

Raif wondered how many times you could cheat death before it wizened up.

Any minute now, he expected to hear the harsh cry of an Ifrit soldier cutting through the laughter, singing, and buoyant voices that filled the Djemaa-el-Fna, Marrakech's main square. He gripped Nalia's hand as he scoured the crowded expanse for the crimson glow of Ifrit eyes. He was taking the name of the square seriously: Assembly of the Dead. Malek had told them how, not so long ago, the square had been used for public executions. As soon as Raif had stepped out of the taxi that had brought them into town from the airport, he'd felt the malicious presence of the jinn who hunted them. Ifrit *chiaan* made the air heavy, covering the energy of the bustling North African city like lava. Hot and destructive, their magic would incinerate everything if it could.

"I thought you said you knew where this place was," Raif said.

Malek shot him an annoyed look. "I said my *driver* knew where it was. Usually when I come to Marrakech I don't have jinn babysitters who think it's a good idea to throw my cell phone out of a *moving plane*."

Raif forced himself to keep his temper in check. It would only give Malek more excuses to point out Raif's comparative youth. He'd had enough of the *pardjinn's* snide commentary on the plane. All that mattered was that Raif got Solomon's sigil before Malek did. Otherwise, Nalia's former master would have a ring that would allow him to control every jinni on Earth—including Nalia, Raif, and Zanari.

"Don't be so dramatic, Malek," Nalia said. "The plane was still on the runway and we couldn't risk anyone being able to track us."

“I hardly think the Ifrit know how to use advanced GPS technology,” Malek snapped.

“Wanna keep it down, *pardjinn?*” Zanari said. “I was hoping to avoid capture until we at least got some dinner.”

Malek ignored her, pushing through the throng of people that crowded the square.

“This place is nothing like your angel city,” Raif said to Nalia.

Morocco wasn’t just a different country—it felt like an entirely new realm. And yet it was full of wishmaker humans and dirt in the sky and iron that made him sick.

“Los Angeles,” she corrected, smiling. “I prefer Morocco. It’s more like home.”

“We’ll be in Arjinna soon,” he said, squeezing her hand. *First the ring, then home.* The words had become a prayer, a mantra, a shot in the dark.

Nalia tightened her hold on his hand. “I hope so.”

The square was all shadows and smoke, the inky night kept at bay with small lanterns set on the cobblestones. Smoke from hundreds of food stalls filled the night air, mixing with the incessant beat from the drum circles that lay scattered around the Djemaa el-Fna. Storytellers cast spells and magicians passed around hats after each trick, hoping for a few *dirhams* for their trouble. The souks bordered the northeast end of the square, a huge swath of labyrinthine alleyways filled with shops selling everything from love potions to rusted scimitars. Most of the Djemaa’s perimeter was taken up by restaurants where diners lounged at tables laden with *tagines* and pots of sweet Moroccan mint tea.

Raif’s stomach growled at the scent of lamb and spices that wafted over from a nearby table under one of the food tents in the center of the square. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten. Dinner didn’t sound like such a bad idea, but he wanted it in the privacy of the *riad*, where he could finally relax. He was still drained from the unbinding ceremony he’d performed to free

Nalia from her bottle, less than twenty-four hours before. Being in those horrible human planes hadn't helped much, either. It was unnatural, spending so many hours in the sky.

"Nalia, does that street look familiar?" Malek asked. He pointed to an alleyway leading away from the Djemaa.

"I'm afraid I can't help you, Malek," she said, her voice cold. "The only time you brought me here, I was in a bottle around your neck."

"Nice, sister," Zanari said. She gave Nalia an appreciative nod and Malek cursed under his breath in Arabic.

Raif fell back as Nalia and Malek continued to bicker about which direction the guesthouse was in. "Anything?" Raif asked Zanari.

She shook her head. "A lot of Ifrit are searching for Nalia, my *voiqhif* told me that much. But nobody knows where she is yet."

Having a sister with the ability to psychically view any place or person in the realms was incredibly useful...when it was accurate, anyway.

"Do they know what she looks like?" Raif asked.

"They know about the birthmark," Zanari said. "That's all I can see."

Nalia had already made sure to glamour her eyes, turning them Shaitan gold instead of the tell-tale Ghan Aisouri violet that would get them all killed. Likewise, the tattoos snaking over her hands and arms had been covered, although those would not have been so out of place in Marrakech. Already, several women had called out to her and Zanari from behind the veils covering their faces, waving around cards with henna designs that looked very much like the tattoos hiding under Nalia's glamour. But the birthmark on her cheek was something she wouldn't disguise; it wasn't the best time, Nalia reasoned, to offend the gods by covering up a

sign of their favor.

