To Drink from the Cup

by PrimalImperatrix

Summary

Doubt haunts Aladdin as Prince Consort. Discovering Jafar's library, he believes that unlike the Vizier, he can use magic as a force for good. Desperate when Jasmine succumbs to plague, and he is forced to serve as regent, his good intentions may not be enough to save Agrabah from the darkness he inadvertently unleashes. Is saving Jasmine and the kingdom worth losing himself?

Notes

A/N: Disclaimer- I don't own them, I just like playing with them.
Despite the time he had spent growing accustomed to the luxury of palace life, the one habit Aladdin had never managed to break was the urge to hoard food. Perhaps, hoard wasn't the right word — stashing and pilfering suited his habits better. He took to keeping jars of cashews tucked away in the drawers of his bedside table and desk in the study. Never once did he pass through the kitchen without palming a piece of fruit, as if he wasn't entitled to it freely. The laundress began to complain about the apples and bread slices and candied ginger that would float out of pockets after being plunged into the wash.

It had been over a year since they had been married, and even longer since Aladdin had come to live at the palace, yet, in the dark reaches of his mind, there was a voice who told him to ration his meals, save some back for a little later. It was the same voice that wouldn't ever let him get truly comfortable in his surroundings. The anxious one that forced his eyes to seek out the exit in every room, that urged him to nick golden bangles off wrists during handshakes, to avoid making eye contact with the palace guards. His heart belonged to Jasmine, but his mind had been cultivated on the streets, where nothing good could last and danger lurked around the corner. The voice would creep in to remind him that this was not his world — he didn't belong here and he never would. Once they figured that out, he would be out on the street again, with only his wits and skills to fall back on. Wits he needed to keep sharp and skills he needed to keep honed.

Doubt was paralyzing him. He was withdrawing more and more. Dismissing himself from meetings and avoiding public outings, he found himself wandering aimlessly through the halls and gardens, only to find his way back to their bedroom to sit quietly and succumb to the poison of the voices. It was this same pervasive self-doubt that had roused him from bed, sleepless and moody.

Staring down at the main entry into the palace, dimmed a silver blue in the cold light of the moon, he remembered how she had chased him down, had refused to give him up. He should have slipped out in the shadows, taken one of the side exits used by the servants. Without him to bring down her reign, she could have been the most beloved ruler in the history of Agrabah. If only he could have disappeared like he was supposed to...

At the gentle scratch of nails across his exposed back, his eyes drew closed, eyes rolling back at the pleasant shiver it sent down the length of his spine. Even through the fabric of his harem pants, he felt her radiant heat against his side before he found the will to open his eyes.

"I hate seeing you like this."

Trying to coax him from where he leaned heavily over the balcony railing, she brought her hand to cup his cheek, brushing a thumb over the days worth of stubble he'd neglected to tend to in his most recent bout of melancholy.

"You've been so pensive lately." She frowned. "I wish you would talk to me."

Worry was etched into her face, her eyes searching his, and he knew his pain weighed on her as heavily as it did him, probably more. Finally turning towards her, he stood, slipping his arms from the railing to wrap around her waist. Resting her head upon his shoulder, he set his cheek atop the crown of her head.

"You have enough to worry about these days."

Canting slightly to press a soft kiss just above her brow, she released a mournful sound. Then he
felt warm droplets dripping upon his chest.

"Jas?"

Jumping back a step, Aladdin craned her head up to meet his eyes. Streaks glistened down her cheeks in the moonlight.

"Why won't you talk to me?"

Panic seized his chest. Damn it. Hands immediately at the sides of her face, he swiped away the tears.

"It's not... you don't..." Slumping his shoulders, his head dropped to stare at the floor, too ashamed to look her in the eyes now. "I wish I had the words to explain."

"Are you..." She began, and he could hear the tightness in her throat constricting her words. "...unhappy here? Or, with me?"

"Habibti, no!" He gasped, crushing her in a tight embrace, whispering into her hair. "Allah, no. Never."

"Then why won't you talk to me about what is bothering you?"

It felt like his insides were caving in. Unwavering, bold, stubborn to a fault — Jasmine was the strongest person he had ever known. In the face of losing her kingdom, her father, Dalia, even him, she had never been more vulnerable, and yet she had refused to cower to Jafar. Now, his Sultana with the fiery heart of a warrior goddess stood before him, reduced to tears, all because of him.

"I'm sorry," he repeated over and over, rocking gently, tucking her under his chin as she nuzzled the nape of his neck. "It's not you, Jasmine. You're the best thing in my life."

"Then, please, tell me what is wrong."

Taking a deep breath to force up the courage to admit it, he replied, "I'm terrified."

Her head shot up, brows furrowed. "Of what?"

"Of the day you all realize that you let a street thief steal the throne."

"Aladdin," she said, aghast. "How could you even think that?"

"Because it's not getting easier." He groaned, loosening his grip on her. "I can barely understand the correspondence we receive. I'm terrible at sorting out the financial records. I can't remember the names of half the court and the foreign dignitaries, and the protocols for every single interaction and event seem stupid and frustrating." Slowly he pushed away from her to hang back over the railing. "... and on top of that, now I know I'm a terrible husband."

"That is patently untrue, and you know it!" Her voice was still thick from crying, but she had affected her commanding tone, like she was negotiating with a petulant emissary who was refusing her terms. "The silliest thing about you pretending to have been a prince was that I chose you because you were unlike every other prince I had met. You never wanted the crown — you only ever wanted it for me, I knew that. I still do."

Her fingers carded through his dark waves, and the delightful shivers returned. Leaning into her touch, he sighed again, opening his mouth to refute her, but the words died in his throat at the press
of her free hand to his lips. Against his chin, Aladdin could feel the warm band of metal that she wore on her ring finger. Flexing his hand into a fist, he felt its match on his own left hand. Its placement there had signified a vow, a promise he was unsure that he could fulfill.

"I love you, Aladdin. And, as far as I'm concerned, you're the best prince I could have ever found for Agrabah." Her eyes narrowed in that way that he had come to associate with her fierceness, her determination to be heard. "You're generous, noble, loyal, and you know your people better than any other ruler because you know their suffering. What more could a Sultana ask for in a husband?" Then, her mouth ticked up in a smirk, a twinkle glistening in her eyes. "Or, don't you trust me?"

A half-hearted smile parted his lips despite himself, and he brought their foreheads together. Palms pressed to her shoulders, he held her like she would disappear if he ever let go.

"I don't deserve you." The whisper ghosted across her lips.

She snorted. "Yes you do, idiot. And, you never needed a genie to prove it."

Closing the infinitesimal space between their lips, Aladdin drank in the taste of her, the scent of her, the feel of her. Every moment he could, he formed a more complete composite of her in his mind — everything that was uniquely Jasmine. Allah forbid anything should happen, he wanted the whole sensory experience of her stored in the vault of his mind.

"We've got a big day tomorrow." Pulling away, she tugged at his hands. "Put all of this misery out of your head for tonight, and come to bed."

Casting one last furtive glance out over the darkened city below, he thought about the first night they stood together on this balcony. The confidence he had felt in that moment when he rose up on the carpet after leaping off the ledge, trying to suppress a laugh at her dumbstruck expression. He would give anything to have that feeling back.

"Alright," he drew the word out long in one last over dramatic sigh before spinning abruptly, scooping her up in his arms. Eliciting an excited gasp as her feet left the ground, he whispered into the shell of her ear."Your wish is my command, Your Majesty."

Needless to say, Aladdin found one more distraction for his weary mind before sleep finally claimed him that night.
Waking up in Aladdin's arms was a feeling Jasmine would never stop savoring. She never wanted to get used to it, to take it for granted. Every morning she woke with his chest as her pillow, and at least one arm slung protectively around her waist. In his sleep, he clung to her like a child might their blanket or favorite toy — unable to sleep unless he held her in his arms.

Trailing fingertips gently across the width of his defined chest, he shifted in his sleep, tightening his hold on her. Lifting her fingers to his neck, she followed the line of his jaw, his cheekbone, delicately brushing aside the flop of dark fringe that seemed forever falling in those deep brown eyes. Moving down the length of the arm not wrapped around her, she contented herself with drawing lazy designs into the palm of his upturned hand.

Magician's hands — dexterous, nimble — Aladdin's hands were a small wonder to her. She was mesmerized by his ability to make things disappear and reappear before she even knew they were gone. Truth be told, it was the first thing she liked about him. As time went on, she often caught herself just watching his hands — the way they moved, always busy, playing with anything he found laying around that was small enough to palm or roll between his fingers. She also savored the other ways he'd demonstrated the wonder of those roving hands.

One day a few months after their coronations, he'd disappeared completely after their lunch together. Searching the entire palace for him, she found him in the library, twirling a qalam between his fingers like a baton. He was repeatedly scribbling something across the parchment on multiple lines, taking the time to peruse it when he reached the end of the page, pen twirling idly as he analyzed his work, only to crumble the parchment up in frustration before starting again. Dazzled by the controlled deftness of his fingers, it took her a few minutes before she realized he what he was doing. He was practicing his signature — something he would need for approving official documents. In that moment she realized, he had never had to use it before. Working as hard as he was, reminded of Dalia's words at the Harvest Dance — He's trying so hard. — she hadn't had the heart to interrupt him, and left him alone until he mastered his task.

The memory led her back to the conversation last night, and his frustrations weighed heavier on her. I can barely understand the correspondence we receive. I'm terrible at sorting out the financial records. Aladdin had told her that he had attended school for a while before his mother died, but he only had a few years before he lost her. He managed well enough with simple reading, writing, and arithmetic, but she had never really pushed the issue to fill in his educational gaps. Now, she worried that he was unfairly paying the price for that with all the expectations and responsibilities they had placed on him.

Pushing the concerns from her busy head, she allowed it to drift back to the simple pleasure of admiring Aladdin's exquisite hands. Raking her index finger down his life line, up his fate line, across his heart line, she heard happy noises rumbling from deep in his throat. In his haze between sleeping and waking, he smiled slightly. Once before, she had admitted to him how much she admired his hands, and he admitted with a sheepish grin how relaxing he found her gentle ministrations when she trailed her fingers over his palm. Since then, it had been her little gesture to him as a silent expression of her love.

Under his hands, inside his embrace, this is where she felt safe. But the comfort he provided her ran so much deeper than that. Under the pressure of her historic reign, she was a living precedent.
The rest of the world was lying in wait for her to show her first sign of weakness, expecting her to fail, to point out any misstep she had as evidence of why a woman was never meant to rule in the first place. But, with Aladdin, she had the luxury of letting down the facade of Sultana, to let her worries be known, the uncertainties she held when she feared making the wrong choice. Unlike the members of the court, the rich merchant class, and the foreign ruling families whose sons she had rejected as suitors, fearful that they would steal her throne, Aladdin would never use her moments of vulnerability against her.

This incredible man was the only person she had ever know with whom she did not need to explain herself. He had known and understood her from the very beginning. Perhaps that had been the unconscious trade he had made when leaving school to begin his education on the streets. He had learned to study people, not books. Read faces, body language, motives and hearts, rather than words. He had known she was from the palace from the moment he laid eyes on her, and empathized with her struggle with the simple recognition of how similar it was to his own. It was for this very reason that she wanted him to join her when she met with her subjects. He served as a translator for a language she had never known — her people. The uncanny ability he had to always know exactly what people needed to hear, or how to help them was positively preternatural. How could he not understand how important he was to this city, this kingdom, to her?

Now she realized that this is what she should have told him last night. But, her fears had clouded her judgment. Otherwise, she would have never have assumed he was unhappy with her. With Baba gone to Sherabad, she was letting the anxiety of being on her own for the first time get the better of her. Still, it needed to be said. The more reassurance she could give him that he held an important purpose in the kingdom, she hoped to Allah that it would drive away this melancholy he was suffering.

Just as she opened her mouth to speak his name, a knock came on the double door of their suite. Cursing her lack of thoughtfulness last night, she reluctantly slipped out of his arms, propping her back against the pillows and the headboard. It would have to wait until later then. She promised herself she would make a point to bring it up the next time she caught him with that distant look in his eyes.

"Come in."

The guard opened the door from the outside, and a teenage servant girl came bounding into the room carrying a tray of tea and fruit.

"Salaam, Your Majesty." She bowed when she reached the edge of the bed, placing the tray over Jasmine's legs.

"Salaam, Maryam," Jasmine replied with a smile.

"Salaam, Maryam," Jasmine replied with a smile.

Groaning at the sound of voices, Aladdin rolled away from the pair, grumbling something unintelligible as he pulled the covers over his head. Jasmine shook her head and ignored him. "Did you sleep well, my Sultana?"

"I've slept better." She shrugged.

Making a dramatic show of his annoyance at all the noise, Aladdin flipped the covers down, grabbed a pillow, flopped onto his stomach, smashed the pillow down over his head, and snapped the covers back up. Holding the Sultana's gaze, Jasmine was impressed with how well Maryam was biting back her laugh, maintaining proprietary to the best of her ability, which was more than she could say right now for her husband.
"So has the Prince," Jasmine added with a forced smile. "But, thank you for asking."

Steam furled from the two glasses of tea, one of which Jasmine brought to her lips as Maryam pulled a stack of letters from her apron pocket.

"The Vizier said you should read this one first." The girl tapped the top letter on the stack. "It came this morning from a Sherabad envoy."

"Oh!" Jasmine jumped excitedly as she broke the seal on the letter. "Wonderful. It must be news from Baba. Thank you for letting me know."

"You're welcome, Your Majesty. Anything else?"

Unfurling the folded paper, Jasmine replied, "Yes, tell Nasreen that I will be ready for her as soon as I finish my tea and tell the Vizier to meet me in my study in about an hour."

"Of course." She bowed again. "Salaam, Your Majesty." Half a step away, Maryam hesitated, adding with a barely hidden smirk. "I hope the Prince feels better."

Something sounding suspiciously like Go away, Maryam came from the nest of pillows and blankets, but it was too muffled to be sure. Breaking the pretense of formality for a moment, the Sultana and Maryam shared a conspiratorial giggle before the girl bowed again and left.

As the door clicked shut, Jasmine elbowed the lump in the bed that was her husband.

"Must you be so hostile to the staff?"

Her question was met with more grumbling as he shifted deeper into his cocoon.

"C'mon. We're on a tight schedule today, so you need to get up."

Leaning over to his side, she peeled up the edge of the cover, yanking away the pillow. He responded by covering his head with both his arms and pushing his face further into the downy mattress.

"...sleepy…"

"So am I. Someone kept me up a few hours last night," she chided. "But, do you really want to miss out on today? You're opening a school that you personally founded in the poorest quarter of the city. It's going to change the lives of children just like you. Aren't you excited? Proud?"

"Can't we do it tomorrow?" He said directly into the mattress.

"You're impossible," she laughed. "Also, your tea is getting cold."

Finally returning to her letter, eyes scanning it quickly, Aladdin emerged, making every effort to express his irritability as he swiped up his tea.

"If you can put aside your moodiness for a second, you might be glad to know that Baba made it safely to Sherabad." She held up the letter before moving onto the next one in the small pile of correspondence.

"Glad to hear it.' Rubbing at his eye with the mound of his palm, he arched his back to stretch. Flicking her eyes to her periphery for a moment, she allowed herself a brief moment to appreciate the sight. He was rather too attractive for his own good, wasn't he? "How long is he there for, again?"
"Hmm? Oh...um..." Returning to the distraction of the missives, Jasmine shook her head to refocus her thoughts and remind herself how to form sentences, which was no small feat when he was putting every one of his chest and back muscles on display. "... as long as it takes to re-secure the terms of the alliance. It shouldn't be too long — with Uncle Chandresh ascending to the throne, it's really just a formality. Although, they always were very competitive towards each other, so who knows? A few weeks maybe, then depending on the rains, another week or two traveling."

"Well, with as busy as you have been lately, you'll barely notice he's gone."

Pausing, she let her hand rest over the last unread letter. "I can't help but wonder if sending him as our emissary was a good idea?"

"Why?" Aladdin plucked a few grapes from the bunch and popped them in his mouth. "Who else is more qualified?"

"It's not that… obviously he knows what he's doing. That's not even in question…" She tapped her nails on the tray thoughtfully. "It just feels so much harder to do this knowing I'm really on my own."

Picking up the last letter, she began to pry open the folds, but his larger hand came down over both of hers.

"Habibti, look at me." Taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger, he guided her gaze to him. "What did I tell you the day we met?"

"That you were a pathetic wretch whose only parental influence was a monkey."

Snorting, he set down his tea so she could use both hands to hold hers. "No. The other thing… when we were standing on the roof and you didn't think you could make the jump."

"Why are you repeating everything I say?"

He sighed, narrowing his eyes at her mockery with a knowing smirk. "You can do this. I meant it then, and I mean it now."

Slipping her hand out of his to reach for those errant black strands again, she asked, "Doniety, how are you always so good at telling others what they need to hear, but never believing any of that advice about yourself?"

"Don't change the subject." Chagrined, he bopped her on the tip of the nose. "This isn't about me, and you know I'm right. You're a one woman army when you need to be. Allah help those who should get in your way when you set your mind to something. I'd rather walk straight into a sandstorm than to cross you on the wrong day."

"Flattering, thank you." She scoffed flatly.

"Besides," he added, words heavy with uncharacteristic severity, "you are not in this alone."

He had that look on his face again — the same one he had when he met her eyes across the alley between those two roofs. The one that made her believe she could do anything because he believed it so adamantly, and that conniving little charmer could convince her of anything.

"I know… I know… you're right." She shifted, sitting up taller. "I am the first the Sultana of Agrabah. I can handle anything these next few weeks can throw at me. I am strong, determined, more than capable— "
"And, humble too," he mumbled around another mouthful of grapes.

Crooking her finger, she beckoned him, leaning forward with hungry eyes. Closing the gap between them, Aladdin complied, eyes drifting shut, lips pursed ready to receive the anticipated kiss. Instead, Jasmine thwacked him with a pillow so hard he fell out of bed with a satisfying thump.

"Get dressed."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I read somewhere (where, of course, I can't recall) that the Harvest Dance was reminiscent of Indian dancing because Sherabad was meant to represent an Indian-esque kingdom, so I took that as my inspiration when referring to Sherabad.

_qalam_- a reed quill used for writing Islamic calligraphy

_Habibti_- beloved

_Doniety_- my world. I love the idea as this for Jasmine's pet name for Aladdin since he become her "whole new world".
Three

Chapter Notes

A/N: Merciful-fucking-universe. *This* chapter. Let's just say this one escalated quickly. One of you asked, Why do I feel angst coming? Easy. I'm a monster who delights in torturing characters for fun, profit, and reviews. So... yeah... enjoy the roller coaster of feels on this one kids.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Considering the amount of damage he had inflicted upon the infrastructure of the city while evading the guards, Aladdin figured the least he could do with his new found authority was build something for the people in return. So, Aladdin built a *madrasa*. Not just any school, mind you, but a school for children like him — a *madrasa* for *street rats*. Zero money plus zero education plus zero opportunities equaled a life of poverty. It didn't take a scholar to work out that equation. No one given another choice would willingly choose to be a criminal. It was the tragic result of making the best bad choice from the limited choices at their disposal. A means to an end. Once labeled a *street rat*, no one was willing to offer them any form of gainful, self-respecting employment. The inhabitants of this quarter of the city, *his quarter*, were doomed merely by urban geography, deemed to be criminals and fiends, so that's what they became. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One that, for the grace of the moral code instilled in him by his late mother and the acquisition of a magic lamp, Aladdin had managed to escape. What did not escape his notice though was that it had been nothing more than exceptional luck that he had profited when others had not. It felt wrong not to give something back, to share a semblance of his own good fortune — the princely equivalent of giving away his bag of dates to a hungry child. He wasn't a statesman, but he could swing a hammer, lay bricks, brush paint. Over the last few months, burdened by his anxiety about his immense lack of any other valuable skills towards the governance of Agrabah, he had thrown himself into this as a personal mission. He had even determined the site upon which the *madrasa* would be built.

The tower was barely recognizable as the decrepit loft where Aladdin and Abu had made their home. Now it was like a shining beacon of hope in a dismal abyss of despair. The walls had been repaired, and a set of proper stairs had been constructed to reach the upper levels. The former homes below had been abandoned ages ago, uninhabitable from years of neglect, a by-product of the lack of funds necessary to make the structures safe. Now these former homes served as classrooms, a library, and a dining room where the students would receive breakfast and lunch while at school. Aladdin had insisted on that point. After all, these may very well be the only meals these children might receive at all. How could a child concentrate enough to focus on learning when they were starving?

Hands gliding along the freshly painted walls, Jasmine marveled at the transformation. The first time he had brought her inside, this place had been little more than a hovel. Charming in its own way to be sure, but still a hovel. Now it was a *madrasa* to rival even those found in the wealthier quarters of the city.

