are the one who removed the love from her life. You are the reason she took her own life.”

Duvalli stilled. “What? Took her

own life? Where did you get an idea like that?"

"Why else would you blame me for her death? She was healthy, happy, whole the last time I saw her. What, other than grief over your actions, could have killed her?"

"You don't know? You haven't guessed? In all this time? All these centuries? It never once occurred to you how your love could have killed her?"

Keeshan's gut roiled, his heart pounded, his vision took on a reddish hue. "No. Tell me."

The Dark Djinn sat back in his

chair then and again affected his typical nonchalance, but Keeshan could see it cost him. "You gave her a child, Sir Knight. You gave her a child and she did not survive the birthing of it."

A dark cloud threatened Keeshan's consciousness, his sanity. Tiny little stars began to dance around his head. He fought through the miasma, fought through the overwhelming grief and regret swamping him. There was something...something more.

"And the child? Did it survive?"

Duvalli sighed, glanced away. "No. They both perished."

Unable to hold himself up, Keeshan collapsed onto the stone stairs of the dais. He held his head in his hands and wept. Wept for his lover, his child, for all the lost years he could have had with her. For all the lost years he never would have with her.

With Circe. With Aimalee. They had missed so many lifetimes together. So many children together. So many possibilities, dashed.

And all because of the rage of one powerful man.

It had to end. It needed to end. He had to set Aimalee free. And if

she came back to him in her next lifetime and her next...if she came to him a thousand times more, he would release her if he could.

He would find a way.

She deserved better.

She deserved a man who could love her and give her the children she craved—had craved for centuries. Not Carter, but a good man. Keeshan would help her find him. Together they would search. Through eternity if need be.

“Well?” The Dark Djinn’s voice was uncharacteristically tight. “I told you. Now you must tell me. Where is Circe?”

Keeshan glared at Duvalli. "One more thing. I want you to tell me how to send Aimalee home."

Was it his imagination or did the Dark Djinn pale, just ever so slightly? "Her time is not up."

"I don't care."

"You cannot send her home," he sputtered.

"I think I can. I think I shall. And you will help me."

A barked laugh ricocheted through the room. "I will not."

"Ah, but you will. I know something you do not."

Duvalli snorted dismissively.

“Even if you could send her home, you won’t. The price for breaking the rules is severe. Another century between visitors.” He proffered a nasty smile. “Can you go that long without a woman, Keeshan? I’ve seen how twitchy you get around year ninety-nine.”

“I don’t care.”

“You will. Around year ninety-nine. You are little more than a hound in heat, Sir Keeshan.”

“I disagree. A hound does not love.”

“Never say,” Duvalli said through a snort, “that you love this...consort.”

“I do. I love her.”

“Like you loved my sister?”

“Yes.”

“Faithless cur.”

“Hardly faithless,” Keeshan said. “I have loved Circe devotedly for two thousand years.”

“Fucking other women. Every woman that came within your auspices. Again and again and again.”

Keeshan stood, reinvigorated. “Tell me, Duvalli. Did you never wonder about them? The women the Great Djinn sent to the lamp? Did you never wonder how or why

he chose them?"

Duvalli stilled. His nostrils flared as a cold, uncomfortable realization began filtering through his thick skull. "No."

"Yes. Oh yes. They were all Circe. One incarnation after another. And in each incarnation, each of her many lives, she came to me. She loved me." He wandered across to the table and poured himself a drink. "How does it feel, knowing that even as you punished me, you were punishing her?"

"No. It cannot be true. It cannot."

"It is true. Mirror. Show me

Circe.”

Duvalli stared in growing horror as woman after woman, life after life flickered across the surface of his mirror. Each one had Circe’s eyes, her smile, her soul. “No. It cannot be true.”

“But it is.” Keeshan watched the parade of faces, remembering each one, reliving with delight this long, arduous journey. No wonder he’d had to try so hard to resist them. No wonder when he succumbed, he’d fallen so hard. Circle was his true soul mate. She always had been and she ever would be.

He would love her forever. With

all his heart.

He would go to hell and back to protect her from being a party to Duvalli's dark revenge. Whatever it took.

The litany ended with Aimalee's angelic features and Keeshan's heart melted just a tad. She was so beautiful. So brave. So...everything.

