



Genie,
No Bottle

Nina Merrill

GENIE, NO BOTTLE

...Laura turned around on the bed to look at him, dropping a fair-sized splat of guacamole on his belly. “Whoops.” She bent and slurped it into her mouth.

Samir’s entire body went rigid at the touch of her lips on his skin. She was thorough, too—her tongue sweeping away every molecule of avocado. He willed his manhood to remain quiescent and soft, but it had, as always, a one-track mind of its own.

“It’s...uh, not that sort of binding.” He could not speak coherently with her mouth on his skin and her hair brushing his belly and groin. And there was still a smear of guacamole on her cheek. He forced himself to continue speaking. “It is far worse than being imprisoned, to have almost complete free will and yet be so constrained.”

He hadn’t meant to reveal this most bitter thought, the one thing that stained his love for Laura, but his brain was not his own at the moment. His hand lifted, his index finger reached out, and she raised her head and looked at him, licking her lips, a growing understanding—mixed with sympathy and sadness—in her eyes.

It was fated.

He sat up slowly, as did she, and, when his mouth touched her cheek to rid her at last of the guacamole, her eyes closed. Samir felt her turning her head so her mouth brushed over his lips. Brushed past. Halted. And returned, so light a touch he might have imagined it, except for the heat swarming over his skin, and her breath against his mouth. Every impulse was to grab her, press her into the bed, thrust his tongue into her mouth, strip those silky blue panties from her and satisfy the vastness of his hunger this instant. But all those taunts about the feckless, unskilled boys of her youth rang in his head. He could not afford to become one of them...

BOOKS BY NINA MERRILL

Unloved

Genie, No Bottle

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BY

NINA MERRILL

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GENIE, NO BOTTLE
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*For Sheliak, that faraway star that
nevertheless sheds light in shadowy corners.*

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“Imagine...creamy flesh, so ripe.” Samir spoke as close to Laura’s ear as he dared—close, but not quite touching her with his mouth. His breath would do the work of caressing her skin, since his hand must not. “So smooth and tender. Silk on the tongue.”

“Mmm.” The noncommittal noise told Samir she wasn’t really listening to him.

“And the bowl—golden and cool, a vessel fit for a princess. I will bring it to you on bended knee. Its value is nothing compared to your own beauty, my mistress.”

“Samir, I’m trying to find an error here.” Laura reached behind her absently, her palm cupping his cheek for a moment, before her hand returned to the computer’s mouse. Samir closed his eyes and relished her warm touch.

“Salt. Lemon. Crisp tortillas.” Ah, there was his reward, the fleeting prickle of gooseflesh over her neck as his breath tickled her skin. She

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was beyond sensitive there, though she didn't seem to realize it. She lifted a shoulder to rub away the gooseflesh, never taking her eyes off the computer screen, and Samir's mouth touched the cloud of her hair and the hard roundness of her skull. It was almost—almost—enough. Yet it would never satisfy his longing for her.

“Samir!”

He moved away and sprawled grumpily on a credenza behind her desk, propping himself on one elbow, like a sultan on a velvet-bolstered divan. “What is so enthralling about these screens and screens of numbers?”

It mattered nothing to the course of the world whether or not this corporation Laura worked for found a few thousand dollars. Laura worked too hard as it was, and almost never permitted Samir to use his magic to ease her path. She needed some rest, a change of pace—just a little time away from her tasks. His petulance sometimes coaxed her into doing what he wanted, but it was an unreliable tool at best.

“We should be out in the sun. We should be in Mexico, choosing three tree-ripened avocados—”

“Mexico is too far to go today for junk food. I have a date tonight, and if I don't find the missing money I'll miss that as well.” Laura never took her eyes from the screen, scrolling through the figures.

Samir scowled and flung his jeweled dagger at the wall, where it sank to the hilt in the soft wallboard, without so much as a satisfying quiver. “We could be in Mexico in moments. Come, give me your hand and we will step on my flying carpet—”

“Fix the hole, Samir,” Laura ordered quietly. “And please control yourself.”

“Yes, my mistress. But you love guacamole.” *And I love you.* He summoned the dagger to his hand and considered using it to slit the throat of Lewis, her blue-chinned swain. Samir knew Laura inside and out, and he sensed in the next hour or two, as she dressed for her date,

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she would tell Samir to stay away for the evening.

That only meant one thing. She'd be having sex.

But not with Samir.

He supposed he couldn't blame her for dating Lewis. Lewis treated her well. He was kind and affectionate. He wasn't a pimply, shallow youth, even if Samir felt he should shave more often and not rasp Laura's peach-soft skin. Lewis brought her tokens of his high regard, though they were trinkets compared to the jewels Samir would have showered upon her had she permitted. And Laura was too passionate, too earthy, too much a woman, to deny herself the pleasures of the flesh.

Pleasures Samir longed to share with her.

From time to time, through the centuries of his enslavement to Laura's family, Samir's designated master or mistress had turned to him for sexual favors. But Laura had never asked him to appease a physical craving. Samir supposed it was his own fault, the result of the many times he had mocked or derided the young men of her acquaintance as she grew up. He had never felt quite comfortable suggesting himself as an alternative, though he'd remained hopeful.

These days he found himself plotting new ways to showcase his own attractions—his muscled body, his *jinni* magic, his eternal thoughtfulness, his competence. Laura never seemed to notice. It was depressing. Not to mention the continual fear that one of these men would impregnate Laura. She was the last of her line, and one of her children would become Samir's master or mistress. When that happened, Samir would be bound to the new child and the wonderful relationship with Laura would end. His love for her would not.

Laura. Samir could have sung her name at dawn from the tallest minaret in Bokhara, or cried it from a pier at dusk in New York, or whispered it in the glare of noon with the toss of a coin in a fountain in Rome.

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How could she know what she meant to him? How could he tell her? What more could he do to show her? Laura of the green eyes and brown, honey-touched hair, the soft smiling mouth, the pointed chin. She'd been a kind and thoughtful child, and she'd grown into a kind and thoughtful woman, less beautiful than the ancient princess for the love of whom Samir had been cursed, but a thousand times more worthy.

She looked up from the numbers, as if sensing his dimming mood. "You go to Mexico, Samir. It's all right. I don't mind."

"It's not the same." He pouted for her benefit, hoping she'd take pity on him now that he had her attention. "I enjoy our travels together."

"Maybe this weekend." She bit her lip, and Samir hooded his eyes so she would not see him staring at the compressed flesh. "Um...Samir..."

This is it, he thought gloomily. She was a bit ahead of her usual schedule. "Yes, my mistress?"

"Tonight might be...kind of a...special night, you know?"

"And by this you mean you want me to vanish."

"Well...yes. You can stay at home—I'll be at Lewis's place for the night, so you'll know where I am and you won't worry, but...a little privacy would be welcome." Her eyes were clouded when she looked at him. She knew how he hated to be shut out of her life for any reason.

"I should be there to protect you."

"Oh, for God's sake, Samir! You'd think Lewis is planning to murder me, the way you talk."