The original plans had called for the headmaster's office to be placed on the upper level, in
Aladdin's former loft. But, when Aladdin had delivered the plans to Jasmine for her final approval prior to construction, she had demanded a redesign. Nearly offended by the idea, she had told him, "No place with a view of sky like the one from your balcony should ever be walled up." Instead, at her suggestion, they had turned the loft space into a classroom for studying the sciences, replete with a telescope to take advantage of that remarkable view. On that, Jasmine had insisted. Up until that point, Aladdin honestly thought it was impossible to love his wife anymore that he already did. He was quite happy to discover he was mistaken. Sitting on the steps leading to the raised level where they had set the telescope, he watched her move around the former loft with wide eyes, mouth slack with amazement.

"I knew it would be incredible," she breathed, her eyes unable to settle of a single spot, and Aladdin couldn't help but smile at her reaction, "but, this is truly astonishing. I am so proud of you."

"Compared to the things you've done for your people, Jasmine, it's nothing."

Crossing the expanse of ornate tiles that now decorated the same floor that had once barely been covered by threadbare rugs, she came to sit next to him on the step just below where he was perched.

"Out of all the trade agreements and alliances and laws that I could make, this school is going to have a bigger impact on Agrabah than any of that." Taking his hands in hers, she gave him a firm squeeze. He noticed her eyes were ringed with a hint of tears, but her knew that this time when he had reduced her to tears, it had been out of pride. "And, you Aladdin, you made this happen. I merely signed the paperwork."

Drawing her hands to his lips, he pressed a gentle kiss on the knuckles of both her small hands. "I hope you're right." He shrugged a shoulder nonchalantly.

"I hope you're right," she repeated in a deep, dopey mocking caricature of his own voice. "I know I am right."

"There's that famous humility again..." He grinned, but the smile was merely for Jasmine's sake.

Jasmine didn't really laugh like he had intended. Biting her lip, an expression flashed across her face that he had learned to associate with the swift inner workings of her mind, racing to fast to focus on a single thought before jumping to the next.

Dipping his head to swipe his nose gently against hers, he asked, "What is it?"

"Aladdin, do you have any idea how—"

"Your Majesty?"

Snapping their heads up towards the newcomer, the newly appointed headmaster was hovering in the doorway.

"Yes?" He noticed the clipped tone in her response.

"We're ready to commence with the dedication ceremony."

"Excellent. We'll be right behind you."

The headmaster bowed and disappeared down the new staircase. Standing, Aladdin offered his
hand to assist her to her feet. When she did not immediately stand, looking if she were considering saying something. He tilted his head in question, but after a beat of silence, she took his hand, standing and looping her arm through the crook of his elbow. Together they made their way outside to a cheering mass of people gathered for the opening.

The area around the new madrasa had been recommissioned into a courtyard to provide an open space for students to sit outside or play. A small decorative fountain bubbled in the center. Colorful plants decorated the edges and corners in raised beds, and a few trees provided pockets of shade from the intensity of the desert sun. The crowd of inhabitants from the poorest quarter of the city — excited children and their hopefully expectant parents — clustered throughout the space. To his surprise, there were not as many people as he would have expected for such an auspicious occasion, especially considering the offering of food and treats to the attendants. Knowing these people as he did, Aladdin would have assumed it would have drawn a small army of attendants, even those without children, at the promise of a meal.

Addressing the crowd, Jasmine stood on the top most step of the entryway, framed in the doorway like she was performing on a stage. He, on the other hand, kept his distance behind at the distance of a few steps. Jasmine took every possible opportunity to credit this achievement to him. Aladdin wore a permanent blush through the entire dedication speech. She could credit him all she wanted, but this was her moment too. None of this would have been possible without the resources she had been able to allocate to the construction. Besides, moments like these were when Jasmine shined. He would gladly keep building madrasas, or bimaristans, or whatever she wanted if it meant he could watch her in her prime upon opening them. She cherished being able to provide for her people, to make strides in bettering their lives, and if he could play some small part in giving her that pleasure, he would do so until his last breath. Nothing less than a commanding presence, articulate and impassioned, he adored watching her — it was like witnessing living art.

The dedication ended with a round of applause from the grateful subjects, and at her signal, two guards opened the doors. A stampede of excited children raced through the doors, leading the way for their parents, who each bowed to their Sultana, praising her with tears in their eyes and extolling blessings upon the royal couple as they passed.

Once the flood of people had mostly dissipated, she released a deep breath, and asked over her shoulder, "How was that?"

"Perfect," he assured. "You're always at your best when you're talking to your people."

Lingering behind the rest of the crowd, the headmaster approached the couple, dropping into a quick bow.

"Your Majesty," he began as he rose back up to full height. "There aren't enough words to express our thanks."

Patting at Aladdin's chest affectionately, she redirected the praise back onto him. "As I said in my address, the Prince is the one you should be thanking. He was the mastermind behind this endeavor."

Eager to change the subject away from him, he asked, "I don't mean to sound conceited here, but I expected a bigger crowd."

The headmaster's face down-turned. "Rumors are spreading that plague has been spotted in the city. I'm sure many of the parents were concerned about exposing their children — "

Aladdin didn't hear anything else after the word plague. All the rest of the words were drowned out
by the blood boiling in his ears.

"You didn't think to inform the palace about this!?!" He barked at the headmaster who flinched at the sudden outburst. "You don't think the threat of plague was a reasonable enough justification for delaying the opening?"

"Aladdin," Jasmine laughed nervously at his side, trying to downplay his reaction. "Really, it's fine. We don't even know if the rumors are true." Casting a smile back at the visibly shaken headmaster, adding, "If it were true, why would anyone risk coming at all?"

"Because their immune," Aladdin answered through gritted teeth. Squaring up to the headmaster, the flush on his face no longer from the embarrassment of unwanted attention, but rather the liquid fire coursing through his veins. "You would willingly expose your Sultana to a possible plague outbreak!? After everything she has done for you!?!"

"Aladdin, please, don't be ridiculous," Jasmine whispered fervently.

Raising his hands in either surrender or a meager defense against Aladdin's ire, the headmaster shook his head to dismiss the accusations.

"Your Highness! My Prince, I assure you I had no intention… I would never willingly endanger our Sultana…"

Everything was happening very fast, and clearly from the look on her face, Jasmine didn't know how to respond. He could feel her trying desperately to get his attention by pulling on the fabric of his tunic. His only response was to gently guide her behind him like he had done the day he had protected her from Jamal.

"Or, miss an opportunity to flaunt your new status and gloat in her praise, right?"

"Believe me, that was never — "

"Aladdin, people are staring."

Grabbing the headmaster by the neck of his robe, Aladdin jeered, "I should drag you into the dungeon myself!"

"Prince Consort, your Sultana is addressing you!"

Jasmine's command echoed on the enclosed courtyard walls. The use of his full title knocked something loose in his rage addled brain. Never once since he had been crowned had she ever personally addressed him by his official royal title, let alone do so in a way meant to assert her lawful authority over him. She referred to him as prince all the time, but never attaching the word consort — a harsh reminder of who needed to be seen as in charge. It accomplished the intended effect rather successfully, as upon registering it being spoken, it snapped him out of his temporary insanity. Releasing the headmaster's robe like hot iron capable of burning him, confused by the actions of his own traitorous hands, he stared at them in slack jawed bewilderment. Then past his hands he saw the faces of the stunned onlookers.

"A thousand apologies, Your Majesty," he spat.

Pivoting on his heel, he marched inside the madrasa, listening to Jasmine make futile attempts at excusing his behavior and apologizing profusely. He had never heard her sound so embarrassed. It twisted his insides. Making his way to the back of the school, he sought a moment's refuge in the headmaster's office. Staring out the window, he thought he would have a few moments of peace to
collect his thoughts and calm his nerves while Jasmine smoothed things out with the headmaster and made the rounds among the attendants.

Then again, it was an ignorant assumption to make of the wife he had just yesterday likened to a fiery warrior goddess. Despite being softened by the silk of her slippers, he could still hear the anger in the force of her footfalls. He winced as he heard the door slam.

"Do you care to explain yourself? Are you out of your mind!?"

If he prayed hard enough, perhaps Allah would send a conveniently timed sandstorm.

Rubbing at the pressure building behind his eyes, meekly he offered, "I told you I was sorry."

"Sorry doesn't even begin to cut it, Aladdin! Did you see their faces?" She was trying desperately not to shout — he could hear it in the strain of her voice — strangled only by the need to prevent any further attention being called to the unfolding scene he was making.

Ignoring her concerns, he turned, adjusting his tunic to have something to do with his empty, anxious hands. "We need to get you back to the palace as soon as possible."

"Did you hear a word I just said?"

Striding past her, he called to one of the guards he knew would have followed her, stationed just outside the office door.

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"The Sultana will be returning to the palace. Inform the rest of the escort we'll be leaving shortly."

The guard smacked his chest in salute as acknowledgment, then abruptly departed. Raking his hands aggressively through this styled hair, he dropped his hands, flexing them into and out of fists. Stern glare plastered to her face, Jasmine was behind him by the time her turned again, arms crossed so tightly it looked as if she was squeezing all of her rage into that glare.

Seriously, what did a guy have to do to get a sandstorm rolling these days?

"What is the name of Allah do you think you are doing?"

"If there's sickness in the city, I'm not taking any chances with you."

"Don't you think you're overreacting just a bit?" She threw her hands up in exasperation.

"When it concerns your safety," he said, stoic as stone, "not at all."

At that, she exhaled some of her anger, stepping closer to him. In a gesture meant to dissolve the tension, she guided her hand to gently smooth with mussed waves, cradling his face when her palm reached his cheek. "And what about you, Aladdin?" He drew his hand up to cover hers and closed his eyes. "Why are you only worried about me?"

Letting the tension release from his jaw, he rolled his shoulders and met her eyes. "Because... Habibti, I didn't spend my entire life in the relative safety of a palace. Eyes boring deeply into her own, he swallowed thickly. "Plague always hits the poorest quarters first. I was lucky to survive... unfortunately, I can't say the same for my mother."

Drawing her hand back to her mouth in a failed attempt to conceal her surprise. "I didn't... you never told me how you lost your mother."
"It's not exactly my favorite topic of conversation, Jas." Dropping his head, shamed in front of her for the second time in as many days, he examined the floor. "I lost my temper. It was uncalled for, and for that I am sorry—"

"Tell that to the headmaster…"

"— but, I will absolutely not apologize for being scared, or wanting to keep you safe. I didn't face down Jafar just to lose you to—"

"Doniety, listen!" She grabbed his face with both her hands. "You're not going to lose me. I'm right here."

"You haven't been through that I have — you haven't seen what I've seen. yes, the poor suffer the greatest, but the plague doesn't discriminate. It doesn't care if your a pauper or a princess."

"Well, good thing I'm not a princess, then." She said, flashing him a look through the tops of her yes. Frustrated with her failure to see the severity of the situation, he still couldn't resist when she gave him those sultry eyes. Tapping the underside of her chin with his knuckle, he finally relented.

"You'll always be my Princess."

"And, you will always be my fast-talking thief." She tapped his cheek and stepped away to lean on the headmaster's desk, hip cocked and arms crossed again. "Top marks for trying, but you're not getting off that light."

Feeling more like himself again now that he had managed to cool off, he slapped his hand at his chest in mock pain. "Then, I beseech you, my wise and merciful sovereign, how may I make amends?"

"Well, the begging and the complementing are a good start…" She threw out her hand matter-of-factly. "Yet, I'm afraid that I am going to have to teach you a lesson about disappointing your Sultana."

"Are you going to make an example out of me?" He growled, stalking towards her, pinning her between both arms, hands gripping the edge of the desk.

"I suppose," she said, affecting an air of superiority, "considering your rather unblemished record until now, we can avoid a public shaming." Hovering just above his lips, she purred, "I shall deal with your insolence in the privacy of our bedroom."

Forehead pressed to hers, he whispered, "It's gracious of you to salvage what's left of my reputation."

A knock on the door interrupted their banter.

"The escort is ready, Your Highness," the guard called from the other side of the door.

Pressing a quick kiss to his lips as promise of her intentions to come, Jasmine made to move, but Aladdin held her in place a moment longer, forehead's still pressed together.

"Promise me…" He exhaled harshly, drawing away. "Promise me you won't take any necessary risks. If there is an outbreak, let me deal with it."
"Alright, Aladdin." Searching his face, she finally nodded softly. "I promise… now come along, you reprobate. You must be dealt with."

Releasing her from his hold, he laughed to himself at the turn of events. "Thank Allah for unanswered prayers."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, I admit, not knowing the exact date of when the movie is meant to be set, and assuming the time is somewhere during the medieval Islamic age, a telescope is probably an anachronism… but it's my fic and I'll anachronize if I want to. I can't fight the beauty of restoring the loft into an astronomy tower. Besides, during the Islamic Golden Age, while Europe was mired in darkness and ignorance, the Islam empires were sciencing it up with all kinds of inventions, innovations, and discoveries. If it really bothers you that much, pretend I said astrolabe. ＼(☆_☆)／

**madrasa** - a school. In the Islamic world, a madrasa could be anything from a primary school to a college for advanced studies on topics such as science, medicine, or theology.

**bimaristan** - a hospital. During Medieval times, the Islamic world was renowned for their comparatively advanced medical knowledge and ability to treat diseases that were death sentences like places in Europe. For a fantastic movie about the culture and medical practices of the medieval Islamic world, I suggest watching *The Physician* on Netflix.
Chapter Notes

A/N: All aboard the angst train! (woo woo!) Sing it with me now! - *It's gonna get worse before it gets better.*

Upon entering the palace, a line of people were waiting for them. Something deflated in Aladdin's chest when he saw the retinue standing on the steps in the Great Hall. It had been too much to hope that Jasmine and him might be able to steal away for a while.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness," Hakim saluted to them. "We were surprised by your early return. Was there an incident at the dedication?"

Before Jasmine could lie for him, Aladdin made his excuses. "It was my fault, Hakim. She was worried about me. I'm not feeling well." From his periphery he could see the face she was making towards him — she thought it was unnecessary to need to explain himself. It didn't matter. The blame for returning rested squarely on his shoulders, and he was willing to carry it. "I don't have the fortitude of our Sultana for public events with so many people."

"Should I fetch the physician, Your Highness?" Maryam asked next to Hakim, a hint of guilt on her face for the remark earlier in the morning.

"Thank you, but no. I'll be fine. I just need to settle my nerves."

"Your Majesty," spoke Nasreen, Jasmine's new handmaiden, stepping forward with a bow. "The Vizier requested an audience with you when you returned. Shall I inform — "

The volume of Jasmine's sigh was loud enough for the entire hall the hear her disapproval. "I'll attend to the Vizier shortly. The prince and I — "

"It's fine." He said out the side of his mouth.

Pleading at him with warm brown eyes, Aladdin refused to be a distraction from something important. Perhaps they had news on whether or not the rumors had been true? Hooking her finger with one of his, Aladdin tugged gently, giving her a look that said she was being ridiculous. Still visibly annoyed at the interruption to their plans, she straightened her posture, lifting her gaze towards her handmaiden.

"Thank you, Nasreen. Inform the Vizier I've returned." She said without a hint of willingness behind her words. The handmaiden disappeared down the side hall, and she added, "I will make arrangements for a private dinner in our suite tonight, and that upon pain of death, unless there is anything less than a state emergency, we are not to be disturbed."

"State emergency, huh?" He grinned. "Is that your way of warning me to stay out of trouble?"

"Well, that would just be a waste of breath, now wouldn't it?"

Pulling her in for a quick kiss on the cheek, he said, "I'll be in the gardens. If you get out early, and
I'm not there, I guess you'll just have to come find me." He winked.

Seeing her reluctance to leave him only reminded him of exactly why he needed to be stronger, to avoid making his problems her own. The duty of a Sultana never stopped. It was a responsibility from which she could never take a break or put aside in lieu of other concerns. Agrabah always came first, even above the needs of her husband, even if he was coming apart at the seams.

Though it pained him to do so, he smiled as convincingly as he could, flicking his head in the direction of the administrative wing of the palace. "Go."

Taking a moment to watch her walk away, Aladdin spun around and headed towards the gardens. In one big push he tried force everything down. The feeling was visceral — it felt like a rope wrapped around him, constricting his chest. Distracted by his own anxiety, it took him a minute to realize that Maryam was chasing after him.

"Your Highness, please, wait! I had a message for you as well."

Coming to a dead stop in the middle of the passage, the servant slid past him trying to come to a stop, stumbling a bit on her feet. Instinctively, he reached to steady her, catching her by the shoulders and letting her find her balance.

"Yes?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Your presence has been requested as well. Shiekh Sunil has returned."

At this he wasn't particularly upset. In fact, the news was a relief. Rather than overburden his wife, he would much rather talk this over with his best friend.

"Thank you, Maryam. Tell him to meet me in the royal gardens."

"How 'bout you tell him yourself 'cause he's already here?"

Approaching from behind, Sunil sidled up next to the prince. Hopping from him to Aladdin, Abu chittered excitedly and settled on his shoulder.

"Glad to see you're back safe, Sunil." Aladdin clapped his friend on the shoulder.

Even after all this time, the name still felt strange. Upon becoming mortal, the Genie had reverted back to using his given name — the one he had been known by as a free *djinn*, long before a powerful sorcerer had enslaved him and trapped him in the lamp. Aladdin understood that it was respectful to use his real name — it gave him identity, helped him feel human. While Aladdin had never had to make the adjustment from phenomenally cosmic being to your average mortal, he assumed that something as simple as being called by your real name went a long way to making the transition easier. Dismissing Maryam, the pair fell into step with each other as they made their way to the gardens in relatively silence.

"One might assume," his companion began as they entered, taking seats on the lounges under the shaded part of the garden just out of the midday sun, "that from that forlorn face of yours, today was a smashing success?"

Leaping from his shoulder to the back of the lounge, Abu raced down the arm, across the tiled wall of the plant bed, and curled up on another lounge to nap in the sun.

Dragging his hands down over his face, dropping onto the edge of the seat, he groaned through his hands, "It was a disaster."
"Please, for the love of Allah," Sunil raised one of his hands towards the heavens and closed his eyes, "tell you me you didn't try to improvise a speech?"

The singe of embarrassment from his first meeting with Jasmine as Prince Ali would forever be an open wound into which the world kept insisting on throwing salt. He was never going to live that moment down.

"No!" He exclaimed, making an X with his arms as if to banish the memory from existence or the idea of repeating it. "I'll leave the public speaking engagements to Jasmine for the rest of forever."

"So, do I wanna know then, or is this gonna be another scrape with near death by second hand embarrassment?"

"Nobody wis more embarrassed than me — trust me on that."

"I'm gonna need to get comfortable for this, aren't I?" Leaning back, stretching out his legs and crossing his feet at the ankles, Sunil propped his arms behind his head. "Alright, lay it on me, kid."

"Honestly, I don't even know what happened… one second, Jasmine and I are talking to the headmaster, and then he mentions there are rumors of plague in the city — "

"Plague?" Sunil leaned forward, eyes wide. "I think you buried the lead here."

Dismissing it out of hand with a wave, he continued, "I don't even know if the rumors are true… but just the possibility of sickness… with Jasmine being there… I just…"

Shooting up from the seat, Aladdin kicked at the leg of a table with the side of his pointed boot. Abu jumped up with an indignant chirp.

"You panicked."

"Yeah." Aladdin heaved out a breath, dropping his shoulders and letting his head fall backwards. "He knew there was a chance, and he didn't even warn us. Next thing I know, my hands are at his throat, accusing him of endangering the princess, and Jasmine is shouting."

"You were scared. It happens, kid. We all make mistakes when we aren't thinking right."

Falling onto the rim of the fountain, Aladdin ran his fingers through the water absently.

Coming to sit next to him after a long moment of silence, Sunil asked. "Everything okay with the temperature of that water?"

Frustrated at his own inability to even express said frustration, he jerked his hand out of the water, elbows on his knees, hands hanging limply between them.

"It was like I wasn't even in control anymore. All I could think about was the image of my mother covered in black sores, dying in misery while I survived, and I couldn't let that happen to my wife."

Sensing the tension hanging in the air, Abu slinked over to Aladdin, and sat between his parted feet. Aladdin scratched his fingers over the little monkey's head.

"Genie?" Falling back on the comfort of the past, he used the only name he had known back then for being who had managed to show him the depth of his own strength, courage, to believe himself even the slightest bit worthy of deserving something good for just being himself. "I turned down your magic. I set you free, and walked away. As long as she was safe, as long as she was happy, I
didn't care about being a street rat and leaving her to live her life. But… she came after me. She chose me, willingly. The only reason I am here now and not on the streets again is because of her and that choice. I don't know if I could make that choice again, not after having her. If Jasmine ever — " The fear polluting his wild imagination restricted his throat, strangling the words. His voice was so small. "What happens to me then?"

