



*A wish
can be
a curse . . .*

EXQUISITE CAPTIVE

HEATHER DEMETRIOS

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A jinni of tremendous ancient power and Empress to Arjinna, Nalia was sold into slavery on the dark caravan, where jinn are forced to grant wishes and obey their masters' every command. She'd do anything to be free of the golden shackles that bind her to Malek, her handsome, cruel master, and his lavish Hollywood lifestyle.

Enter Raif, the enigmatic leader of Arjinna's revolution and Nalia's sworn enemy. He promises to free Nalia so that she can return to her ravaged homeland and free her imprisoned brother. But freedom comes at a heavy price and danger is everywhere.

In this gorgeous fantasy debut, Heather Demetrios brings to life a deliciously seductive world where a wish can be a curse and shadows are sometimes safer than the light.

EXQUISITE CAPTIVE

HEATHER DEMETRIOS

RHCP DIGITAL

For my grandma Rita Weeks,
who makes wishes come true



The Arjinnan Castes

THE GHAN AISOURI: Once the highest caste and beloved of the gods. All but annihilated, the members of this female race have violet eyes and smoke. They are the only jinn who can access the power of all four elements: air, earth, water, and fire.

THE SHAITAN: The Shaitan gain power from air and have golden eyes and smoke. They are scholars, mages, artists, and the overlords who once controlled the provinces.

THE DJAN: The largest caste and the peasant serfs of Arjinna's valleys. They have emerald eyes and smoke, and their power comes from earth—the sacred soil of Arjinnan land. They are manual laborers, denied education or advancement.

THE MARID: Caretakers of the Arjinnan Sea and fishing folk, these serfs draw their power from water. Their eyes and smoke are blue. They are the peasants of the coast, as uneducated as the Djan and subjected to equally brutal labor.

THE IFRIT: Long despised throughout the realm, the Ifrit have crimson eyes and smoke. Their power comes from fire, and they use its energy for dark magic. They are soldiers and sorcerers.

The Jinn Gods and Goddesses^{[fn1](#)}

GRATHALI: Goddess of air, worshipped by the Shaitan

TIRGAN: God of earth, worshipped by the Djan

LATHOR: Goddess of water, worshipped by the Marid

RAVNIR: God of fire, worshipped by the Ifrit

^{[fn1](#)} *Because the Ghan Aisouri can draw power from all four elements, they worship every god, though individual Aisouri have their favorites.*

PROLOGUE

He'd buried her alive.

The surrounding darkness was a black, writhing worm—hungry. It twisted around her body, tightening its grip. What little air remained reeked of iron; it would be a slow death. She could already feel the poisonous metal bleeding into her skin, infecting her blood. Nalia inhaled anyway: a trickle slipped past her parched lips, then dripped down her throat and slowly seeped into her crushed lungs. Not enough.

The bottle was a vault.

She'd been drifting in and out of sleep, floating on a foggy sea that seemed to have no beginning, no end. Time here was an elastic thing, bending and shifting at will.

For so long now, she'd been living in prisons within prisons within prisons, like a nesting doll. Earth; Malek's compound; the bottle. If he let her out, she'd still be a slave. Just one with a little more room to breathe. She'd never forgive Malek for the ripping, tearing, choking sensation of being stuffed into a bottle the size of her pinkie. It had been designed to punish, nothing more.

Officially, she was in the bottle because she'd run away again. Unofficially, she'd kicked her master's ass. How many times had she tried to escape? He always knew when she left, as if some sixth sense had nudged him, then whispered her name in his ear. Her sentences in the bottle followed a predictable pattern: Nalia ran away. Her master summoned her back. She spit in his face. Called forth the wind to wreak havoc in his perfectly organized study or willed a storm to rain upon his priceless treasures. He put her in the bottle. After a time—long or short, depending on his mood or what

he needed from her—he let her out. The pattern would resume again as her master tried to tame the wildness within her.

This time was different. This time, Nalia had wanted him to hurt too.

She'd expected Malek's usual raving—he hated when his jinni wasn't right where he wanted her to be—but what he did instead was far worse. He'd looked at her, standing there in the doorway of his study, then returned to his reading, waving her away as though Nalia were nothing more than a dog. Before she knew what her hands were doing, Nalia had thrown Malek through a wall. The look on his face. The way the plaster had crumbled all around him, like powdery snow. Of course, her revenge had had its price: whatever pain she inflicted on her master ricocheted back to her. Punch her master, she punched herself. Her defiance had been worth the sudden pain jolting up her spine and the two ribs that cracked as soon as her master hit the wall. It was *almost* worth the punishment of this endless suffocation. Almost.