Samir frowned. He didn't think Lewis was planning to murder Laura at all. His fear was that Laura liked Lewis far too much, and would choose Lewis as her life partner. If only he could find a key, some fatal flaw within Lewis, and reveal it to Laura. But he couldn't do that if Laura wouldn't permit him to escort her on the date. The years of

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Samir actively guarding his mistress were over now that Laura understood how to command him and limit his meddling. “His intentions are far from honorable.”

Laura laughed. He tipped his head back to watch her upside-down as she rose and came around the desk. Samir tipped his head back further, one eyebrow raised. The metal spike of his turbaned helm touched her belly. A vision of another spike, farther below, and more like velvet than steel, tormented him. He was glad his loose trousers and heavy tunic concealed his hips. She bent to kiss his concerned forehead, but her throaty chuckle ruined the innocence of the kiss. “As are mine, my *jinni*.”

As always, when she kissed him or called him “my *jinni*,” Samir felt a warm glow rather low in his belly. In fact, it wasn’t his belly at all. Despite his despair at hearing her plans for the evening, he was still smitten. He reached up a hand and cupped her cheek. “I will escort you there, my mistress, and when you have...when you are ready to come home to me, simply call my name and I will fetch you.”

“I’m going alone, Samir.”

The growl erupted from his throat before he could prevent it, and he sat up without warning, almost striking her chin with the helm’s spike. He clapped his hands together and vanished from Laura’s office.

* * *

Laura sighed. Sometimes Samir simply didn’t understand she needed time of her own. Likewise, she couldn’t imagine he wished to spend all his time with her. When she’d bought the house, she’d chosen one with a large, east-facing room just for him, and furnished it the way she thought might make him feel most at home. It was for him, yes, but also for her, to give her the privacy she craved, without hurting his feelings. She tried not to impose on him or ask him for magic he didn’t freely offer.

Laura was nine years old before she realized not everyone had a

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jinni. On her ninth birthday, Samir explained the curse laid upon him and her family. Long ago—millennia ago—her family’s name had been Jarrar. Samir had paid too much attention to their spoiled, beautiful daughter. They’d sought the services of a powerful sorcerer to rid them of the *jinni*. Their princess was meant for better things, they’d thought.

The sorcerer did as they asked, but when he named his price, it was too steep. He wanted their daughter in exchange for ridding the family of the pesky spirit. They refused, and, in his jealous spite, the sorcerer cursed the Jarrars, condemning them to wander far from their beloved desert for ten centuries. For good measure, he bound Samir to them in a life of servitude, so neither would ever be free of the other. The family roamed the world until the curse wore away, leaving them in Phoenix, Arizona with their tame *jinni*, at virtually the same latitude they had started. Across the continents and centuries of their wandering, the family names came and went, through marriage or clerical errors.

Though the family’s curse had expired, Samir’s own binding would continue unto infinity, unless he found a way to remove the sky-blue jewel lodged in his navel, the manifestation of his binding. The binding was specific. Samir belonged to the person in each generation who could see him.

In many ways, having Samir around was like knowing Santa Claus was real. Special things happened when Samir was in a good mood. The Brussels sprouts too horrible for a child to consume without gagging? Vanished. Not enough swings at the park? The set enlarged enough to hold one for Laura. The high school locker door stuck? A quirk of his eyebrow solved that. Couldn’t sleep? He was always ready to talk or play chess or magic-carpet her away to some exotic locale.

In other ways, having Samir around was like having a pesky brother who never left the room. He showed up in classrooms when she least expected it, sitting smirking in the teacher’s chair with his curled-toe boots on the desk and his arms behind his head. It made him laugh to

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watch her struggle not to react to his presence. He'd had a fondness for appearing in the mirror while she stared at her teen-age reflection or practiced coquettish looks, daydreaming of cute boys at school. He changed her radio presets to stations he preferred. He wouldn't do her homework for her, but delighted in telling her something on the page was incorrect.

In high school and college, however, the most aggravating thing was Samir's self-assigned role of chaperon, and the comments that accompanied his assessment of each of her boyfriends.

"He's an unattractive youth. A lip like a camel's. Does he spit as well?"

"Does your father know you're dating this young man?"

"His hands should be in his pockets and not on your more obvious assets. In Phoenicia, we would cut them off at the wrists for such offenses."

"It is time you sent this one home. He brings nothing but trouble. Do not lie down with scorpions."

"He thinks this is how to kiss a woman? Oh, the things I could teach that boy. If he were worthy, which he is not."

And on, and on. Most dates ended with the young men wondering why she was irritated, never knowing the source was someone they couldn't see or hear. Now that she was a grown woman, Laura had no qualms about using Samir's binding to force him to butt out of her love life.

One must, after all, be firm with *jinni*. Given an inch, they'd take seven leagues. A girl needed privacy, even from her closest friend. Even if he was aggravatingly right about the men she dated. She'd never found a man to compare with Samir, and she suspected she never would.

As a child, she had tried to help Samir break the curse. She had tried everything she knew to pry the sky-blue jewel from Samir's navel.

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Cooking oil. Vaseline. Ice. Her father's cordless drill. A hammer and chisel. When she got out her little pocketknife, Samir at last drew the line and explained to her he suspected only magic could lift the curse, and he had been given only a one-word clue many centuries ago—sublimation.

The dictionary hadn't helped her understand the concept at nine years of age. But her junior year in high school she encountered the word in her chemistry class and rushed home with shining eyes—naturally, the one day Samir had chosen not to follow her around school—to announce she knew the solution. Sublimation of a substance meant it transformed directly from a solid to a gas, such as the evaporation of dry ice. Samir had obligingly gathered up his tunic to expose the sky-blue jewel in his navel, and the two of them had stared at it for an hour, pondering how to render its diamond-hard material gaseous. That day, she'd sprawled on her stomach on the bed next to him, her feet waving in the air.

“What do you suppose would happen if we could get your jewel to sublimate, Samir?”

He'd thought for a while. Laura had wondered why he was taking so long to answer. Surely, in all the many centuries since he'd been bound to the Jaynes, he'd had time to figure that out.

“I believe my binding would be at an end, and I would become human. Unless there is a secondary curse laid upon me.”

“Oh, but—then you could die, couldn't you?”

Samir looked at her with his chocolate-velvet eyes. “I would have my free will again, and be only a little less than I was when I offended in the first place: a man.”

“But you could die!” The idea that Samir might one day be gone was intolerable to her. Her dearest companion from her earliest moments, he knew all her secrets, her loves and her hates, her longings and her fears.

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“I have lived long enough.” He soothed her, stroking her little-girl cheek.

“But I give you your free will! You don’t ever have to work magic for me again! Give me a wish and I will wish you freed!”

Samir had kissed her wet eyes, one by one. “My little mistress, as long as I am bound, nothing gives me more pleasure than to serve you.” Then he’d smiled his wide, slow smile. “You have been reading the stories of Scheherazade again, haven’t you? But just think how you have helped me. None of my other masters and mistresses ever came to me with so much as a definition of the word, much less attempted a solution.”

Now that she was a grown woman, she often pondered the nature of the curse and what might break it. But while she longed to do whatever she could for Samir, in her heart she didn’t truly want to break the curse if it meant he might vanish from her life. There seemed to be no good alternative for her. Break the curse, and Samir would become mortal and eventually die, or perhaps leave of his own free will. Not break the curse and leave him a bound slave for the rest of her life. Not break the curse, marry and have a child, and lose him anyway.

