

LYRAEL'S SACRIFICE

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Prologue

Even in times of famine and drought, when the rains didn't come and the tribe members died along the long-horned cattle and the goats and the camels, when the desert swept in and reclaimed the land at the base of the forbidden mountains – even in those times, the girl children of the Azzura clan were offered food and water first.

They were protected and guarded, watched over as they grew to womanhood. Their skin was kept smooth and free of hair except for eyebrows and eyelashes above sky-blue eyes, except for the golden tresses which flowed like silken sunshine to below their knees and even to their ankles.

The last few years had been good and the tribe had prospered. Now the time had come to take the jewelry and hides and livestock to the far mountains and to the sea beyond. But in order to gain the wealth offered by those distant cities and ports, to use the riches to attract husbands and wives so new blood would be added, the tribe had to trek across the desert. They would need to avoid the Djinn, the spirits who hated all mankind, who killed with shifting sand and violent sandstorms. Who could sometimes be distracted, appeased by a gift – by the sacrifice of one of the Azzura.

The tent village was broken down in preparation for the trip. The camels loaded, save for a single camel and a single structure where seven women waited.

The tribal elders gathered around a fire under a sky containing both the setting sun and rising moon. Their deeply tanned faces were wrinkled, somber, their fingers gnarled by age and hard work.

They passed a cup made from an ancient skull, drank the bitter, dark brew it contained and felt the liquid burn through them. When the cup was empty, they danced as the younger men pounded on drums made of animal hides stretched across frames of bone. They danced until they were lightheaded, until they felt the god's presence. Only then did the drums cease and the eldest of them pick up the carved pieces of wood and cast them into the fire. His voice lifted in praise to the god for interceding when six of the tokens disappeared in hungry flame while the seventh lay smoldering on a bed of ash. It was a clear sign telling them which of the Azzura was to be offered to the Djinn so the rest of the tribe might travel through the desert safely.

Chapter One

Lyrael waited in the small, enclosed shelter of sewn hide. Her sisters and cousins huddled together, clinging to one another, praying to the god that he would spare them—all of them. But Lyrael knew the god wouldn't grant their prayer. She had seen the black mountain panther in her dreams. She had watched him turn into a black *juudu* bird and land in a pale, skeletal tree, only to slither down its white trunk in the form of a black serpent.

She shivered and fear clawed at her chest. Her heartbeat vibrated through her like a sudden thunderstorm across the land.

In her dream the snake and the panther and the bird came at her summons and were angry that she had the power to whisper their name in the wind. *Asrafil*. That's what they were called. That's what *he* was named.

For when the deadly serpent reached the lower limb of the tree, he dropped to the ground and the sand swirled up in greeting, spinning around him, hiding him from her sight though she knew what he was. Djinn. The enemy of her people.

Lyrael gazed at her two sisters and the fear in her chest receded, allowing her a moment of happiness. By the time the tribe returned to their lands, neither of her sisters would be a satisfactory offering to the Djinn. They would wear short braids and have down-covered woman's mounds—just as she would have if she had not called *Asrafil's* name in the spirit dream. After this trip, she and her sisters would all have joined the ranks of the mated women, their places taken by girls moving from childhood to womanhood.

The drums and singing stopped. In the twilight silence Lyrael heard beasts stirring, camels being prodded to their feet to start the journey across the desert. She straightened as footsteps drew near the hide shelter. "They come," she said, not bothering to cover her face with the material that was fashioned into one continuous garment flowing from head to foot in a robe that sheltered her skin from sand and sun.

Her female relatives stopped crying but continued to cling to each other. They looked at her, hiding their fear, their hope, their guilt.

They knew of the dream though she had not spoken to them about it. She saw it in their eyes but didn't ask them how they knew. Any who dream-walked were given to the Djinn for fear their spirit travels would draw attention to the tribe, bringing death and additional hardship.

The flap of the shelter was drawn back. The women were told to step outside.

"You will come with me," Herachio, the tribal leader's son, said to Lyrael, his body tense, his eyes both sorrowful and fearful.

They had grown up together, had begun sharing glances lately as they tended livestock and saw to the chores necessary to survive their harsh land and life. Sometimes Lyrael caught herself thinking of a future where she and Herachio built a shelter and lived as a joined couple, though they had never spoken of it. Until an Azzura woman was freed of her obligation to the tribe, no male allowed himself to grow too close, to risk his heart or share confidences for fear of having his secrets and his life delivered into the hands of the Djinn.

Lyrael tilted her head slightly in acknowledgment of Herachio's words, in a silent promise that she would not disgrace herself by railing or fighting against her fate. For even in times of famine and drought, when the rains didn't come and the tribe members died along with the long-horned cattle and the goats and the camels, when the desert swept in and reclaimed the land at the base of the forbidden mountains—even in those times, she had taken the food and water offered knowing this might one day be required of her.

She turned to her female relatives, kissing each of them as they passed by her on the way to where the camels carrying their family belongings waited to begin the long trek to the mountains and sea. And when the last of them had rejoined the tribe and the young men had started to break down the final shelter so it could be loaded upon the only unburdened camel, Lyrael followed Herachio into the forbidden mountains.

He took the common pathways at first, those allowed for hunting, those the god had claimed from the Djinn. Then he took the less common ones—the lands in between, where the god was said to still fight the Djinn on behalf of the tribe. And finally Herachio led her into a narrow crevice, the symbols carved on either side of the stone marking it as taboo to all save those who had been granted permission by the elders.

Lyrael's breath grew short and she stumbled in the dark, rock-strewn place. She almost went to her knees in fear because the spirit-presence was so powerful in the tiny space.

Herachio hesitated long enough for her to gain her footing, to regain her dignity and honor. She would not disgrace herself by going to her death crying and cowering.

The hot breath of the desert rushed past them. They climbed upward, a gradual slope at first, then a steeper one with glimpses of the night sky.

She shivered when they finally exited the rocky passageway. Her attention went immediately to the tree she'd seen in her dreams. It was like a pale, skeletal hand glowing under the full moon, its limbs bare of leaves and flowers, its trunk smooth and foreign to this land.

There were bones scattered on the ground near it. Terror made its first inroad into Lyrael's soul. She imagined the other Azzura who had been brought here before her, who had been sacrificed to the Djinn for the good of the tribe.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out, from pleading. Her breathing grew harsh as she fought the need to flee before Herachio could slit her throat as they did the goats they sacrificed to the god.

As if sensing where her thoughts lay, he said, "There is food and water in the calabashes. There's enough to last for seven days."

She noticed the calabashes then but wondered if they were empty, his promise of food and water a lie meant to comfort her, to distract her so her death would be achieved without pain or fear. None of the Azzura knew what it truly meant to be sacrificed to the Djinn. No woman taken ever returned.

In the dark of the night, when the elders slept, the girl children of each new generation whispered. They scared themselves with tales of grisly bloodletting and madness, of spirits who could appear human but whose skin burned like a firestone and whose eyes flickered with flames. The Djinn were beautiful and deadly beings, alien with their slitted pupils and features that mesmerized. They were demons who hated the god and took delight in tormenting those the god had created.