"Hell, Nalia, you're seventeen," Malek had said, just before he put her in the bottle. "When I was your age, I was running a multinational corporation, not pulling childish disappearing acts."

He had been sitting at his desk, near the window that overlooked the rose garden, sipping his absinthe with that faraway look in his eye—like he was examining the fabric of the universe, peeking through holes the gods had forgotten to sew up. Malek didn't appear much older than she was, yet he'd been living far longer. Whether it was due to a wish from another jinni or a human mage's skillful ministrations, Nalia didn't know—Malek's enduring youth was just another one of his secrets.

"This running around the planet as soon as I have my back turned, and your little violent outbursts . . ." His voice had trailed off. Then, "I can't allow it to continue."

Nalia shouldn't have tried to run. How silly, to think she could go where Malek wouldn't find her. She was his property, bought and paid for long ago, just another jinni on the dark caravan, the slave trade that had claimed thousands of jinn before her. Ghan Aisouri, Shaitan, Ifrit, Djan, Marid: the caravan wasn't picky—it would take jinn from any of the five castes. Nalia's last hours as a free jinni were filled with flames and death, the palace overrun with Ifrit vermin and their poisonous dark magic. Civil war. A coup. Revolution. The whole realm in shambles, its powerful Ghan Aisouri protectors slain in one night of carnage. Locked out of that world, Nalia could do nothing but remember. And hope.

When she tried to distract herself from the airless void of the bottle by imagining Arjinna, her homeland, Nalia's good memories were like photographs that had been handled by too many dirty hands. Frayed, faded, falling apart. Soon, they would be gone. And the other memories, the ones that followed her around like lonely ghosts—they were the only things worse than this bottle.

She could feel it coming, the panic. Creeping up on her, a nearby echo. She'd tried so hard to tame it, but the memory of Malek's voice, his presence, fed her terror. Her heart clenched and she struggled to fill her lungs.

"Please," she whispered. To Malek. To her dead mother. To the gods of this wasted planet. "Please."

The bottle was a tiny, bejeweled thing attached to a thick gold chain. Indestructible and protected by magic. Malek wore it around his neck at all times, a constant reminder that she was his. If Nalia listened closely, she could hear the slow, steady rhythm of his heart: *buh bump buh bump buh bump*. She'd give anything to reach through the walls and tear it out with her bare hands. Feel it beating against her palm.

Suddenly, the walls began to contract, as though she were in the belly of a tiny, panting beast. *In. Out. In. Out.* She

knew what was coming next—hope and relief washed through her just before the nausea set in, a vertigo of epic proportions.

The bottle began to spin like a whirling dervish, faster and faster, and her body slammed against the bottle's side. Nalia screamed as the now scorching iron walls of the bottle burned her skin. She threw her arms up to protect her face. A tiny pinprick of light appeared above her and then it was just gravity and smoke and heat until she shot through the opening in a cloud of golden incense, landing hard on the floor of Malek's study.

She crouched on the ground, shuddering as a tidal wave of *chiaan*—magic—washed over her, so much of it that she had to clamp her hands over her mouth to keep from vomiting all over Malek's Persian rug. She was a dam holding back an ocean of unused energy that would burst any second. Nalia flung her hands toward the fireplace, desperate to release the magic without burning down the mansion. The *chiaan* flowed past her fingertips, bright yellow flames that seared the air.

She laid her head on the floor, weary and feverish.

Malek crouched in front of Nalia, his beautifully cruel face inches from her own. Though human, he had the ageless glamour of a young demigod.

"You see now, don't you?" he whispered, his voice tender, but his onyx eyes hard. "We need to be together, you and I. This fighting—it only brings us sadness, no?"

He lifted her chin. His fingers smelled of clove cigarettes, and his breath carried the faint scent of the absinthe's anise.

"Nalia?"

He tightened his grip, his thumbs digging painfully into her jaw. She nodded her head, numb. Finished. There was only one response that would keep her out of the bottle now.

"Yes, Master."

1

ONE YEAR LATER *Present Day*

GRANTING WISHES IS A BITCH.