Laura sighed and rested her forehead on her desk. At least with Samir gone from her office and no longer a distraction, she could focus on the problem at hand. The missing money at last emerged from a combination of three incorrectly entered transactions. Laura sent an email with the corrections to the company auditor, turned off her computer, stretched, and sighed again. Another problem solved, in time for her date.

* * *

Samir turned his head lazily on the cushion. She swayed toward him, dressed in floating veils and glittering silver coins. She was only one of several, each dressed in different costumes, yet all twins of Laura. This one, though...the dancer...there was something about her,

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something more *Laura* than the others. The delicate coin girdle about her waist rang like tiny, sweet bells with each twist of her hips as she undulated in her dance.

A second *Laura* knelt beside his divan, where he lounged like a *pasha*, and offered him sugared tea flavored with rose petals. A third held his foot in her hands, massaging it with strong strokes of her oiled fingers and thumbs. Her hair fell over her hands in a nut-brown wave. Yet another rubbed his temples and stroked cool hands over his brow. Samir knew it was foolish to indulge again, but he could not help himself. It was only for a few minutes after all, and his mistress was away for the evening.

The dancing *Laura* drew his eyes time and again, growing more real with each passionate glance. Samir crooked a single finger and a veil pulled loose from the waist chain she wore, drifting to his hand. He lifted the fragile silk to his mouth and buried himself in her scent: musky red amber and lemon. The hot fragrance of an afternoon spent tangled in bed, wracked by pleasure and tumbled in citrus blossoms. She appeared momentarily surprised by the veil's removal, but a knowing smile replaced the look. From nowhere, she conjured a date, dark and rich and sweet as honey, and placed it between his lips before dancing away just out of his reach.

No matter. Another crook of his finger and a second veil floated away, followed by a third. One last crook and the spangled brassiere's catch gave way. She covered her creamy breasts with her palms, fingers separating the slightest bit to allow her nipples, hard little carnelians of flesh, to peep between. Samir licked his lips and summoned her forward. His erection pointed to the sky, achingly hard and hungry. With a saucy sway or two, she settled astride him on the divan. He grasped her hips and pushed inside her with a slow, rocking thrust. Her head fell back and she gasped, "Samir. Oh, my *jinni*. Oh."

The thud of the front door slamming open shattered his spell and

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the various Lauras evaporated like fog in the sunlight.

The real Laura was home. Thank goodness the *simulacra* had been made of little more than well-ordered shadows and dust motes, easily banished, but still he was startled and discomfited, and more than a little confused when he looked up and found Laura leaning over the back of the sofa. She prodded at him, poking his belly uncomfortably near his jewel and his erection.

“Samir, you have to pay the cabbie. I left my purse at Lewis’s.”

“Laura?” he stammered. In that unguarded moment, half caught in his fantasy, he forgot to be formal, and reached up for her face. She had come to him at last and he would welcome her with a delighted passion as boundless and undulant as the desert dunes.

“Please, Samir! He’s out at the curb!”

Laura sounded desperate, and was there a hint of a sob in her voice? Coming fully aware at last, Samir batted at her hands to make her stop. He sat bolt upright on his couch and clutched a cushion to his lap, where his cock had lifted his loose trousers into a pavilion of desire. Laura’s fingers might encounter his erection, and then where would he be?

Through the east window he glimpsed the driver next to the cab in the darkness. Samir closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and collected himself long enough to go outside and shove money into the cabbie’s meaty hand. A moment later, a clap of Samir’s hands returned him to his place on the sofa. Laura hitched up her short dress and clambered over the sofa back. She was wearing neither shoes nor stockings.

Samir caught her as she lost her footing on the cushions. She plowed her face into his chest, as she’d done when she was a child, and howled.

Because he’d been alone he had turned off the air conditioner. The house was hot—that desert heat he loved so—and he had removed his helm and tunic. Her tears wet his skin, and he could smell liquor.

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“What is it? What has happened?”

“...girlfriend...”

“What girlfriend? Whose? Lewis has another girlfriend?”

Violent nodding against his chest.

Samir sighed. “Did I not tell you I should have gone with you? Why will you not listen to me, my mistress?”

She smacked his chest with the flat of her palm and sat up. “You’d have killed him. Or me. Or both of us. God, I need a drink.”

Samir looked down. She had left mascara and eye shadow on his chest. He rolled his eyes and waved his hand to vanish the smudges. “You need no such thing.” He caught her hand as she unfolded her legs and tried to stagger toward the door. “You have had plenty, I believe.”

“I’m not drunk. I’m angry. There’s a difference.” She sat again when he tugged.

Samir folded his arms. “Tell me.”

“God,” she said again, swiping at her streaming eyes and nose with the back of her arm.

Samir grimaced and conjured a handkerchief for her instead.

“Thank you. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Of course she wanted to talk about it. He hadn’t spent years listening to her tales of woe without learning how best to comfort her. “I will make you coffee, my mistress.”

“By all means, make me coffee, my *jinni*.” Her tone was spiteful, and Samir knew the liquor was still strong in her body. Laura never ordered him about so rudely.

He vanished himself to the kitchen. There, he fished in the cupboards for the Turkish coffee pot. A moment later, Laura stood in the doorway, watching, scrubbing at her face with the hankie.

“She had a key.”

“Who had a key?” Samir could guess, but he knew Laura had to tell it in her own way in order to get it out of her system. He took the beans

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from the freezer and ground them in the crank mill. Filtered water, then the pot was on the stove, heating. There were some things neither magic nor technology could improve. Coffee was one of them.

“I told you.”

“You did not, my mistress.” He turned up the gas the tiniest bit. “Did he at least feed you a good dinner?”

“Yes.” Laura slumped against the doorframe. “He took me to a sushi place. And then we went dancing. We...uh, had some tequila. Then we went back to his place.”

“Where you left your shoes and your stockings.” His tone was stern and disapproving, and Laura looked abashed.

“And my purse. Would you fetch them?”

“The coffee will burn while I go.”

“It won’t. I’ll watch the coffee. I won’t let it boil too hard.”

“You’ll ruin it. You always do, my mistress.”

“I promise. I can’t leave my purse there, Samir! Please?” She came into the kitchen and placed her hand on his bare chest.

Without her shoes, the top of her head came to his chin, and he looked down at her sternly as she tilted her face up. She blinked a bit. Yes, she was quite drunk. He was certain she didn’t realize her fingertips were teasing the nipple they covered, but he surely noticed it when a current of heat went straight to his groin at her touch. He took a step back, nodded and clapped his hands, vanishing to Lewis’s place.

What he found there made him black with fury. Not only was the sleeping—and unshaven yet again—Lewis tangled in the covers on his bed, he was also tangled in the long limbs of a blonde. *A naked blonde*. And on the chair beside the bed, peeping from a heap of other clothing, was Laura’s purse, her nylons, and her silky blue panties.

Samir swore an oath, grabbing all three items, plus the shoes he found beneath the chair. Then he pointed a terrible, rigid finger at Lewis and prepared to sunder him cruelly. How dare the man reject

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Samir's mistress? How dare he hurt her? How dare he...