At the base of the tree a stake had been driven into the ground. Attached to it was a length of braided rope, its weave tight and strong. The sight of it made Lyrael think of the times she'd crafted just such a rope and used it to tether a calf so its mother would remain nearby and easy to milk.

Beyond the calf-rope was a neatly folded blanket. To the side were several calabashes, gourds with only a minimum of woven fabric surrounding them, as though whoever created them wanted to leave no trace the Djinn might follow.

Herachio directed Lyrael to sit underneath the tree and pull up her robe so he could lash the rope to her ankle. When it was done, he brought a firestone out and used it to build a small flame, and from the flame, to heat a thick piece of root from the *gego* tree until it glowed red.

He pressed the hot root to the calf-rope, burned the knot so it melted and smeared, creating an inescapable shackle. Then he ground the red tip of the root into the sand until it cooled and blackened. Afterward he put it back in one of the hidden pockets of his robe and retrieved a necklace. Where most necklaces were strung with beads and carved fetishes, this one had only a single disk made from the dried and flattened fruit of the *jukaabe* plant.

Herachio slipped the necklace over Lyrael's head. The deadly yellow fruit lay against her chest, providing her with a way to escape.

She glanced up but Herachio wouldn't meet her eyes. Without a word he stood and waked away, leaving her to the night. To the Djinn.

She shivered and scooted over to the base of the tree, looked inside the calabashes and found water and food. For long moments there was only the harsh sound of her breathing and the panicked thundering of her heart. But slowly those sounds faded, to be replaced by the call of night birds, the singing of insects and the rustle of both predator and prey as they moved around in search of food.

Lyrael huddled against the tree. Its smooth surface was warm against her back, as though it had soaked in the sun's rays during the day and now held on to the heat. The feel of it through her robes calmed her, gave her strength so that she didn't scream and

reach for the *jukaabe* fruit when the sand in the distance began to swirl angrily, to rise to the height of a man and move toward her, a golden funnel gaining speed and power, a deadly force that could easily kill.

Asrafil rushed toward the Azzura woman. The sandstorm was as much a display of power and anger as it was a test of her courage.

This woman had whispered his name in the spirit world and summoned him to her. Him! Who was a prince of the Djinn.

He stopped abruptly in front of her. The wind from the storm concealed his form even as it whipped and tore at her robes. She lifted a hand and he stilled deep inside himself. He waited to see if she would be like one of the nameless females who had been brought here in the past, who had failed the first test by reaching for the *jukaabe* fruit and dying by their own hand.

The sands continued to swirl around Asrafil, cloaking him. His control of the fine granules was so complete that the pale gold grains didn't attack the beautiful sky-blue eyes now darkened with fear and glistening with courage.

Her hand moved past the necklace to clutch instead at the cloth covering her nose and mouth, keeping her face hidden from him. The show of bravery pleased him, stirred him. It replaced some of his anger with curiosity and the hope she would not disgrace him among the Djinn by having the power to summon him but not having the will to face him.

Her fingers trembled as she kept the wind from pulling the cloth away from her skin. Her body shook but she did not cower away from him or cry out or plead for him to spare her. Nor did she pray to her god to save her.

Anger returned with thoughts of the mortal's god. Asrafil's rage pulled more sand from the ground around them. Two of the calabashes containing her food went tumbling into the darkness, leaving a trail of hardened bread and dried meat behind them.

She whimpered, a small sound of distress. Yet still she did not cower in the presence of his anger and power, in the violence of the sandstorm around them—a rage brought on by the hate he bore her creator for coming upon the land of the Djinn and claiming it in bloody combat and ruthless conquest, for driving the surviving Djinn into hiding and naming them demons.

In the face of her courage Asrafil saw the touch of Djinn in her. It was a piece of his kind stolen when the daughters of the alien god's creation plucked all of the fruit from the oracle's tree and ate it.

The winds swirling around Asrafil slowed. The grains of sand dropped one by one as his desire to see what this female looked like increased.

With the curiosity came worry. That he would find her appealing, alluring. That he would come to care for her and crave the ecstasy of merging his body with hers, only to

stand helpless and disgraced as she died before entering the city of the Djinn as many, many others of her kind had done before her.

It was his decision which of the three tests to administer first and he chose to further test her courage by presenting a terrifying visage. He preferred to end things before they began if that was her choice.

As the sands dropped away the moon reflected off the shiny black scales of a serpent. His massive body was coiled, his torso lifted in the air, the hood on either side of his face flared as his tongue flickered in and out, tasting the Azzura's essence in the air and finding her utterly desirable, utterly terrified.

Chapter Two

Lyrael was paralyzed by the sight before her, so frightened that her fingers twitched involuntarily as if to reach for the *jukaabe* fruit.

Have courage, Lyrael, her mother had whispered, her wet cheek pressed to Lyrael's when the tribe's elders sent for the virgin Azzura women. Your vision is the strongest born to us in two generations. Have courage and you will find a place among the Djinn.

Lyrael lifted her chin, reminding herself as she did so that even the youngest of the calves and goats sacrificed to the god struggled against death. She had seen this serpent in her dream walk. She knew the Djinn whose spirit was linked to hers could take this shape. Words formed in her thoughts but remained frozen in her throat so that only the whisper of his name escaped. "Asrafil."

The giant serpent swayed and she thought of the cobras she had seen in the bazaar, how they moved back and forth, charmed by the music of their keepers. "Asrafil," she repeated, her voice stronger.

The heat of the tree against her back surged into her. She felt connected to it, as if she could sense where its roots sought water deep in the ground, where its branches stretched heavenward, not reaching for the skies but shouting that what had been stolen would one day be reclaimed.

A sandstorm swirled. It rose from the serpent's coils and gained in speed as it lifted to hide the shiny black scales, the hood with its strange markings, the desert-colored eyes with their exotic pupils.

This time when the sands dropped away a man stood in place of the serpent. Lyrael's breath caught not only at the size of him, but at the sheer beauty. He towered before her with muscled arms crossed over a naked chest, his lower body hidden by flowing trousers, his feet bare.

Unlike the men of her tribe who kept their hair sheared close to their heads, Asrafil's midnight hair was worn in a thick braid that snaked down his back and past his buttocks, coming to rest against his thigh at the same place her own did.

Heat moved through Lyrael's face and she was glad the robe hid her reddened cheeks when her eyes encountered the bulge at the front of his trousers. Its size and position revealed his carnal interest.

Asrafil's erection should have terrified her, and yet the heat from where her spine pressed against the trunk of the tree moved into her womb, her woman's folds, the swollen knob she sometimes stroked during the dark hours of the night when the breathing around her in the tent told her that her family members were asleep.

She dropped her gaze to the ground and battled the unexpected reaction of her body to him. Her cheeks grew more flushed as moisture escaped from her slit and dampened her robe. It took several attempts before she could look up again, this time moving past the heavily muscled thighs and aroused penis, moving past the chest and arms to linger on his neck, either side of which bore the same swirling marks that had been on the serpent's hood.