His everything.

He stroked the mirror even as her image faded.

He glanced at Duvalli, who somehow seemed diminished. Even his two hounds were unaccountably meek, their long snouts buried in their paws.

“Duvalli. Break the enchantment.”

The Dark Djinn growled an epithet.

“Break the enchantment. Send her home.”

“I cannot. It’s not within my power.”

Keeshan’s fingers curled into fists. He took a step forward.

Duvalli cringed. “No. It’s not. You are the one with the power, Sir Keeshan. It’s always been you.” He looked away and muttered, “Idiot.”

“What do you mean, I have the power?”

Duvalli shrugged and angled his entire body toward the wall. "One of the Great Djinn's jests, I suppose. Like sending you Circle again and again." He frowned as he drifted off into thought, chewing on that bitter bone.

"Duvalli! Tell me how to set her free."

"It's so simple. I cannot believe you never thought of it."

"Tell me!"

"Simply draw the incantation backward. Over her heart." He shrugged. "Simple."

His pulse flared. "It had better work."

Duvalli sighed. "I assure you. It will work. But I warn you. If you do this, she will not remember you. All the time she has spent with you will be lost, a vague memory of a long-forgotten dream."

"I don't care." A lie. He did care. He cared a lot. But freeing Aimalee was more important than anything. He only wished he could free his sister too. Only wished he could break the spell for all of them.

But now that he knew the truth, his course was clear. His course was set. He would live forever in the lamp. And when she came to him again in a hundred years—or in

two hundred, as Duvalli threatened
—he would send her back. And
send her back again.

Because he loved her.

And he always would.

Chapter Eighteen

When Keeshan returned to the lamp, Aimalee was sitting on the throne in the mirror room with a big bowl of white fluffs on her lap. "There you are. Where have you been?" she grumbled when he bent to kiss her. She tasted delicious. Like butter and salt and something earthy.

"What are you eating?"

"Popcorn. Want some?" She held up the bowl and he hesitantly took one of the crunchy balls and placed it on his tongue.

She laughed. "Not like that. Like this." She took a handful and smooshed them all into her mouth, crunching heartily. "Im sk blod."

"Scoot over." He seated himself in the overlarge chair and pulled her into his lap, taking a handful of the treats. But he didn't shove it into his mouth, he simply held it in his hand. "What are you watching?" He had to wait for her response while she chewed and swallowed. Then she took a sip from a red can perched on the arm of the chair.

"I think I'm figuring everything out."

He stilled. “Really?”

“Yep.” She nodded. The silky tufts of her hair brushed the bottom of his chin. “I figured out the banquet hall. Finally, a decent drink.” She tipped up the can and took another sip. Then belched. “If I ask for specific things, they just appear.”

“It is a magic lamp.”

“Yes. But you have to *know* how to ask, don’t you?”

Funny. He’d been here forever and hadn’t quite realized that. She’d figured that out in less than a week.

“And the mirror. I figured out

how to make it show me everything.”

“It is a *magic* mirror.”

“Everything!”

She belched again and collapsed into his arms with a sigh. “Keeshan, I think I could stay here with you forever.”

He couldn't respond. He simply could not. If he tried, he would probably dissolve into a mortifying puddle of tears. He would love for her to stay here with him forever. But she couldn't. He couldn't let her. He had to give her back her life.

“So what are you watching?” He

kissed the top of her head.

She snorted. "Carter."

The sinuous trail of jealousy snaking through his gut was unpleasant. "Why?"

"Do you know what that bastard did?" Her tone was virulent.

Ah, then. Perhaps there was no need for jealousy.

"What did that bastard do?"

"He stole my dissertation!"

"That bastard!"

She tipped her head to the side and nibbled her lip. "He *tried* to. Turns out he was too stupid to steal it."

“Too stupid to steal it? How is that?”

Ah. This was bliss. Sitting here with her in his arms. Knowing he had to send her home...but not now. Not yet.

“He took it to the IHA Conference and presented it to two hundred peers.”

“Is that bad?”

She snorted. “He couldn’t answer any of their questions. I mean, not even the easy ones.” She peeped at him over her shoulder. Her outrage was adorable. So he kissed her. “You should have seen him sweating and stuttering and

making things up. What a dweeb. I don't know what I ever saw in him."