"Kid..." Sunil squatted down in front of the last man he would ever call master, and the first master he would ever call friend. "As long as I have breath in this chest," he smacked firmly with his palm for emphasis, "you will never be on your own again.

Looking up at the man in front of him, something inside broke and came crashing down. Every emotion from the miasma inside him came flooding to the surface. The words were meant to be comforting, a promise. But, Aladdin couldn't overlook the reason the Sunil had been gone the last few days — he was making plans and arranging for supplies. The boat Jasmine had commissioned as their wedding gift had been under construction for months. It was a matter of time.

"Oh yeah?" A bitter taste flooded his mouth as he said it. "How are you going to do that from the middle of the ocean?"

Mouth parted in shock, Sunil just stared forward like he'd taken an arrow in the chest and Aladdin had wielded the bow. "Kid, It's not — Look, I promise — "

"I have a headache. I'm going to go lie down."

Pushing past Sunil, he wouldn't look back no matter how many times his friend called his name. Not even at the painful way his voice broke on the word, Kid. Making his way back inside the palace, Aladdin knew it was unfair to treat his best friend like this. He owed the man his life. But, that man, just like everyone else he had ever loved, was leaving. All the good intentions and promises in the cosmos couldn't change the fact that Sunil and Dalia wanted a different life, one that would take them away from Agrabah. He lived in the fear of losing Jasmine, but there was nothing he could do to stop from losing Genie. After a life spent in the forced servitude of others, of people who had stolen his freedom and personhood, how could he deny him his dream? Jasmine had become his dream, and he was willing to do anything to keep her. But, Jasmine he still had — Sunil, Genie, was leaving. Better to push him away now, and get used to the permanent empty feeling it would create inside his heart.

He'd have one less person in the world he could count on, and one more reason to believe that it was impossible for him to hold onto anything good. For as long as he could remember, he'd been on his own with nothing to his name but a loyal monkey accomplice. Becoming part of a family should have meant that now he had somewhere to belong, but really, it only meant now he had everything to lose.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I have always been upset by the fact the Genie was never given a proper name. From what I know about djinn lore, they were a race of beings created by god from fire in between creating Angels (light) and man (clay). There are various stories about how humans were able to trap them with iron and enslaved them to do their bidding. So, in my head cannon, Genie was a free djinn who was trapped, who would have had a name and a life before that happened. And, while I know that the name Sunil comes
from Sanskrit rather than Arabic, thanks to Krishna, there are a lot of names that mean blue. I thought that was somewhat appropriate.

Sunil - From Sanskrit (su) meaning "good, very" combined with (nila) meaning "dark blue". A name that means good and blue? Tell me that isn't perfect!
A/N: You’ve all been very strong to deal with the emotional warfare I’ve inflicted on you, and know that you need a break. One more angsty chapter, and I promise that the next one I write will be fluffy and domestic and so cute it’ll probably be disgusting. I'm sorry if it's starting to feel repetitive, and I'm afraid of making the characters too whiny. Aladdin is starting to feel like Harry Potter circa book 6, and I don't want that... but I'm trying to play up the impact of the trauma he's experienced in life. I have a lot of training in working with students who are have trauma (adverse childhood experiences or "ACEs"), and I've tried to relate the emotional ups and downs, the internal turmoil, the outburst of rage and violence, and all the other baggage that impacts them and their ability to learn. I recently watched the episode, "Noel" from the second season of the West Wing, and they do a good job of demonstrating how Josh deals with the his trauma, or rather how poorly he is dealing with it, on his own. I took a little inspiration from that episode for writing Aladdin.

Now, for the next installment of *But, Why!*...
Sure, had she made the announcement she was looking for someone willing to question her and tell her no, those same jackass nobles would have been lining up at the palace gates. Unlike those seeking to obstruct her simply because they were upset by her position and power, Dalia was objective. She was the rational voice in Jasmine's head that helped to ground her when she was too flustered by her own emotions. Dalia had called Jasmine out on her own stubbornness more time than she could count, and was always the first to point out when Jasmine was getting in her own way. If it hadn't been for Dalia, she would never have given Prince Ali a chance, and missed out on the greatest adventure of her life.

Falling in love with Aladdin.

Pinching her nose with one hand, the opposite resting in her folded elbow, Dalia waited impatiently for Jasmine to confirm or deny her question.

"I'm not quite sure — " she began, only to be interrupted.

"You're not quite sure if your husband, the prince, threatened the headmaster the school you just dedicated today!?!"

"Oh…" She leaned back until her head was resting over the chair, eyes traveling to inspect the ceiling, which suddenly held great appeal. "I thought you were talking about something else…"

Crossing the room, she started laughing, throwing her hands up, stopping just short of Jasmine's desk.

"What else on earth could I possibly be talking about right now?"

Setting her elbows on the desk, she rubbed the tired out of her eyes that, after half a night's sleep and an emotionally exhausting morning, was beginning to catch up with her. "The rumors of plague hitting the city."

All of Dalia's apparent outrage dropped from her face, along with her trademark sarcasm. "What?"

"That's why Aladdin assaulted the headmaster — apparently he had some knowledge of the threat, but didn't think to alert the palace."

"And, that's why Aladdin hit him?"

"Hit him!?" With a screech across the floor, Jasmine shot up from her seat. "The rumor mill does run fast in these halls, doesn't it? If only the gossipers would exchange efficiency for the slightest bit of accuracy… still, I'm amazed you've already heard."

"One of the guards reported it to Hakim, and Hakim reported it to me on my way here."

"The guard said Aladdin hit him?"

"That's what was reported to him…" Dalia shrugged. "He was just passing the message along to his superior."

"Unbelievable." Jasmine shook her head. "No, Dalia. He got in his face, he yelled, he grabbed him by the robes and threatened to lock him up, but he certainly didn't hit him."

"What happened?"

Holding the gaze of her former handmaiden turned vizier, she tried to brush it off.
"Don't worry about it, Dalia. I dealt with it. Aladdin hasn't been feeling well lately."

Dalia continued, unabated by Jasmine's protests. Taking Jasmine's shoulders in her hands, Dalia squeezed them. "Tell me."

Unable to keep pushing her emotions to the side, to keep trying to be a Sultan first and a wife second, she relented. "He... he thought he was protecting me, I guess?"

"You guess?"

Sighing, seeking answers that even she herself didn't have, Jasmine broke away from her hold to fall onto the window seat rather ungracefully. "He blamed the headmaster for putting me at risk."

Bending her legs upward, she let her head fall into her knees, wrapping her arms around her head. The seat cushion depressed under Dalia's joined weight. From behind, she felt Dalia's hand graze gently down the length of her back, then slide back up, making soft little circles.

"So, at what point did you scold him by shouting 'Prince Consort, your Sultana is addressing you'?"

Jasmine raised her head to find Dalia smiling at her, and couldn't fight snorting out a small laugh. "Oh, they got that part right, did they?" Dalia just nodded the affirmative, trying not to laugh. "Well, you should have seen his face."

"I would have paid good money for that."

Leaning to Dalia's side, Jasmine let her wrap her into a side hug.

"He's been so distant lately. His moods are erratic..."

"I know. We're all very worried about him. Several people have mentioned to me that they've noticed a change in the prince."

"So, it's not just me? Well, don't tell him that... he's been evasive enough as it is, and if he thinks the entire palace knows... All he ever says is 'You've got enough to worry about', which just makes me worry about him even more."

"Aladdin is just a man, Jasmine. A brave and honorable man to be sure, but he is still a man like the rest of them. Unlike us, they deal with their problems one at a time. He doesn't understand that our minds are different, that we're used to dealing with more than one crisis at a time. Men want to fix things — find the swift, logical solution that causes as little damage as possible. It might seem cruel to you that he's holding back, but in his mind, he's doing that he thinks is a kindness to you."

"But, if the situation were reversed he'd be the first person there trying to get to the bottom of what was wrong."

"Of course, Jasmine. The boy worships the ground you walk on. He knows exactly what it takes to fix you when you're upset. To him, that's his job, and that's easy. It's how to fix himself he doesn't understand."

Swiping at her eyes, Jasmine wiped the tears on the silk of her pants, leaving small wet dot. "It's not fair. He always know exactly what everyone needs, but refuses to focus any of that love back on himself. He's in so much pain... I can feel it, and it's killing me."

"Which is exactly why he hides his pain. He loves you too much for you to hurt, even if it means..."
he hurts alone."

"Well, then he's being the world's most loving idiot," Jasmine scoffed. "The day we faced Jafar, watching helplessly as he banished him to his death — " Fighting a sob, she grit her teeth, the memory still so fresh, burned into her mind forever. "I will never forget his painful scream echoing through the Great Hall. I still hear it in my nightmares. He was just... gone. He was going to die, and it was my fault because he came back for me, and there I was, helpless to do anything for him. I didn't think anything could ever hurt as much as knowing that. But, I was wrong, Dalia, because nothing is worse than having him right beside me, quietly re-suffering that level of imaginable pain."

"If I recall, he escaped tragedy and came back to save the entire kingdom. He made it through that, he will make it through this."

"Not without a little help," Jasmine argued, waggling her fingers like she was casting a spell. "He doesn't think he's capable of amounting to anything without a bit of pretending and a handwave of magic." She pulled away from Dalia, picking at her nails nervously. "Honestly, if it wasn't for Sunil, I don't think he'd have lasted as long as he has without breaking."

"Actually, Jasmine," Dalia's face went nervously slack, eyes pleading for a shred of mercy. "That's the real reason I needed to talk to you."

Under her current duress, it took Jasmine's brain a moment to catch up and make the connection, and she steeled herself for what she already knew. "You're leaving."

"You know, it's fascinating," Dalia mused offhandedly, an attempt to lighten the mood, "how fast a ship can be built when it's been commissioned by the Sultana."

This was all becoming too overwhelming. Aladdin was spiraling, Baba wouldn't return for weeks, and now, her last anchor was literally about to leave port. Stones were stacking one by one onto her chest, pinning her down, stealing her breath. She could feel the decompression of the weight in her chest. She gripped the fabric of Dalia's skirt in her first.

"I'm not ready," she whispered.

"Serving as your Vizier was always meant to be temporary..."

"You're not just my Vizier, Dalia. You know that." Jasmine flashed her a face of disbelief. "Besides… who am I going to find to replace you? Who can I trust to be honest with me, and not have an ulterior motive?"

"Actually," Dalia unfurled Jasmine's tight fist and took the hand in her own, "your father and I have been discussing that… how about your aunt?"

"Aunt Indira?" Jasmine scrunched up her face in question.

"Why not? She was maharani — she understands what it takes to rule a kingdom. Now that your Uncle Chandresh has ascended his brother's throne, there isn't exactly a lot for a widowed royal to do besides remarry." Taking on a more somber tone, she added. "None of her children survived, Jasmine. She wants to pass on what she knows to you — she is very proud of your ascension."

"I haven't seen her since Mama's funeral," Jasmine shifted, letting her legs drop back down to the floor. "She wrote me a very flattering letter after my coronation."

It made sense — Indira would be an invaluable resource for a young Sultana just coming into her
own. It was also a safe decision for Jasmine. Indira would not have any designs on the throne nor would she have any motive to make the Sultana look like a fool because she was a woman. It was a heartbreaking trade to make for Dalia, but politically, it was a gift she should not overlook.

"So, she'll be traveling back with Baba then. I suppose that means I have you for a few more weeks."

"Actually..." Dalia's voice got very high and she smiled innocently.

"You're killing me," Jasmine shook her head, but couldn't help laugh. She had gone from handmaiden to vizier, and yet nothing about Dalia had changed.

"We've been putting this off for almost a year and a half," Dalia whined. "We barely escaped for a week as a honeymoon. Jasmine, it's my dream... our dream."

"I suppose I have kept you here rather selfishly, haven't I?" Rising from the window seat, Jasmine turned, standing in front of her oldest and dearest friend, taking Dalia's hands and holding them out before her. "Dalia, as reward of your devotion and service to the crown, as Sultana of Agrabah, I declare you officially relieved of duty to the Sultana." Dalia beamed, tears of joy ringing her eyes. Then, Jasmine finished, tone dropping with sarcasm, "Just know that your timing is terrible and I will never forget how you abandoned me in my time of need."

Dalia kicked at Jasmine's shin playfully.

"That is exactly the kind of affront to the crown that could sentence you to a lifetime of duty," Jasmine warned in feigned offense.

"Thank you, Jasmine."

"No... my thanks are to you, Dalia. A ship isn't nearly enough to express my gratitude and love for you." The women embraced in a long hug. Jasmine closed her eyes tightly, trying to press into the moment all of her unspoken appreciation and love — a single embrace meant to encompass all the words she could never find to express the true depth of her feeling. "Promise me that we'll have one last celebration together before you disappear around the edge of the world."

"Of course," Dalia agreed. "You know how Sunil adores a party."

"Then it's settled. You're not allowed to leave until I can give you two a proper send off."

"Far be it from me to subvert the will of my Sultana."

"You didn't have any trouble with that when I was a princess."

"Yes, but you weren't giving me ships and throwing me parties then, were you?" She flicked her hand through the air dismissively.

Sensing the end of the conversation was at hand, Jasmine said, "Aladdin and I are taking dinner in our suite, and unless there is an invasion, we are not to be disturbed, understood?"

"Perfectly, Your Majesty." Dalia raised her finger into the air as if she wanted to make a point. "But, technically, I don't work for you any more, so perhaps you should tell another member of the staff — "

"I'm leaving now," Jasmine deadpanned, and slipped out to inform the kitchen staff her plans for secluded romantic dinner.
A/N: maharani — the term used for an Indian queen or princess, that comes from the word Maharaja, which means "Great King"
Chapter Notes

A/N: Alright, confession time: I am a lying liar who lies. I promised a fluffy, romantic chapter... and it's coming, I SWEAR! I have spent the last couple of days researching information I need for later parts of the story, and I got sidetracked with some really helpful information. Then, thanks to a terrifyingly well targeted advertisement based on said research and YouTubing of Aladdin clips for reference, I stumbled across an a book called *We Hunt the Flame*, whose Arabic inspired fantasy world and sweet romantic character interactions were, as if divinely sent by the universe itself, EXACTLY what I needed to help me write this story. So, that being said, I have lots of notes written for the fluffy scene I promised, and I ensure it will be worth the wait. Meanwhile, the part of my creative mind that wants to actually be a good writer started thinking about the pacing and outline of the story, and was like... *have you considered trying plot?* Needless to say, I was strong armed by my muse into writing something that was actually important to the story line, but I don't think you will be disappointed.

The fluff is coming. It is. But, I needed to set something up, and then we can have a lovey, mush-filled aside with levels of saccharine sweetness that will probably result in you developing Type-2 diabetes.

In the mean time, look! -waves jazz hands- A shiny plot driven distraction!

---

Everywhere he went in the palace, he could feel the eyes. They watched him, pitied him, judged him. He couldn't escape their gaze. He had left Sunil in the garden, and there would be servants making the necessary preparations for dinner in their suite, cutting Aladdin off from his customary retreats. The voice in his head seeped more poison into the back of his mind. Those silent stares spoke volumes.

*They know you don't belong.*

*They know you'll never live up to the expectations.*

*They know you are a weight around her neck.*

*It would be easier on everyone if you would just slipped away in the night...*

Truth be told, Aladdin didn't know if it was escaping those eyes, or an attempt to outrun the voices that drove him deeper into the palace. The hallways and rooms down here were less recognizable. These lower levels served more pragmatic, domestic functions as opposed to the opulent rooms upstairs. Still, that didn't mean they weren't ornate and grand. After all, they were still part of the palace. It was that they merely paled in comparison to the exquisite rooms he frequented as a member of the royal family.

Servants quarters. Storage for finery, dry goods, lamp oil. Passages for the staff to flit from one end of the palace to the other in a matter of seconds rather than cross the expansive spaces upstairs. A holdover from the expectations of Sultan's in generations past, they were passages for them to
move unseen.

Certainly, Jasmine didn't expect such clandestine behaviors from her staff, being neither seen nor heard, like her forebears who had built the passages. Of all people, she knew personally what it was like to be stripped of your voice, your presence considered a vexing toleration until something could be done with you. The powers that be had tried to silence her, and they had failed, miserably. Jasmine could not condemn another being to such a fate. She wholeheartedly respected the service of the palace staff, and had taken great strides to make sure that anyone who dedicated their life to the palace was granted the respect and adulation that one was due for such loyal service to the state. She had personally overseen a raise in their compensation, ensured their duties were not overly taxing or dangerous, and that they had access to the palace physicians whenever they felt the slightest bit ill. After all, illness in the palace could easily spread.

Aladdin pushed the reminder of this morning's incident from his mind, and stalked further down the hall.

That's when he realized for the first time, despite having such usually keen awareness, he was suddenly registering his surroundings as more than just blurry outlines and colorful shapes. The same rugs and vases and mosaics were repeating. He was walking in a circle. He'd forgotten that the hallways in the lowest levels all connected back on each other. It made sense. There were no gardens or terraces or grand halls for the servants to use. No use for a path to lead anywhere other than their intended destination and back again with the most efficient means possible. Heaven forbid that a servant should keep a royal waiting.

Apparently, he had run out of places to hide. Perhaps he should take that as a sign to return to the suite and wait for Jasmine to finish up with Dalia. He would follow the hall back around until he came to one of the stairways that lead up to one of the many palace wings. Pushing forward, he tried to shake away the last remnants of his worries. They needed to stay downstairs, hidden away like the servants of old. An evening of Jasmine's undivided attention was too sumptuous of a promise to sully it with these oppressive doubts. It had been far too long since they had been given the time to bask in the proximity of each other, to talk idly rather than with an agenda, to savor the simple joy of being husband and wife. He needed that desperately, and Jasmine needed to see he was well, that there was nothing to trouble herself about, and that all was right in their world.

A niche along the wall appeared ahead, and Aladdin quickened his pace, eager to scurry upstairs. But, to his surprise, with his agile feet out of practice, he skidded to an abrupt halt before nearly slamming into a closed door. Instead of the staircase he anticipated, a large dark door loomed menacingly before him. While he knew that he had been distracted while pacing the halls, unlike the decorations that adorned these halls, he couldn't recall passing it before.

As The Prince, Aladdin didn't really spend much time downstairs. Naturally curious as he was, when he had first arrived at his new home, he had done some preliminary exploring. But, as preparations for the wedding, the coronation, and lessons in navigating the expected duties of royal life all increased the demands on his time, his explorations had taken a back seat to trying his best not to appeal like a proper fool.

Examining the door, he genuinely had no idea what lie on the other side of it. Otherwise unremarkable, the only difference if held from the other doors in the hall was its placement. Besides staircases which had been built on the left sides of the halls leading to the palace wings, it was the only opening on the outside wall, as opposed to the others all to his right, opening to inward rooms that made up the interior mass of the lower space. Interest piqued, he reached for the handle, and pulled. It was heavier than he expected, but with enough effort, it hefted open. Swinging slowly, it gave way to another passage, the length of which difficult to ascertain as it
faded into darkness. Grabbing a lamp off an adjacent table, Aladdin slipped into the darkness pulling the door shut behind.

The walls inside the passage were very different than those in the last hallway, much more spartan and utilitarian. Made from a much less refined stone, they appeared to be carved directly into the mount on which the palace had been erected. Making his way down the passage, he came upon a stairwell that dropped abruptly into further darkness. A musty odor hung in the air, and a chilled dampness clung to his skin. One hand against the wall, the other holding the lamp far enough away from his body to illuminate the next several steps, Aladdin felt like he was descending into a labyrinth.

The minute his feet hit the bare, earthen floor, he knew exactly to where he had traveled. Formed in the shape of a circle, cells ringed a curved wall behind iron bars. Narrow shafts of light cut sharply through the dark from squat rectangles high on the ceiling, too small for even a child to squeeze through, and too high to reach even if standing on another man's shoulders. The windows, if you could call them that, served two obvious functions — ventilation to prevent prisoners from asphyxiating before a sultan could have the pleasure of putting them to death himself, and to remind those same prisoners that there was still a world outside, full of warmth and light, promising that the next time they returned to it, it would be the last thing they ever saw.

Turning away from the cells, Aladdin whispered a grateful prayer that in all the years he had spent agitating the guards, he'd been spared such a fate. Instead, he examined the opposite wall. A chair or two for the guards, a rack of hand held weapons to keep the prisoners in line, a set of keys hung from a nail. Then, he saw another door, smaller in shape than the last one, with a rounded top, made out of metal lattice rather than solid wood. Also, unlike the last one, this one was locked. A large padlock hung through a loop on the handle, seemingly excessively in size for such a small door. Peering through the holes in the lattice, the flame didn't penetrate deep enough into the windowless room to discern what it held or why it would be locked. Taking the ring of keys down from the hook, he tried each one to no avail.