He wore gold in both earlobes, small loops fitted tightly around the lobes. His skin was bronzed, his face the same color as his chest and feet, as though he walked in the sun unhindered by a robe.

His mouth was a tight, straight line and Lyrael shivered at the sight of it. She had the urge to press her lips to it and coax a smile from him.

As she watched, his mouth grew firmer. She wondered what he was thinking, if he was growing angry or if he intended to pleasure himself on her and then kill her—to entertain himself as her tribe traveled in the night, putting distance between themselves and the Djinn.

Once again Lyrael's chin tilted upward in a show of bravery and resolve. She was connected to this Djinn. It had to be so for her to see him in her dream and to know the encounter had called him to her, would have called him to her people as they traveled across the sands if the elders hadn't left her here. She forced herself to meet Asrafil's gaze and look into his exotic eyes with their oddly shaped pupils.

He smiled then, a small curl of masculine lips. She found her heart filling with joy, with sunlight.

"I am pleased," he said, speaking for the first time. His voice was a deep rumble that made her think of the giant, predatory cat he could become.

Asrafil crouched in front of the woman and despite himself he was more than pleased. She had spoken his name twice and he had felt the invisible tie between them strengthen. Her connection to the Djinn was strong, but it would have to be. He was a prince of his race, a creature of fire, and she had brought him to her. She had called out his name on the winds of the spirit world and he had not been able to refuse her summons.

His cock already burned for her. He wanted to quench the flame by sheathing himself in her wet woman's flesh. The scent of her arousal was an intoxicating perfume clinging to him, filling him, expanding within him so that his earlier anger at her power over him was pushed aside in favor of exploring her. Her show of bravery gave him hope that she would pass the remaining tests and enter the city of the Djinn to become his *sorja*—the wife of his heart and flesh and spirit.

In the time that followed the desecration of the tree, it had only produced a single fruit. When the most powerful of the Djinn seers had eaten the fruit, he had seen the day when the Djinn would reclaim their world. But to regain it, they would need these Azzura women whose ancestors had stripped the fruit from the tree in a day and eaten something meant to last the Djinn for centuries.

Asrafil had seen her fingers twitch in the presence of the serpent, had felt a stab of sorrow at envisioning her placing the *jukaabe* fruit between her lips and ending her life. But he would not have stopped her. Only those Azzura who passed the tests were welcomed and valued by the Djinn.

“What are you called?” Asrafil asked, knowing that by accepting her name he took a part of her inside himself. He would forever feel her loss should she fail the tests he must administer.

Her eyes flashed with surprise, curiosity, wariness and all three reactions were like fingers lightly teasing over his shaft.

“Lyrael.”

The name pulsed through him. It echoed, claimed, resonated deep within as if combining with his own name to form a melodious chord that gave her more power over him. For an instant his earlier anger returned, stirring the sands at his feet. But when she looked away from him he felt loss instead of satisfaction.

There was no turning back. The seed planted long ago had grown roots and woven through time until it came to fruition here. Now. In this offering left by the mortals underneath the tree.

Asrafil grasped the rope keeping her tethered and followed it beneath the folds of her robe until he reached her bound ankle. He encircled it, marveled at how dainty she was. Pleasure flowed up his arm from the first touch of his skin to hers. Satisfaction settled in his belly at the way she accepted his touch. Her eyes and the scent of her arousal communicated that she found his attention pleasing.

She was nervous. The race of her heart gave her away, as did the wild flutter of her pulse against his palm. But it was a virgin’s nervousness fueled by a woman’s knowledge of what he would eventually want from her. Asrafil’s cock jerked in anticipation of seeing what was now hidden.

With a thought the rope burned away from her ankle in a smokeless fire, making Lyrael gasp and try to pull out of his grasp. He tightened his grip and she once again relaxed, accepting symbolically that it was he who now held her bound, not the dictates of her tribe. When she met his eyes, he rewarded her with a small piece of knowledge. “The Djinn are creatures of fire. We were created at the beginning of time, when this world was molten rock and nothingness.”

Asrafil stroked the fine bones of her ankle and then released her, shifting his weight back onto his heels and once again crossing his arms. His crouched position made his cock and balls press against the thin material of his trousers. “Remove your robe,” he said. “I wish to see you.”

She met his gaze immediately in a silent test of his will. But when he didn’t yield, she stood, her fingers trembling as she unwound the *jamri* cloth and let it drop away to reveal her face and the sunlight gold of her hair.

He’d known she would be beautiful. All the Azzura were. But he hadn’t anticipated the way his heart would sing at the sight of her face, how strong the desire was to pitch

forward and worship at her feet, to pay homage by kissing up her body and pledging his own to her.

A lesser Djinn might have yielded, might have taken his cock in hand and begged for her acceptance, or simply fallen on her like a beast. Asrafil stiffened his spine in both a subtle display of how much he had to offer her and a silent command for her to continue disrobing.

Lyrael shivered, not from cold, but from the heat swirling inside her. He'd said the Djinn were creatures of fire and she felt the flames of desire licking across her bare cunt to settle in her womb and nipples.

She could barely keep her eyes away from the place between his legs. He had taken the form of a man, but he could easily rival a bull.

She licked her lips. Nervous. Uncertain. Afraid—not of him, at least not at the moment, but afraid of his reaction. No man had ever seen her naked body.

He shifted and the sands once again swirled at his feet. Her hands went to the length of woven rope at her waist. She unwound it seven times before letting it fall to the ground.

For a moment her robe remained closed, but as if he'd commanded it, a wind stirred, parting the cloth and revealing a line of skin from her throat to her bare mound. Lyrael shrugged the garment off and it slipped away, settling in a soft pool around her feet.

"Come to me," Asrafil said, barely able to keep himself from grabbing her and pulling her underneath him, from freeing his cock and taking her even though there would be nothing but pain for her if he did so without preparing her first.

Lyrael lingered for only a moment. Instinct guided her to remove the necklace and place it on her dropped rope, to offer him her trust with a demonstration that she wasn't so afraid of what he would do to her, what he would ask of her, that she would choose death rather than obey him.

She closed the short distance between them and gave a soft whimper when his hands went to her hips so he could pull her onto his lap. His crouched position made her thighs splay so her bare mound and swollen woman's flesh were visible.

Lyrael bit down on her lip to keep from uttering another sound as the heat of him burned her like erotic fire. The sheer fabric of his loose trousers did nothing to hide his strength, his powerful muscles, the temperature of his skin—hot like the desert sands during the middle of the day.

"Unbind your hair," he said and she obeyed, first uncoiling the long braid and then freeing the strands so her hair flowed down her back and past his thighs like a golden curtain.

"You please me," Asrafil said once again, his eyes leaving her face to roam downward.

Her nipples tightened into hard pink buds when his gaze settled on them. Their size and shape and color were like the *daakol* flower found only in the mountains.

"Do you pleasure yourself in the night when no one is awake to hear you?" he asked, his voice low and rough.