"Neither do I."

She punched him on the shoulder. "Stop it. Anyway, after that debacle his education was called into question and he had to go before the National Archeological Board and defend his credentials. And you know what?"

"What?" He loved it when her eyes shined like that.

"He kind of forgot to graduate."

"No."

She nodded gleefully and

crammed some more popcorn into her mouth. "And he kind of forgot to tell anyone he never graduated."

"No."

"Yup. And get this, they kind of fired his ass."

"And this pleases you?"

"It delights me. Maybe we'll get a director who actually cares about the artifacts..." She trailed off. "Oh."

"What's wrong?" he asked, though he knew damn well what was wrong.

"It's just..."

"Yes?"

“When I go back...I won't be here anymore. With you.”

He cleared his throat. “You have to go back sometime.”

“But not soon.” She nestled in deeper, nuzzling him like a kitten. When he didn't respond, her body tensed up. “Not soon, right?”

He kissed her nape. “Not now.”

She took his cheeks in her hands and forced him to look at her. Her lips taut, she whispered, “It's soon, isn't it?”

He nodded. Just the hint of a nod. He couldn't lie. He couldn't keep it from her.

“Ah, no.” A whisper, a plea. She kissed him so gently his soul start to weep. “No.”

“Aimalee—”

“No!” She wrapped her arms around his neck and wove her fingers into his hair and forced his mouth back to hers. To silence. “No. No talking.”

She kissed him for a long while and he allowed it, soaked it in. He memorized every movement, every taste, every heartbeat. He would need this, this memory, in the long dark days ahead. He let her consume him, gave himself to her bit by bit, kiss by kiss, touch by

touch. If he gave enough of himself, maybe it would be like being with her when she left.

When he sat in this chair and watched her through the mirror. When he watched her living her life and loving another man. Having children and watching them grow. And then one day passing from this world to the next. He would watch her until then.

And then he would wait. Wait until she came to him again. Not remembering him again. Not loving him again.

Yes. He let her kiss him and he gave himself to her. And when the

passion began to grow, he ignored it. Until she would not let him ignore it anymore.

“Keeshan?”

“Yes, Aimalee.” He could barely think with her touching him like that.

“Take me to the fantasy room.”

“You don’t want to go there.”

“I do.”

“It will bring your fantasy to life. Your deepest, darkest sexual fantasy. It will come to life. It’s not often pretty.”

“Take me there.”

So he did. Dreading the

revelation, dreading what he might discover but too besotted to refuse her a single thing, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the seventh and final room in the lamp. They approached the door, prepared as they were, filled with intentions as they were, and the locked door opened unto them.

Keeshan stepped inside.

And stared.

It was Aimalee's bedroom.

Gently he set her on the bed and gazed down into her shining eyes. "What exactly is your fantasy?"

She laughed, a tiny snuffle. "It's nothing much. Not really."

“Tell me.” He sat beside her.

“I want to be loved.”

“You are loved.” He kissed her.

“No, silly. I want to be *loved*...by a man I love. That’s all.”

He chuckled and levered over her, pressing her down onto the pillow. “We don’t need a fantasy room for that.” But then he stilled. “Do we?” He loved her. No doubt about that...but she’d never said it.

Perhaps his sudden uncertainty washed across his expression—it certainly washed across his soul—for she cupped his cheek and smiled. “No. We don’t. But it’s my fantasy. I want to make love with

the man I love in my own bed.”

“Am I,” he swallowed, “the man you love?”

“Absolutely you are.” She kissed him. “Keeshan, I love you. With all my heart.” She blinked back a sudden swell of tears. “I don’t want to leave you. I am scared to death to leave you.”

He kissed away the dampness. “We will be together again.”

“It won’t be the same.” She kissed the corner of his eyes, one after the other. And he realized there were tears on his cheeks as well. “Just love me, Keeshan. Love me.”

“Ah Aimalee,” he said. “I do.”

But then he showed her. With his mouth, his lips and his body. He showed her. He brought her to the edge again and again until she screamed, begged and growled for mercy. And then when she was ready, when her body was weeping and wet, when she trembled and twitched and demanded to be filled, he did.