...leave the pieces for Samir to pick up.

His right eyebrow arched upward. *Indeed.* He would pick up the pieces of Laura's life yet again, but this time he would be sure she saw how much he loved her.

Samir lowered his arm, and vanished without destroying Laura's very former boyfriend.

* * *

This time she would not ruin the coffee. Laura watched carefully as the first drops of rich brown water splashed into the glass knob on the percolator's lid, then turned down the flame just so.

She felt the faint earthquake that accompanied Samir's rematerialization. She turned and smiled, pleased at the sight of her *jinni*, half-naked in the bright kitchen, his mane of dark hair coiling over his shoulder. He stood with her tan pumps under his brawny arm, and the misty pantyhose and tiny purse in one hand.

In his other hand, her blue panties dangled from an accusing finger. Her gaze slid to his angry face, and she felt herself blushing furiously, the smile gone.

"It's not like I lied to you about my plans for the evening, Samir." She snatched the scrap of fabric from his hand.

"Because we focus on the snake, we often miss the scorpion." He turned to the coffee pot and put her things on the counter.

"Oh, spare me your Bedouin aphorisms." Laura scrambled into the panties and staggered a moment as her toe caught in the leg elastic.

"My family is Phoenician," corrected Samir frostily. "Yours was Bedouin."

"Oh yes, of course, you're filled with the wisdom of the ancients, aren't you, my *jinni*?"

"And you are filled with the wisdom of the agave, aren't you, my mistress?"

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Laura marveled how Samir's back could convey such rigid disapproval. He took the pot off the stove, reached for two tiny cups, and poured. He added three lumps of sugar to each cup, stirred and handed her one. Then he took her by the shoulder and steered her into the living room, to the couch. "Sit before you fall. And don't spill."

"You're worse than my mother ever thought of being." But she sat.

The coffee was scalding hot and much too sweet and she longed to gulp it down. Instead, she sipped and tried to ignore the black look on Samir's face. She hated it when she disappointed him. His good opinion of her mattered, though she knew he must always do as she commanded. But this time it couldn't be helped. Lewis had really hurt her. The more she dwelled on the memory of the blonde opening the bedroom door and finding them on the bed, Lewis's hand up Laura's skirt, the more upset she became. What hurt the most was the way Lewis had jumped away from Laura as if they'd been doing something wrong.

"She came waltzing in like she owned the place!" Laura exclaimed, giving voice to the memory. "I was so embarrassed. And Lewis—Lewis—just...fawned over her. She was some old girlfriend. God knows why she chose to come back, but...wow, is that relationship ever over!"

"It is good that it has ended." His tone was stuffy, and Laura felt the last of the anger drain away into a pool of self-pity. She wanted to wallow.

"You don't care. You're only glad it's over because I wouldn't let you come with me on my dates with Lewis. Don't you understand that sometimes I don't like looking like an idiot who talks to herself?"

Samir set his coffee cup on the table and rose from the sofa. He stood, muscular legs spread, and arms folded, glaring down at her inscrutably. Even in her self-pitying, half drunk haze she could appreciate his beauty. His folded arms pushed the mounds of his biceps

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into prominence and drew attention to the strength in his shoulders. Though she liked his exotic look when he wore his turbaned helm, she preferred the loose waves of his dark hair spilling over his collarbones. The lustrous length of his hair never feminized his craggy face. A long leather belt wound twice around his waist to snug his loose trousers to his flat belly and carried the scabbard for his little dagger and a small leather pouch whose contents he had never shown her.

For the first time, Laura realized what a handsome creature Samir was. She'd always thought of him as attractive in a romance-novel-cover sort of way, but her stern *jinni* was nothing short of beautiful.

"You will apologize to me, my mistress. Your statements are unkind and untrue. Bound or not, I care."

She stared, thinking, but not about his words. She was thinking about Samir's physicality, and another question occurred to her in her uninhibited state. "Samir, do *djinn* have sex? I mean, you used to mock the boys I dated and tell me they were terrible kissers, but how did you know? I never see you with a woman—or a man, for that matter. Can you—"

"My mistress, you are still very drunk."

"Well, yes, of course. Too much tequila. Which reminds me—what about that guacamole? Did you go to Mexico after all?"

He threw up his hands at this shift. "Yes."

Laura gave a happy squeal and dashed for the kitchen, where a covered bowl of green goo waited in the fridge. She snatched the bowl, a bag of corn chips, and two sodas. "Come on! TV time. I need to watch something stupid to take my mind off this horrible night."

"Laura..."

"If you don't hurry, I'll hog all the pillows!"

By the time she reached the bedroom where the enormous television set occupied most of the dresser, Samir was already reclining, with all but the laciest pillow propping him up.

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“You cheated.” She bounced onto the bed next to him and plopped the chilled bowl of guacamole onto his naked belly. There was a loud clink as the ceramic struck his jewel. Laura sobered and lifted the bowl. “Whoops. Sorry.”

She examined his navel for a moment, then patted his tummy. “You’re all right. That wasn’t ‘sublimation’ either. Darn it!”

Samir didn’t smile. Instead he opened the chips and the sodas. Laura sat cross-legged next to him and ran the channels with the remote. At last she stumbled across an old episode of *Gilligan’s Island* and paused there to watch and munch.

* * *

At least the sodas had caffeine in them, thought Samir. In her foolish enthusiasm, Laura had forgotten the coffee in the living room. And she had diverted the topic of conversation away from her disastrous date. Now they were on her bed—king size, for she loved to sprawl and watch television with him—eating guacamole and salty tortilla chips. He couldn’t say he was unhappy with the way her evening had concluded. Plus he’d managed a nap, and an erotic fantasy or two.

After the monotonous show ended—an episode he’d seen at least thirty times over the past forty years—Laura resumed her surfing and ran across the one show that never failed to delight her: *I Dream of Jeannie*.

Samir groaned. “Laura, please. Anything else. Anything! A game of chess. Or I will grant you a wish.”

Laura grinned at him, crunching chips and guacamole. She had a blob on her cheek and it distracted him. She was too attractive in the cocktail dress, with her legs bare and folded like a little girl’s. “Nope. It’s my favorite show. You know it is.”

“It is filled with inaccuracies.”

“That’s why I like it so much! We know everything they’ve got

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wrong.”

Samir sighed. The show was stupid and pointless. If he weren't so hungry, he would nap again. Instead he chewed, while Laura laughed.

“Why don't you have a bottle, Samir?” she asked, when the scantily clothed female genie on the television smoked herself into her bottle and was corked.

It had taken Laura a long time to get around to asking that question. Her mother had asked it immediately, and most designates of the past had wondered why he had no lamp.

Laura turned around on the bed to look at him, dropping a fair-sized splat of guacamole on his belly. “Whoops.” She bent and slurped it into her mouth.

Samir's entire body went rigid at the touch of her lips on his skin. She was thorough, too—her tongue sweeping away every molecule of avocado. He willed his manhood to remain quiescent and soft, but it had, as always, a one-track mind of its own.

“It's...uh, not that sort of binding.” He could not speak coherently with her mouth on his skin and her hair brushing his belly and groin. And there was still a smear of guacamole on her cheek. He forced himself to continue speaking. “It is far worse than being imprisoned, to have almost complete free will and yet be so constrained.”