"Yes," she whispered, shivering as his lids dropped to partially cover his eyes. His nostrils flared. "Show me."

Chapter Three

Lyrael's cunt pulsed with the command. Her silken folds grew slick. They parted like a flower kissed by the sun and ready to blossom.

She licked her lips and he hissed, reminding her of the serpent that had swayed in front of her. Lyrael's gaze dropped to her splayed thighs, to her aching woman's flesh positioned only inches away from his male organ.

His excitement and interest were obvious, revealed by his fullness and by the wet spot where his cock leaked. He hissed again and took her hand in his, guided it to the place they were both looking at. His fingers covered hers as they gathered her arousal then stroked over her clit.

Lyrael cried out. She grabbed his shoulder with her free hand in order to steady herself. Her cunt spasmed. Her wet fingers were forced over the swollen knob a second time.

"Again," he commanded, taking his hand from hers though it settled on her thigh, ready to force hers if necessary.

She shook as she circled her erect clit. She panted and cried and clenched her buttocks as she obeyed his command, stroking herself as she did in the nighttime when everyone was asleep.

Lyrael resisted the urge to fuck her fingers into her slit until finally the emptiness in her channel couldn't be ignored. Then she pressed a single finger in and sought the hidden place that would make her body release and send ecstasy flooding through her.

Asrafil growled this time. The sound rumbled through her and made her want to rub her body against his. It made her want to go to her hands and knees, to offer herself to him as she'd seen animals do.

His fingers covered hers again. This time they forged into her, stretched her, burned her with their heat and their width.

Lyrael whimpered and hunched forward. She placed her head on his chest as the painful pleasure of having him invade her tight channel made her helpless, needy. He let her hand escape so he could press another of his fingers inside her. His movements quickened as her cries grew sharper and her body yielded, adjusted, accepted that he commanded it, that he controlled the rhythm and the pleasure.

"Now," he growled, "scream your pleasure now." And she flooded his palm with arousal as her sheath convulsed around his fingers, milking them as if they were a cock.

Asrafil rubbed his cheek against the silken blonde of Lyrael's hair. He reveled in the way she clung to him, shook from spent passion. Only the iron will of a Djinn prince

kept him from revealing how deeply her obedience and acceptance of his touch affected him, how much he hungered for her.

Desire roared through him, burning with a heat that rivaled his Djinn core. He wanted to thrust his cock into the very place his fingers had been. He wanted to feel her slick, tight sheath fighting him, welcoming him, clutching him in fear that he would leave her body.

With a thought he could take another shape. He could become a lesser man with a smaller organ. But this was the form he favored. This was his truest manifestation when he chose to look almost human.

Asrafil brushed his lips against her hair, the caress light so she wouldn't notice the affectionate gesture—the mark of how weak she was already making him.

He placed her on her knees as he stood. It was deeply satisfying to see her naked at his feet, her arms around his legs, her face tilted upward in a submissive pose. She would call him master if he demanded it.

The thought sent a jolt of desire through his cock and up his spine. She might have summoned him in the spirit lands and brought him to her, but he was the one who would rule in the physical world, not her.

He freed the hidden binding of his trousers and let them fall to his feet. He stood for a minute as she measured him with her eyes, the nervous wash of her tongue over her lips making his penis jerk and leak in anticipation.

Asrafil crouched again, his knees spread, his cock jutting upward, hard and hungry. His heavy balls hung underneath, full of Djinn seed.

Lyrael licked her lips again. She thrilled at the way his body tensed, at the way his penis pulsed as though it wanted to feel her mouth and tongue on it.

She glanced at his face through lowered eyelashes. His eyes were slitted and his lips a straight line. She wanted to please him. She wanted to give him a release to equal the one he had pulled from her body. But she wanted to see him smile at her, to know she was more than a cunt to fuck, more than a human to amuse himself with.

She dared to stand. To put her hands on his shoulders and lean forward. To press her lips to his and touch her tongue to the seam of his mouth in a silent question.

He went completely still and for an instant she thought he would reject her, rebuff her. But then his hands went to her hair, holding her to him as his mouth opened and his tongue thrust against hers.

He tasted of desert storms. Of ancient power and molten rock. Of the very beginning when there were only the Djinn.

She held on to him as he became her world. Her breath. The beat of her heart. As he showed her with his tongue that he was the one who would always command, always dominate.

Lyrael was gasping for breath when he finally freed her. She was so lightheaded from the kiss that she sank to her knees and put her forehead on his thigh. Slowly she became aware of the nearness of his cock.

Asrafil growled at the first brush of her lips against his thigh. His hands clenched in her hair as everything inside him demanded that he force her mouth to his penis.

He could order her and she would obey. He could use his strength and make her take his cock into her mouth.

His rigid organ and tight balls didn't care how or why, only that they knew pleasure and gained release. But he cared. He wanted her to give to him freely, to offer this without compulsion as she'd willingly put aside the deadly necklace before coming to him.

Fire streaked through him when she turned her head and licked over his foreskin. It burst over him when she circled the head of his penis first with her tongue and then with her lips before drawing him into her mouth and sucking.

"Lyrael," he said, his voice breaking, his heart thundering as exquisite sensation whipped up his spine. He panted as she allowed him to push deeper into her mouth, to begin fucking in and out, trusting that he wouldn't hurt her in his passion.

Never had he dreamed he would find such ecstasy with a mortal woman. But as her lips and tongue caressed his cock, as she took him willingly into her heated depths, Asrafil could not hold back the sounds of his pleasure. He could not stop himself from praising her, guiding her.

His world became her wet, silky mouth. In and out he forged, his breath coming in short pants until his balls tightened, burned, warned of impending release.

Asrafil wanted to fuck into her channel, but now he was afraid to do so. He was afraid that until the first lava-hot rush of semen erupted through his penis he wouldn't be able to maintain his control. He feared that once he was inside her tight sheath, his cock held in the fist of her inner muscles, he would forget himself and rut on her like a crazed beast.

"Lyrael," he cried out, throwing his head back as the pull of her lips became more demanding, as she took him even deeper into her mouth and swallowed as though she wanted all of him.

His buttocks clenched and he fought the urgency. He fought the release—not because he wanted to deny himself the pleasure, but because he wanted to delay it.

The air carried the heavy scent of their arousal. The moon bathed them in light so that each touch, each expression was revealed.

She whimpered and struggled to take more of him, seemed to feed from the pleasure she was giving him. Asrafil found it intoxicating, a rush of power that could easily become an addiction—one that could easily be his downfall.

He tried to retreat emotionally by reminding himself she had yet to pass the remaining tests. It was too late. Each stroke of her tongue deepened the spell she cast on him. Each pull of her lips became a call he couldn't refuse.

"Now!" he growled in warning, giving in to her summons and letting orgasm come. His seed poured into her in a hot rush that left him curling over her, using her for support.

Liquid fire poured down Lyrael's throat. Its taste was spicy, like the *juura* fruit. It's effect on her was devastating.

Need streaked through her breasts and cunt. Desire overwhelmed her and she continued to suck hungrily, to desperately swallow each drop Asrafil fed her from his body.