He slid inside her body, into her warmth, into the tight, slick cavern of her soul. He slipped in deeply and reveled in the delicate flutters, the desperate clutching of her cunt. He kissed her as he withdrew and

then kissed her when he thrust once more, capturing her cries in his mouth, swallowing them and consuming them, as if swallowing and consuming a part of her would fill him up when he was alone once more.

When his body started to tighten, when hers began to shake, when the passion and the rhythm deepened and fled, when both their hearts began to skidder and thud in tandem, he let go of the leash. And he took her. Deep and hard and straight to the core. He took her.

The explosion was beyond anything he'd ever known. And he

could tell from the wonder in her eyes she felt it too. Together they flew on wings of absolute, bone-deep ecstasy. And he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the only magic involved was the magic the two of them made. Together.

And then when she was sleeping, when he knew that a moment could never be more perfect than the moment they had just shared, when he knew his strength would not last for long, he let his hand slide up her side, over her perfect breast to rest on her chest, on the beating of her heart. And he traced the familiar symbol.

Backward.

In a flash, she was gone.

He was left alone in the thin facsimile, this mockery of her room.

He buried his face in her pillow still infused with her scent and he wept.

Chapter Nineteen

When Aimalee awoke she was tangled in the shrouds of a persistent dream. It was aggravating because she could smell it, sense it, taste it, but when she tried to capture it, it wafted away.

She rolled over in her bed and draped an arm over her face to block the sunlight streaming through the window and tried desperately to remember. It had been so...pleasant. So warm. So real. But even as she reached for the memory, it danced away.

She groaned in frustration and rolled over. When she saw the clock, she groaned again. Damn it all. She was late.

She dragged herself from bed and padded to the bathroom. All through her shower she was haunted by snippets and sinuous trails of that tantalizing dream.

There had been man. She remembered as much. And phenomenal sex. But strange things like floating candles and mirrors that were televisions and... cheesecake. She definitely remembered that. As she stood at the sink, brushing her teeth and

gazing blankly at her reflection, she tried to remember. But like a fog it was impossible to grasp and a filmy vision at best.

And all through breakfast as she ate her egg and toast and sipped her coffee, she was haunted by a lingering, incomprehensible sense of loss. Which made no sense—because it was only a dream.

She dressed slowly, still in a daze, and made her way to work, careful to avoid everyone. She simply wasn't in the mood for conversation.

When she got to her office, she expected everything to return to

normal. Her work had always done that for her—washed everything else away. But that odd, restless melancholy clung to her. She sat at her desk and stared at the items cluttered there, unable to dive in. Unable to make any sense of things.

First of all, these weren't the same items she had been working with yesterday. They were all new and completely unfamiliar to her. There was an opened crate by her worktable filled with straw, so clearly these items had just come in and were waiting for her to catalog them. But she'd never seen any of them before. The artifacts from last

night's event were all neatly stacked on shelves by the far wall but there was something just... wrong about them. Like something was missing. But she couldn't put her finger on it.

She was still in a numb stupor when the door to her workroom opened.

“There you are.”

Aimalee flinched. Sorcha was the last person she wanted to see this morning.

“For God's sake, where have you been? You missed all the excitement.”

Aimalee picked up a clipboard

and studied it. Flipped through the pages. She knew Sorcha was standing there, waiting for a response, but she had no inclination to engage.

“Did you have a nice vacation? Must be nice. Just taking off like that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Carter was pretty upset.”

“Carter?” Carter had been in her dream. Hadn't he?

“But then, I suppose that's a moot point...considering.”

“Considering what?”

Sorcha gaped at her. “Do you

mean you don't know? Carter was fired."

Aimalee blinked. "Fired?"

"Yes. The idiot tried to pass your dissertation off as his own and the board found out."

A vague memory washed through her. Sitting on a throne. Eating popcorn. Watching Carter get fired on television. She had dreamed that. Hadn't she?

"After the big confab, he just disappeared. Didn't clean out his desk or anything. But then you can hardly blame him, I suppose. It was probably mortifying. Getting hauled before the board of

directors. Humiliated in the press. I would disappear too." She laughed, a harsh, forced offering.