Nalia did her best not to glare at the client as he outlined his absurd request.

What is with these humans? They find out they've got a jinni to do their bidding and they suddenly think it's Aladdin, like I could snap my fingers and shazam!—instant gratification.

It didn't work that way. Granting was a science, an art of exactitude. Earth was a glass sphere balancing on the point of a needle, and one errant wish could shatter it against the cold hardness of the universe. And though Nalia was one of the most gifted among her race, some things were impossible. Case in point: here was this corrupt stockbroker, telling her he wanted to be the president of the United States.

"Look," Nalia said. "I don't have that kind of power. I'd have to brainwash the entire world, which is . . . beyond difficult. My recommendation is to wish for stock—loads of it. Then you'll be rich, and money is power—"

"I *am* rich," the client said.

He leaned close, his eyes peeling off her clothing. He reached out a hand and trailed it down the length of her arm. Nalia stiffened. *Disgusting wishmaker. They're all the same.*

Every atom in her body screamed to attack. Instead, she held her breath, as if the client were a bad smell that would

soon go away.

He's not worth it, she thought. This touch, this too-close cloying scent of man, was nothing compared to Malek's wrath. She'd endure it, if only to avoid the bottle.

"I want something money can't buy," he murmured.

He wasn't the first who thought Nalia did more than grant wishes.

The client drew closer, his body nearly pressed up against hers—this was what came of meeting in hotel rooms. But they were some of the only places Nalia could guarantee there wouldn't be any witnesses. She could imagine what the human newspapers would say if someone caught her granting on Hollywood Boulevard.

Privacy had its benefits; it would only take the tiniest movement of her fingers to have a noose around his neck. If it came to that.

Nalia took a step back. "I don't know what Malek told you, but this is the deal: one wish. Exclusions include, but are not limited to: love wishes, death wishes—yours or someone else's—world wars, changing the past, wishing for another jinni, and asking for more wishes."

It had been clever of Malek to think of the granting loophole, a sneaky human way of garnering well above three wishes. There was nothing in the rule books that said a jinni couldn't grant wishes on *behalf* of her master, as though *he* were the jinni and Nalia was simply the conduit through which the magic flowed. Malek's first wish: that she grant wishes to his clients, associates, friends, mistresses—as many as he wanted, to as many people as he chose. She'd had no choice but to obey his request.

The client tilted his head to the side, studying Nalia as if she were a piece of avant-garde art that he didn't quite understand. She guessed he'd been expecting a temptress in harem pants and a face veil that floated out of a lamp and said things like *your wish is my command*. Most of the wishmakers did.

“You have quite a lot of limitations,” he finally said.

He looked expensive, like he summured in Monte Carlo. Young, rich, and bored, these sons of new money were Malek’s favorite type of prey. He never told them the fine print ahead of time; no, he left those conversations to Nalia.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something,” she said.

Nalia leaned against the wall, arms crossed. She didn’t know much about him—Malek rarely discussed the details of these cloak-and-dagger transactions—but the client had been in a position to give her master something valuable, something a power-hungry man like Malek needed. Sometimes it was money. Information. People. For Malek, everything—*everyone*—had a price.

Including Nalia.

She longed for the day when Malek would ask her to grant a wish for a homeless woman, a sick child. But the only people who earned his wishes were criminals—traitors, terrorists, liars, thieves. They all had blood on their hands, and this one, she could tell, was no exception.

The client crossed the plush carpet and poured himself a drink from the well-stocked bar. Beside it, a wall of windows framed the dusky Hollywood Hills, where mansions full of secrets hid behind bougainvillea and security cameras. Sunset Boulevard lay below the suite, a serpentine river of red and white headlights that flowed into the dark heart of Hollywood. The whole city was a prison, built on shattered dreams and lost souls.

He contemplated the view for a long moment, then swirled the amber liquid in his glass, knocking it back in one go.

“How old are you?” he asked, turning to her.

“Old enough to be unimpressed with your car, your money, or that ridiculous watch on your wrist,” she said, with a look at the solid gold monstrosity.

His answering grin was the kind a schoolboy might give when he’s thoroughly enjoyed his punishment. “Malek told

me you were . . . what was the word he used? *Feisty*. He said not to take it personally.”

“No,” she said. “You should definitely take it personally.”