Even when he softened she kept his penis in her mouth and reveled in the moans he made, in the way he panted above her. She only released him when the fingers tangled in her hair drew her away from his organ.

Lyrael licked her lips and Asrafil groaned. He grew hard again before she could look to his face and view his expression. He nudged her to her back and she went willingly. She spread her legs and showed him her wet inner thighs, the swollen cunt lips already parted to reveal her slit.

Asrafil was dizzy from the pleasure she'd given him. He was drunk from the submissive display before him.

He wrapped his fingers around his cock and it pulsed against his palm in urgent demand. The sight of her bare mound and parted woman's flesh were a lure he couldn't resist.

He leaned forward and buried his face between her thighs, licked along her glistening folds and swirled his tongue over her clit. Her arousal was a sweet nectar that went to his head, each taste making him hunger for more.

He pressed his tongue into her sheath, fucked her with it as she thrashed beneath him. Her moans and whimpers fed his lust.

Fire streaked up his cock and he pumped his fist in time to his tongue's forays into Lyrael's slick channel. He stroked the length of himself as he plundered her slit and swallowed her juices.

She pulled her knees toward her chest and the change of position allowed him to claim more of her, to spear his tongue even deeper into her wet core. He thrust hard and fast until finally she cried out his name and came.

Satisfaction filled Asrafil at the way she sprawled, boneless from the release he'd given her. Her breasts quivered as she panted, her thighs remained splayed, her soft, swollen folds still open, an invitation for him to seek them out again.

Something primitive stirred inside him. Something he'd never experienced before, the desire to mark a female with his seed.

He leaned over Lyrael and continued to stroke his cock, to fuck through the ring formed by his fingers. His buttocks began to flex each time he reached the tip and his palm glided over the slick head. White-hot flames licked at his skin as the need to come built until it couldn't be denied. He gasped as semen jetted from his cock and splashed onto Lyrael's bare mound and silken abdomen.

She cried out and arched as his heated release coated her skin. She whimpered and shivered and called his name. Even then it wasn't enough for Asrafil.

With a growl he freed his penis. He grabbed her hand and forced it to his seed. He used her fingers to spread his come, to massage it into her flesh and mark her with Djinn fire.

Lyrael begged as liquid flame burned through her cunt. She pleaded for him to fill her with his cock. Whatever he had done to her, she knew the fire burning her from the inside out would only be quenched by having him inside her. "Please," she whimpered, her need so intense that tears rolled down her cheeks.

There was no fear in her when Asrafil settled himself on top of her. He guided his straining cock to her entrance. "Easy, my beautiful Azzura," he whispered against her lips when she encircled his waist with her legs.

Her hunger was so great that she was ready to impale herself on his huge male organ. "Easy," he repeated, kissing her gently, binding himself more thoroughly to her with each press of his lips to hers. The intimate sharing of breath was the sharing of spirit among the Djinn.

"Easy. I am large and you are small."

He palmed her buttocks with one of his hands. He controlled her movements as he held himself above her and carefully pushed his cock into her. Despite his efforts to prepare her, despite the arousal that flowed freely from her slit, Lyrael's sheath was a tight fist that he fought against, pressed against until it slowly parted.

He caught her whimpered cries and swallowed them as her channel squeezed him mercilessly. Her slick flesh burned him and he wanted to cry out from the torturous pleasure of working his way inside her.

His buttocks clenched and his neck muscles strained with the effort. Sweat coated his body in a fine sheen. Ecstasy. It was everything he'd feared it would be when she whispered his name upon the night winds and summoned him to her.

Asrafil groaned, unable to hold sound back any longer as his balls pulled tight and Djinn fire streaked through his penis. She scraped her fingers down his back and pressed more tightly against him, shuddered underneath him and his body echoed the movement.

"Lyrael," he whispered against her lips. He was panting from the strain of working himself into her virgin channel. Possessiveness inflamed his heart. She would never know another male.

"Please," Lyrael begged, burning from the heat of him. Needing him to mate with her, to fill her womb and channel with his seed.

She turned her head slightly and used her tongue to trace the swirling patterns tattooed into his neck. He thrust in reaction, a hard stab that made her scream. The pleasure riding the thin edge of pain.

Lyrael touched her tongue to his tattoos a second time and his body jerked. His cock forged even deeper and he tensed, gathered himself, reminded her of the serpent he'd been earlier, coiled and ready to strike.

She licked him again and this time he surged all the way into her. He thrust through the barrier formed by her inner walls and completely filled her.

Asrafil stilled and she looked into his face and became ensnared by the alien eyes with their slitted pupils. "You will not disgrace me," he said. His words confused her but he gave her no time to question him or to think further on them.

Asrafil's mouth captured hers. His tongue stabbed into her mouth, rubbed and twined and tasted as his hips began flexing, as his cock slid out and then back in. He penetrated her over and over again until there was no thought, until he once again commanded that she scream her pleasure and come at his summons.

She cried out his name as liquid fire poured into her. Her release was an ecstasy that shimmered through her. It took her like heat rising from the desert sands and disappearing into the night sky.

Asrafil rose with Lyrael in his arms. He used his power over wind and sand to free them both of the tiny grains that clung to them. When it was done he sent the wind scurrying to the folded blanket left for her and watched as it tumbled and unfurled and flattened to form a bed.

She had passed the first test. Tomorrow there would be another, and perhaps a third. But for tonight they would sleep beneath the oracle tree.

Chapter Four

Lyrael opened her eyes to the call of the *huudi* bird, the sunrise bird. Her first thought was to roll from her mat and dress quickly so she could beat her sisters to the easiest of the goats that needed milking. It was a game they played every morning. But the bone-white limbs of the tree above her and the male arm across her naked breasts were a stark reminder of her sacrifice.

She would never race with her sisters again or joke and laugh as they filled their calabashes. They would never again whisper of a future where their hair was worn in short braids and their woman's mounds were no longer bare as tradition required of the Azzuras who might one day be sacrificed to the Djinn.

Sadness welled up inside Lyrael. Her tears escaped to wet the sand.

She reached over and placed her palm on the tree. Once again heat surged into her. Only now she recognized it as Djinn fire and knew this tree belonged to them.

Next to her Asrafil stirred and rose onto an elbow. He traced her tears with the pad of his thumb, followed them to the sand before his fingers stroked along her neck, over her shoulder and down her arm. His hand finally came to rest over hers.

She felt the tree respond and caught glimpses again of its roots reaching deep into the ground. She'd thought they sought water, but now she saw they grew from an ancient place created at the beginning of time—when this world was molten rock and nothingness as Asrafil had spoken of, when the Djinn were created from fire.

Asrafil closed his eyes and nearly wept as the tree touched him through his Azzura female. The past lay before him in a twisting trail that spanned centuries. Once the seers of the Djinn had come to this tree and viewed what had been by fasting underneath its pale limbs. They had glimpsed what might be by eating of its fruit. But when the women created by the alien god stumbled upon the tree and stripped it, they had stolen the Sight from the Djinn.