That Sorcha was amused by another's trials churned in her gut and Aimalee turned away, repulsed by how much she disliked her coworker.

There was something else there too, something larger. A betrayal she could sense but just couldn't pin down. "Did you want something, Sorcha? I'm busy."

"Oh, yes." She smoothed her hair. "The new director wants to see you."

"The new director?"

“Bring your dissertation. He wants to discuss that with you.” Sorcha leaned closer and whispered in a cloying, conspiratorial tone, “He’s gorgeous.”

“Really?” Aimalee set the clipboard back on the hook.

“I don’t know where they found him but he’s got a pedigree like you wouldn’t believe. He worked overseas for the international archives and knows absolutely everybody who’s anybody. Did I mention he’s hot?”

“I believe you did.”

“Really, Aimalee. You really should show more interest. This

man will have your career in the palm of his hand. He could make you or break you.”

Aimalee fished through her files to find a clean copy of her dissertation. She pulled it out and cradled it in her arms. “Unlike you, Sorcha, I don’t need to rely on a man to make me.”

Sorcha sniffed. “You don’t need to be pissy.”

“Not being pissy. Just telling it like it is.”

Sorcha puckered her lips. “There’s something different about you.” Aimalee shrugged and angled her way past Sorcha toward

the door. "Did you get laid?"

Aimalee rolled her eyes and, ignoring the question, slipped out into the hall. She tried to ignore the emotions that question evoked, visions of a tall, handsome perfect man, of love and loving, the memory of a dream lover she just couldn't shake, but the thoughts were rooted in her mind. She couldn't brush them away.

In a haze she made her way to Carter's office.

No. Not Carter's office. Not anymore. There was some new boss. That was going to take some getting used to.

Oddly enough, she had no sense of panic, of betrayal at his sudden desertion.

It was as though her fixation on Carter had been simply erased.

This was turning out to be the oddest day.

“Hi, Marie.” She forced a smile as she greeted Carter’s secretary and Marie beamed back. Funny. Aimalee didn’t remember Marie grinning when Carter was her boss.

“Morning, Aimalee. Welcome back.” Aimalee was about to open her mouth and say she hadn’t gone anywhere – why did everyone think she’d been on vacation? –

when Marie stood and crossed to Carter's door. "He's ready to see you now."

"He?"

"The new boss? Mr. Keeshan?"

Aimalee nearly fainted as a wash of prescience flooded her.

Keeshan.

There was something about that name that made her tingle, down to her toes.

Marie winked. "I think you're going to like him." She knocked on the door and poked her head in. "Aimalee West is here to see you."

A low murmur echoed through

the door and Aimalee's sense of unreality swelled. She knew that voice.

No. She didn't know it. But she remembered it. Somehow.

Marie held open the door and Aimalee walked through.

There was a man sitting at Carter's desk but this man was not Carter. This man was nothing like Carter. Sorcha had been right on. He was handsome. He was hot. But he was something more. Someone more.

Aimalee stared at him, her dissertation clutched to her chest. She'd never met this man but

somehow she knew him.

He stood when he saw her and she boggled at his height, his breadth. And heavens.

The look on his face.

It was a hunger.

An aching unlike anything she'd ever seen in a man's expression—leastways when he was gazing at her.

“Aimalee.” He said her name like a prayer.

She stood there mute, an idiot, as an odd emotion, a peculiar recognition swirled through her.

It's him! her mind kept crying

but she didn't know what that meant.

It's him, who?

She swallowed the drool pooling in her mouth and nodded jerkily. "Mr. Keeshan."

He tipped his head to the side and gave her a crooked smile. "It's just Keeshan, Aimalee." He stepped out from behind the desk, looking heart-stopping in a crisp three-piece suit. She caught a whiff of his scent and little alarms started going off in her head. Her heart began to pound.

When he put out his hand, she just stared at it.

He wanted her to touch him? Glory be. What would that be like? He stepped closer and she took a step back.

“Aimalee.” She tried to ignore the dimples blossoming on both cheeks. “Aren’t you going to shake my hand?”

She tried to force her mind to function. She lurched forward and slipped her hand in his.

And her world exploded. Memory drenched her. Memories of Keeshan and the lamp and their kisses and loving. Their love. Everything came back in a flash.