The client shook his head. “Aren’t you a piece of work? Bet Malek has all kinds of fun with his jinni.”

Nalia curled her fingers against her palm, willing the magic to stay put. *Not worth it*, she chanted. *Not worth it. Not worth it. Not worth it.*

But his words had brushed up against the truth, a painful reminder of this newest horror in her life. Malek, two weeks ago, saying good-bye to her before his business trip: his lips close to her ear, the heat of him. *We’re meant to be together, you and I. You’ll see that soon enough, Nalia.*

The client’s soft laughter brought her back to the hotel room and its cold, sharp lines, all black and white and so humanly modern. He smiled to himself, as if at a private joke, while he poured another drink. He sipped it, then threw himself into a black leather chair and crossed his legs, the relaxed posture belying the excitement that flitted around the edges of his voice.

“You said no death wishes. What about pain wishes? A brink-of-death sort of thing,” he asked.

Nalia looked out the window. Instead of Hollywood’s bright lights, she saw the palace dungeons of Arjinna, her homeland. Her mother’s command she’d been too cowardly to refuse. The boy who had died. His blood on her hands. She could never take it back, that first lesson in the abuse of power.

She gave the client a frozen look. “No.”

Other than the soft whir of the air conditioner and the muffled car horns below, the room was swathed in silence.

“Well, doesn’t hurt to try.” He steepled his fingers and gazed at the ceiling. “Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll take a magical power. Invisibility. Think you can rustle that up?”

So casual. He spoke as though her stolen childhood and the years of training to grant, to *manifest*, to coax wishes

out of the universe's tightly closed fist was the equivalent of flipping a burger. All that pain, sacrifice, and loss—*gods, so much loss*—it all came down to one man-boy's whim.

Nalia pulled a scroll from her back pocket and tapped it once with her finger so that words suddenly spilled across it. Words that would make the client *think* he was getting what he asked for. Her insides screamed, *the bottle! the bottle!*, and for a moment Nalia faltered as she imagined the look on Malek's face when he found out what she'd done. She'd been so good. After those first two rebellious years with Malek, she'd spent the past year obeying his every command until the bottle was only a throbbing memory in her gut.

But the bottle was preferable to being trapped in his bed. His anger over this transgression would buy her more time.

She handed Malek's client the contract. "Sign on the dotted line."

"Got a pen?"

She smiled and held up the jade dagger she kept inside her boot. "We use a different kind of ink."

"Kinky."

"Your finger, please."

He held out his hand. "I'm guessing I can't have my lawyer look this over."

"You guessed right."

She whispered over the dagger until it was only a dagger, taking the enchantment off so that this one little scrape wouldn't paralyze him. Then she brought the blade to his skin. She cut him deeper than she needed to and his sharp intake of breath filled her with more satisfaction than it should have. She'd been with Malek too long.

Nalia pressed his finger against the paper, then rolled it up.

As soon as she let go of the contract, it disappeared.

The client's eyes widened, his casual cool replaced with wonder. "What'd you do with it?"

“I put it away.” She wasn’t about to give him a lesson in rudimentary magic. “Ready?”

He leaned back in his chair, slipping his nonchalance on like an old overcoat. “Are *you*?”

She held out her hand. “Payment.”

His fingers searched an inside pocket of his suit coat while keeping his eyes on her the whole time, as though she were some kind of monkey that would suddenly begin performing magic tricks once he looked away. He tossed a thumb drive in her direction and she plucked it out of the air, then slid it into the front pocket of her jeans. Anything could be on it—nuclear codes, scandalous photographs, an eighth Harry Potter book. Whatever was on that thumb drive now belonged to Malek: just one more rung in his ladder to the sky. At this point, what power *didn't* he have? He'd be ruling the planet in no time. Practically did already.

“Now don’t move,” she said.

“You’d be a great dominatrix, you know that?”

He was making it far too easy to ruin his life.

Nalia ignored him and closed her eyes, focusing on the magic within her. She wouldn’t have to wait long. The *chiaan* was close, as if it were stored in some small compartment wedged between her ribs. It stirred, a creature awakening from a deep sleep, stretching and yawning. Nalia’s blood warmed as the *chiaan* flowed through her veins, tumbled over joints, and clawed its way into her lungs, her heart. Her fingers tingled, every inch of skin humming with energy and intention as she drew on the strongest elements in the room—air, and the fire from the candles she’d lit earlier. She focused her mind on erasing the client’s features until nothing was left of him. The calculating eyes: gone. The smirk: a memory. The hands: clear as water. She waited until she could stand it no longer, waited until she thought her bones might break under the impatient pressure of the wild, thrashing thing inside her. Then she lifted her hands, palms facing the client.