He hadn't meant to reveal this most bitter thought, the one thing that stained his love for Laura, but his brain was not his own at the moment. His hand lifted, his index finger reached out, and she raised her head and looked at him, licking her lips, a growing understanding—mixed with sympathy and sadness—in her eyes.

It was fated.

He sat up slowly, as did she, and, when his mouth touched her cheek to rid her at last of the guacamole, her eyes closed. Samir felt her turning her head so her mouth brushed over his lips. Brushed past. Halted. And returned, so light a touch he might have imagined it,

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except for the heat swarming over his skin, and her breath against his mouth. Every impulse was to grab her, press her into the bed, thrust his tongue into her mouth, strip those silky blue panties from her and satisfy the vastness of his hunger this instant. But all those taunts about the feckless, unskilled boys of her youth rang in his head. He could not afford to become one of them.

Samir slammed the lid on the inferno of his desire, and concentrated on giving Laura the best kiss of her life. Drunk or not, rebound or not, here was his chance, and he was taking it.

Small tastes first. Gentle lippings, nuzzlings, warm and dry as the desert air. The light touch of his fingers at the hinges of her jaw, more to position her than restrain her. He could feel her willingness to participate in the easy tilt of her head and the soft parting of her lips. There was the tender arch of her upper lip to explore, curved and re-curved. And the lushness of her bottom lip, full toward its center, sweetly creased. The corners of her mouth, where he allowed his tongue-tip the smallest taste. Left—salt and lemon; right—a hint of avocado still. Samir felt her biting her lower lip and wondered what she was fighting against. He hoped it was her own desire, and slid his tongue toward the center, gently sucking her lip free of her teeth.

“Let me do that,” he breathed, and suited action to words. Her hitching breath and slight quiver was all the reward he could have wished for, but when her hands left her lap and clutched at his ribcage, a hot ball of triumph exploded in his chest and melted throughout his body, pooling at the base of his spine.

New, so new. Samir hadn’t kissed a woman in years, except for those chaste kisses to Laura’s cheek or forehead. Friendly kisses. Not kisses of passion. But even the passion he had known in decades past paled beside the blast furnace that was loving Laura. His fingers moved, one hand sliding into her hair to cup the back of her head. The others traced down her neck—ah, yes, the gooseflesh, beyond sweet—

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to her shoulder, where they found the narrow strap of her dress and fretted there. Not pushing her, not threatening to undress her, just...hinting. Asking.

Laura's fingers dug into his ribs when he released her lower lip and transferred his nibbling attentions to the upper. He could feel her swallowing hard, then the slippery velvet of her tongue emerged and skimmed along his teeth before retreating. Ah, so she was giving up the fight, conceding the field, retreating to lure him. Samir released her lip from his teeth and waited, barely breathing, mouth still touching hers. Waited for the space of three stuttering breaths before he lifted his head to look down at her.

Her throat worked as she swallowed again. Her lashes rose heavily, revealing a thin rim of green around enormous pupils. Samir knew that look, the look of a woman whose eyes were darkened by desire. Laura met his gaze and held it, her grip softening. Awareness grew in her eyes, and Samir released her—perhaps the most difficult task of his life, letting go of her, but he hadn't survived multiple centuries without learning the finer points of seduction.

Don't push. Let the quarry come to you, willingly, but even more important, eagerly.

Laura drew a long, shuddering breath, and Samir waited for the excuse he knew must come. "I am so drunk, Samir."

Samir knew she wasn't, not any longer, but she needed time to assimilate this new experience. Any excuse would do.

He bowed his head, concealing his triumph. "You are tired, my mistress. It has been a difficult evening. I understand." Sliding off the bed, he banished the remains of their snack to the kitchen with a wave of his hand. Then he took himself out of the room and closed the door behind him. His hand drifted down to the leather bag at his hip. He returned to his own room, donned his lightweight shirt, tunic and helm before transporting himself to the top of Camelback Mountain, where

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no one would disturb him.

The desert night wind breathed here on the hill, carrying the day's heat upward from the city. Samir found a sheltered place between two rocks, set his leather bag down, opened its mouth, and walked toward it. He had never been quite sure whether he changed size, the bag enlarged, or the two met somewhere in the middle, but by the time he reached the lip of the bag and stepped inside, everything had equalized. He needed the reassurance of his own things around him, the items that were always with him, for he had never known when the binding would shift from one designate to another. Inside the bag, he set a small globe burning for light, and went to stare at his tapestry again. Examining it for changes, and dreading what he might find there, was a daily ritual.

On the wall was the family tree of the Jarrars in all its complexity, knotted into the weave of the fabric, names in tiny script next to each branch and twig. He had enchanted the tapestry many centuries ago to maintain itself as each new babe was born or family lines ended without issue. Over the past ten years, only one branch still glowed golden with life. The others were all dark, an effect of the sorcerer's bitter vengeance.

Laura's leaf was the last one on the tree. Samir sat on a small cushion in front of the tapestry and gazed at it. What would happen to him when her leaf, too, went dark? He wondered if this was the eventual demise the sorcerer had planned for him: a slow dwindling of his life spirit after millennia of servitude.

His hand went to his belly, where he could feel the sky-blue jewel hard beneath his clothing. Sublimation...was it a gradual end, or more an immolation, a final burst of glory that consumed his soul? He wished he knew.

* * *

Laura tossed and turned, sleepless. Her mind was filled with Samir's hot, dark eyes and incredible mouth. Had a kiss ever been so

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divine? But he was a *jinni*.

Magic kisses couldn't help but be better than earthly ones, could they?

Tangled in the thoughts of beautiful Samir were the ugly images of Lewis and the blonde, Lewis's craven apologies, and Laura's mortification. Time after time she replayed her sobbing barefoot flight to the elevator and out to the hot city streets and the serendipity of a passing taxi.

She'd really liked Lewis. He seemed nice enough, and she'd been only a few days away from telling him the story of the *jinni* who was her permanent companion. Now she would have to begin again with someone new. If only she made better choices in men. If only she could stop comparing them all to Samir, and finding them lacking.

There was the crux of her problem. She and Samir had made a life together. Now that she was looking at herself more objectively here in the warm darkness of her room, she realized she was unwilling to give up that sweetness for any of the men she had dated so far. When she was a child, Samir had been a special playmate, but as she grew up, she'd learned to trust his judgment and welcome his humor and wisdom, even his sometimes harsh comments about her boyfriends. He'd been right every time. When she struck out on her own after high school, he was the safety net stretching beneath her, but he never interfered when she insisted on doing her job herself, without his magic to help her succeed.

Instead, Samir had focused on making a home for the two of them, whether that was a dorm room at college, a ratty apartment or their house in Phoenix. He saw to it that she had clean sheets, delicious meals, excursions to wondrous places on his flying carpet or whisked away wrapped tight in his arms.

Then there was the divinity of his coffee.

A few times over the years she'd joked he would make someone a

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fine wife one day, but she was also grateful for the peaceful comfort he created for the two of them. Somewhere along the way their relationship had changed from mistress and *jinni* to life partners, who did everything together except make love. She had sought physical satisfaction from other men, but something was always missing. Dating always felt like cheating, and at last she understood why.