A laugh bubbled up inside her.

It was him. It was Keeshan! Her Keeshan.

He was here.

His pupils dilated as their palms met. His grip tightened and he yanked her closer. The next thing she knew, she was in his arms, her precious dissertation falling to the floor in a fluttering, forgotten sheaf.

“Oh Keeshan. Is it really you?”

His grin broadened. “You remember?”

“I do. I remember everything. But...how?”

He kissed her. Their lips met in a tingling wash of passion and relief.

“I’ve missed you.”

She laughed. “It hasn’t been that long.”

“It’s been far too long.” Their lips met again and this time they clung. He tasted her. Groaned and tasted her again.

“But...what happened?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We broke the spell, Aimalee. Together we finally broke the spell.”

She cupped his cheek. “You’re free?”

“Yes. I’m free. And we are together. Could life be more perfect?” A knock came at the door

and Keeshan frowned. "What is it?" he barked.

Marie pushed open the door and peeped in. Her eyes widened when she saw Aimalee in Keeshan's arms but she didn't make a comment. She merely cleared her throat and said, "Your sister is here to see you, sir."

"Your sister!" Aimalee gaped at Keeshan. "She's here?"

He nodded. She noticed tiny tears lurking on his lashes. Tears of joy. "Yes, Aimalee. She's here with us as well."

"Well, for heaven's sake, Marie. What are you waiting for? Bring

her in. I can't wait to meet her."

Marie nodded and ducked back out of the room.

Aimalee shot a brilliant smile at the man she loved. "We are together again. Both you and Lisette are free of the Dark Djinn. Oh, Keeshan, is it finally over?"

"No, my dearest," he said, bending down to kiss her once more. "It has only just begun."

Epilogue

Far from the world, in a palace obscured from human sight by a magic older than time, the Great Djinn reclined on her lush divan and gusted a great sigh.

Her devoted servant, the ever-vigilant Rorrim, shimmered into human form and stepped forward to offer her a chalice of cold wine. She nodded to a platter of fruit and cheese and he brought it to her as well. He watched her as she ate, sipped, awaiting her slightest command.

Setting down the chalice, she sighed once more. "So, Rorrim. A happy ending after all."

He dipped his head to hide his smirk, a grin of pure delight. "We knew Sir Keeshan would figure it out."

Nonchalantly, she fluffed out the foamy pouf of material covering her slender arms. "Eventually."

"I am surprised you let him go, my mistress."

She glanced at him then, her gaze a weight on his soul. "Sir Keeshan broke the enchantment, Rorrim. Fair is fair."

“But he was your favorite entertainment.”

“Yes. He was delicious. But I can still watch him.” Her lips twitched. “Never say you are jealous, Rorrim.” She patted his thigh. He shivered. “You are one of my favorites too.”

He cleared his throat in an effort to dislodge a growing annoyance. “For which I shall be ever grateful, my mistress.”

The Great Djinn sent him a charming, playful smile. “Besides, I am a firm believer that a punishment should fit the crime.”

It was all Rorrim could do to

contain his growl at that dig. She had been punishing him, tormenting him far longer than his simple trespass should warrant. "And did Sir Keeshan's punishment fit the crime?"

"Hardly. Duvalli far overstepped his boundaries." She arranged her skirt now, a transparent effort to call his attention to her legs. They were lithe and long. And he looked.

"Yet you allowed it."

She shrugged insouciantly. "Free will."

Rorrim merely snorted. Free will indeed.

“Come, my darling. Give me a massage.”

Obediently he stepped behind her and set his fingers to her shoulders, kneading, working her. Her skin was warm and velvety smooth. He shuddered.

“S-so what do you intend to do with Duvalli?” Now that Sir Keeshan was free of the lamp, the Dark Djinn had no purpose in this realm.

She picked up a hand mirror, observing her flawless reflection. He was certain she was observing him too. “Oh, he shall suffer.”

As did all men in her auspices.

“I should think he’s suffered enough. Two thousand years without the ultimate fulfillment?” A man could only take so much. And Rorrim should know.

“He’s the one who brought that on by kidnapping and enslaving an innocent woman.”

“So you will keep him entombed?”