Raif frowned. "I'll feel a lot better once we stop moving."

"No chance of that anytime soon," Zanari said, with a nod at Malek.

The *pardjinn* had promised that the *riad* he was taking them to was safe: a discreet hotel with only eight rooms, hidden in the folds of the medina's confusion of narrow alleyways and streets. The ancient sector of Marrakech was the perfect hiding place for them, but what made it ideal was also the thing that was keeping them from finding their way around it themselves. They'd only been in the square for fifteen minutes, but that was long enough to be ambushed by the enemy.

"I can tell you this much," Zanari continued. "Calar wants Nalia to disappear. I don't think we should expect an all-out battle. She'll want to do this quietly."

The Ifrit empress had her very best killers scouring Earth. But after killing Haran, Nalia had proven that highly skilled assassins—even ghouls with dark powers—weren't enough to take down the last of the royal Ghan Aisouri.

"This place is crawling with Ifrit," Raif said.

Zanari nodded. "Can't see any, though."

"Probably disguised. But if we feel them, they feel us."

Raif's eyes swept the crowded square. Nobody seemed to be paying Nalia any attention, but it would only take one mistake to alert the Ifrit.

As Malek turned to say something to her, Nalia's headscarf slipped down. His hand reached out to adjust it. In seconds, he'd secured the scarf so that it twisted around Nalia's neck and head like the Moroccan women in the square.

"He's a man of many talents, isn't he?" Zanari said wryly.

“Half the time, I don’t even think Malek’s touching her on purpose,” Raif said. “He’s just so used to doing what he wants with her.”

It bothered him that sometimes Nalia didn’t seem to notice Malek’s closeness. The way they moved in tandem, how she always came when he called: he wondered how long it would take for her to realize she wasn’t Malek’s slave anymore.

Raif quickened his steps and threaded his fingers through Nalia’s, rubbing his thumb against the scar around her wrist, where Malek’s shackles had once been. She raised her other hand to the headscarf, self-conscious.

“I look silly, don’t I?” she asked.

It was a lucky thing the women in this part of the world wore such clothing—it allowed Nalia to hide the identifying birthmark on her cheek that had helped Haran find her. The ghoul had killed six jinn before he got to Nalia, including her best friend, Leilan. He’d nearly killed Nalia herself.

Raif shook his head. “Not silly at all. Beautiful as always.” He leaned in to kiss her, but Malek’s voice stopped him.

“PDA isn’t approved of in Morocco,” he said. “You kiss her out here and you’ll attract way more attention than you want.”

“PDA?” Raif asked.

Nalia shot Malek a glare. “Human thing,” she said, turning back to Raif. *Later*, she mouthed with a tiny, secretive smile. His breath caught a little as he thought of the room they’d share, just the two of them.

Raif pulled his eyes away from her mouth and cleared his throat. He had to stay focused. “No luck?” he asked, nodding at the street Malek was dragging them toward.

Nalia shook her head. “I don’t know what’s safer: staying in the square or walking through the medina. At least here it’s open. Gods, why did the sigil have to be in the Crossroads?”

To jinn, Morocco was known as The Crossroads, the country on Earth with the highest concentration of jinn and the location of the portal between the human realm and Arjinna. Full of refugees, slaves on the dark caravan, and expatriates, the city was a hub of jinn activity. Raif knew it would be difficult to blend in with the human population. He was too recognizable as the face of the Arjinnan revolution and no doubt word had gotten out that the Ifrit had increased their efforts to capture him. The sooner they got out of here, the better.

“This would be a good time to say, once again, what a terrible idea it was to take all my guns from me,” Malek said.

Nalia had emptied the plane of Malek’s firearms by throwing them onto the tarmac before taking off from Los Angeles—a necessary precaution after Malek hypersuaded Zanari, controlling his sister’s mind so that she put a gun to her own head. Raif wasn’t sure what had kept Malek from killing Zanari that night; he’d just seen Raif kiss Nalia and help free her from the bottle—to say Malek was enraged would be an understatement. Emerald *chiaan* sparked at Raif’s fingertips and he closed his fists over it, staunching the flow of magic. There’d be time enough to make the *pardjinn*’s life miserable.

“Malek, I trust you about as much as the Ifrit looking for me,” Nalia said. “And I certainly would never arm one of them.”

Malek placed his hand against his heart. “You wound me.”

Nalia ignored him, pulling Raif toward the circle nearest them that had formed around a band of musicians. Drums and tambourines accompanied the high lilt of an old man dressed in a traditional kaftan, a robe of homespun cloth with a pointed hood that lay flat against his back.