The magic shot out of her, leaving Nalia cold and dizzy. When she opened her eyes, the room was empty.

“Holy shit,” she heard a moment later, near the corner of the room where a floor-length mirror stood.

Nalia started for the door. Like a criminal, she ached to sprint from the scene of her crime, but she moved calmly forward. He was just a wishmaker—the client didn’t deserve her fear.

“Wait.” She felt a hand close around her arm, but she shook it off.

“Do. Not. Touch me.”

“How do I change back?” he asked. She couldn’t see it, but Nalia knew the client’s cool, lecherous facade was cracking into a thousand pieces.

She threw open the door. “You don’t.” The corners of Nalia’s lips turned up, ever so slightly. Once granted, a wish could not be unmade. “Be careful what you wish for.”

She felt the darkness of his energy as it pushed against her own. She had no idea where he was, but she heard his breath go ragged. Close. Too close.

“Listen, you little bitch—”

She was there, and then she was not. An image of the alley behind the hotel flashed through her mind, then the familiar smoke surrounded her, enveloping Nalia in its honey-scented cloud. Seconds later, she was in the alley, her breath coming out in short, choking gasps. In Arjinna, evanescing had been like snapping her fingers. On Earth, it was like pushing a boulder up a mountain. So much in this land was backward and upside down. The iron all over the planet didn’t help, either. It sapped her power so that simple acts took more *chiaan* than they should.

Nalia hunched her shoulders against the cool night air as she made her way toward the parking lot beneath the hotel. Tourists and young human girls with fake brown skin and yellow hair crowded Sunset’s sidewalks, pushing past her as they talked on their cell phones and laughed with their

friends. Men walked up to them with postcards advertising new clubs or bars, and everywhere there was music and bright lights. Electronic billboards advertised new films, and neon signs flashed against the blackened sky. A man held a hand-painted sign that said Jesus loved her, and a woman with dirty brown hair and overlarge clothes sat on the corner, begging for change. A little boy stood with his mother, his mouth open as he gazed at the sights around him. For a moment Nalia stared—the child wasn't her brother, she knew that, but he looked so much like Bashil that the constant ache for him that lived deep in her bones became a sharp pain that radiated through her. His eyes slid to hers and Nalia looked away, her vision blurring.

She reached the famous upside-down sign near the hotel's entrance and gave her ticket to the parking attendant, nervously fingering the thumb drive as she waited for the valet to bring her car around. At least Malek would have whatever he'd sent her here for. She shivered, imagining the look on his face when he found out what she'd done. Destroying this client's life had been the highlight of her three years as Malek's slave—she'd almost forgotten what it felt like to have power, to have a whole nation bend its knees when they saw you. But as the shadows of the night closed around her, all Nalia could think of was the impenetrable darkness of the bottle.

BEIJING, CHINA
Present Day

THE *HUTONG* IS EMPTY. NARROW STREETS SNAKE PAST rusted rickshaws abandoned beside buildings with broken windows and peeling paint. The ancient houses lean against one another like fallen dominoes. Most of the residents are home, their bicycles parked alongside crumbling brick walls or locked up beneath dusty red flags that hang from poles over the potholed streets. Cooking sounds and animated conversation spill out of closed double doors. The scent of frying meat and hot peppers fills the air. There is no evidence of the small card tables where the neighborhood's grandmothers play mah-jongg during the afternoon, and the flea-market stalls sit empty of their wares. Here and there a bright fluorescent light hangs above a doorway next to a red silk lantern, beaming into the ghostly streets, but otherwise a thick darkness shrouds the neighborhood. The only movement outside the shuttered homes is the slink of thin dogs poking their noses in the trash.

A puff of blue smoke fills a side street, and the Marid jinni within its aqua plumes looks over her shoulder, then slips through the faded red doors of an abandoned *siheyuan*—one of the *hutong's* courtyard residences. She darts into the shadows just inside the doors, hugging its brick wall and hardly daring to breathe. She twists her jade shackles around and around her wrists, a nervous habit she can't help. Above the courtyard, Beijing's bright lights block out the stars and its skyscrapers stretch beyond the soot-

stained sky, their tops lost in the clouds of pollution. She stares at the swath of sky above her, waiting.