Without the fruit of the tree, the Djinn were stranded in the present with their need for vengeance. They were left with only memories connecting them to the past, only their intention to reclaim their land calling from the future and pulling them forward.

Asrafil leaned down and pressed his mouth to Lyrael's. He willingly shared a part of his spirit with her and let the ancient Djinn fire flow from the tree to meld their fates together.

He was forbidden from speaking to her of the tests. From speaking to her of the city of the Djinn or telling her how and why the long-dead elders of her tribe had been tricked into offering the Azzura as sacrifices.

He could share his body and bring her pleasure, but he was forbidden to speak of the tender emotions she stirred in him, of the future he hoped to have with her. He could make no promises to alleviate her fears or doubts. The choice to live or die remained hers until the third test was done.

Asrafil deepened the kiss. He swallowed her whimpers and responded by rubbing his cock against her silky mound. She had charmed and ensnared him, first by her courage and then by her beauty. She had bound him to her by calling his name on the dark winds and then by accepting him, by voluntarily putting the necklace with the poisonous *jukaabe* fruit aside and yielding her body to him, submitting to him.

Lyrael's thighs parted in silent invitation and Asrafil slid his cock into her wet channel. He moaned into her mouth at the snugness of her sheath. She burned with Djinn fire, with the small flicker of it that all the Azzura carried inside them as well as with the flame seared into her with his seed.

Asrafil acknowledged to himself that her heat and need and connection to him had turned the blaze inside him to an inferno that chased away his caution. He would die with her if she failed one of the tests yet to come. He, who was a prince of his people, would follow her spirit to wherever it fled should she choose death.

He kissed her as he thrust his cock in and out of her slick sheath. He shared his spirit, his flesh, and longed to share his heart and his future with her.

His hips pistoned forcefully as he neared release. His cock and balls burned with the need to come.

She responded as she'd done the night before. She clung to him and whimpered, came for him when he commanded it. Her cries filled his chest with masculine satisfaction even as she milked him of his seed.

Their hands remained on the tree and he could feel these moments being woven into the history of the Djinn though he could glimpse nothing of the future. "Lyrael," he whispered, not wanting to move into the day but knowing it was required.

"I need to get up," she finally said, her gaze shifting away from him in sudden shyness.

Asrafil rolled to a sitting position. He let her disappear into the purple-gray of the predawn as he examined the contents of the calabashes and found fresh fruit. He cut the fruit into small pieces by pressing it against the rim of one of the calabashes, then he set each chunk on the lid of another food container. When he was done he rose to a crouch and waited for Lyrael's return.

Lyrael's breath caught at the sight of Asrafil. She had been so flustered by her need for a few minutes of privacy that she had not thought to reach for her robe. And now, as the purple faded into the yellow-gray that warned of the sun's nearness, she was still naked, as was Asrafil.

His masculine beauty and exotic features made heat curl in her womb. They made her pleasure knob stiffen and her breasts grow heavy.

He crouched as he had the night before, with his knees parted and his large sac hanging underneath his cock. She shivered and her cunt clenched in response to the sight of him.

Asrafil's gaze found hers and the force of his will pulled her to him. She knelt before him, willing to take his male organ in her mouth and swallow his fiery come if that's what he wanted of her.

He cupped her face and she nuzzled his palm. With a desperate yearning she wished his features would soften to offer a hint of his thoughts, his feelings.

His cock was rigid again. Huge and thick. The foreskin was pulled back to expose the flushed, wet head.

Lyrael leaned in and licked across his glistening tip. The sharp intake of Asrafil's breath and the spicy *juura*-fruit taste of him made her nipples tighten to painful points and her clit throb.

She reached between her legs to touch herself only to be halted by his growled, "No."

"No," he repeated, stopping her when she would have pressed her lips to his cock in order to appease him. In order to gain his permission to play with her woman's knob and ease the need raging through her.

"Place both of your hands on my thighs," Asrafil said.

She licked her lips and looked at him through lowered eyelashes. She watched in satisfaction as his nostrils flared when she placed her palms on either side of his straining cock.

His muscles bunched underneath her hands and his penis grew fuller. The heavy veins on its underside pulsed wildly. She stroked the skin of his inner thighs with her thumbs and his cock jerked in reaction.

"Enough," he said. His voice was a harsh command and yet the sound of it had arousal coating her swollen cunt lips as her chest filled with feminine pride and hope. He was Djinn and held her fate in his hands. She would live or die at his whim, but she was not completely powerless against him.

"I'm hungry," she whispered, letting the provocative words settle over him. Watching as flames roared to life in his slitted pupils.

"Then I will feed you," Asrafil said, his fingers tightening in her hair when she would have leaned forward to caress his cock with her lips, his other hand reaching for the fruit she hadn't noticed before.

Asrafil fed her from his hand. He struggled to hide what it did to him when she licked the juice off his skin and sucked his fingers into her mouth. She tempted and tormented and teased him with each offering of food, defied him subtly even as she obeyed him openly.

The Djinn were beings of fire. They were primal and deadly and serious, their passion hot and fierce and all-consuming.

He wanted to take her again, to take her repeatedly. He wanted to enjoy the unfamiliar playfulness as well as her submission. He wanted to burn her with Djinn fire and let her strip him of his control so that his emotions lay bare to her. He fed her the last piece of fruit instead, though he allowed his fingers to remain in her mouth as the scent of her arousal assaulted him, mixed with the heated smell of the desert.

With a thought, a small sandstorm swirled to life near where her robes had fallen the previous night. It passed over the necklace with its deadly dried *jukaabe* fruit and brought it to Asrafil's hand before the grains of sand fell harmlessly to the ground.

Without a word he pulled his fingers from the wet temptation of her mouth and clasped the necklace around Lyrael's throat. Then he rose to his feet and stepped away from her, called the sand again, wrapping himself in it and leaving.

Lyrael's heart thundered in her chest. She watched the sandstorm gain in mass and become large enough to bury a caravan as it sped away from her. She shivered and prayed to the god that none of the Djinn found her family or her tribe as they traveled to the distant mountains and seaports.

At the far end of the valley the sandstorm vanished. At first Lyrael thought Asrafil sought a few moments of privacy as she had earlier, but when he didn't return, a chill settled in her chest and she was glad to have the sun's rays caressing her skin.

Despair and doubt threatened to overwhelm her as fear had once done. Had she meant nothing to him after all? Had he merely amused himself? Had she pleased him enough that he had decided to spare her life? Or was this the reason why she'd been left food and water for seven days? Because he would return at dusk for that period of time before his interest in her waned and she was left to die, her bones joining the others scattered around the tree.

She stood and gathered her robe, only glancing away from the place Asrafil disappeared long enough to shake the sand from the material. She gave up her vigil when she was covered from head to toe and the belt wrapped seven times around her waist in order to hold the robe in place.

Lyrael drank then. Long pulls from one of the calabashes as the sun beat down on her.

The skeletal tree offered no protection. She knew she should break some of the smaller branches and stick them into the sand in order to form a rough shelter out of her blanket. But the thought of desecrating the Djinn tree in that manner made her heart ache and her stomach roil in protest.