She tossed her head back and laughed, a melody. “Don’t be silly. I will release him.”

Rorrim paused in his ministrations. “I thought you wanted him to suffer.”

“Oh, he’ll suffer.” She waved

him back to work. “The idiot is besotted with Lisette.”

How true. Pity the man besotted with a woman who did not *see* him. “So you’re going to release him?”

“Precisely. Send him out into the world. With the knowledge that if he does not find her—and win her—in this lifetime, he will lose her forever.”

“Forgive me, my mistress...”

“Yes?”

“But that doesn’t sound like you.”

She chortled. “Quite right. I intend to send him out into the

world with the knowledge that if he does not find her – and win her – in this lifetime, he will lose her forever...and the knowledge that if he fucks another woman, any woman, I will personally assure he never finds her.”

“And?”

She dipped her head. “And... Lisette will not remember him.”

“Ah. That’s more like it.” Rorrim gently pushed her forward and began rubbing the tight muscles of her back. “I, for one, shall miss them. They’ve been great entertainment during my captivity.”

“Mmm. A little harder.” She tipped her head “There.” And then, “Never say I have not kept you entertained.”

“Mistress. You are always entertaining. But you are occupied with other matters much of the time.”

She disengaged, frowned at him. “Are you pouting?”

“I simply thought that I would have more of your time.”

“You’ve been my servant for four thousand years. Surely that is time enough for any man.”

“Closer to five. And not nearly enough. Not with you.”

She grinned and rose, paced over to the billowing curtains opening to the grand balustrade, the bells around her ankles jangling in a seductive harmony. Teasing him. Teasing his sanity. She struck a pose against a pillar, glancing at him from beneath lush lashes. "Dear Rorrim, you should not have made that wager in the first place. You most certainly should not have lost it."

He pretended to tidy some vials, uneasy with the direction the conversation had taken, with what his expression might reveal. He heard her return to the room, to the

bed and his body tightened. Slowly, he turned. She had draped herself across the velvet coverlet, the diaphanous froth of her gown barely concealing her curves.

She lifted a lithe leg and wiggled her toes at him. The bells around her ankles danced.

He arched a brow, pretending indifference. He always did. It was better this way. "Another foot rub, my mistress?"

"Whenever I wish. Remember?"

Oh. He remembered. "When I made that wager, I had no idea how demanding you would be."

She sat up and surveyed him,

tapping her lush lip with a painted nail. "I have been wondering, Rorrim. Why did you make that wager? It was truly a stupid move. You were bound to lose."

He took in this vision, the beautiful, effervescent woman sprawled across an enormous, comfortable bed and his passion stirred. Stirred in a way she had not allowed for several millennia. But her hold on him was loosening. He could sense it. Soon the beast within him, the true man, would be unleashed. She did not realize this, did not sense the shifting sinews of sortilege. But he did...

“Well?”

He stepped closer, drawn by her power, her beauty, her soul. “Don’t you know?”

She shook her head. Her curls jounced.

“I made the wager because I knew I would lose.”

“What?”

He stepped closer still. “I wanted to lose.”

“You *wanted* to serve me for five thousand years?” She gaped at him. Even in that, she was beautiful.

“Oh yes.”

“Why?”

In response, he sat on the bed and took her beautiful foot in his hand. He explored her with leisurely strokes and then set the elegant creation to his mouth and nibbled on her toes. She shivered and shook. Her expression became dewy.

“Really, Delilah. Don’t you know?” She started when he used her given name. But he noticed she did not protest. He lowered his head and traced her arch with his tongue. She warbled a moan. “I would do anything to be near you.”

“Even serve as my mirror?”

“Even serve as your slave.”

“But you’ve been bored? As my slave?” Was that a pout on her luscious lips?

“I never said I was bored.” He ran a finger between her toes and watched her squirm.

She tugged her foot from his grasp, uncomfortable, perhaps, with his expanding passion, his power, with the rising wreath of excitement in the room. She made her way back to the divan. He followed. Idly, she toyed with the pieces of her game board, which she kept on the side table.

“You should be happy to learn then,” she said, “that the lamp has a

new inhabitant for you to torment.”

He chuckled. “I saw. That really was naughty of you.”