The music made Raif think of campfires in open fields, women dancing barefoot in rich Arjinnan soil, and the feel of his *tavrai* around him. A pang of homesickness hit Raif as the words of the song became clear to him: *so long, so long have I journeyed*. He glanced at Nalia and saw his longing reflected in her own eyes. Gods willing, they'd be there soon, restoring their ravaged homeland together.

"If we had my cell, we'd be there by now," Malek muttered to Nalia as he stared at the map in his hand for the hundredth time.

"You control the CEOs of every Fortune 500 company," Nalia said, her eyes never leaving the weathered faces of the musicians. "I'm sure you can manage to read a map."

"I haven't had to read a map in seventy-five years," Malek said. Though Malek didn't look much older than Raif, he'd been alive for over a century. Being half-jinn, Nalia's former master aged incredibly slowly, much like his full-jinn counterparts.

Malek crumpled the map and threw it to the ground. Raif closed his eyes and took a breath. He wished he could discipline Malek like he would a *tavrai*: extra guard duty or a few rounds in the training ring with his most brutal fighters. But Raif wasn't in the Forest of Sighs and Malek certainly wasn't under his command.

"Nalia, you know Earth better than I do—what are our options?" he asked, drawing her away from Malek and Zanari.

"Get out of the Djemaa right away, for one. I can feel the Ifrit, but I can't—" Nalia stiffened. "There," she whispered.

She inclined her head slightly to the left and Raif's eyes slid to where an Ifrit soldier was making his way through the crowd. He was dressed in a kaftan, the hood up, but even from here Raif could see the glow of the jinni's scarlet eyes. Raif turned away—he'd be recognized in an

instant.

“Is it just the one?” he asked.

“I think so,” she said. Nalia pretended to drop something and when she stood, Raif noticed the glint of her jade dagger in her hand.

“I’ll try to be quick, but be ready, just in case,” she said.

There was no question who would fight—Nalia was four times stronger than he was, the only surviving member of a royal knighthood, with access to all the elements instead of just one, like most jinn. It wasn’t time to be proud. Raif caught Zanari’s eye and she nodded. She’d seen the Ifrit, too.

Just as the Ifrit neared them, his eyes narrowing as he took in Nalia’s face, Zanari bolted toward Nalia. “There you are!” she said loudly.

Nalia turned, startled. Zanari wrapped her arms around her and pressed her lips to Nalia’s. Raif’s eyes widened. He hadn’t been expecting that, but then, neither had the Ifrit. The jinni stopped just a foot away, confused.

Zanari pulled away. “I thought I’d lost you,” she said, her voice soft and seductive. She’d turned more than a few heads, but all that mattered was those precious seconds that distracted the Ifrit.

Nalia swallowed. “N-no. I’m...here.” She smiled and dipped her head toward Zanari, whispering something in her ear.

His sister laughed, but from where Raif was standing, he saw her flex her fingers, ready to use her *chiaan*. Nalia dove to her left, the jade dagger winking as it sliced into the Ifrit’s skin. One cut of the charmed blade and he was paralyzed. The humans nearby screamed. Zanari manifested a shadowy barrier around them to put some distance between the humans and the

body on the ground.

“So much for flying under the radar,” Malek said.

“You need to get us out of here,” Raif ordered. “I don’t care how, but make it happen *pardjinn*.” He rushed over to where Nalia kneeled over the Ifrit. The jinni’s eyes were wide with terror.

She held the blade over the Ifrit’s chest, her face pale. Raif took the knife out of her hand and drove it into the jinni’s heart, pulled the blade out, then wiped the blood on his pants’ leg before giving it back to her.

“Let’s go,” Raif said. He pulled Nalia up with him.

“They’re coming,” Zanari was clutching at her head. “They don’t know it’s us, but they know something happened here.”

They raced toward the dark, serpentine streets of the medina. Malek grabbed a Moroccan man who stood on the fringes of a circle surrounding a cobra who swayed back and forth to his charmer’s hypnotic tune.

“I’ll give you five hundred *dirhams* to take me to Riad Melhoun,” he said in rapid-fire Arabic.

“Eight hundred,” the man responded, his eyes no doubt taking in the cut of Malek’s wool coat and the expensive watch on his wrist.

Malek glared. “Seven hundred. That’s too damn much and you know it.”

“This isn’t exactly the time to be bargaining, Malek,” Nalia growled.

“*Yalla*,” the man said, waving his hand with weary resignation. *Let’s go*.

Raif grabbed Malek’s arm. “Why didn’t we do this from the start?”

“I hate being cheated,” was Malek’s reply. He shrugged off Raif’s hand and followed the

guide.

“Humans,” Raif muttered.

They plunged into the medina as the square behind them filled with the sound of police sirens.