Her eyes scanned the mountain where she and Herachio had emerged. Nothing looked familiar. She could search for hours trying to find the hidden tunnel and deplete her water with the effort.

"What am I to do now?" she whispered, casting her words to the wind though her visions rarely came when the sun reigned.

Lyrael closed her eyes and pressed her palm to the smooth trunk of the tree, seeking comfort and finding the answer she'd sought instead.

Djinn heat poured into her as it had before, swelling upward from the deep roots of the past and pushing Lyrael into a vision of the future, showing her a black mountain panther who watched and waited. Who could not answer her call or aid her as she crossed the hot sands. But who would take the form of Asrafil and welcome her if she came to him, followed him.

Lyrael tried to ride the vision further as she could sometimes do in the spirit dreams, but the shining white of the tree's branches blinded her to the images beyond what had already been shared with her. She stroked the smooth trunk in a silent offer of thanks, then opened her eyes and looked across the sands to the place where Asrafil had gone.

There were no handles on the calabashes left for her as there were on the everyday vessels used by the tribe. There was no way to travel with two or three of them over her shoulder, though she could fashion a sling from her belt and carry a lone vessel containing water.

Fear skittered through her as she pictured those last minutes with Asrafil. He had placed the necklace on her and given her a way to end her life as Herachio had done.

Lyrael gathered her courage and her resolve. She had set aside the necklace and gone to Asrafil willingly the previous night, not because she sought to trade her body for her life, but because their spirits had found each other and touched in a dream walk. She may have summoned him initially. But she felt bound to him even before he encircled her ankle with his hand and burned the calf-rope away, freeing her from the dictates of her tribe and claiming her for his own.

Chapter Five

Asrafil watched from his perch on a rocky ledge. The sun beat down on the black coat of his panther form. What had taken him only moments to accomplish was taking Lyrael hours. And yet she came to him. She battled the desert heat and shifting sands in a demonstration of her willingness and determination to walk at his side.

This was the second test.

Asrafil did not allow himself to believe she would fail. He did not allow himself to flinch when she stumbled and went to her knees, each time lingering there a few moments longer than the last time before struggling to her feet. He did not look away as she took the last drink of water before abandoning the calabash.

When she reached the mountain, he stood and revealed himself. He gave a low, rumbling growl then turned and disappeared into the cave behind him.

The desert crossing was only part of the test.

Exhaustion made Lyrael's arms heavy weights at her sides. Her happiness at seeing the panther leaked away with the tears rolling down her checks.

Once again she gathered her resolve and drew upon the vision she had seen when she touched the Djinn tree. Slowly, painfully she climbed to the ledge and faced the cave entrance. She saw the tribal marks etched into the stone at the sides and top—warning that any who entered would be killed.

Lyrael was too tired even to fear. She wanted only what the vision had promised, to be held and welcomed.

She stepped into the cave and saw the panther above her, crouched as though he would spring. "Asrafil," she whispered, going to her knees as the giant cat leapt from his rocky perch.

Sand gathered and swirled, appearing out of nowhere to become a fierce sandstorm, dropping almost immediately to reveal Asrafil. She whimpered when he gathered her into his arms and kissed her gently. His tongue rubbed against hers as though he were seeking forgiveness, reassurance. She granted him both. Exhaustion and happiness made her boneless as he carried her deeper into the cave.

Lyrael fell into an exhausted sleep to awaken as cool water flowed over her naked body. She startled to find herself once again outside under a blue sky. But this time she was shielded from the sun by palm trees, saved from its heat by a breeze over oasis water.

Asrafil cupped the water in his hand and brought it to her lips. He repeated the process over and over again until her thirst was quenched.

"No," he told her when she would have escaped his lap and splashed water over her body.

He picked up her discarded robe and dipped one end of it into the cool water. He washed her thoroughly, cleaned her of sweat and sand, his touch so intimate that a different kind of heat filled her.

"You are beautiful," he whispered, abandoning the end of the cloth and picking up a date. He pressed the fruit to her lips, fed her as he'd done earlier, stopping only when she refused to open her lips and take any more.

Asrafil shifted her on his lap then. He held her as he'd held her before, with her legs splayed, his cock rising between them. The golden curtain of her hair flowing over their thighs.

Lyrael leaned into him. She initiated the kiss as her hands traced the muscles of his arms, his shoulders, before moving around to capture his braid.

Asrafil shuddered under her carnal assault but didn't stop her when she slowly undid his hair. She had not passed the third test yet. But in his heart she was already his *sorja*, the only one allowed to free his hair from its braid. The only one allowed to touch him so intimately.

"Lyrael," he whispered. His cock became trapped against her abdomen when he pulled her to him as his unbound hair flowed over his back in a sensual wave.

She clung to him, touched her tongue to his, thrust and parried in the wet heat, her fingers combing through his black hair and lightly scratching his back. It was an ecstasy of the heart, the spirit, the flesh.

Asrafil let her torment him. He let her stroke and tease and entice. He endured the burn in his cock and balls.

He wanted to spend the day with her here, underneath the date palms. But they were so close to the city of the Djinn. So very close. And he longed to be home, to spread her buttocks before the scribes and fill the last of her virgin openings with Djinn seed so her name could be written in the Book of the Djinn beside his own.

Afterward they would retreat to their bedchamber in order to make love and talk. They would be able to share their thoughts and feelings, to get to know each other in a way that was forbidden until she was his *sorja* in fact as well as in his heart.

Need rode him but he resisted the urge to cover her body with his own and thrust his penis into her welcoming slit. He'd been mesmerized not only by her woman's folds as he'd bathed her, but by the breasts he'd yet to suckle from.

With a groan his hands went to her arms. He pulled them behind her back so she arched, her nipples like pouting buds begging for attention. He lowered his head, wet first one hardened areola and then the other with his tongue. He pressed his lips to them in a gentle greeting before giving them an open-mouth kiss as his tongue swirled over them.

Her cries were sweeter than the song of any bird. The arousal leaking from her slit and coating his penis where their bodies touched was more erotic than any heated oil.

“Please,” she begged him and he relented. He began suckling, his tugs becoming fiercer, his growls joining her whimpers as her swollen cunt lips spasmed against his cock like a hungry mouth trying to draw him inside.

Lyrael threw back her head and shamelessly offered her breasts to him. She rubbed her feverish cunt against him and offered her heart, her soul. He seared her with his heat, engulfed her in the flames of passion and she wanted to burn forever with his Djinn fire.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Not from loss or exhaustion, but from the need for him. Her whimpers became cries. Her breath grew short as his teeth joined his tongue and lips in claiming her breasts. He bit and suckled, no longer a gentle exploration but a fierce, dominant claiming. She was shaking by the time he lifted his face. She was willing to do anything he asked if only he would fill her empty channel with his cock, his seed.

Asrafil devoured her with his eyes. Nothing in the centuries of his existence had prepared him for this. For her.