No matter. Pulling out the bejeweled *fibulae* pinned through the fabric of his tunic, he wriggled the sharp point into the keyhole. Aladdin wasn't much for jewelry and finery. Even his royal attire was considered modest by most. But, the part of his brain that had been conditioned for mischief saw the unspoken benefit of wearing a piece of jewelry that could easily double as a lock pick. You could take the thief out of the market, but…

It was embarrassing how easy the lock fell open. Maybe he wasn't as rusty as he had assumed. Or, maybe he needed to have a conversation with Hakim about the real security of supposedly secured places.

Holding the meager source of light aloft, he noticed a few more lamps scattered around the space, their metal catching the flame with a dull reflection. Most still held a small amount of fuel, and sprang to life with enough coaxing. The opposite wall was curved as well, and Aladdin surmised that the dungeon had been built into the foundation of one of the many towers. From living inside the palace, he had forgotten that most of the structure was comprised of rounded towers, rising into the sky with their gilded domes. The interior of the palace was designed to subvert the circular shape of the walls within square rooms, making it much easier to place furniture flush against surfaces. It had been a long time since he had gazed longingly at the palace, wistfully imagining the grandeur of life inside, unaware he was actually staring at his future home.

Ignorance had sure been bliss back then. He should have listened to Jasmine when he had the chance.
Spiderwebs congested space, ensnaring everything. Dust adhered to objects like paste had been applied and they had been rolled in it. One table was covered in various kinds of glassware — vials, bottles, jars — their contents inside preserved for posterity. From the various ingredients and instruments, it appeared to be alchemical equipment.

In the middle of the space, a short wall rose up, revealing what appeared to be a well set into the middle of the floor. Walking the perimeter of the well, he leaned over, the light unable to reveal the depth within. He didn't want to imagine how far that meant it went down. The image of a gaping tiger's mouth flashed inside his mind's eye, reminded of a tumble to what he thought would surely be his death. Out of all the stumbles, trips, and falls he's taken while trying to evade the guards, that had definitely been the worst. Just thinking about it was enough to knock the wind out of his chest all over again.

Then, the memory triggered an idea, which scanning the room felt like the beginning of a revelation. Pieces were falling into place. Across the room, a set of shelves rose upwards from another table workspace, stuffed with scrolls and books. Gliding the light horizontally across the rows of books, the dust dulled titles weakly caught the flame on their gold lettering.


Dozens of books, all with similar titles, shelves stacked with a small library consisting of a single topic: *sihr.*

Magic. They were all books about magic. Treatises on theurgy, alchemy, nature, divination, astrology, and now, no surprise that he had puzzled out who the collector of these volumes had been, the darker arts. Confirming his previous assumption, Aladdin felt his chest tighten at the realization that he now stood within Jafar's abandoned lair.

On the table, one of the books lay spread open to the last page the malevolent Vizier had read. Brushing away to accumulated layer of dust, Aladdin squinted in the semi-darkness, trying to read the scrolling text of the passage.

'Upon seizing a wild djinn, the creature can be subdued and compelled into obedience with the following incantation: Azamatu Alaykum, I command you. If the name of a djinn can be ascertained by the sorcerer, the djinn can be summoned directly, and bound to talisman or inside a vessel. Neither capturing or summoning a djinn is an easy feat. Many seeking the magic of a djinn find better use of their time and resources by seeking to obtain an already bound djinn.'

This was the book that had lead Jafar on the quest for the *Cave of Wonders*, that had forced their paths to cross. A strange feeling was pooling in Aladdin's stomach, and he was amazed to discover the feeling was excitement. The desire to prove his worth had driven Jafar to learn magic, which had in turn lead him to Aladdin, leading Aladdin to the lamp, and eventually to a new life as the Prince of Agrabah. If the threads of his fate had been woven so intricately with Jafar's thanks to the knowledge in these books, perhaps it was also his fate to find them.

Aladdin had witnessed Jafar's power first hand, even before the powers he wielded had been magnified by the Genie. The staff the vizier had created was strong enough to coerce any being, and that magic had come to him long before he had acquired it through three wishes. From the conversation they had, just two *street rats* side by side in the vast desert, he knew the lengths to which Jafar had gone to acquire and maintain his power. From these books, Jafar had learned how to wield *al sihr.* But, Jafar had held grandiose, vile ambitions. Magic in the hands of someone like Jafar was dangerous. In the hands of someone with pure intentions, with the consideration of a kingdom and its citizens first in their mind, with the desire to be a good leader rather than acquire power for the sake of power, then perhaps…
The lamp light in the room began to flicker and fade, the scant oil reserves of the lamps having been consumed. How long Aladdin had remained here, mesmerized by the books, by the knowledge contained within, by potential promise the held, he didn't know. It could have been hours. It could have been minutes. Either way, he needed to return upstairs. Snuffing out the weakening flames, he slipped out of the metal door, clicking the lock firmly back into place. Now, upon the discovery of its contents, Aladdin realized why it had been locked in the first place. Fighting the nagging quandary about why they hadn't just been destroyed, he wondered, if like his unintentional discovery, that its survival had not also been by design.

Reinserting the fibulae, he knocked the accumulated dust from his tunic, and made his way back up the stairs. From the length of the dungeon entrance to the first staircase he crossed, he caught himself counting steps and noting the direction.

He wasn't really sure why.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Alright, so, my inner history nerd came out on this one, and I have been doing some in-depth research. Most of the information I used for this chapter came from one of these sources, so rather than write an essay on magic in the Islamic world as my authors note, you can just read them for yourself if your really interested:

Magic in Islam

Binding Djinn

Occult in Islam

fibulae -- a decorative pin that served as an ancient safety to hold the drape of clothing

Luma'at al-Nuraniyya - "Brilliant Lights" - discussed the occults powers of wielding the name of God, and how to make talismans and amulets

Kitab al-Mawalid - "Book of Nativities" - ancient Middle Eastern astrology

Ulum al-Ghyab - "The Occult Sciences" - not necessarily the name of an actual book, but sure it sounded like it could be one  \(_(\mathcal{V})_/\)
A/N: (low whistle) Wow. I think I need a cigarette. You might too after reading this. And, if you don't smoke... you might start. I have written romantic scenes before, but this... just kind of happened. And It. Wouldn't. Stop. I've never written anything this detailed before, but I feel like I still left it feeling tasteful. I'll leave you to decide.

You enjoy this while I go adjust the rating... I hope it was worth the wait.

Clusters of candles were scattered around the bath. They kept the light low, much lower than oil lamps. Flames danced on their wicks behind geometric cutouts, casting shapely shadows flitting across the walls. Steam lifted in slow rising plumes to mingle with the drifts of frankincense scented smoke, blending with the heady rose oil of the bath water.

Enveloped by the water and Jasmine's body, lulled by the soothing heat from both, Aladdin hovered on the edge of lucidity. Seated between her legs, head pillowed by the swell of her breasts, he fought the urge to sleep. Despite the promise of the rest of their evening to come, blissfully content in this moment, it was hard to not succumb to the call of a restful sleep that had been so perniciously evading him.

She could tout the magnificence of his hands all she wanted, but Jasmine's were capable of just as much magic. Reclined on the slant the soaking tub, she dug her thumbs into the seemingly impenetrable knots embedded at the crook of his neck. The result of her work was a series of whimpers and groans as the cords of taut muscle became pliant under the pressure of her touch.

It was weakening his resolve. How could he keep all this misery buried deep inside when he was literally melting under her fingertips? Her efforts weren't lost on him. She was trying so hard. Jasmine was the Sultana of Agrabah — a woman so powerful she had an army at her beck and call — yet, here she was laboring over him. As much as he needed her to know that he was fine, she was trying to prove that she could handle that he wasn't.

Shame was burrowing into his heart. The fact that he had doubted her ability to juggle the needs of her people with the needs of the people she loved, frankly, that embarrassed him. If he had learned anything from his time as Prince Ali, he knew, above all else, Jasmine considered duty the foremost aspect of character. To accept responsibility only to shrink away from it when times became too hard, in her mind, that was an act of cowardice. And, trapped alone in this spiral by his own stubbornness, he had lost his perspective, forgetting an important truth. Yes, Jasmine had accepted a crown and the duty it carried. But, she had also accepted his hand, despite having refused so many others. The woman who had fought so avidly to avoid a marriage that would put someone in a position of authority over her people, had chosen him above all others. Jasmine would be damned before she willingly neglected the duty she had willingly accepted as wife.

At that realization, his efforts to protect her suddenly felt selfish and misguided rather than self-sacrificing and noble.

"I feel guilty," he offered meekly.
"About what?"

"Ruining such an important day."

Chuckling at his disappointed whine as her hands left his shoulders, they wrapped around his waist. Dropping her cheek to his shoulder instead, she kissed the oil soaked skin with the side of her mouth.

"While it was not your finest moment, I understand why you reacted the way you did." One of her hands migrated up the sensitive skin of his stomach, tracing the definition of the subtle muscles on his abdomen. He shivered, and she smiled against his skin. "Regardless of what transpired, it doesn't negate the impact the school will have on your old neighborhood. Aladdin…" Her next words carried a sense of awe. "...you didn't just change lives today, you saved them."

"It's not enough, Jas," he sighed, squeezing his eyes tight shut, forbidding to release the tears fighting for freedom. "It feels like it will… I'll never be enough. I wasn't raised to be a prince. No matter what I do, I'll never be what you need."

At his words, Jasmine's grip tightened protectively, cinching him to her like a rope.

"I am the only person who gets to decide what I need. And, once I make up my mind, have you ever known me to waiver?"

"You changed your mind about me before," he reminded. "You thought I was a thief, remember?"

"You are a thief," she laughed incredulously.

"Yeah, but in the street, when you asked for the bracelet… you thought I was the worst kind of thief."

"I knew what you were from the moment you stepped between Jamal and me." She tugged at the lobe of his ear with her teeth. " The kind that steals hearts."

"You changed your mind about Ali…"

"No, I didn't, Aladdin," she pulled back when she realized her attempts were in vain, and he could hear how affronted she was at his suggestion. "I knew what Ali was from the beginning too — a pretender, just like every other prince who swaggered into my throne room. Four little words — Do you trust me? When you spoke those words Prince Ali ceased to be and I recognized my thief all over again. There was nothing to change my mind about." Guiding his head with a hand at his opposite cheek, she met the periphery of his dark gaze. "You have nothing to prove to Agrabah, or to me. Stop living in the fear that I'm going to wake up one morning and suddenly realize I've made a mistake. I'm never going to regret choosing you."

"Promise?"

"I swear." Brown eyes bored into him, hard as diamonds, not out of anger, but out of steadfast determination. "I love you, doniety."

A slow easy grin pitched up the corner of his mouth. "I love you too, habibti."

Urging his with a gentle push, and a peck on his cheek, she suggested, "Let's eat."

As she donned her robe, he was dismayed at the loss of all that soft, supple skin as she tied the wrap around her waist. Squeezing a towel around her long, ebony hair, she removed the excess
water before twisting the fabric around her head with practiced precision. Picking up her brush from the vanity, she made her way to the balcony. Slipping on a navy sirwal, he decided to forgo a tunic and follow her instead.

The staff had moved the majlis and rug from the lounge space in their suite to the expansive open balcony, where they could enjoy the view of the thriving city under the crescent moon and twinkling stars. Silver trays were spread across the rug, picnic style, filled with an assortment of snacks and finger foods — goat cheese and bread slices, pomegranates, dried meats, olives. A carafe of wine stood next to two glasses, which Jasmine filled as he approached, offering one as he sat. Taking a sip, he set it aside before plopping down casually to her left, leaning on his side with a propped elbow and legs stretched away from her. Jasmine spread the soft cheese on two slices of bread as Aladdin tossed olives into the air, catching them with his mouth.

"Well, I see you're in better spirits," she teased. "Looks like tonight is just what the physician ordered."

"The only medicine I need are your hands on my back." Rolling his shoulders he marveled at the newfound release of tension. "I swear, you have a healer's touch."

"Perhaps I missed my true calling?"

In a single deft motion, Jasmine unwound the towel, tossing it aside, releasing damp, wavy tendrils that curtained her face. As she reached for the brush, his hand halted her movement as it rested over the top of her hand gripping the brush.

"Allow me?"

Considering, she shrugged a shoulder affirmatively, harboring an amused smirk. Pushing himself off his elbow, he positioned himself behind Jasmine like she had done in the bath, his legs kicked out at each of her sides, the inside of his acrobats calves pressed firmly to the outside of her thighs, leaving just enough space to work. Hands starting at the small of her back, he ghosted his fingers over her delicious curves through the thin silk of her robe. Grazing the pads of his fingers effortlessly over the corrogation of her ribs, the sharp angles of her shoulder blades, the ridges of her spine, he sank them into the sensitive skin of her scalp. Raking his trimmed nails up and into her crown, parting the black veil to opposite sides. Humming her approval, she clenched her hands into his legs, digging her own nails into his calves, arching her back into his chest. Reversing the direction of his hands, he drew out and gathered the length of her hair into his hands.

Starting at the nape of her neck, he pulled the soft bristled brush up and back in long swoops. The tangles unraveled under his strokes, hair falling down the slope of her hunched shoulders as she let her head drop to her chest in subdued relaxation. In fluid movements from the root of her bangs, then each of her temples, he slicked the top layer of hair smooth in three more long strokes. Having successfully tamed the wildness of her tresses, he repeated his motions through two more rounds, merely for the sake of loving the touch of her hair as much as she loved it being touched.

Discarding the brush next to the now ignored feast, he put his nimble fingers to task in separating her hair into evenly sized portions. Sure, any handmaiden worth her salt could braid, but none of them had the practiced dexterity of his magician's hands. Parting, twisting, overlapping, he maneuvered the parceled out strands into an intricate work of art befitting any queen.

In one last slow caress across the span of her neck, he swept his completed masterpiece over her shoulder. The plait cascaded down over her left breast. Nape once again exposed, he pressed his lips to the very center of her neck just below the hairline before trailing a line of excruciating slow kisses down her vertebrae. From the front, he hooked his fingers under the fabric draped over her
shoulders, loosening it away enough to slip off each side as he worked downward, until it fell, pooled at her waist. Reaching the limits of how far he could bend in such close proximity, he again reversed direction to drag the velvety inside of his bottom lip upwards adjacent to her spine until he reached the pulse point at her throat.

Either Rajah had found his way past a locked set of doors, or he had reduced his wife to panting.

"After all this time… you still… find ways… to surprise me, doniety."

"Either you're already drunk, or I'm slipping, because we both know that thing with my lip is my signature move…"

"Clearly… I meant the thing… with my hair." She corrected, examining his handiwork with a lift of the plaited tail. "Where did you learn to braid hair so skillfully, and why have you never revealed this before?"

"I used to do it for Umm." Hovering just behind her ear, he whispered. "She told me it would impress girls."

Twisting on him, bringing herself to crouch on her heels, she sunk her hands into his hair. "Consider me impressed."

Diving into him, her mouth was voracious, warring with him over who could lay claim to the other's first. Aladdin's hands exploited the delicate skin of her now exposed back. Jasmine scratched her nails over his own. Abruptly, she broke away, leaving his lips cold in her absence and eyes blinking like a drunkard. When his eyes finally adjusted again, she was recumbently stretched as far away from him as his grip on her hips would allow. One hand splayed on the majlis behind her, the other nonchalantly sucking pomegranate seeds from her index finger.

Leveling a hungry glare in her direction, huskily he demanded, "Come back here."

Darting her tongue over the juice on her lips, she replied, "Make me.

"With pleasure."

Pinning her to the cushions, he pressed his chest against hers. "Trust me, habibti…" He smiled into the line of her jaw. "... you have to be careful what you wish for."

"Three little wishes," she purred, "and, suddenly your an expert?"

Sucking at the dip in her clavicle, he mmhmm'd before working through the valley of her breasts. Each kiss a punctuation. "It's. All. In. The Details."

"You've always been very detailed oriented," she all but moaned as he swiped his tongue around the 'O' of her belly button.

"I take my job very seriously," he joked. "I serve at the pleasure of the Sultana."

"At my pleasure — " She arched an eyebrow. " — or, to pleasure?"

"I like to think a little of both."

The next move he made to use his mouth sent her hands grasping for anchorage on any available object. Frantically, she fist the rug, yanking it several inches. The dinnerware rocked and clattered. Eyes cast upwards to the wide, ink-stained sky, she writhed beneath him. Jasmine wasn't
the only one seeing stars.

When she could take no more, she hooked her hands under his arms and yanked him over the top of her to finish the job he had started. The guards in the courtyard below could surely hear her — hell, probably most of Agrabah — but he couldn't bring himself to care. Considering how loud she was being, obviously neither could she. Sometimes, it was good to be Prince Consort.

In the slow de-escalation of their love, Aladdin rolled to his side to spoon her. Instead, she rotated in his arms to curl into the plane of his chest. Setting his chin atop her head, she nuzzled into his neck.

"Here's the plan," she murmured, her words thick and lazy from exertion. "I will worry about the state and politics and trade and all the other official nonsense… and you, just take care of the people… because honestly, they couldn't be in better hands." As the words fell from her lips, she clasped his hand, thumb entwining with his, her fingers enclosing around the side of his palm — a gesture of promise, a pact. "The best partnerships are built upon each party bringing their own strengths to the table. Being my prince isn't about being my equal in skill — it's about being my equal in virtue."

Ruminating on her words, he let a beat of thoughtful silence hang between them as he let them settle into his heart.

Brushing his nose along the side of hers, he whispered with a smile, "Deal."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *sirwal* — thanks to my new book, I have learned the proper name for "harem pants"

*majlis* — a low set arrangement of cushions forming seating like a couch, also a new term I learned

*Umm* — mother
Eight

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm not entirely happy with this chapter, but I really wanted to get an update posted. As reward for your patience while I was on holiday in California with my writer friends, I tried to compose a chapter that hit all the important areas — a little angst, a little fluff, a little plot momentum. This was the first time I really struggled with the dialogue though, so I'm paranoid it is too stilted and forced in some places... but not every chapter is going to be perfect, right... so I'm not going to stress over it. One the bright side, I think it's the longest chapter yet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even if the circumstances for the occasion were to bid farewell to their closest friends, their found family, Aladdin had to admit it was a refreshing change of pace to have a little fun. In the days that had passed since the incident at the madrasa, his mood had lifted. He'd allowed himself to stop dwelling on his failings, choosing instead to take advantage of the short time he had left with Dalia and Sunil. Both he and Jasmine had made every effort to the remaining spend time with them, filling their last few days together, waxing nostalgic over shared meals or listening to Jasmine play the oud while Sunil sang songs from days gone by. It all felt very reminiscent of their earliest days together in the palace, before expectations and duty had become shackles around his wrists. But, Aladdin knew that like all good things, this too would come to an end. One last night together, a party, to distract from the inescapable fact that Dalia and Sunil would be leaving upon the mid-morning tide.

The gathering was a small affair compared to public events that drew citizens from all over Agrabah, such as the Harvest Festival. Despite being restricted to invitation only for those who had worked with and known Dalia and Sunil, the guest list was much larger than Aladdin preferred. A small part of him was irritated that he was expected to spend part of their last evening together playing host. Partygoers approached the two couples to pay their respects to their two rulers and bid a safe journey to the departing pair. Taking it in stride as best he could, Aladdin grit his teeth through the beginning of the evening, plastering on a smile and leaning hard into the charm for which he was so well known.

Eventually, the line of well wishers evaporated, the crowd dividing into clusters around the Grand Hall, availing themselves of food and drink, and the amusements of conversing and dancing. When the music from Sherabad dance rose up from the ensemble of musicians, the crowd parted to witness the feat of their Prince's legendary dancing. Unsurprisingly, thanks to his lightness of foot, Aladdin had taken to dancing just fine without magical intervention. When the recognizable tune filled the air, he would always feign embarrassment, claiming he didn't want the attention. Inevitably, Jasmine would lead him out and through the beginning steps before he inevitably stole the show, leaving her behind laughing and clapping with the other guests. It had become customary — the music would begin, Aladdin would refuse, Jasmine would coerce him, and within a few minutes, the show would begin. It was a game they played at every party, and all the guests participated.

Landing the backflip that had now become his signature big finish, Aladdin staggered off the dance floor, breathless and thirsty, the manic beat of his heart drowned out by the thundering applause.
Sunil handed his a glass of something, of what, he didn't even care as long as it was liquid. Hugging up against his free arm, Jasmine raised up to plant an appreciative kiss on his cheek for once again playing along.

"For the record," Sunil said, raising the hand that held his cup and pointing at Aladdin, "I taught this kid all his best moves."

"You wish you still had half my moves, old man."

"Oh, it's going to be like that, huh?"

"Yeah, if you're going to be petty about it."

"C'mon Jasmine," Dalia groaned. "If we leave now, they will have no one to impress, and they'll stop."

Laughing at their respective spouses, Dalia dragged Jasmine back towards the dance floor just to show the boys how little they cared about their pissing contest, sarcastic or not.

"I feel like I should be offended right now," Sunil commented, "but, they really do have us all figured out, don't they?"