It was, and probably always had been, Samir she wanted. *In every way.*

The realization destroyed any hope of coaxing sleep. Before dawn she rose and crept out the back door to stand on the patio. The tequila had been unkind; she needed aspirin and liquids, but for now she wanted fresh air to clear her muzzy head. The night had solved nothing, except to take the edge off the pain of losing Lewis. In its place were the new, disturbing feelings about Samir. She'd always seen him as her companion—a handsome, intelligent man, with a few very interesting magical tricks up his sleeve. An oddity.

Until the moment she had felt his blatant erotic reaction when she'd tipsily licked the guacamole from his bare belly.

Friends no longer, she feared. Her hands twisted together in front of her. It would kill her if she'd lost Samir's regard over this, but how could it ever be the same between them? She'd ruined everything.

"Oh, Samir," she said to the gray dawn. "My *jinni*, I'm so sorry."

His voice came from behind her. "My mistress, I am not sorry."

She hadn't meant to summon him, but the depth of her misery must have made the call plain. Laura fought the urge to turn and fling herself into his arms for comfort. She schooled her features and turned. He looked wind-blown, his tunic a bit askew and hair teased from beneath his helm.

"I was drunk last night."

"But I was not."

This hadn't occurred to her. She stared at him, her mouth falling

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open a little. *He had been the one to initiate the actual kiss, hadn't he?* Oh, she'd been curious for years, but...

"I did nothing I did not wish to do," he continued. "Did you?"

Laura felt hot color stain her cheeks. Her glance fell to her feet. "No."

"Then where is the problem?"

"I used you, Samir. I was hurting, and drunk, and stupid, and—" She stopped. She had to look up, for he was too close, but he was so familiar and so comforting a presence that she simply leaned forward and put her head on his chest. The hot tears flowing now were not for Lewis. They were for her shoddy treatment of Samir. His arms came around her and Laura cried harder. She felt his breath stirring her hair.

"Use me then," he whispered. "I am yours, my mistress."

Laura lifted her cheek from his chest, where the sudden acceleration of his heartbeat had surprised her. It was such a small distance to cross—mere inches—and Samir's mouth was so beautiful. There was the pale demarcation between the reddened flesh of his lips and the stubbled skin around them. She imagined the sweet rasp of that skin on hers, and put her fingers to his lips, blinking hard to clear her vision of tears.

She touched the arch of his cheekbone. And then she kissed him.

Everything Laura was went into her kiss. Hopes, fears, memories. Quarrels, joy, wonder. Regret, foolishness, awe.

When their lips opened and their tongues met, Samir made a choked sound. Around them a maelstrom arose, hot, dusty, swirling grains of sand and grit flew into the air, rattling the bony branches of the *ocotillo* bushes and setting the wind chimes ringing. Nothing touched the two twined in its center, though Laura's hair sparked with static as it lashed in the wind. Her arms slid up around Samir's neck and, in an instant, he had wrapped her so tight in his arms that she could scarcely breathe. He was lifting her to her toes as he kissed her back, then her feet left the

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ground altogether.

There was a flicker, the same flicker she had experienced before when Samir whisked the two of them away somewhere instead of using his magic carpet to fly there. She opened her eyes. The wind was gone and they were in the living room, still twined.

“That’s some trick.” She laughed. “Did you call the whirlwind?”

Samir shook his head, a slight frown between his brows. “It is difficult to control the *jinni* magic at times like these. I cannot help it. You...excite me.”

Laura looked at his tense face and smoothed her palms over his cheeks. “I think you should at least take off your helm.” Some wild rabbit in her belly raced in circles. Could she really be about to proposition her *jinni*?

Samir raised his hands to his head and lifted off his helm. He held it under his arm and looked at her. She had never seen him look so serious. “I’ll take that.” She put it on the coffee table.

Next were the buttons on his tunic, and he stared at her fingers as she opened each button, one by one, from neck to hem. “Goodness. Twenty buttons. I’ve never counted before.” She tugged off the garment, folding it and placing it on the back of an armchair.

As her fingers touched the buckle of his belt, Samir caught at her hands. “Laura, what is it you wish of me?”

She met his gaze and tried to be brave. She had known Samir all her life, but only in the last twelve hours had she seen him as a sexual being. Yet she wanted nothing more than to take him into her bed, into her body. “P-pleasure,” she stammered at last. Not quite brave enough to whisper what was in her heart of hearts.

Samir looked at her. She thought he looked sad, but it must be her imagination, for he took her hands and pressed one to his chest, where his mighty *jinni*’s heart thundered, and the other over his groin, where she could feel his flesh awakening under his clothing. His mouth

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curved. "Such as this, my mistress?"

"Exactly such as that." She tried not to tremble, but did not succeed. She reached again for the buckle of his belt, only to have him stay her hands yet again.

"I'll attend to my belt." Laura recalled how he never permitted her to touch his leather pouch, and stood back watching as he unbuckled the belt and unwound it from its double wrap about his waist. The belt, dagger and pouch went onto the coffee table.

"What do you keep in there?" she asked, for perhaps the thousandth time.

"My things."

As always, the same reply.

He looked at her, arms lifted from his sides, inviting her perusal. "Well?" This time his smile was wider and even more sure.

"Well what?" Laura felt her bravery waning. She bit her lip; somehow the fun and friendly romp she had envisioned was becoming something much more intense.

"Ah, I see. More kisses are in order before we continue." Stretching out a hand, he caught her behind the neck, and in one tug she was in his arms again. Without the barrier of his tunic she could feel the heat of his skin through his shirt. Her hands were on his chest. Beneath her palm, his heartbeat still shook his body.

She watched as his head came down, inch by slow, maddening inch, until his mouth hovered above hers and the tip of his nose brushed her cheek. He teased her with skimming kisses, until her mouth opened beneath his and he could not resist the invitation. Laura sagged against him as his tongue swept into her mouth and stroked the roof of her mouth, the edges of her teeth, and withdrew to coax her after it. He took the weight of her in his arms, lifting her easily with one arm behind her knees and the other at her shoulder blades.

"Samir!" She gasped as he swung her high into the air.

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His teeth flashed white. “Where shall I take you, my mistress? To the shore? The Sahara on a carpet rich with the wool of new lambs? A tiny craft in the very center of the vast ocean? The top of the tallest building in the world? An undiscovered pyramid in the jungles of Central America or Southeast Asia? Where? Only name it, and we shall go.”

Laura laced her fingers into the black waves of his hair. She could have any of these wildly romantic things. Her *jinni* had the power to grant wishes, create elaborate fantasies, make dreams come true—and yet, there was only one thing she wanted.

“Take me to bed, my *jinni*,” she whispered, blushing.

Samir threw back his head and laughed—a *jinni*’s laugh, tremendous and chesty and ever so slightly ominous. She must never forget what he was: the most powerful being she knew.

“You can have anything you want, and this is what you choose? My mistress, I must teach you to dream larger dreams.” As he spoke, he carried her down the hall, and now he put one knee on her bed and lay her on its tumbled sheets as though she were made of spun glass. He stood back and, giving his body a shiver as a wet dog might, shuddered away his clothing and boots.