The Ifrit jinni pursuing her evanesces just outside the square of pale moonlight that shines into the center of the courtyard. Red smoke billows out around his massive body, filling the air with the scent of sulfur and a stench that reminds the Marid of Beijing's overflowing trash bins. As the smoke clears, the Ifrit scans each darkened corner with eyes that blaze scarlet. When he spots the jinni cowering against the wall, he smiles.

"Hello, little mouse," he says. "The cat has been looking for you."

The Ifrit has just arrived from Arjinna, and he's hungry from the journey. His stomach rumbles.

"Please," the jinni whispers. "I don't know who you are or what you want, but I'm nobody. Just a slave on the dark caravan, that's all."

"Come into the light, little mouse," the Ifrit coaxes.

The Marid jinni presses against the wall. She doesn't understand why this Ifrit is stalking her. What has she done?

"Does the little mouse want to run to another hole?" The Ifrit takes a step toward her. "She knows the cat will catch her, yes? The mouse is tired, so tired, from running. Running from the palace, running from *me*."

"The palace? I'm only a Marid—I've never been to the palace. Honest. I've been on Earth for six hundred summers."

The Ifrit crooks his finger. "If the little mouse does not let me see her face, she will make the cat angry. He will have to use his claws."

The jinni whimpers as she steps into the moonlight, silently crying out to the gods. Her body trembles as a gust of wind swoops through the courtyard. The rancid smell of the Ifrit gets stronger the closer she is to him, like rotting food or, no, more like . . . rotting flesh. And suddenly she

knows this is no ordinary Ifrit, and the word, the horrible word for what he is, fills her with mindless terror.

Ghoul.

She gasps and tries to run, but the Ifrit reaches out and pulls her to him with one of his clawed hands. He yanks her hair back and she screams, the sound leaving her throat like a flock of startled birds.

“The mouse will shut up or the cat will tear off her face,” the Ifrit growls.

The Marid closes her eyes as the Ifrit ghoul leans into her. He runs his hands over every inch of skin on her face, looking, looking, looking for something. A razor-sharp nail drags along the birthmark near the corner of her mouth. Blood drips down her face and she cries out as the ghoul licks it. His tongue burns.

He lets her go. “This mouse is the wrong mouse.”

The jinni stumbles as she backs away from him. She wants to evanesce, but her mind has gone blank—there is no picture of a safe harbor to concentrate her energy on. It’s as if she has forgotten how to breathe.

The ghoul smiles. “But the cat is still hungry.”

The Marid stands, horrified, as the ghoul’s smile stretches to his ears, then grows wider, splitting his face open to reveal dozens of eellike teeth. Her agonized shriek lasts only a moment. Once those teeth sink into her soft flesh and break her skin, she can no longer speak. No longer move. Limbs frozen.

But she can feel everything.

The ghoul finishes his meal, then licks his lips and sighs with satisfaction. He shudders and the air around him warps as his body and face transform into those of his victim. The ghoul gazes at his reflection in a stagnant pool of water on the courtyard floor. As long as he stays out of the moonlight, his true form is hidden. He touches the birthmark beside his mouth and smiles. Next time, his quarry won’t see him coming.

2

MALEK ALZAHABI LIVED IN A SPRAWLING SPANISH-STYLE mansion in the Hollywood Hills, between an heiress and an Academy Award-winning producer. Palms bordered the expansive grounds, fountains splashed, and servants bustled in and out of rooms crammed with priceless antiques and several museums' worth of art. His home was something of a legend, a story shared in halls of power, in the backs of limousines. The people who passed through the tall, wrought-iron gate that surrounded the property were the fault lines of society—the movers and shakers of the world. Foreign dignitaries. Journalists. CEOs and scientists. Black-market specialists and the kings of Earth's underworld.

Chanel-painted lips whispered of a mysterious young woman who slipped in and out of Malek's parties, a girl who defied the laws of physics and made dreams come true—if you could believe everything you heard. She moved with the grace of a belly dancer, entrancing men and women alike with her strange golden eyes full of secrets and the tumbling dark hair that wound past her neck and over her shoulders like loving snakes.