"We never had a chance. That's what you get marrying women way smarter than you."

"Yeah," Sunil agreed, before correcting, "well, smarter than you, definitely…"

"Remind me again exactly why I'm going to miss you?" Aladdin raised a brow in question.

"Who else is going to keep you honest when I'm gone?"

"Speaking of which… joking aside, I never apologized for what I said the other day."

"Trust me, I'm used to dealing with you when you get all introspective and cranky."

"Still, I wanted to say it, before — "

Raising his hand, Sunil shook his head. "Don't worry about it, kid."

Turning back to the object of his affection, Sunil let the entire conversation drop. Following his gaze, Aladdin watched them gliding across the dance floor with sweeping gestures, spinning in a circle back to back. Then, he watched a smile creep across the other man's face as the two women rocked their hips in tandem, steepling their hands, giggling like teenagers. With loving eyes, Sunil was mesmerized by the former handmaiden who represented the dream he never even dared to hope for, and for whom he sacrificed all the powers of the cosmos.

A question nagged at Aladdin, after all this time.

"You would do it again, wouldn't you?" Sunil's attention returned to the conversation. "Give up absolute power just to have her."

"Would life be easier with magic?" Sunil answered his question with a question, and shrugged as he answered it. "Sure. But, what's the point of living forever and having all that power if you don't have anyone to share it with? Magic always has a price, kid. The price for me was an eternity alone, destined to serve those who only sought to serve themselves. I couldn't even help the people I loved — "
"Um... Excuse me, I'm incredibly lovable."

Pushing him in the shoulder to shut him up, Sunil continued, "Every master I ever had used my magic to secure their own happiness, yet it was the greatest obstacle to happiness for me. That's the trade off. In a perfect world where I could keep magic, earn my freedom, and get the girl, it's no question. Who wouldn't want the power to give their loved ones everything they want, to protect them, maybe even make the world a better place. But, that wasn't an option for me. So, if the choice was between an infinite lifetime with magic, or a mortal lifetime with Dalia... hell, that's easy."

"We've seen mortals use magic though," Aladdin offered.

Scrutinizing him, Aladdin could see Sunil trying to work out where this was heading. Fighting the tightening in his throat that strangled his next question, Aladdin examined the remaining contents of his cup.

"I know I shouldn't think about it... but, if Jafar had been a better man, used his power for the good of Agrabah —"

"There is a big difference between having power and taking power." Sunil stated, cutting him off. "Jafar took what was not meant for mortal men, and sacrificed the one thing that made him different than you."

Recalling again that conversation in the dunes, Aladdin stiffened. "We had more in common than I'd like to admit."

"You have more power than you realize, Aladdin, and it's the kind someone like Jafar could never have — the kind that is earned, not taken."

"Okay, you're right. I am different from Jafar. The Cave of Wonders chose me for a reason, so maybe that means..."

"You know what I admire most about you, kid?"

His well timed interruptions were not lost on Aladdin. "My disarming charisma and instant likability?"

Poking him firmly in the chest with a chuckle, Sunil said, "That big 'ol heart of yours. You genuinely care about people, and you always put other people's needs first. That is what makes you powerful. Not being a prince, or having magic, so don't sacrifice it in the pursuit of some imagined greater power. Do no thirst for what cannot be quenched, no matter the size of the cup."

"Magic never made you a villain, Sunil. It can't be all bad."

"No," he agreed, with a heavy, somber smile. "It only ever made me a slave. Jafar too, in a different way." Sunil finished the last of his drink. "It doesn't matter the intention, there is always a price. Always. It never names it up front, and the more you're willing to pay, the more it will take, until there is nothing left. Magic eventually makes slaves of us all."

Before Aladdin had time to really process the wisdom imparted from his friend, Hakim appeared at his side, expression severe.

"Your Highness, forgive my interruption, but I have urgent news for the Sultana."

Cutting through the mass of bodies in motion, Jasmine was already making her way toward them,
Dalia in tow.

"Is everything alright, Hakim?" She asked as he bowed.

"A student from the bimarestan just arrived at the gates with an urgent message from the head physician. He's waiting for you and the vizier in your study."

A medical student arrives at the palace with urgent news just days after rumors are spread about plague in the city. It didn't take a great leap of intelligence to figure out the message. Aladdin felt a knot twist into his gut. Tamping down the anger that had flared days ago, he reminded himself that Jasmine was safely back in the palace, so he tried to focus on the conversation unfolding around him.

"Stay," Jasmine said, putting a hand against Dalia's arm. "You are relieved of duty, remember? Stay with Sunil and enjoy the rest of your party.

"How am I supposed to have fun when I know what's a stake here?"

"Simple. As your Sultana, I command you to have fun."

Leveling a glare at Jasmine, she frowned, pointing to Aladdin. "It's only funny when you do that kind of stuff to him."

"I can handle this. Besides, the prince is coming with me. So, go off and pretend to be having a good time. As soon as I know what is happening, you will too."

"Fine." Dalia rolled her eyes, admitting defeat. "I guess I'll just be over here acting as if the city isn't in dire peril..."

"I'll handle this." Sunil wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulders and guided her towards a table where she could complain while she ate her feelings.

"Lead the way, Hakim," Jasmine said reaching for Aladdin's hand to bring him along.

The sounds of the party died behind them, the music and voices fading behind marble walls and columns as they entered the administrative wing of the palace. Two guards were already posted outside her study when they arrived, one opening the door for them to pass. Inside was another guard who stood deathly still in opposition to a young man who was pacing nervously, every inch of his body covered by layers of plain linen, holding what looked to be a head covering under his arm.

Jumping a bit when he saw the Sultana enter, he bowed awkwardly like he didn't know what to do with his hands. "Your Majesty, I apologize for interrupting your gathering, and I thank you for seeing me. Forgive me if I keep a safe distance. I'm immune to the disease, but I don't wish to possibly expose my Sultana."

Dismissing his apology with a wave, she marched around her desk. "Your master was wise to send you. The rumors are true, then?"

"It's already spread through the poorest quarter and into the market district." He replied. "The captain has already promised extra patrols to minimize panic and set about quarantining the sick."

"Is the bimarestan well equipped for such an influx of patients? What resources can we provide? What will you need?"
"Beds are filling up quickly, and the first priority will be securing enough food to feed everyone."

"What about medicine?"

"It won't matter."

Everyone looked towards Aladdin before he even realized he was speaking.

"The prince is right, Your Majesty. The plague is unlike most ailments we see. Once infection sets in, there is very little we can do in the way of treatment besides provide comfort until they pass, or begin to recover. It simply doesn't respond to the administration of medicines the way other diseases do. Our only recourse is to fight the fever, and wait."

In all the time that Aladdin had been with Jasmine, he had never seen her look helpless. Now she stood at her desk, searching the faces around her for the slightest hint of guidance. No one had anything better to offer.

"Alright then… it's late, and I fear there isn't much we can accomplish tonight. For now, the kitchens will provide you with a supply of food, to accommodate those already in your care until we can get something more permanent arranged. Tomorrow, after fajr, I will convene a council to determine a plan of action for dealing with this crisis. Hakim, I will need you to attend. And, while I am loathe to summon the head physician away from where he is most needed, I seek his expertise in forming a proactive response."

"Of course, Your Majesty. He will gladly make the time."

Rather out of character for his normally unflappable warrior goddess, he was surprised when Jasmine slipped slowly into her chair, slumping into the backrest, gaze distant with racing thoughts. "How long should we expect this to last?"

Swallowing, the student looked to the others around the room as if he was hoping for someone else to deliver the bad news.

"A few weeks, at the earliest." Aladdin spoke to take the pressure off the young man, receiving a grateful nod for this effort, before casting his eyes to the floor, adding, "My mother lasted nearly forty days."

Closing her eyes for a long moment as she took in his words, she held her breath for the same length before asking, "Then, what else should I do?"

When no one responded to her query, it took Aladdin a second to realize she was directing the question at him, the others silently waiting for his response. Racking his brain, hoping to knock a bit of wisdom loose from his own experience, he fought the urge to panic. Mercifully, something useful managed to fall out of his mouth.

"The city is going to go from pure chaos to The Empty Quarter in about the span of a day. Those without the means to escape the city will hide in their homes, boarding up the windows and doors. Extra patrols are a good start, Hakim, but I'd be more worried about opportunistic criminals trying to take advantage of the situation than panicking citizens. I think it would be smart to keep a strong presence around the market to watch the unattended stalls and shops." The Captain nodded his agreement as Aladdin continued. "The lucky ones will end up at the bimarestan, but those who are already sick, those in the poorest quarter, are just going to find anywhere they can, waiting to die. It's important the physicians attend to the people unable to leave their homes."

"Don't worry, Your Highness, we've already made preparations for that." The medical student
replied.

"Nicely done, then," Aladdin responded, as if he knew what he was doing. He was amazed he'd made it this far, expecting any moment his foresight to lapse and leave him looking the proper idiot he expected to make of himself in these situations. "You should also summon the Imam to attend the meeting tomorrow. People will be seeking assurance and support beyond our capabilities, and the mosque will provide help in distributing resources to the homebound."

Set now with her list of tasks to focus on, he could see that Jasmine was ready to take action.

"Farooq," she called to the guard who had been waiting with the student, and he stood to attention. "Please escort the messenger to the kitchen and make the arrangements for the food delivery."

"Understood, Your Majesty," he replied, fist to his chest, moving towards the door with the student following closely behind.

"Hakim, send someone to summon the Imam."

"Of course," Hakim saluted.

"Wait!" Aladdin called, everyone stopping in their tracks. "Hakim, make sure that any guards patrolling are covered." He motioned towards the strange linen garb the student wore. "It's the best way to prevent spread of the infection."

"Noted, Your Highness. I'll see to it that anyone traveling in the city take precautions."

Assigned their tasks, the others left Aladdin and Jasmine behind in the study. Jasmine had yet to move from behind her desk, Aladdin approaching her to plop down and lean on the corner. Massaging the pockets of his eyes, he felt her arms slide around his neck, and her forehead meeting his.

"I suppose the party is over." She sighed. "We need to alert the guests."

"Take a minute," he whispered. "Let your nerves settle back into place first. If you go in there rattled, they'll believe there is reason to panic."

"Allah must be looking out for Dalia and Sunil," she offered. "It's fortunate they are leaving tomorrow morning."

"Small blessings, I guess..."

Drawing back, fire blazing in those eyes as she locked gazes with him, he could feel her vibrating with unspent nervous energy.

"I'll follow your lead on this. What resources we have are yours to command."

Tilting his head, biting back a surprised laugh, he asked, "You handing over your kingdom, just like that, to a prince? Who are you and what have you done with my wife?"

Ignoring the jest, voice strained by the severity of her words, she answered, "I trust you implicitly, Aladdin. I made you a promise to let you handle this because I trust you with my kingdom, and my life."

At the words, something shifted inside him. It solidified, gaining purchase in his heart — that big 'ol heart that Sunil had just poked and praised what now felt like hours ago — lending him a
profound sense of purpose. With her father away, at the mercy of an intangible enemy, Jasmine had never been so out of her depth before, and for once he could actually help. He knew this plague personally. He’d seen the damaged it wrecked first hand. He still carried the scars from surviving it, physically and emotionally. She needed him more than ever — more than a friend, more than a husband, more than someone she could trust to show her vulnerability. For the first time since he'd tricked Jafar into the lamp he remembered what it was like to be her hero. Jasmine had never needed saving, not then and certainly not now, but unlike his fearless wife, Agrabah couldn't protect itself. He got it now, what she had seen from the beginning, what she meant when she spoke of his understanding of her people. Jasmine was Agrabah's Sultana, it's indelible leader, but she had chosen Aladdin because he was it's champion.

"I won't let you down, Jasmine. I swear. Whatever happens, I'll take care of Agrabah."

Tears lingered in the corners of her eyes, not of sadness, but of immeasurable pride. Carding her fingers through his meticulously styled hair, he was beginning to suspect she secretly loved destroying it. Parting his knees, he made space for her to come closer, maneuvering to adjust for her added weight as they leaned together into the desk. Enveloped in his embrace, she finally brought her mouth to meet his. He deepened the kiss, moving his hand to the small of her back, tightening the available space between them to next to nothing. Taunting him with every graze of her pelvis against his, he fought the urge to violently clear to desk surface of its contents, and throw her down on top of it. The idea had merit. In her study was certainly something they hadn't tried yet… then her lips were abandoning his with a sigh.

"We have a party to break up."

"And, then we can finish the party we just started, right?" He urged hopefully.

"Actually, doniety," she said, lips still distractingly within reach, "we have an early start tomorrow, remember?" Stepping out of his grasp, she patted his cheek. "I'll take care of the guests. You go ahead and retire."

Wounded, he threw his head back, "Really?"

"You'll survive," she promised, adding, "I'll be up shortly."

Just to be petulant, he remained in dramatic repose as she exited, leaving him alone. Bracing his hands on the edge of the desk, he gripped it tightly, forcing his pent up energy elsewhere so he could walk. Offhandedly, he wondered if he would have enough time for a cold bath before Jasmine made it back to their suite.

Chapter End Notes

Again, I would have liked to provide links to my research, but I cannot figure out how to get links to actually post without disappearing when I hit save.

oud — hopefully I have identified it properly since I don't really have footage I can go back and check, and I'm working mostly from memory here, but I'm mostly positive this is the name of the string instrument Jasmine was playing in Aladdin's loft. I trust those of you in the the know to correct me if I am wrong.
The second of the Five Pillars of Islam, the Salat states that Muslims are to pray five times throughout the day, at specific times with specific purposes in mind:

**Fajr:** This prayer starts off the day with the remembrance of God; it is performed before sunrise.

**Dhuhr:** After the day's work has begun, one breaks shortly after noon to again remember God and seek His guidance.

**'Asr:** In the late afternoon, people take a few minutes to remember God and the greater meaning of their lives.

**Maghrib:** Just after the sun goes down, Muslims remember God again as the day begins to come to a close.

**'Isha:** Before retiring for the night, Muslims again take the time to remember God's presence, guidance, mercy, and forgiveness.

I figured it was just easier to post an explanation for all of these in case I make reference to them in future chapters.

*The Empty Quarter*— this is probably my favorite name for anything, ever. It's just so haunting and menacing sounding. I love it. It is the English translation of *Rub al Khali* the name for the desert between Saudi Arabia and Oman. It is the largest, continuous sand desert in the world, virtually absent of all geographic features besides sand dunes. At 1 million sq miles (650k sq km) it's larger than France. In Arabic legend, this is also the home of wandering *djinn*. 
Chapter Notes

A/N: Not to brag, but this may be some of my finest work ever. I am particularly proud of a few turns of phrase I conjured writing this.

That being said, I am going to preface this chapter by saying that I took a few liberties for plot-based purposes. To blatantly steal a phrase I read from the author's note of another Aladdin fic, I would like to state for the record that I am a non-Muslim potato. Beyond the fact that I immediately resonated with that term, and laughed way harder than I should have until I cried, there is no better way to describe the limitations of knowledge/insulting levels of ignorance regarding the Islamic faith, their complex system of belief, and the many interpretations of that faith. I am a history teacher, I have studied world religions, and I know a little more than your average non-Muslim. I find it to be a fascinating system of belief, and like all belief systems, having parts I agree and disagree with, varying wildly upon the different interpretations. Based upon that knowledge, this important plot point came to me, and because it worked so seamlessly, I ran with it. As always, I am relying on the expertise of my practicing, Arabic speaking readers to call me out on my shit if I just got this so very wrong.

So, with that noted, enjoy the next part.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The palace felt empty and devoid, but not as much as the desolate city. Nine days after the palace had received confirmation of plague, word had traveled outside the kingdom driving away travelers and traders. Ships were absent from the port, those docked at the time of the first reported cases now having fled before their sailors could bring it aboard. With the gates closed, guards posted on both sides of the wall to keep the sick in and the healthy out, the caravans bringing crucial supplies were now forced to camp at wahahs and wadis where the guards were sent to retrieve the goods, before moving onto the next leg of their journey. No sounds of life could be heard rising up from the sooj.

How was Agrabah to survive thirty-one more days, especially when it was going to get worse before it got better?

True to her promise, Jasmine had remained sequestered inside the palace, more isolated than she had ever been in her life. Those same nine days since confirming the outbreak were the same number of days since Dalia and Sunil had left. Escaped, really. Jasmine had planned to escort them to the port, see for herself this ship she had commissioned for them, and appreciate a long, lingering goodbye. Instead, Aladdin and her had to settle for forced, hasty farewells in the throne room before Hakim saw them safely to the ship.

Dalia — her best friend, her surrogate big sister, her Grand Vizier — gone in the time of her greatest need. Sunil, whose indispensable wisdom she had come to rely upon, gone with her. Baba was still over a dozen days away, soon to begin his return journey from Sherabad with Aunt Indira, but not soon enough. Even her interactions with Aladdin, now her sole confidante, had been limited to passing moments.
Serving as her general on the ground in a war against this disease had him rising early and retiring late, when he came to bed at all. Thankfully, most mornings she saw him at the council briefings, all the members reporting directly to her about the state of the available resources, the developments at the bimarestan, the extent of the impact on the population. Observing from the head of the table, she would watch as Aladdin marked the progress of the disease on a map of the city, as he delegated tasks as confidently as any leader she had seen, as he debated the merits of possible solutions with the other members to tackle the ever-developing problems that arose. Despite his repeated criticism of his competence as a ruler, he was proving quite adept.

Surely, his previous experiences had primed him for this particular crisis, but she had never once seen any of the members of their makeshift council dismiss him outright or question the basis of his authority. Much to her surprise, they hadn't questioned hers either. Obviously, she had to security of Hakim's loyalty, but the other three men took no umbridge over being directed by a street rat or a woman.

Ibrahim, the imam, frequently offered blessings upon them, remarking how their unconventional union and rule was truly a gift from Allah to the kingdom of Agrabah for all it had done to improve the lives of the citizens. The other two, Jibril, the head physician, and Navid, the master of the Merchant Guild, were too practical to concern themselves with petty squabbles over the power structure of the kingdom, especially when it was proving so fruitful, and there were more pressing concerns about the survival of the kingdom itself. Jibril couldn't heal without the resources Jasmine had been able to generously provide as Sultana. Navid had enough foresight to know that if the death toll rose high enough, the need to fill jobs in labor and trade could easily be filled by the other half of the surviving population.

She had been very lucky that in such a vulnerable moment in her kingdom's history and her short reign, she had been delivered the five best partners a Sultana could have hoped to find. More than once, she had considered keeping this a permanent advisory council after the crisis abated. She had no need for aristocratic viziers when she could deal with the experts directly.

At the same time, thanks to her promise to Aladdin, and despite the support of those she had gathered around her, felt she was contributing very little. She was disappointed in herself with how quickly she had become comfortable allowing others to do the heavy lifting in her fear that she did not have the knowledge and experience necessary to deal with this crisis. In effort to feel as if she wasn't just sitting idle, she had spent the majority of her time reading everything known about disease, learning about different types of illness, their causes, how they spread, and applied it to what she knew about the infrastructure to the city. Trapped as she was, the plague felt interminable, but eventually it would pass. When it did, she would make improvements to clean water access and sanitation her first priority.

And, as a side project, as a show of gratitude to Jibril and the tireless efforts of the physicians at the bimarestan, she had already begun drawing up plans for expanding the hospital, dedicating long term funding for the attached medical school, as well as financing an expedition for students to study the medical advancements made in kingdoms abroad. She hoped it would provide the framework for a scholarly and cultural exchange program through which to share the known world's accumulation of knowledge. Perhaps, someday, she would be able to build an immense library to serve as a repository for all that acquired knowledge, drawing students from all over to study.

Though not the first of their reforms, together she and Aladdin had built a school as their first monumental achievement. Perhaps, this library could be the keystone of their legacy. She couldn't help but smile at the idea.
The thought of her husband triggered an ache at his absence. Most of the time they had spent together since the party had been while they were in bed asleep. She fought the urge to be sad — it was the epitome of selfishness and privilege to sit in the protection of the palace and pine for her husband when unknown numbers of wives were lamenting the absence of husbands who would never come home. She could never tell him this, knowing what it had cost him, but she was thankful Aladdin was had grown immune. She counted herself very lucky that her husband's health was not something she would have to worry about along with everything else. It reminded her that she should take the time to express her immeasurable gratitude to Allah for this small mercy during al-Isha before retiring.

Raised voices outside her study drew her attention, and she abandoned her work on her desk to find the source of the noise. Coming to stand on the balcony that wrapped around the two story hall in the middle of the administrative wing. Jasmine saw Aladdin taking the stairs two at a time, arguing with Jibril and Hakim as the trudged behind him.

"If you won't listen to me, maybe you'll listen to your Sultana!"

"I'm afraid to even ask," Jasmine announced, all of their heads snapping upwards.