Laura propped herself up on one elbow and stared at him. She had never seen anyone so...naked...before. Though she had seen naked men, it was always in passing—on their quick way to the bathroom to fetch a condom, or as they moved over her body a moment before thrusting inside. None of them had ever stood over her, hands on hips, inviting her regard. Samir was brown all over, with a small mat of dark hair at his sternum, which arched down his belly to the sky-blue jewel lodged forever in his navel. And below that, a male organ so hard its tip curved back to touch his belly—almost to the jewel itself.

Laura sat up and tugged her nightgown over her head, then let it slip to the floor. Her panties followed. She reached out and stroked a hand

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over his naked chest, crossing a nipple and his muscular abdomen to pause at the jewel, and then on to clasp his erection. Samir sucked in a harsh breath.

“This dream is large enough for me,” she said breathlessly, and when she fell back on the bed, he followed.

* * *

Samir meant for their first time to be long, and slow, and delicious, the finest display of a *jinni's* sexual prowess.

In a word: magic.

Instead, Laura's hot palm wrapped around his cock and tugged him forward between her knees as she lay near the edge of the bed. She opened her thighs to him and brought him straight into her, the dilated green gaze never leaving his. Her mouth opened on a delighted gasp as he pushed inside, her neck and back arching. Stretching out her arms, she beckoned him into them, twining herself so close his pubic bone pressed against her mons as he thrust.

He tried to go slow, to plumb her slippery depths with courtesy until he learned the silken fist of her body, but Laura chose otherwise. Her hands grasped him at the base of his buttocks and set the pace, faster, ever faster. And deep—so deep that all of him was warmly, wetly clasped. The slippery sounds of their coupling, combined with Laura's soft cries, were all he heard aside from the rush of blood in his ears.

In a short time she went rigid beneath him, her head falling back and her breathing harsh. Samir slowed his pace, stroking the tiny bud at the apex of her thighs with his body as well as he was able while she climaxed and her skin flushed a luscious pink. When she opened her eyes, they mirrored her sweet confusion and the height of her pleasure. She smiled until his thumb slid between their bodies and caressed her into an immediate second climax. She caught her lower lip between her teeth to stifle her loud cries of pleasure. This time her eyes never left his, and an invisible but deep, erotic connection tugged him over the

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edge into his own massive orgasm. It seemed to go on forever, showers of his fluid bathing the inside of her body.

“Oh, my God,” Laura panted.

Samir moved to the side and lay on his back next to her. He tried very hard to erase the smug smile on his lips. He had at last made love to the woman of the millennium, his personal goddess. Nothing would ever be more satisfying.

Not even the princess for whom he had been cursed could compare. He didn't even remember her face.

“Did the earth move?” Laura teased, wriggling close to him and putting her head on his muscular upper arm.

“Quite likely. I could feel magic escaping.”

“That's called an orgasm,” Laura laughed.

“I know the difference.”

“Oh, excuse me. Sir.”

He curled his finger beneath her chin to make her look at him. “You are happy?”

She smiled the best, sleepest smile he had ever seen on a lover. “I'm happy. I'll never walk again, but I'm happy.”

“I shall make you breakfast. And coffee.”

Laura gave a jaw-cracking yawn. “You shall let me sleep first, my *jinni*. I didn't sleep last night for thinking of you and that...amazing...kiss.”

Samir didn't even try to hide his satisfied smile this time. Laura pressed a swift kiss on his mouth, then scooted up the bed until her head rested on a pillow. She beckoned him after her, arranging herself spoon-fashion in the bend of his body and legs, tugging his arm across her. “Then we shall see what I want most, breakfast or...or not.” Her laugh was the most wonderful thing he had heard in many years, made wholly new by pleasure. And her breast in his palm was the softest, roundest, ripest fruit he had ever held.

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When Samir woke next, the room was in full Arizona daylight, hot and white. The bed was empty, except for him. The house was silent. He glanced toward the master bath, but the door stood open. He rose from the bed and padded through the sunny house looking for Laura. She was not in the kitchen, or the spare room, or the room she had made for him, filled with sunlight and Persian rugs.

But there, on the floor in the living room, was his leather bag, its mouth open.

Samir groaned. Without a doubt, Laura was inside it. He hurried toward the bag, and, as always, it welcomed him.

Yes—there she was. She was standing, naked with her hair sex-tangled, and pink marks of passion still on her body, in front of the Jarrar family tree. Her fingers traced branch after branch and he could see her lips moving as she read the names of ancestors, cousins, aunts, grandparents, family hundreds of generations removed.

“My mistress, please do not—”

“Samir! Oh, Samir, I meant only to take a peep inside the bag but I—” She turned to him, her face stricken with mingled shame and alarm. “I dropped it and then I—fell in, I think, and I saw...this.” Her hand waved at the one glowing branch of the massive tree. “And I found these.” Her fist opened and in her palm he saw two ancient, desiccated Brussels sprouts. “And him.” She pointed to a ratty, old teddy bear, lying on a cushion. “Samir, I—”

“Come away from there!” He heard his own dismay and struggled to control his reaction. “Please, my mistress.”

“Is this where all the Brussels sprouts I didn’t eat went? Did you have to save them all?”

He shook his head in impatience. *Leave it to Laura to obsess about the details.* It was what made her an excellent accountant. “I must have missed a few when I cleaned. This was the quickest place to hide them where your mother wouldn’t notice.”

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“These are decades old!” Her gaze kept turning back to that one glowing branch, and he crossed the floor of the bag to pull her away from the rug. “And Teddable! I remember when Mom made me throw him out. He was so old and dingy and worn. But you saved him.” Her sad eyes grew large. “Samir, what is this place?” She caught at his wrist as he drew her toward the mouth of the bag, and halted him.

Samir sighed. He might as well get it over with. She would never rest until she knew the whole story. He knew her too well. “You remember I’ve told you I am bound to someone in each generation.”

“Yes, of course.” Laura sank onto one of the cushions and tugged him to sit on another.

“Centuries ago I never knew where the next designate might be. Remember, your family was cursed to wander by the same sorcerer who bound me.”

Her hand crept to the teddy bear and clutched it against her breasts as she nodded.

“As each new master or mistress was born, I was torn from the side of the previous. And so I...learned to travel light, since I never knew where I would next be called.”

“Oh, how terrible.” Laura’s brow creased in sympathy. “But”—she looked around her—“I thought you said you didn’t have a bottle.”

“It is my home, not my prison. I come and go as I please. These are all my things. My shelter, no bottle.”

“All your things...but not that.” She pointed to the tree on the wall. “That is...that is my family. And I—I’m the only one left.”

“Yes, my mistress.”

Laura rose from her seat and went to stare once more at the tree. “If I read the tree correctly, my mother must have been the designate before I was, and her father before her. The other lines are all dark. Those lines are...dead.”

“Yes.”

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“No wonder she never questioned me when I spoke about my invisible friend. She knew all about you.” Her gaze cut to him and he saw her flush. “Did you ever—”

Samir shook his head, a rueful smile on his face. “I never made love to your mother. Distant others of your family, yes. It is true. I am not completely chaste. But Laura...” He took a deep breath. The next words were ones he had never spoken in his very, very long life. “I have never loved another so much as I love you, my mistress.”