Words swirled around Nalia whenever she walked into one of Malek's soirées. She didn't need to be a mind-reading jinni to know what they were: *lover, witch, demon, Saudi princess*. The words didn't matter to her. Neither did the people.

Nalia gunned her Maserati, taking Mulholland's curves with expert precision. The stars winked above the convertible as she sped past mansion after mansion. The

wind shoved against her skin, waking Nalia up and taking the edge off the granting pain. By the time she got to her master's mansion, she'd be good as new—by Earth's standards, anyway. She hated how much she loved Malek's most recent gift, but she couldn't resist a tiny catlike grin as the engine's power hummed through her. The thing had probably cost enough money to feed a small country for a year, but Malek had given it to Nalia as if it were an extra pack of cigarettes he'd had lying around. An afterthought.

Just take what you can get from the bastard, her closest friend, Leilan, had told her after Malek gave Nalia the car. Even though Leilan was a free jinni who had never been on the dark caravan, she was born a Marid—one of the serf castes—so she knew what it was like to be a slave. It was why she'd escaped Arjinna in the first place.

When the car neared the mansion's front gates, they swung open. The guards standing outside nodded to Nalia as she drove past them. Every light in the house burned—Malek was having another party, one of the rowdier ones judging by the sounds spilling out the open front door. There'd be too-thin women in low-cut dresses who watched themselves as they laughed and flirted, men in Italian suits who moved through the room like sharks. Champagne and caviar. Cocaine and Ecstasy.

"Perfect," she muttered. "Just what I need."

Malek's business trip had lasted for two glorious weeks. She hadn't asked or cared why he hadn't brought her with him as he usually did; she'd been too busy reveling in his absence and the relative freedom that came with it. Waking up in the morning without a master to serve—priceless.

She knew one of the guards would inform Malek that she'd returned. Not like he didn't already know. The thick gold cuffs on both of her wrists were nothing more than fancy shackles imbued with the magic of her peculiar institution. The instant the slave trader had received his payment from Malek three years ago, the shackles had appeared on

Nalia's wrists. She hadn't seen this happen, of course. She'd been too drugged. There had been Malek's face, shadows, whispering, and then, suddenly, the bracelets.

Not only did the shackles tell Malek her exact location, they allowed her master to easily summon her, any time of the day or night. He only had three wishes, but an endless number of commands that had to be obeyed. *Get this. Go there. Do this. Do that.* As long as she didn't manifest something, it wasn't a wish. So tonight she'd be expected to join him at the party, to be all but handcuffed to his side while he made his deals with Earth's devils. *Smile, smile, smile.*

As she drove closer to the house, she felt his summons. It was as if Malek were tugging on a string attached to her belly button, pulling her toward him. Right now it was mildly uncomfortable, but the longer she waited, the more painful it would become. If she ignored it, the magic would take over. Her body would dissolve into a cloud of smoke and, seconds later, she'd be standing beside him. The people around him would simply blink and assume she had been there all along—the magic's safety valve against human detection. The longest Nalia had ever held out against his summons was twenty minutes, an excruciating effort. Then he'd put her in the bottle. The calendar had said May when Malek willed her inside it, July when he let her out.

Malek didn't like to be kept waiting.

She steered down the long driveway, gripping the wheel as she fought against his call. There was a certain savage joy to making him wait. To saying *no*.

Of course she'd go to him eventually—she had no choice. If she were smart, she'd be good. Play the exotic jinni, let him parade her around like a prize racehorse. Pretend not to notice the way he'd started looking at her when he thought she wasn't paying attention. Her stunt with the client was enough for one night. If she didn't find a way to escape from Malek, Nalia had a lifetime to piss him off.

She turned into the garage and parked her Maserati next to the Lotus Malek had recently acquired from a Russian arms dealer. The metal garage door clanged shut behind her as Nalia cut the engine and jumped out—all she wanted to do was sleep. A sharp pain had begun to radiate from the base of her skull, the beginnings of a migraine. Granting hangover.

Off in the distance, a cacophony of drunken laughter and shouting spilled out of the house. It was the time for secret longings to become exposed, when masks slipped off after too many glasses of this, too many pills of that. Time for Malek to get what he wanted from his guests.

Nalia was almost to the garage door when she stopped. Her adrenaline spiked and she whipped around, eyes scanning the darkness. She wasn't alone.