The two men lingering behind paused a step apart to drop a bow and a salute respectively. Aladdin continued towards her undeterred.

"Excellent timing!" He exclaimed, a manic quality to his statement that unnerved her. "Would you be so kind as to inform Jibril and Hakim that they are completely overreacting?"

Lifting a skeptical brow, she crossed her arms and leaned her hip into the rail enclosing the balcony. "That depends entirely on what you've done this time."

"Me?" His voice went high, hand to his chest, offended. "I haven't been able to do anything, and that's the problem." Throwing a thumb over his shoulder as the two men finally joined them on the balcony. "These two insisted I return to palace."

"Your Majesty," Jibril spoke, his tone already sounding apologetic. "For the sake of brevity, I will be blunt. Our dear prince needs some rest."

"Sure, why not?" Exasperated, Aladdin threw his hands up in the air melodramatically. "We're at peak crisis, but I'll just take a day off."

Concerns shifting at his word, Jasmine pushed off the rail. "What do you mean? What happened?"

"Well, I'd barely been at the bimarestan five minutes when I received a message from Ibrahim that the samaritans from the mosque are refusing to continue visiting the poor. They're complaining about the conditions being najis."

"Sire, with all due respect," Hakim sighed, holding the expression of someone braced for a blowback of hostility. "When that man stood up and proclaimed this plague was a scourge from Allah to punish the poor for their wickedness, your response was to shout Allah"
Yahkthek, then threatened to lock his children up in a room with plague corpses."

Aghast, Jasmine covered her mouth, whispering through her fingers, "Aladdin! You didn't!?"

"No! Incorrect!" He pointed, voice strained. "What I said was, how would he feel if his children were trapped in their home with their dead loved ones? It wasn't a suggestion! I just wanted him to think next time before declaring himself the next prophet and decreeing Allah's will!"

Taking a deep breath, Jasmine inhaled and exhaled deeply before asking, "Can we jump directly to the part where you're yelling at each other outside my study?"

"My Sultana, based on his behavior, I was concerned about his own health, and I insisted the prince return to the palace" Jibril said. "His dedication has been laudable, but he has barely slept the last few days, and I've rarely seen him eat."

"Who's going to make sure that the poor have food to eat?" Aladdin countered. "I have a responsibility to take care of my own, just like they took care of me."

"Your highness," Hakim said quietly, firmly, "You have been burning the candle at both ends for ten days. No one has dedicated more time and energy to helping the people of Agrabah than you, but you are only human, and you have limits."

"Hakim is right." Jibril agreed. "How will you take care of others if you don't care for yourself."

Pleading, Aladdin turned towards his wife. "Can I get a little help here?"

Looking between the three of them, Jasmine swallowed a curse. "Gentlemen, would you give us a moment?"

Excusing themselves, they descended the stairs. Searching her face, Aladdin's eyes were full of desperation. Placing a hand against his cheek, he whined as his willful demeanor evaporated at her touch.

"Doniety, you know they're right." She pushed aside that dark curl from his eye. "This is exactly what happened at the madrasa. You're pushing yourself too hard, you're holding in too much stress, and it makes you irrational and defensive."

"That guy was an ignorant ya ibn al sharmouta. His comment was pointed directly at me."

"Agreed," she laughed softly. "But, you took the bait. You reacted exactly how he expected a street rat to respond."

Shaking his head, he whispered, "Everything I've done for them, and they still don't respect me…"

"When it comes to people like that, you could lay your hands directly upon them and heal blindness, and the minute their eyes could see you for what you were, they would spit on you." She said taking both his hands, enclosing them between hers the best she could considering the difference in their size. "Some people are just hateful and cruel. We are all born tabula rasa, but we do not get to choose the words the world writes unto our souls. We are shaped by what we are told, what we see, and how we are treated. Why do you think it was so difficult for Jafar to find someone worthy of entering the Cave of Wonders?" Taking his face in her hands, she directed her fierce gaze into his. "Do you understand what a rare form of person you are to have endured the hardships you have experienced, and to remain so fundamentally good?" Dropping her hands, she turned her gaze back to the men waiting at the bottom of the stairs. "That man may never respect you because of what you were, but I know four others who respect you in spite of it." Returning her
gaze to him, she canted her head sympathetically. "And right now, those men, and your *wife*, are very worried about you."

"*Habibti*, I appreciate that, and I love you even more for it, but this is the first thing in my life that I have ever been good at — " To which he amended when she opened her mouth in riposte, "first *legal* thing, at least. People like that man are only worried about themselves ... if I don't do this, who will?"

"If you run yourself ragged in the process, and become unable to do it as a result, who does it then? We're not telling you to stop, we're just asking you to slow down. You're no good to any of us like this."

Exhaustion evident in his face, he closed his eyes, gripped her tightly around the waist, and said, "Fine. I'll rest. But, just for tonight."

Smiling triumphantly, she tugged him along at arm's length like a pet on a leash as he reluctantly followed. He looked absolutely defeated, but she could deal with his pouting if it meant he would listen to reason and take care of himself.

"The prince will see you at the council briefing in the morning, gentlemen." She announced to Jibril and Hakim before entering the hall to the royal suite.

On their way, Jasmine stopped a servant to inform the kitchen that the prince would be taking his evening meal in their suite. Entering their rooms, Jasmine needed no other evidence that something was wrong with Aladdin than his complete silence. Guiding him to the bed, he planted his feet, bending his knees over the edge as he dropped his full weight backwards, surrendering into the bed.

Leaving him long enough to fetch something more comfortable to sleep in, Jasmine pulled open the doors of the wardrobe. Obviously, she didn't spend a great deal of time personally attending to his clothes, and she was a little embarrassed she relied so much on the servants as she searched through the folded stacks on the shelves, unable to find what she was looking for. Finally locating the *sirwal*, it sat on top of a simple wooden box she didn't recognize. Setting the *sirwal* aside, she lifted the hinged lid a few inches. Inside, she saw a faded purple *kufi* flattened against a folded red *vest*. Lifting the top layer of clothes, she saw the familiar striped outfit that he had worn with it.

Jasmine had always wondered, but had never asked what had happened to the outfit. After he'd been given several new sets, the original had just disappeared. She assumed that he had held onto it all this time for sentimental reasons. It broke her heart to speculate on the alternatives.

Having changed, Aladdin crawled into bed with Jasmine, laying his head upon her lap while she set against the backrest, fingers trailing through his hair. She didn't encourage him to talk or badger him with a lecture. They just sat in companionable silence, appreciating this fleeting moment together in a time of chaos as Jasmine slowly lulled Aladdin into the sleep he'd been avoiding.

The quiet gave her time to think over the problem of how to attend to the needs of the poor. If she had been even the slightest bit ill, she would have an entire army of physicians, servants, and family to attend to her needs. Surely, not everyone was being as heartless as the man at the *mosque*, but if there were enough *samaritans* refusing, and the number of sick was still rising, then they were definitely going to be short handed on people willing to deliver food, attend to the needs of the sick, or simply just visit long enough to fight the crippling isolation. If it were up to Aladdin, he would tend to each house personally, even if it killed him.

Sometimes, he was the world's biggest idiot. Other times, he really was too good for this world.
The nagging urge crept back into her mind, convincing her again that she wasn't doing enough. She was surprised when this time it was the voice of her mother.

*We will only ever be as happy as our least happy subject.*

Then, conjured by Aladdin's awful remarks, an image appeared in her mind.

How many days had he sat beside his mother's corpse waiting for someone, anyone to discover them? How many little Aladdins were out there right now waiting for the same thing? Unfortunately, Jasmine knew the horror of watching the light fade from your mother's eyes, but what was it like for a child to see that light fade and know that with it had died the only love you had ever known? That the sickness that had spared you had taken instead the only person who had ever wanted you?

*...if I don't do this, who will?*

Looking out the open balcony, half a day's light remained over the silent city. She could visit at least ten homes before the servants would be bringing Aladdin's meal. But, the only people in the streets were her own patrols — they would recognize her immediately. Reconsidering what she had found inside the wardrobe, a terrible plan formed in her head.

*Somedtimes, Princess, sometimes you just have to take a risk.*

If she was caught, Aladdin would be furious. No argument or reasoning or flirtatious banter would make him understand what she had been thinking. Yes, he wanted the people, now his people, to act in accordance with the duty they had towards their fellow man, but he absolutely hadn't meant for her to take it upon herself to fix that. So, she just couldn't get caught. That's fine. It's not like she hadn't managed to sneak out of the palace before, and since then, she'd learned a few things from him. Besides, it wasn't like she wouldn't take precautions.

Having finally succumbed to several days worth of exhaustion, Aladdin was dead to the world. Gently, she slid her lap from under his head, replacing it with a pillow. He barely noticed before he shifted, wrapping the pillow in a stranglehold. He'd be out like this for hours — she had time. This would work. Everything would be fine. Opening the wardrobe again, she popped the lid of the wooden box and removed the garments stored inside.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Alright, again, I was forced to do research, and I don't feel particularly confident about the accuracy of some of the translations, the swears especially. I tried to do confirm accuracy through multiple sites and trying to search out different versions, but I was worried about changing the spelling of some of these. I know how confusing English is, and how one word can mean five different things, and how a slight spelling difference can make two words vastly different. So, I'm going to trust what I found until someone tells me otherwise or suggests something better.

*wahah*- oasis

*wadi*- stream, river, dry bed, or valley

*sooq*- marketplace
najis- things that are impure or unclean, making them unfit for prayer. I have often seen Muslims wash their hands and feet before praying at a mosque.

'iyaada- one of the duties Muslims have to other Muslims, in this case, visiting the sick

tabula rasa - "blank slate", this one is actually Latin, but the concept is inspired by Islamic teachings. It is a philosophical idea along the lines of nurture versus nature, that we are born "blank", lacking preconceived notions about anything, and our learned experience dictates who and what we become. It is my understanding that, whether it is referred to tabula rasa or not in Islam, this concept is applied to children making them incapable of sin prior to adulthood. Basically, if you die as a child, you automatically go to heaven b/c as a kid, you cannot be held responsible for your actions.

Allah yahkthek- "May God rip out your soul"... still not sure about this one, but I really love the punch of this as an insult

ya ibn al sharmouta - "Son of a bitch", though I am confused b/c I saw another word for bitch, and saw this translated on another site as "son of a whore". But, "Son of a bitch" is my second go to curse after fuck, so I really wanted to include it
Ten

Chapter Notes

A/N: First, refer to previous author note and consider this chapter a continuation of it's ramblings. Second, again, I want to take a moment to express my thanks to readers and reviewers on this story. You’ve been my sole inspiration to continue writing, and a few of you have left some truly heartwarming, tear-inducing reviews (Olivia, I'm looking at you! I wish you had an account so I could have sent you a proper message expressing my gratitude. If you really like my style, and ever want to give my original work a read, and give my ego a boost in the process, you just let me know. I'm looking for betas.) So, again, my ever-loving thanks to all of you.

I made a discovery doing research last night that resulted in this chapter, and a big part of the plot progression, basically writing itself. This story is falling together with scary serendipitous beauty.

Also, I'm trying really, really hard not to get excited about this as I'm superstitious, and fear I'll jinx it with all the hype and dreams I will build up for it... but did you hear they announced development for ALADDIN 2. I cannot remember the last time in my life I wanted something as bad as this! Make this happen universe... you owe me one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A light weight falling to rest on his closed eyelid sent his eyes twitching briefly before Aladdin shifted to his opposite side, curling around his pillow again. A few more small objects falling into his bed-mussed hair went unnoticed as they sat discarded. It wasn't until something fell into the shell of his upturned ear that he bolted upright. Snapping out of his dead sleep, he aggressively swiped at his ear, making the kind of terrified squeals he normally reserved for finer moments of bravery, like all those times he had been cornered by the palace guards in the corridors. Dislodging whatever had fallen into his ear, he pulled his hand away to examine the spider or beetle he imagined crawling into his ear canal. Instead, all that he found was the one half of a pale beige shell. A pistachio shell, to be accurate, like the others that were scattered across his sheets and pillow. Two more separated pieces of shell rained down from above. Tipping his head slowly backwards, he laid eyes on the furry little culprit cheerfully prying out the green nuts as he sat atop the wooden overhang of the four poster bed.

The the initial frenzy of alarm had faded, but Aladdin was well and truly awake after such a fright. From the look of it, he had only managed a few blissful hours of sleep. The light filtering through the gauzy curtains around the bed was still bright and full. Jasmine must have closed them when she had slipped out. He didn't know how long she had been gone, but she left to return to her work while he slept. He remembered she had made a point to stop one of the servants and arrange for a meal to be brought to him, ensuring he actually ate something more substantial than the quick snack he would settle for, if he ate anything at all. By the angle of the light, he still had plenty of time before he could expect anyone to arrive.

Apparently, Abu had found the pouch of one of the very snacks he had stashed up there. A few nights ago, he'd nicked them from the dry storage on his return journey to the depths of the unoccupied dungeons and the secret reliquary that he had found hidden there. For the first few days
of the plague crisis, he'd been able to ignore the voices of doubt, but as he grew weary and stressed, they had called back to him. They made him question things he had learned to be true, like that he was managing this crisis amazingly well, and that he could in fact be a strong, capable leader.

The harder and longer he worked, the less he slept and ate, the more susceptible he became to their provocations. Six days after plague had been confirmed in the city, after Sunil had sailed away from the shores of Agrabah taking Dalia with him, the mystique and promise of al-sihr became a temptation he could no longer ignore.

While Aladdin was basically literate, he wasn't a strong reader. After he had come to live at the palace, he realized the limitations that his lack of education would cause him. Wanting to improve his basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, he'd searched the library hoping to find something he could use to practice. There he had discovered a few old primers for school age children. He assumed they were the same ones that Jasmine had used when she had first begun her lessons. Embarrassed as he was at the idea, he knew that he had to start somewhere.

Like so many times before, he'd gone to Sunil begging for help, to make him better, to make him more than he was. Sunil provided explanations to the concepts Aladdin didn't understand, then they practiced identifying the more common words in the books by sight. The effort paid off faster than Aladdin had expected, and his reading comprehension improved enough to better understand most of the words he now saw on official documents and correspondence, but it didn't make him better at understanding what the information really meant. Not to mention that while he could tell you what the word was, and maybe what it meant, he was still painfully slow at doing so. Fluency only came with consistent practice, and it took more time than Aladdin could reasonably dedicate to it. Despite practicing as often as he could, even taking advantage of the time allotted by so many sleepless nights, it was still a tedious process.

Which is why he had smuggled a handful of the books into his bedroom after that second trip, hoping he would be able to read them at his own pace rather than spend hours hiding out in the dungeons, having to make excuses for his disappearances. Stashing them in the rafters above them bed, he left the pouch of pistachios with them, in case he would want a midnight snack while reading. Leave it to Abu to ferret out the location of any food he'd left hidden around the palace.

Standing up on the bed, he stepped to prop a bare foot onto the bedside table, using it as a step before leaping up to catch the rafters in both his hands. As an added benefit, he scared the life out of Abu who screeched as he dropped the pouch, nuts spilling everywhere. Laughing, Aladdin didn't feel the least bit bad for returning the favor.

"Serves you right, you mangy snack bandit." Both hands occupied holding up his body weight, he jutted his chin towards the mess. "Don't think you're not cleaning that up."

The monkey skulked back to the spilled nuts, and began to pick up the strewn pistachios one by one, dropping them in the bag, chittering indignantly like he was cursing under his breath.

Expertly suspending himself from the rafter with one hand, Aladdin tapped along the top of the rafter until his fingers fell on the spines of the stacked books. Using his forearm to drag them to the edge, he maneuvered them flat against his chest, cradling them tight with the same arm as he dropped back down to the mattress with a bounce.

His selection of just a few hadn't been easy — Jafar had acquired quite the collection. Considering that Aladdin's knowledge of magic basically consisted of genies have it and you don't, he figured that much like the process of reading, he should start with a primer.

The first of the three books he had grabbed was called Ghayat al-Hakim, "The Goal of the Sages".
It consisted of four volumes which seemed to cover the general areas of magic from the workings of the universe to the bodies found within, including how to foretell the future based on their positioning. Stones, colors, and incense all had unique aspects, and the book explained how to use them to achieve specific magical outcomes. There were recipes for concoctions one could brew that upon drinking would alter and affect to the benefit of the imbiber, or for the ill of your enemies. He learned there were an array of curses one could use for the same purpose.

An index in the back of the book organized a list of spells by function. Some benign and helpful, such as increasing the yield of a crop for a season or protecting it from the ravages of drought. Others went against "the rules" that the former djinn had expressly forbade breaking, like making people fall in love. One in particular had been marked by a now frayed ribbon — to find a lost treasure. Running his finger over the aged ink, a shiver arced down his spine. The last time this spell had been invoked, it had led Jafar to the location of hidden cave, filled with untouchable treasures and a seemingly worthless oil lamp, that could only be retrieved by a diamond in the rough. Unbeknownst to him at the time, the casting of this spell would change the entire course of their lives. Jafar's actions may have been selfishly motivated, but in the end, the magic he had wrought had resulted in benefiting so many lives in Agrabah.

Despite Sunil's warning, Aladdin was determined to do it again. Sunil had been enslaved by magic, serving to cast his opinion of it in only a negative light. In his heart, Aladdin knew that in the right hands, magic could be a powerful tool for good.

The only problem was that these spells and potions and rituals, they all took time. Even if his lack of magical skill wasn't the issue, the more powerful spells required rare, hard to come by ingredients, or they required the specific timing of celestial alignments. Unlike djinn magic, the magic that could be accessed by man was complicated, restricted by limitations. If he wanted to put any of this to immediate use towards ending the plague crisis, maybe he would have more luck summoning someone with a little more flexibility in their practice.

Setting down the Ghayat al-Hakim, he reached for another book, moving aside a Greek compendium called Magaeia, for the book that had been left open on the table in the dungeon for the better part of two years.

Just like any other child of the desert, Aladdin had heard legends about the djinn, but until one had come billowing out of a lamp to grant him three wishes, he hadn't actually believed in them. He'd heard scary tales of shapeshifters and creatures who would feast upon human flesh, but he had no idea that there were so many kinds of djinn. Nor that at one point in time, they had been so powerful and numerous that they had built their own societies.

Ifrits roamed the desert wastes, taking up residence in the ancient ruins of civilizations past, some waiting to pounce on any unsuspecting human who came across them, others taking them as lovers, marrying them, and having children.

Unlike their desert dwelling counterparts, the Marid were drawn to water, often inhabiting oceans and wahahs. Of all the djinn, they were the most likely to offer three wishes to humans. They were the largest of their kind, towering like giants. Aladdin had never pressed Sunil to speak of his past life as a djinni — he seemed keen to move forward in the pursuit of his now attainable dreams. But, if Aladdin had to guess which kind of djinn Sunil had been, an ocean loving, wish granting giant seemed to fit the bill.

Some djinn took the form of animals, like the Hinn, others took the form of dervishes, like the Jann. Another, the Sila, were so rarely seen that some questioned their whether or not they had ever existed. All three took pleasure in meddling in human affairs, both benign or mischievous.
And, much to Aladdin's relief, enlisting the cooperation of a *djinn* didn't require to trap or trick them — according to the book, wishes could be granted as the result of kindness or favors. In some cases, *djinn* helped humans out of the kindness of their own heart, merely out of their love and fascination with humans.

They weren't all altruistic and friendly though. There were also *djinn* who seemed more like nightmarish beasts — vile monsters compared to someone like Sunil. *Palis* would feed off human blood, *ghouls* off human flesh. The most terrifying of all, the *Vetala*, would simply possess your corpse and where your body as their own. Then again, better to possess your dead body than to take it while you were still in custody of your soul. The malevolent *Shayteen* were doombringers who would happily possess you while you were still alive, using your body to commit heinous sins, serving a dark master named *Iblis*.

A shuddering realization disturbed Aladdin as he read the passage. Had that been the fate he had doomed Jafar too? He had looked so different than Genie after his transformation. Had he become a *Shayteen*? Aladdin refused to linger too long on the fear that he had inadvertently helped to bring such a demonic power into the world. If for no other reason than that, he had a responsibility to take up the use of magic for good.

The most fascinating of the *djinn* was called *Qareen*. Each human had one, referred to as a companion, who followed them through life. These were not wish granters like their cousins, and could in fact be trained to work for humans. Once compelled, a *qareen* could perform a number of feats for a human companion. They could obtain information on anyone, as *qareen* could commune with one another. And, knowing the action of other *qareens*, it could foretell some semblance of actions and events to come. It could perform small favors, such as locating lost or stolen objects. It could use it's power to compel the will of others... they could even cure illness.

As a human companion, the *Qareen* was part of the human — the darkest parts. They existed as culmination of a person's deepest fears and most sinister desires.