Her face crumpled. She fell to her knees before him, and covered his hands with kisses, turned them and kissed the palms. Hot tears fell on his skin. “I have loved you for such a long time, but I never understood that. And if I thought about it, I thought you were something I could never have...you were my family’s *jinni*. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you have a life of your own to live. You have free will.”

Laura asked the very question he had pondered so often himself. “Samir, what happens to you if your curse is not broken and I—die?”

He shrugged. “I do not know.”

“Is that what the sorcerer meant by ‘sublimation’?”

Samir shrugged again, shaking his head.

“Then there’s only one thing to be done.” She looked at Samir fiercely. “I can’t let you die, not if I can keep you alive. If we can’t break your curse, perhaps another generation can.”

Samir gasped. “No, my mistress!”

Laura rose again and stood looking down at him. Tears sprang afresh. “Don’t you see? If I don’t have a child, we can’t be sure you’ll live after I die.” She headed for the mouth of the bag, Teddable swinging at her side.

Samir lunged and caught her ankle. He groveled at her feet. “I would rather die when you die, my mistress, than see you love another. I would rather wander the earth alone than see you take another man to

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your bed. I would rather—”

“Silence, my *jinni!*” Laura interrupted him with the words of command, and he pressed his hot face into the floor of the bag. The teddy bear dropped beside him, and a moment later, Laura crouched there as well, stroking his hair.

“My mistress, please do not force me to leave you. Please let me stay with you until the end, whatever end it may be. I beg you—”

“I will do what I must, Samir,” she breathed, looking down at him with sad eyes. “I would give my life, as you have given yours.”

The bag trembled, negligibly at first, then with more vigor. It was like being in an earthquake as cupboards sprang open and things fell from the shelves inside. Cups, saucers, cutlery. Lamps. Books. Clothing. His magic carpet fell over, unrolled, and began sailing around them as a vortex of force arose. Laura squeaked in fright and crowded close to him. Samir shielded her naked body with his own as the shaking increased and the vortex whirled and spun. Then, with a massive flex, the bag convulsed. Everything inside it shot out at tremendous speed, including Laura and Samir, as if the bag had sneezed.

Samir covered Laura’s body while his personal effects rained down around them.

At last, the shaking stopped. Samir rose and stared in dismay at the mess.

On the floor at his feet, Laura was laughing. “Look, Samir, look!” She held out her hand. In her palm was his sky-blue navel jewel, winking like a cold star.

And it was shrinking. A faint mist drifted up from Laura’s hand.

Samir stared down at his belly, his fingers groping for the place where the jewel had been for centuries.

“It’s not there anymore! We’ve done it! We’ve broken the curse!” Laura cried. “It’s sublimating! Look at it, going from solid to gas.” A

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moment later her palm was empty.

Samir fell to his knees, astonished. His curse—broken? The hot, heavy *jinni's* heart that had pounded in his chest for so many millennia seemed to slow and cool. He looked at Laura in alarm. “What is happening to me? Laura! What...”

Her gaze skittered over him and, to his relief, she didn't seem frightened. “I think...” She ran her hands over his muscular shoulder and nodded. “Yes, you're definitely a little smaller. I think you're not a *jinni* any longer. Try some magic.”

Samir held out his hand toward his belt and dagger, but they did not fly to him. He spoke the *jinni* word of command, but still they lay on the table where he had left them before carrying Laura to her bed. He looked at Laura, stunned, and for the first time in centuries, afraid. The curse was lifted, but what did that mean?

“Last of my line.” Laura smiled. “I think...I think the sorcerer must have meant you for me. Someone who would love you back as powerfully as you loved her. Me.”

“Can it be? Is the curse lifted?”

“The jewel is gone, so what else could that mean?”

He flexed his arms and torso, feeling the difference in strength. “I am a weakling. I am small.”

Laura crawled across the few feet separating them, and kissed his now-empty navel lingeringly. “Believe me, Samir...you're far from small.” She trailed a teasing finger down his belly and circled his cock once, twice, then closed her fingers around him. She looked up and grinned at him before pulling his head down and kissing his mouth with passion. “But I think you are only human. Men do rather like being touched like this...”

“Oh, yes, my mistress,” groaned Samir.

“And like this...” Her mouth trailed down his neck to his chest, where she bit a nipple.

GENIE, NO BOTTLE

“Sweet Astarte, yes.”

“And like this.” She kissed her way down his belly and pushed him onto his back on the rug, where she spent a heady few moments suckling the head of his organ.

Samir moaned and fought to keep his hands out of her hair. He didn’t remember this feeling so good before. Rarely had anyone sought to give him pleasure; instead, they wanted what he could provide.

“Laura!” His gasp made her chuckle and bite down before she pulled her mouth away with a soft popping sound.

“Yes, my *jinni*?”

“Tell me you love me again.”

“I’ll tell you every day for the rest of my life.” She straddled him, hands on his chest, and eased her body down over him, encasing him in that sweet, hot darkness once more. “If you’ll tell me the same.”

“Now that I have a life, most assuredly. I will court you. I will woo you.”

“Mmm. I like how that sounds.” She began to move, and Samir clutched at her hips, helping to set the pace. A slow, deep, wonderful tension began to coil in his belly. He arched upward to meet each grind of her pelvis.

She tilted her head, her breathing quickened. “Although...it is a pity...”

His eyes widened. “What? What is a pity?”

“We’ll have to go to the grocery store for avocados now.” Laura’s gurgling laugh was followed by her sweet, happy gasps of delight, and Samir knew what it meant to be a man at last, in the arms of his love.

NINA MERRILL

Nina Merrill started writing stories in elementary school and wrote her first full-length novel in a spiral-bound notebook at age thirteen, followed by several practice novels. Her favorite Christmas present was a typewriter and a ream of paper. After college, she took a job with a large international corporation, programming computers and writing technical documentation. A few years ago, she rediscovered writing during a prolonged period of insomnia and began to indulge her passion with a vengeance. Nina is currently making the leap from corporate drone to mild-mannered bookseller in an independent bookstore in Washington, where she can feed her addiction to fiction. Nina currently lives with her computer geek husband in a quiet happy house full of books, animals, and dust.

You can learn more about Nina by visiting her website:

http://nina_merrill.livejournal.com/

* * *

***Don't miss Unloved, by Nina Merrill,
available at AmberHeat.com!***

For young Nona Hartley, sophisticated businessman Jude Danzig seems the perfect choice for her first lover. What begins as mutual attraction rapidly spirals into an intensely physical affair, yet when

Nona confesses her growing emotional attachment, she is devastated to learn Jude could care less. Nona flees Miami, determined to forget him.

Two years later, Nona is stunned to see a man walking down her street, and even more dismayed when he stands on her front lawn in a thunderstorm, staring at her house. Is it really Jude, and if so, why is he here?

And does she still care?

When she learns Jude has bought a local competitor's citrus grove, all bets are off. What's worse is realizing her feelings for Jude are unchanged even after so long apart. Memories of his rejection sting, but this time there's a difference: Jude reveals the dark secret tainting his life. Can they set aside painful memories and reach a place where neither is unloved?

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