“Whatever can you mean? Carter was an absolute pig to Aimalee. And for heaven’s sake, the idiot touched the lamp with his bare hands. What would you expect me to do?”

Rorrim sat down beside her on the divan, a place he was not supposed to sit. The heat of her thigh singed his. Their eyes met.

She looked away.

He hid his smile. “He was quite a pig, I suppose.”

She cleared her throat. Her attention flitted here and there. Anywhere but on the man at her side. Because, sitting by her side, he was a man. Not a slave. She cleared her throat again. "Yes. He was abominable. But nothing a thousand years in the lamp cannot cure."

"Naturally."

Her lashes fluttered, fanning her cheeks. "So you don't mind going back?"

He settled back on the divan, made himself comfortable, not bothering now to hide his dark grin. "Oh, I'm not going back to the

lamp.”

“What? B-but you have to.”

“Do I?”

“You’re my slave. Remember?
For five thousand years.”

He nodded, capturing her gaze with his own. And he held it, like he’d held her foot, watching her squirm. “It has been five thousand years.”

Her mouth fell open, her cheeks flushed. “No. No. It can’t have been. It can’t have been five thousand years already.”

“But it has been.” With a flourish and a flurry of his own

brand of magic, a pleasure so long denied him, he produced the hourglass. Even as she watched, the very last grain of sand fell to meet its brothers at the bottom.

She stared in horror as the truth of it drove home. Her long, elegant throat worked.

“I am no longer your servant, Delilah. No longer compelled to remain here.”

When she finally met his gaze, he was surprised and gratified to see tears lurking on her lashes. “So you’re leaving?” Her voice was small.

“What did you think would

happen when my time here was up?"

She shrugged. "I didn't think..."

"You didn't think the time would come?"

"I-I didn't think you'd leave."

He quirked a dark brow. "I'm not a boy, Delilah. Not a mortal you can play with and torment." He was a Mage in his own right, with powers that at least equaled hers. It was time she remembered that.

Her face fell. "Have I tormented you?"

"Every day."

Her throat worked as she

swallowed. "I didn't mean to."

Yes, he was a man who had taken a wager, a wild gamble to win the woman he desired. Now was the moment of truth. Now he would learn if the gamble would pay off.

A silent eternity passed between them. Then she said, so softly, "Don't go, Rorrim. Please."

"My name is Wulfric. Remember?"

She blinked.

"Say it."

"Wulfric."

"And I've had enough of being

your servant, Delilah. You want me to stay?"

"Yes."

"Then it shall be on my terms."

"And...wh-what are your terms?" He rather liked the way she fluttered. Her fingers, distressing the fabric of her dress, the lashes, uncertain whether to open or close, her heart, in the pulse at her temple. He rather liked her unsure, as she was now. "I think you should be mine."

"Your...servant?"

He moved closer. She did not retreat. "For five thousand years at least. Maybe longer."

When he was close enough to take her in his arms, he did and she leaned against him, into him, stoking a fire that had been banked for far too long.

He held her like that for a long while until he could bear the hunger no longer. Then he dipped his head and kissed her lips.

Ah, yes! Bliss.

Sweet, savory sin.

He ached to taste her elsewhere as well. And he would. He had plans for his lady. Five thousand years worth of fantasies to bring to life.

When he lifted his head, she

shot a smile at him, wild and wicked and wise.

“I don’t know, Wulfric,” she said, glancing at the game table. “Perhaps we should wager on it...”

About Sabrina York

Her Royal Hotness, Sabrina York, writes naked erotic fiction for fans who like it hot, hard and balls-to-the-wall, and erotic romance and fantasy for readers who prefer a slow burn to passion. An award-winning author in multiple genres, Sabrina loves writing hot, humorous stories in all kinds of settings.

Sabrina York welcomes comments from readers. You can

find her website and email addresses on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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Print books by Sabrina

York

Adam's Obsession

Ellora's Cave Publishing



www.ellorascave.com

Lust Eternal

ISBN 9781419945625

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York

Edited by Carrie Jackson

Cover design by Syneca

Cover photography

by:Studio10Artur,Lynette,

v.s.anandhakrishna/shutterstock.com

Electronic book publication June 2013

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