*Every child at birth inhales their first breath, and upon exhale rises the qareen. For that is why the child cries at birth, pained as it purges all the sin it has carried into life, for children are innocent and incapable of sin until they are adults. It is this shadow of ourselves that tempts us, urges us to commit misdeeds and hurt others. To misunderstand, to harbor animosity towards others and what they have, to seek revenge to rectify it. They succeed in using our weaknesses as weapons against us, whispering the waswasah, they cloud our mind with doubt and desperation.*

The slamming of the book echoed loudly in the empty room, Aladdin pushing it away with shaking hands. These words had suddenly become far to close for comfort. Instead, the words that Jasmine had spoken to him yesterday repeated in his mind, giving him consolation.

"*We are all born tabula rasa, but we do not get to choose the words the world writes unto our souls... Do you understand what a rare form of person you are to have endured the hardships you have experienced, and to remain so fundamentally good?*"

A strange worry haunted Aladdin that he had stumbled across something dangerous, not meant to be seen. It couldn't be that easy for humans to harness such powerful magics... could it? Obtaining information, forcing the will of others, locating stolen objects... Is that what Jafar had done? Had he been able to tame his *qareen* and use it serve him?

A heart-stopping knock on the door jolted him, sending the book in his lap to the floor his powerful thud. Shoving the books under the bed, he looked out the window again, surprised that the light had faded so dramatically, hours having passed lost in these books.
"Come in," he announced, taking a few breathes, forcing down his anxiety until he was presentable.

The door opened, and Maryam entered carrying a tray of simple, yet hearty lamb and lentil stew.

"Salaam, Your Highness."

Bowing, she placed the tray in front of him as he returned the greeting. Then, picking up one of the stray half shells littering the bed, she held it, smirking curiously.

"Wasn't me, I swear."

Attending to the remaining shells, she sighed, "Cheeky little monkey always makes such a mess."

"Gets away with it too. He knows he's cute." Tearing a piece of flatbread, Aladdin dipped it into the stew. "Has the Sultana eaten yet? I was hoping she would join me."

"No, sire," Maryam replied. "The Sultana has not taken a meal since breakfast. Shortly after leaving you to sleep, she returned to her study, commanding that she was not to be disturbed and locking the doors."

That was odd. Jasmine had a fairly open door policy when it came to her study. She believed that as Sultana, she should be accessible to her people, and not sequestered in secrecy like Jafar had urged of her father. Rather, it was her bedroom, her private sanctuary with Aladdin, where she kept a tighter rein on who came and went, and made demands of privacy.

"Well, we'll see about that," Aladdin scoffed, winking at Maryam. Picking up the small dessert plate on the tray, he extended it to her offering a piece of orange-almond *halva*. "Thank you, Maryam."

Smiling broadly, she plucked one of the sliced pieces from the plate, dipping her head in a bow in appreciation, nibbling as she left the room. By the time the door shut, Aladdin was already trying to puzzle out Jasmine's motivations. If the smell of dinner wasn't so enticing to his deprived stomach, he'd march down there right now and figure out what was going on. Had something happened while he had been sleeping? He needed answers, but now that food was in front of him, he was decidedly starving. As soon as he finished, and stashed the books back in the rafters, he'd find out exactly what Jasmine was doing.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Most of the words I used in this chapter were easily defined as part of the passages, but here are two that weren't:

*waswasah* — "the whisperings", voices heard by malevolent beings to tempt man to sin and to doubt. They are intrusive thoughts that the person cannot escape. When I learned about this, I couldn't believe how perfect this belief and the concept of the *qareen* aligns with what Aladdin is experiencing. As part of my research, I read that this is associated with modern day OCD, a disorder with which I am intimately familiar, of which I primarily deal with "Pure O"— obsessive, obtrusive, racing thoughts, that in my case, take the form of crippling anxiety towards failure, abandonment, and acceptance by others.
halva — a dessert made from semolina or sesame that is flavored with fruit, rose, chocolate, coffee, and/or a variety of nuts. It kind of reminds me of nougat or fudge, but not as soft.
Eleven

Chapter Notes

A/N: I spent part of my morning sharing my critiques with a writer friend on her first draft of her second novel, and in my advice about why I was struggling to resonate with her main characters, I realized that after reading her first and the now second books, her characters weren't making enough mistakes. They weren't causing enough drama or conflict through their own actions. They were being too logical and rational and working out all their troubles in their heads before acting... and frankly, that makes for a pretty boring story. And, in this explanation, I realized why I endear myself to temperamental characters who make irrational, impulsive mistakes, and thus was struggling to embrace her characters: I AM AN EMOTIONAL SADIST... which is why I wrote this chapter for you. Clearly, I'm the reason we can't have nice things.

Strap in kids. This is where it starts to get real.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Another set of guards passed her in the empty street, and Jasmine clenched her fist in the fabric to resist the urge to adjust her headcovering again. Unlike the *shaylas* she would normally wear to cover her hair and arms outside the palace, the linen headpiece had no openings. Closer to the *burqas* that some women wore in the more conservative parts of the Islamic world, the linen covers were designed to fully cover the upper body. Honestly, she had seen much more elegant *burqas* than the plain, but practical, garment she had draped over her body. Comparatively, she felt like she was wearing a rice sack with eyeholes. Perhaps calling them eyeholes was a bit of a liberty — the screen that allowed her to see wasn't much better than a moth eaten scrap of rectangle shaped fabric that had been sewn into the front.

Her basket was much lighter at this point in the afternoon. Even if there was enough light left in the day to continue visiting homes, the amount of food and water she had been able to carry with her had limited her reach. She had just enough provisions for one more stop, and unless she wanted to risk sneaking back into and out of the palace again, that would leave her grand total of families helped at five.

At first, it had been hard to tell the homes full of the sick apart from those who were trying to keep them out. Most of the windows and doors on the street level homes had been barricaded with whatever wood scraps could be found. The only way she had been able to tell the difference was to note which side the scraps had been nailed. Those who had self-quarantined to keep out the spread of illness had secured the barriers from the inside.

The alley she had been traveling dead-ended into the backside conjunction of several buildings all squeezed together as the road curved on the opposite side. Turning around, she only made it a couple steps before she heard a squeaky hacking in the eerie silence that had fallen over Agrabah. Moving in a circle to pinpoint the direction of the sound, she continued to see nothing until another cough drew her attention towards a hanging partition she had overlooked. The dust stained and grimy curtain blended seamlessly into the aged sandstone and unpainted stucco of the surrounding walls. Another distinct cough erupted from behind the partition, higher pitched than the first.
Children. At least two of them. Cautiously, she approached, adjusting the basket to prop it on the swell of her hip. She could hear shuffling behind the curtain.

"Hello?"

The shuffling stopped dead, but she was close enough to hear the soft wheezing of labored breathing.

"Are you hungry?" She asked. "I have food."

Another silent moment passed before the blackened crescent moons of dirty fingernails curled around the edge of the curtain. A portion of a timid woman's face appeared, mostly obscured by the partition.

"Salaam," Jasmine offered, holding up the basket so she could see the provisions inside.

"Salaam," the woman returned, a hint of suspicion, peering into the basket.

Deciding that Jasmine was on the level, she drew the curtain open for her to enter a space barely wide or deep enough for an adult to lie down in either direction. Nothing more than a gap in the wall where two ill fitting building came together. Examining the small space they had cobbled into a shelter, she found the source of the coughing. In a pile of discarded clothing and carpets laid two little girls, one about four or five, the other an infant who had yet to see the completion of her first year.

The older child began hacking again, and the mother jumped to attend her, raising a cup to the girl's mouth after she had finished. Standing there, Jasmine felt rather useless, still holding the basket and watching. A small cry broke into a wail from the baby, but the mother's hands were still occupied, one helping to hold up the older daughter, the other to manage to cup.

"May I help?" Jasmine offered.

Glancing between her two sick children, the mother nodded, "Please."

Setting down the basket, Jasmine scooped up the infant. Her body felt limp, languid, and it scared Jasmine to handle her. Trying to be mindful of supporting her little body in all the right places, she bounced the baby gently. When that didn't work, she hummed and swayed back and forth instead.

In that moment, her lack of maternal skills was woefully apparent. She was thankful that as a newly crowned Sultana, she would be let off that particular hook for a least a few more years before anyone started making comments about producing heirs. Feeling rather inept, she looked back to the mother, who now that she had a moment to observe her, Jasmine realized was barely out of childhood herself. The girl had to be several years younger than she and Aladdin, not having even reached her second decade. That was how she ended up on the streets, Jasmine decided. It was a harsh assumption, but having her own experience with an overreactive father, Jasmine didn't have to jump to many conclusions as to what would have been the fate of a young, unmarried pregnant girl. Now, to make matters worse, she had a third mouth to feed while the city was ravaged by a plague.

"She's hungry."

The young mother's words knocked Jasmine out of her own head. "Oh! Yes. Let's trade."

Handing the child over to the mother, Jasmine passed her in the tight space to sit cross legged next to the older daughter. But, the mother just clutched the wailing infant, staring at Jasmine oddly. It
occurred to her then how Jasmine must look, head covered, her feminine shape concealed with the legs of her husband's striped *sirwal* exposed underneath. Flipping up the front of her cover to reveal her face, the woman breathed a sigh of relief, then tried to conceal her shock at the face she discovered there.

"I thought as much. You didn't sound like a man, but a girl in my situation can never be too careful." Dipping her head the best she could while still holding the child, she cast eyes downward. "Although, I wouldn't have guessed I was hosting royalty."

"Let's just say I'm here in an unofficial capacity and forgo all that propriety nonsense, shall we?" She waved her hand dismissively before she reached for the basket, dragging it over to where she sat. "When was the last time your other daughter ate?"

"Too long," the mother replied. "She's very weak."

"You take care of the little one, and I'll tend to your oldest."

"Thank you, Your—"

"Jasmine." She insisted.

Nodding in reluctant understanding, the young mother offered her own name in return. "Najwa."

Positioning the baby, Najwa sat, sliding down one shoulder of her simple *abaya* to allow the baby access to her breast. Removing a few pieces of flatbread from the basket, Jasmine placed a few on her knee before re-wrapping the stack, raising them towards Najwa before putting them back into the basket.

"You'll need to keep up your strength too, otherwise both of your girls will be starving."

"I know. As soon as I'm done feeding Zaynab, I'll help myself." As Jasmine returned her attention to the food on her knee, Najwa continued. "It was bold of you to come out personally, especially when I imagine there are plenty of nobles praying for a solution as easy as a convenient illness that would remove the first Sultana from her throne."

Out of all the things Jasmine had been worried about when she slipped out of the palace, that honestly hadn't even crossed her mind. Taken aback by the girl's candor, now she felt like an absolute fool. She tried to shake it off, focus on importance on what she was doing here. If anything, she should take pride in the fact that, despite her lack of tact in expressing so, the girl was impressed that her Sultana was out doing the dirty work while most of the members of her court had taken sanctuary outside of plague riddled Agrabah.

"Obviously, they wouldn't have sanctioned my excursion, hence the need for the outfit."

"Is Aladdin going door to door delivering food in one of your colorful gowns?" She snickered, before realizing her insult, and correcting herself. "Forgive me, I mean, the Prince."

Her apology was drowned out by Jasmine's laughter. The image of Aladdin hopping across rooftops and bouncing off shop awnings in her formal attire was so ridiculous it actually made Jasmine snort.

"No," she shook her head, still trying to gain her composure as she tore the flatbread into smaller pieces. "Although, he'd probably fit in my clothing. With his bone structure and enough cosmetics, I wager he would make a rather beautiful woman."
Emboldened by her Sultana's good-humored response, Najwa agreed, "He does have rather delicate features, doesn't he?"

The familiarity with which she referred to Aladdin prompted Jasmine to ask, "Do you know the prince?"

"All the girls know Aladdin..."

"Oh, really now?" Jasmine raised a brow comically.

"I meant, from before..." She let her eyes fall back down to the infant and back with a pang of remorse, quietly adding. "He always looked out for us girls in the sooq."

That explained the second child, then. Painfully, Jasmine closed her eyes at knowing how that child had come into the world, before pushing that dark truth away. What was done, was done. Instead, the memory of a handsome, charismatic stranger bravely stepping between her and an enraged vendor demanding recompense by blade came to mind. "That sounds about right..."

"It was more that I knew of him, really. Everyone did. He was the most notorious thief in the city, the bane of guards. Someone to keep an eye out for," she continued. "But, he was always kind though. Kinder than he had any right to have been, considering his circumstances. He gave Badriya and me some of his pilfered oranges once." She jutted her chin towards the older girl when she said the name, smirking at the thought. "His monkey didn't seem to happy about it at the time, but I never forgot that small act generosity."

"Abu has..." Jasmine considered her words carefully in regards to her husband's partner in crime. "... a strong sense of self preservation."

"I'm happy for him," Najwa said. "Nice to see good things happen to good people. Gives me hope despite all this." She let her eyes travel, indicating the small space they found themselves in. "We're blessed to have such attentive and generous rulers, who try to provide for the lowliest of us. Who would willingly tend to the sick by their own hand."

Blushing, Jasmine didn't know how to respond. She hadn't come out here seeking praise. Reluctantly, she took the compliment.

"Thank you, Najwa."

"And, to you, Your—" The Sultana gave her a critical eye. The girl grimaced a bit, trying out the name like a shoe that didn't quite fit. " — Jasmine."

"You're very welcome."

"What smells good?"

A small, hoarse voice spoke from Jasmine's side. The older girl, Badriya, blinked sleepy eyes that widened when she saw what was in Jasmine's hands.

"What this?" Jasmine held up the bread, teasing. "No, This is absolutely awful. Worst bread you've ever had. In fact — " She reached for the basket, removing a clay jar. " — You'll need some of this to even choke it down."

Removing the lid, the rich, oily scent of hummus filled the space, Badriya's already wide eyes lighting up. Dabbing smears of the chickpea spread onto the bite size tears of bread, she fed them one by one to Badriya, helping her to drinks of fresh, clean water in between. As Najwa fed the
Jasmine learned all sorts of things, like the name of her best friend, Rashida, how excited the girl was that she could attend the new school when it opened back up, and that her little sister's birthday was coming up. Najwa kept making repentant, apologetic faces towards her Sultana as the girl rambled on, but Jasmine adored it. Having finished her meal, belly finally full for the first time in who knows how long, exhausted by even this limited bit of exertion, Badriya closed her eyes again.

"Rashida is never going to believe that I ate dinner with the Sultana," she yawned contently, lazy with sleep. "She is going to be so jealous."

Rolling to her side, the little girl curled into a ball against Jasmine's thigh, and draped an arm over the leg in a half-hearted hug.

Brushing her hand over the girl's sweat soaked hair, Jasmine whispered, "Saha, Badriya. Sleep well."

Whispering a response, it was too muffled for Jasmine to hear, so she leaned closer to the girl, asking, "What was — ?"

Abruptly seized by an attack of fierce, wet coughing, Badriya jerked her head away from Jasmine's leg just as the Sultana leaned down, their faces separated by less than a foot. Stunned as the discharge of bloody sputum dislodged from the little girl's lungs and splattered directly onto her face, Jasmine froze for a second before reacting to help the girl to sit up to breathe. When the fit resided, Badriya collapsed back into her makeshift bed of rags. Lifting her head, Jasmine caught Najwa's wide eyes, an expression contorted in fear. The woman shifted the now sleeping baby away from her breast, pulled up her sleeve, and cradled the baby with one hand against her covered chest.

"My Sultana… there's…" Unable to find the words, Najwa indicated to her own face by touching her cheek.

Jasmine already knew it was there. She could feel it dampening her skin. Wiping over her left eye and cheek, she pulled back a trembling hand to see fingertips covered in viscous, bloody flem. Distracted by her pleasant conversation with Najwa, forgetting the circumstances as she reveled in the opportunity to speak so casually with one of her subjects, to be treated like a person and not an idol, to entertain the whims of an excited child, Jasmine had completely neglected to replace her head covering before attending Badriya.

"I should return to the palace."

"Is that wise, Your Majesty?" Najwa stood as her sovereign jumped up. "Perhaps the bimaristan would — "

"I hope this food sustains you for some time. May Allah give you and your girls strength. Salaam."

With that, Jasmine was through the grimy partition before Najwa could even return the blessing. Then she was running down the alley until she was far enough away that she couldn't see them, and they couldn't see her. Falling against a wall of a barricaded house, she fought the urge to break into tears. Using the bottom length of her now useless head covering, she used it to towel away the rest of the blood. It left a thick, crimson smear on the thin linen fabric.

Her mind raced back through the texts she had read on how the sickness was transferred. Her eyes had been open, so had her mouth. Even if they hadn't been, it could still enter through her nose just
by breathing it. Najwa had been right. It was irresponsible of her to return to the palace, but what choice did she have? She didn't even want to imagine the panic that would erupt, the questions that would fly, if she walked into the *bimaristan* dressed like a commoner boy, covered in plague infected plague.

Maybe, she was just assuming the worst? Even if she had been sheltered in the palace her entire life, maybe the access to proper medical care and a steady, healthy diet meant she was stronger than most? Maybe… maybe… *No… Stop deluding yourself.*

As she began her trek back towards the palace, she sought the tedium of list making and the logic involved to distract her, to calm her. Ticking off tasks in her mind, she noted the first was to discreetly send for Jibril.

The tears finally began to fall. Replacing the head covering, she wasn't sure whether it was still for the sake of her anonymity, or out of abject shame. She had promised. He had trusted her, just like all those times she had unconditionally trusted him. Aladdin was never going to forgive her for this. *No*, she shook her head, heavy tears dropping to the sand, Aladdin was *never going to forgive himself.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *shayla* — the type of headscarf that Jasmine wore in the market that looks like a long, narrow piece of silk or linen. I think in other scenes, like when she was waiting for Aladdin to come back to the palace with her hairpin, she may have been wearing one again, but the cut also kind of looked like a *chador*, which is longer and covers the arms and upper body more. So, if I'm wrong, let me know.

*burqa* — a full body covering women wear in more conservative states of the Muslim world, specifically Afghanistan comes to mind, but I honestly can't speak to the current laws regarding women's attire in the years since I was a teenager and remember seeing news coverage of the US war in the country

*abaya* — the dress like covering that Jasmine wore in the movies over the top of pants, at least, like the scarves, I hope I've identified it right. It's so hard to find the correct terms when you have to research such esoteric things like "Islamic medieval women's clothing" on the internet. I know that I've seen the words used in both *We Hunt the Flame* and *the Daevabad Trilogy*, but without a picture in the books to work from, I can't be sure I'm referencing the correct thing.

*Saha* - a blessing of health and good fortune
A/N: Everyone stop panicking. Calm down. I know it's been horrendously long since I updated and it was rather cruel of my to keep you waiting so long, but trust me I have several very good excuses I plan to throw at you. First off, once August got here I had to begin shifting back into school mode, so the mental energy and time I had been using for writing had to be put towards lesson planning and preparing for the upcoming year. For those of you not in the States, school generally starts between the middle of August and September first. And, us teachers start several days before the kids. On top of that, I found out four days before the first day of school I was moving classrooms, so I spent several days moving and reorganizing in my new space. Then, thanks to the chaos that is the first few weeks of school, it took me a few weeks to get back into my stride and fall back into my teaching routines. I had planned to use the three day holiday weekend (it's Labor Day here in the States which we get off as a federal holiday on Monday) to get caught up on the writing I had neglected...

...but, as the universe likes to waylay my well thought out plans, I began suffering from a cold on Friday night which I believe has warped into a sinus infection. My head is pounding, my sinuses are so impacted I can barely hear out of my left ear, my throat feel like I swallowed acid, and all the meds make me want to sleep. But, luckily I had written a short start to a chapter earlier... so that is what I am going to post. I have most of the next chapter already handwritten, but not typed, and the following chapter after that is fleshed out and a few snippets are written. So, I am working, slowly but surely. No promises, but I hope to get at least two chapters posted before I go back to work on Tuesday. We will see if it happens, as it all depends on how I feel and my energy levels. Thanks for being patient and holding on. I don't have any intentions on abandoning this story, but now that school is back and session, my posts will be further apart.

I apologize this is so much shorter than my previous chapters, and that in my opinion, this feels like filler. But, I wanted to post something for you guys. More to come eventually, so be patient. In the meantime, go buy Aladdin on digital and watch that until I can get my act together.

The door to Jasmine's study was still shut when he arrived. Trying the handle, the door did not budge— locked, just as Maryam had said. Raising his fist to knock, voices on the other side stilled him, hand hovering just above the hard wood plane of the door. Turning his ear towards the sounds, the voices were far too muffled to make out any of the words in the conversation. Just as he pressed his ear against the surface, the door swung inward taking Aladdin by surprise. The motion of his body already having carried him forward, he stumbled a step into the pair of people making their way out. Crashing into Jibril and Jasmine, equally shocked at the collision they were suddenly involved in, everyone halted, staring at each other in the doorway.

"Salaam, Your Highness!" Jibril greeted him awkwardly. "You look well rested."