The sight of Lyrael shaking in passion, her thighs spread and her cunt glistening, her nipples marked by his desire as her eyes begged him to possess her – it satisfied him even as he knew he would crave it over and over again.

With a low growl he removed her from his lap and positioned her on her hands and knees. He covered her with his body and gloried in the sight of his night-black hair draped over her, touching her skin before pooling on the sand.

He impaled her in a single hard thrust, gave her more of his weight so she folded onto her elbows. He took her as the black panther would take its female. In a rough, fast mating that culminated in a scream as he gripped her shoulder with his teeth and pumped his seed into her.

Afterward Asrafil curled around her as they lay on their sides. He held her back tightly to his chest and felt her heartbeat thunder where his palm caressed her breast.

For the moment she was quiet, content, but he knew conversation would come if they lingered here. And as much as he craved it, needed to hold her in the afterglow of passion and share the history of the Djinn and the true reason for her sacrifice, it was forbidden. They were too close now for either of them to fail the other – her by choosing death, him by deviating from the path the ancient seer had set out for the Djinn who would claim the Azzura women.

Asrafil allowed himself a few moments of bliss, of tenderness. He stroked her breasts and belly, her bare mound and thighs as he explored her ear with his lips and tongue.

How easily he had lost himself in her. Become the servant as well as the master.

This was why the tests were so harsh. The Azzura women could just as easily destroy the Djinn as be their salvation.

"Lyrael," he whispered against her ear. His fingers explored her wet slit. His cock was hard again. When she would have turned in his arms and offered herself to him, he denied her. He forced himself to release her and rise to his knees.

He dressed her himself this time. Wound the robe between her legs, knotting it in various places so it would not slip from her body the short time it would be on her. She opened her mouth to question him but he hardened his features and put his finger on her lips in a command for silence.

When he was satisfied with the robe, he placed the deadly necklace on her. Then he stepped away and called the sand, glad the third test would be over in a heartbeat.

Lyrael watched as the sand gathered into a familiar storm, this time lifting high into the air. He would appear as the black *juudu* bird. She knew it with certainty.

In her dream the snake and the panther and the bird had come at her summons when she whispered the name *Asrafil* in the spirit winds. They had been angry then, and she had been afraid. But now her body hummed with pleasure and her heart sang from the tender way he had held her, the thoroughness in which he had secured her robes. He would not hurt her.

The sand fell away to reveal the bird hovering above her. She gasped at the sheer size of it but she did not flinch as it dropped from the sky with its sharp black talons extended in front of it. She did not scream when it grasped the cloth of the robe and lifted her into the sky, though her heart raced with the fear of being so high above the ground.

His wings beat the air and their speed increased. The desert valley with the oasis became a place of the past as he soared above the mountains her tribe knew were still claimed by the Djinn.

Lyrael's breath caught in her throat as he began to dive. Her hands balled into fists and a whimper escaped as fear tried to consume her. Many times she had witnessed the *juudu* bird kill its prey by hurtling it against rock.

The mountain raced toward her. At the last instant she closed her eyes. Felt her heart stop as her mother's words passed through her. *Have courage and you will find a place among the Djinn.*

And then her heart began beating. Her body burned with Djinn fire and she opened her eyes to behold the city of the Djinn with its golden domes and spires.

Asrafil flew across white sands until they reached the city. Then he gently placed her in a courtyard where four Djinn waited. They were tall and muscular, their hair braided to reveal the intricate tattoos on their necks, their only clothing the same flowing trousers Asrafil had worn the first time she saw him as a man.

The Djinn were gathered around a raised circular dais. The image of the skeletal tree was carved into it, touching the edge at each place they stood—north, south, west and east.

This time Asrafil did not call the sand but shimmered like heat rising from the desert as he changed into a man in front of her. He cupped Lyrael's face and brushed

his thumb over her lips to keep her silent when she would have spoken. Pride and desire filled him as he gazed at her. The first test had been one of courage. The second a show of willingness and determination. The third a test of trust.

Now there would be no more tests.

Had they been in their bedchamber, he would have welcomed her to the city of the Djinn with kisses and heated touches and whispered words of love. He would have worshipped every inch of her until they were both shaking with the need to join. But they could not seek privacy until she'd been claimed completely.

There was no advantage in lingering or in allowing the scribes to witness how enthralled he was with his Azzura female. Asrafil removed the necklace and it turned to ash in his hand. He reached for her robe—pausing to shake his head in denial as her face flamed and her mouth opened as though to protest the presence of the scribes.

He undid the knots he'd put in the material in order to ensure her safety as he flew with her. When they were free he gently pulled the garment from her hands even as she tried to keep herself covered with it.

Asrafil destroyed the robe as he'd done the necklace. He scooped Lyrael into his arms and stepped onto the dais, moving to its center.

He lay her down on the image of the tree, positioned her arms on the limbs that touched the east and west, pressed her wrists to the warm stone so she would know she was to keep them there. He bent her knees and splayed her thighs, knelt between them but did not rebuke her when she whimpered in protest. Shyness colored her face and breasts even as her exposed cunt wept and parted.

A scribe held out an urn small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. Asrafil dipped his fingers into it, coated them before rimming her last virgin entrance. She startled at the touch, whimpered again, but she did not disgrace him by disobeying his silent commands or by trying to evade his touch.

He worked his fingers into her. Stretched and prepared her until she was arching, displaying her arousal with the juices that coated her lower lips and inner thighs.

Asrafil draped her knees over his arms so she was completely open, completely helpless as he pressed his penis to her back entrance. He leaned forward and covered her mouth with his—unwilling to share any more of her with the scribes than he had to—he swallowed her cries as he forged inside her dark channel.

Lyrael shuddered as he pierced her. Cried out as his length and width seared her nerve endings and made it impossible to remain still. She pleaded with her body for him not just to sheath himself in her forbidden passage, but to claim it as he had done the rest of her, to fill it with his seed.

He growled into her mouth and began thrusting. The rub of his pelvis over her swollen clit and the taking of her virgin ass was an unbearable pleasure. The presence of the watching Djinn faded as Asrafil become her entire reality.

She yielded to him. Let him demonstrate how easily he could command her body and summon her pleasure.

She screamed in release as he poured himself into her. She begged for him to take her again even as he left her forbidden channel.

Asrafil gathered her into his arms and stood, his attention directed at the scribes.

“Let the name Lyrael be written in the book of our people. Her mortality was sacrificed by her tribe and now she is one of us. She is Azzura Djinn. One who belongs to the past and the future. To the tree of the oracle. Place her name next to mine as *sorja*, the wife of my heart, my flesh, my spirit.”

When Asrafil stepped from the dais and strode away from the four scribes, he looked down at Lyrael and allowed her to see what he felt for her. Her heart filled and her eyes glistened as she looked into his eyes and found a love hot enough to rival the fire which created the Djinn.



About the Author

Jory has been writing since childhood and has never outgrown being a daydreamer. When she's not hunched over her computer, lost in the muse and conjuring up new heroes and heroines, she can usually be found reading, riding her horses, or hiking with her dogs.

Jory welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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