A jinni: she could feel its presence, a manic energy that pulsed everywhere at once. Goose bumps scattered across her skin and she held her breath, straining for a sound that would tell her where the intruder was. It was stupid to think she was finally safe, that maybe everyone back in Arjinna really *did* believe she was dead. *Of course* it was only a matter of time before the Ifrit jinn who'd taken over her homeland realized they were short a body. During the coup, the Ifrit soldiers had used human weapons to massacre her caste—the empress and her royal knights, the Ghan Aisouri. Nalia could still feel the bullets tearing into her flesh. The formidable Ghan Aisouri magic had been powerless against Earth's lightning-speed technology combined with Ifrit dark magic. Yet, somehow, Nalia had survived.

She was the last of the Ghan Aisouri.

“Show yourself,” Nalia demanded.

Nothing. Was he invisible? The irony wasn't lost on her. She felt the jinni's menace, lurking in the dark. Wisps of golden *chiaan* sparked at her fingertips. The Ifrit were evil, violent jinn who'd long been outcasts due to their love of

dark magic. She had no idea what to expect from her opponent.

“You’re here to kill me, so let’s get on with it,” she said.

A low male voice answered. “Am I?”

Nalia called up her reserves of *chiaan*, centering her energy so that the heat of defensive magic could begin coursing through her. She directed the yellow light emanating from her fingers toward the voice, but she was out of practice, and the magic that was supposed to reveal the jinni only succeeded in breaking the window of Malek’s new Aston Martin. Her stomach twisted—her master’s summons was getting harder to ignore.

“You’ve come a long way to hide in a corner, Ifrit pig,” she snarled.

The jinni’s tone was withering. “You confuse hiding with being entertained, *salfit*.”

Nalia bristled at the slur. It was what Arjinna’s lower castes called her race, a snide nod to the Ghan Aisouri’s palace high up in the Qaf Mountains, so steep that only goats could manage the climb. *Salfit*: goat fucker.

“I’ve always found that term of endearment so evocative of our beautiful mountain territory,” she said.

She’d heard the slur before, many times—the lower castes were serfs, forced to obey Shaitan overlords and the royal Ghan Aisouri who controlled the serfs’ lives, owning them in much the same way Malek owned Nalia.

But it hadn’t always been that way.

In ancient days—thousands of summers ago—Arjinna had been nothing more than a wild land upon which tribes of jinn roamed, fighting for control of the realm’s resources. After a time, one race proved to be the most powerful—the all-female Ghan Aisouri, the only jinn who could control all four elements. So great were their powers, many considered the Aisouri to be daughters of the gods—and indeed the violet-eyed females were born randomly into the families of other castes, like blessings scattered from above. Jealous, the

fiery-tempered Ifrit tried to wrest control of the realm from the Aisouri. But with the help of the Shaitan, known throughout the realm for their wisdom and innate magical ability, the Aisouri pushed the Ifrit into Ithkar, a barren, volcanic region cut off from the rest of Arjinna by the Qaf Mountain range. Fearful of future uprisings, the Aisouri chose an empress from among their ranks and then divided Arjinna into regions assigned to the jinn races: the Djan in the valley, best for their earth element; the Marid near the sea, ideal for their water magic; and the Shaitan in the mountains, where they could draw upon their element: air. As a reward for aligning themselves with the Aisouri against the Ifrit, the Shaitan were given control over the Djan and Marid—a control they quickly began to abuse. Until recently, the Ifrit had remained on their side of the mountains, happily keeping the realm in chaos by providing serf rebels with dark magic and weapons to fight their Shaitan overlords. Little did anyone know that the Ifrit were planning a bloody revolution of their own.

It had taken Nalia's own enslavement for her to truly understand the misery of the serfs' existence. But it was too late for apologies.

There was a low, diabolic chuckle near the Maserati and she threw her fingers toward it, filling the garage with bright golden light. The *chiaan* skimmed across the gleaming surfaces of the cars, missing the invisible jinni.

"You're rusty—I would have expected more from a Ghan Aisouri," he called, from the other end of the garage. "Maybe it was just smoke and mirrors with you royal knights all along."

Nalia took a breath. "Say that again, swine."

The jinni just laughed.

Dark green smoke rolled toward her and Nalia pummeled it with scorching bursts of magic, shots in the dark. The jinni, hidden within the shapeless cloud, spun her into disordered confusion until all she saw was thick, *chiaan-*