Glancing down at the rumpled, loose clothing he had slept in, he realized he should have probably
taken the time to get dressed into attire more befitting of a prince. Then again, he hadn't expected to cross anyone but palace staff and Jasmine. He certainly hadn't expected to find Jibril coming out of her office.

Smiling tightly, eyes direct, Jasmine asked, "How long have been standing out— " she corrected, "—waiting out here?"

"Just got here actually," he replied, tilting his head in the direction of the physician. "Is everything alright? You should have woken me."

"Not at all. Jibril was just passing along the updated numbers from the bimaristan, and to get my signature on some documents for — "

"Financing," he interjected. "I needed to explain a mistake made in my math — so easy to do under the circumstances. Stress and sleep deprivation makes it so much harder to function, as you know, my prince. I made a silly error in my calculation. The Sultana was kind enough to approve the corrected amount needed to fill the gap my error left in the payment for our supplies from the caravan."

"Of course," she laughed, rather nervously. Aladdin had used laughter as a deflection in enough embarrassing and awkward moments to recognize when it was being used as a distraction, especially when it was something Jasmine so rarely did. "How could I say no? Anything to help the citizens of Agrabah in our time of need."

"Right, of course..." Aladdin agreed, barely convinced. Something was off, and Jasmine, always so graceful and composed, even under pressure, was suspiciously on edge. Curiosity peaked, he diverted from the previous task that had brought him to Jasmine's study door, feeling the need to suss out whatever was going on. "Jibril, may I walk with you? You can catch me up on what I've missed."

"No that's quite alright, "Jibril shook his head. "Nothing pressing you need to concern yourself with. Salaam to you both."

Taking a step to move past him, Aladdin cut in front of Jibril as he tried to make his exit, using his body as an obstacle to forced the man to stop.

"Before you go, please let me apologize for my behavior earlier— "

Cutting him off, Jibril smiled softly and raised his hands in surrender. "You have nothing to apologize for, my prince. We have all been under immense stress lately, and none of us are immune to the effects of that, as my own mistakes can attest. He raised a hand to touch two fingers to his temple, indicating his mind. "When we are frustrated and tired, we are not ourselves." Aladdin was too well versed in body language and tone to miss the way Jibril's inflection changed as he continued, and the way his eyes flicked subtly towards Jasmine as if the next part was directed at her. "It makes us irrational, prone to mistakes and impulsive actions. We act before we consider the repercussions."

"Well, I appreciate and respect the will it took to stand up to your very stubborn prince." Aladdin smiled, bowing his head slightly toward Jibril. "I promise not to put you in such a position again."

"Glad to hear it. My medical advice is to continue resting, and for the health of your poor neglected Sultana, spend a much deserved evening with your wife."

"Thank you, for coming so quickly, Jibril," Jasmine almost shouted as he took another step to
leave. "I mean, thank you for bringing the mistake to my attention so quickly, so we could rectify it immediately, before something bad happened."

A quiet beat passed as Jibril observed Jasmine, replying, "Nothing to thank me for, Your Majesty. Just take some time to rest as well. We all have a part to play in ensuring Agrabah makes it to the other side of this plague, and none more important than you."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Jibril." Aladdin stated. "I have a feeling we will have much to discuss."

"Until tomorrow," he nodded. "Salaam."

Finally making his escape, for lack of a better word to explain the way that Jibril had attempted to remove himself from the situation, once he was making his way down the staircase outside her study, Aladdin turned to Jasmine.

"Are you alright?"

"Wonderful," she replied a bit too quickly, before correcting. "Well, as wonderful as one can be while entirely consumed by trying to save her kingdom from a plague." She dismissed her words with a wave as if brushing chalk words from slate. "Nevermind all that. How are you feeling, doniety?"

" Fresher," he answered honestly for the first time in a long time when it came to how he felt. "Clearer. I hate to admit you were right, but I needed proper sleep."

Moving her fingers up the slope of his neck, she hummed, "Good. But, I'm not totally convinced you've come back into your senses if you're willing to admit I was right."

"Perhaps I'm suffering from some lingering mania,' he smirked, eyebrows raising playfully, "because I think Jibril is right too." A small laugh escaped Jasmine as he pressed their foreheads together. "I've been neglecting you."

"Under the circumstances, I think demanding attention from you at a time like this would be rather selfish, don't you think?"

"Well, if anyone has been selfish, it's been me, habibi. I know better than anyone how much you resent being held prisoner in the palace under the guise of protection, of what's best for you… and yet, the first demand I ever made in our marriage was exactly that."

Pulling back, her expression hardened into stony reservation. He had not seen that look on her face since the night he had come to her chambers as Prince Ali. At the mere suggestion they flee the palace and go on an adventure, his jaded princess had delivered that same skeptical expression. "I thought a princess could go anywhere?"

"Not this princess."

"You should see these places. You want too?"

"How? There are guards at every door."

"Who said anything about a door? Sometimes, Princess, sometimes you just have to take a risk."

"No," she said softly, interrupting the train of thought in his memory. "You were right, Aladdin. I should have stayed in the palace…"
The words were distant, broken, defeated — so fundamentally un-Jasmine. He knew exactly what she needed right now. What they both needed.

"You've been out of the world for a while. I think it misses you. It's so much less when you're not in it. I mean, look." Pointing towards the windows, their shutters thrown open to the city from which he insisted she protect herself. Ink stain was consuming the sky, chasing away the last remnants of color along the horizon. "Look how dark it is outside without you."

"I don't want to alarm you," Sarcasm turning her face less severe without losing any of it's seriousness. "That's called night, Aladdin. That's what happens when the sun goes down. But, don't panic. It comes back in the morning."

"You really know how to kill a mood, you know that, habibti?" Kissing her cheek to hide his laughter, and from giving her the satisfaction of her cutting sarcasm amidst his masterful exercise in flirtation. Instead, he brushed his lips across the sensitive skin on her earlobe, whispering, "How long has it been since I've shown you the world?"
Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay, no matter how tired I was or how bad I felt, I felt worse leaving you guys with the last chapter. As Favlie pointed out, and I totally agreed, the last chapter felt unfinished, cut in half. In truth, that is exactly what had happened. I had originally intended for this to be part of the previous scene, but I realized it needed to be from Jasmine's perspective and not Aladdin's, and I did not want to write a split POV scene. I've been very consistent with dedicating each chapter to a single perspective, either Jasmine or Aladdin, and I didn't know how writing a split scene would read. So, the result was a too short scene I felt really guilty about sticking you with. I'm better than that, and I apologize. So, as penance, I forced myself to suck it up, wrangled my muse, and delivered on another chapter with time to spare for readers enjoying the three day holiday weekend here in the States.

Side note, I did not realize until reading this after typing it how Jasmine's spiral of fear and irrational trains of thought so accurately reflected what it is like when trapped in the grip of intrusive thoughts that, despite all reason and evidence to the contrary, you can't convince yourself are untrue nor shut off. So, enjoy this intended ride through my own personal hell that is Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

An unbroken arrow of moonlight shot towards the horizon, dividing the surface of the sea with a long white stripe. The dancing waves gave the illusion of shimmers as the light reflected off the rippling water. A hundred feet above, Carpet raced across the expansive gulf, ecstatic to be freely soaring among the clouds once more.

Jasmine hadn't been the only one cooped up inside the palace during the plague crisis, inadvertent or otherwise. With her responsibilities as Sultana, Sunil in preparations for his trip in the weeks leading up to the outbreak, and Aladdin having been solely occupied with attending to the needs of the city since, their friends Rajah, Abu, and Carpet had been left on their own. Rajah, normally her giant orange and striped shadow who never tended to be out of earshot from Jasmine, had taken to lounging around with Abu and Carpet in their quarters. Knowing the tiger's keen sense of her own feelings, she imagined her long-time companion could sense the melancholy in his new found compatriots. It gave her some solace knowing they had comfort in each other, even if it left her alone for most of her days while confined in the palace.

But right now, the wind was tangling her unbound hair, tucked against Aladdin with his arm securely wrapped around her waist, she could bask in the simple pleasure of spending time together as Aladdin and Jasmine, as husband and wife, instead of Sultana and Prince Consort. Even before the sickness had appeared in the city, it had been months since they had taken the time for an adventure like this. She craved the release — to be able to step away from the pressures of the palace for a short time and simply just be.

This was the first time since her coronation that she wished for respite from the burdens of being Sultana. She surprised herself at the word choice. *Burdens.* She had never used the word to describe them. Before all this chaos, they had been stressful *responsibilities* and *duties.* Now they
were burdens, obstacles, and choices made between the lesser of two evils. All she had wanted her entire young life was to slide on her father's ring and be the next to sit on his throne. She had achieved her greatest ambition, and was anxiously awaiting the challenges posed by her position. Jasmine craved that challenge. She lived for problem solving. As a child, she had done puzzles, riddles, and logic games for fun. Debate and discourse was her preferred sport. Yet, in all the years she had spent educating herself about the nations of the world, the laws in her kingdom, how to conduct trade and commerce, and even how to wage war if necessary, she could never have imagined the challenge that this sickness could pose.

The entirety of the kingdom was exhausted. If some stroke of luck or blessing from on high didn't come soon, Jasmine feared there would be no Agrabah left to rule once the sickness had run its course.

Especially if the first Sultana ended her historic rule as another victim lost to the plague. Guilt thickened her mind, making it hard to think. Hard to do anything but wallow, to feel sorry for herself, causing her anxiety and fear to spiral. Constant, intrusive thoughts were bombarding her brain, an avalanche of worry over how stupid she had been, over the fate of the kingdom, over Aladdin.

She cursed the fact it had been his own words of encouragement that had sent her down this path. Now, if — no, the voice inside her head corrected— when she became sick, what would happen to him? If his own anger and grief over not being able to keep her safe didn't destroy him, her death surely would. He was unbelievably strong. He had to be to survive on his own from such a young age. But, back then, he had nothing to lose. There was nothing to gamble with but life and limb when he stole from the market. She had changed all that when she had brought him into her world, made him part of a family, given him status and authority, respect from those who had formerly spurned him. Made him vulnerable by giving him everything he had never had, and desperately and secretly wanted.

In return, he'd promised to live a life by her side, supporting her as his Sultana. A man willing to stand behind a woman was more rare than water in the desert. She needed him. She loved him more than she thought capable of loving anyone. He'd proven he was willing to risk his life to keep her safe and her kingdom safe. Then she had gone and one idiotic, impulsive move placed everything he cared about in jeopardy.

Without her, Aladdin thought he was nothing. Their future together, serving her and Agrabah, loving her, giving her the world— to him, that had become his divine purpose. If she was suddenly gone, what would become of her handsome thief? To Baba, he would always be seen as a son, the good man who had saved his kingdom by outsmarting a maniacal tyrant. Aladdin would always have a home in the palace. But, they had no heir, and Baba wouldn't live forever. Despite their marriage, Aladdin had no legal right to the throne, nor would he want it. And sure, ss long as Sunil and Dalia were in the world, he would always have a family, but they were far away now. Even if he had someone to love him, a place to call home, would he ever be able to let go of the guilt that would become scar tissue around his heart. Should Jasmine perish, so would everything that made Aladdin the man with whom she had fallen in love.

From the moment she had felt the blood hit her face, time had been running out for her, like the fuse burning down on Prince Anders' cannon. The resulting explosion would not come from a big gun but from the big heart of her husband. Her ever-loyal husband. The man she had promised to love, honor, and respect in marriage — the same vow he had sworn and dutifully upheld a thousand times over. The man she had trusted with her kingdom because he was the only one who had never lusted after power and planned to steal it away from her. Willingly, the title thrust upon him simply from falling in love with her, and all the responsibilities attached. He had begged her to
trust him, to let him take up the mantle of protecting and caring for their city solely because he believed he was expendable, and she was not.

And, as payment in kind for that trust, she had betrayed it.

What have I done?

"You're awfully quiet tonight."

"Just another long day in a string of endlessly long days."

"Feels like it's never going to end when you're in the thick of it." Bumping his shoulder against hers, she placated him with a small smile, and he seemed pleased with the result. "We're almost through the worst of it. Jibril has the physicians keep tallies on the wall — the number of new patients that arrive daily, and the number of deaths by day's end. Right now, it seems like it's never going to stop climbing, but in a few days, the tally will be shorter than the day before, and even shorter the next."

The sobering truth gripped her like the hand of a ghoul on her throat. Her stomach lurched. In a few days time, her life would be culminated by chalk line on a piece of slate— the first Sultana of Agrabah reduced to a single tally mark.

"So many lives cut unexpectedly short," she said, voice tight. "So many unfulfilled dreams and ambitions."

To be honest, Jasmine didn't know if those words were for her people, or for herself. Death had never scared Jasmine. She had been exposed it upon losing her mother, and had the unfortunate lesson of learning at an early age that it was an inescapable part of life. The people you loved would all eventually die. As much as it would break her heart, she had accepted that fact, and with time, could eventually bear to lose Baba, Dalia, even Aladdin. But, in the haze of immortality that blinds the youth, she had never been forced to think about her own demise. Tension stiffened her entire body. The thought stifled the air in her lungs, her breath reduced to shortened bursts. She was not ready to die. The thought paralyzed her with unquantifiable fear. There was still so much she wanted to accomplish in this life, that she wanted out of it. Now, her remaining minutes were slipping away like grains of sand in an hourglass. Her life was to be cut tragically short. Her husband would fall into despair. Her family dynasty would end. Her kingdom would fall into ruin and pass to someone else's hands. War would ensue. Blood would spill. Her people would die.

I am a fool. I never deserved to be Sultan. No-one who acts so selfishly should ever be allowed to rule.

"Do you ever wonder…" She began, unable to finish, her throat closing up before all the words could escape.

Trees were gliding beneath them now. When had the water disappeared? Were those mountains in the distance? She couldn't make out the distant shapes with the tears blurring her eyes. Swiping them away, one eye with the back of her hand, the next with the pads of her fingertips, she banished the evidence of her remorse in two swift motions before Aladdin could see them fall. She knew better than to believe that Aladdin hadn't noticed she was crying. To his credit, he was allowing her to keep up the illusion of strength and resolve by not acknowledging it.

Tipping up her face with a knuckle under her chin, he encouraged her to continue her question. "Do I ever wonder what?"
"Do you ever wonder how you survived?" She swallowed around the lump forming in her throat. "Why you lived when so many others perished?"

Features rearranging, his naturally expressive face warped from a smirk to sorrow so rapidly it made her wonder if despair wasn't his natural state. Every emotion he displayed, merely a series of rotating masks he wore to conceal the truth buried beneath.

The weightlessness of descent wreaked havoc on her stomach as Carpet dove towards the ground to land. The sensation felt foreign. She had traveled in all forms imaginable at the time— cart, camel, horse, ship, and most recently, flying carpet. Yet, never had she experienced any form of motion sickness in her various travels, not even sea sickness. As a sharp cramp bit into her belly, she realized the nausea had been preferable to the pain. Eventually it passed as Carpet lowered them down to settle on the crest of an outcropping of high bluffs along the rim of a verdant river valley.

"The short answer is yes," He said, acknowledging he hadn't forgotten her question already, nor was he ignoring it. "And, I think I know why… but do you want to hear the real reason, or my version?"

"Tell me both, and I'll pick the one I like best."

At her answer, his eyes twinkled as brightly as the smattering of stars above their heads. "After the first few days at the bimaristan, unable to do anything as people suffered and died, I asked Jibril the same question. He said it's random chance. Some people just survive. Their bodies are stronger than the others."

She furrowed her brows thoughtfully. "But, that's not what you believe, is it?"

"It's silly, Jas, I know..." he laughed, blushing as if he were embarrassed by the thought he seemed reluctant to share. "But, after the Cave of Wonders... I mean, I was the only person Jafar sent in who survived. The person whose worth lie far within. I guess I was the only person it ever deemed worthy... it called me a diamond in the rough."

Like with the story of his mother, Jasmine was realizing that Aladdin had never really shared the story of how he had come to possess the lamp. She knew the general story, obviously— Jafar had captured him and taken him to the desert, he'd been promised a reward in exchange for retrieving the lamp, and as was to be expected from the former vizier, Jafar had betrayed him and left him for dead. She also knew he'd managed to escape by tricking the genie out of a wish, because bringing it up much to Sunil's chagrin, was one of Aladdin's favorite pastimes. But, in all this time, he had never truly divulged the specifics, like for example, that he and the cave had carried on a conversation.

"It?" Jasmine raised an eyebrow. "As in, the cave? The cave talked to you?"

"Yeah. It was a giant tiger's head, like Rajah. When I approached, it spoke to me, warning me not to touch anything. Then I walked inside it's open mouth, which was the entrance, but then the floor dropped out from under me, and I fell at least a full story— "

"And we are absolutely positive you didn't hit you head in that fall?"

"I'm completely serious." He shrugged, half smiling, and fully aware of how ludicrous it sounded. "I mean, an evil sorcerer turned his parrot into an al ruhk and chased us on a magic carpet, which we also rode here... but talking tiger headed caves is where you draw the line for the impossible."

"No, I believe you." Rolling her eyes, she snorted. "I mean, it certainly explains why Rajah took to
"Laugh all you want, but honestly, I think somehow my destiny was tied to the Cave of Wonders, like I was meant to be the one who retrieved the lamp. That I was meant to be the one to use the lamp, to wield that power for good."

"The last few weeks have forced me to reevaluate my perspective, the belief I have in myself and the things I am capable of... and I think whatever my purpose in this world is, it was tied to that cave. It started with the lamp. It connected me to something much more powerful... and that's why I survived when my mother didn't. It was a link in the chain connecting me to that moment — if my mother was alive, I would never have become a thief, I would never have met you in the market, Abu would never have stolen your bracelet, and I would never have come to palace to return it, or been caught by Jafar and taken to the cave."

This was certainly a recent development. She had never heard him speak of himself with anything but thinly veiled contempt and insecurity. If nothing else, thank Allah that some good had come out of this crisis— it had finally convinced him of his worth. It was beautiful the way he had found such serenity in the tragic hand he had been dealt, and now saw it all as a means to an end.

"You think I'm insane," he scoffed when he saw the way she was grinning.

"Not in the slightest. In fact, it just confirms what I have known from the start. That anyone who truly looked would see there was so much more to you than the boy whole stole bread from the market."

Blinking a few times as if he was struggling to process what he had heard, slack jawed at her statement, he crossed his arms and said, "You literally accused me of being a petty thief not an hour after I saved you from losing your hand, and left me standing in the middle of the street before I could explain."

"Yeah," she leaned back on both arms, batting her eyelashes playfully. "But, my heart didn't want to believe it."

Snaking his arm around her waist again, he pulled her tightly against him, tilting his head until his cheek pressed against her forehead.

"I'm rubbing off on you in the worst ways," he shook his head, unable to contain a chuckle.

They stayed like that for a long moment. The air felt bizarrely warm for the middle of the night, Jasmine appreciating the coolness of his skin soothing the flush on her own. Odd, considering it was usually his warmth that she craved to drive away the chill she found herself so easily susceptible too. Allowing herself to finally be present in the moment, content in knowing he had managed to find some peace within himself, Jasmine too found peace in her own racing mind. She had just allowed herself to close her eyes and relax when she felt Aladdin's entire body tense. She felt his weight shift as he pressed his check a little firmer into her forehead. Jolting up so fast it nearly knocked her over, he turned and pressed a palm to her cheek, then back to her forehead.

"Habibti, you're burning up."

In the bliss of the moment, she had almost allowed herself to forget. How stupid of her. How naive. Had she expected to be able to hide it? No. But, she also hadn't expected the symptoms to appear so fast. She had anticipated having time to tell him, preferably tomorrow, after they had been allowed one last night together. Now she had to tell him everything. Now she had to ruin this beautiful moment with the devastating truth that she had betrayed him, and could pay the ultimate
price for that betrayal.

As she opened her mouth to speak, a torrent of words and tears threatening to spill forth, another cramp wrenched her stomach, so sharp and piercing she cried out and clutched her abdomen.

"Habibi?" He tried to keep her focus on him, but she couldn't manage through the pain. "I'm taking you back."

Without waiting for the command, Carpet took flight, launching into the air quickly. The abrupt change in elevation sent her reeling. Her ears felt wrong, sudden vertigo impairing her balance. Throwing off all sense of awareness, she grasped blindly for support, taking the edge of Carpet into one fist, the other searching out Aladdin's hand.

Was he calling her name? She could see his lips moving, but the sound was distorted, distant, like it was bouncing off the walls of a canyon, or he was yelling underwater. The haze in her head did nothing to dull the pure panic now etched into his face, or the pain rending her listless and depleted.

Eyes fluttering, she lost control of the fight she was waging with consciousness, letting her eyes roll backwards. Unable to support her own weight any longer, she crumpled, the momentum carrying her sideways until she was careening off the edge of Carpet. All she felt was the whoosh of the air as it enveloped her in like a blanket, completely oblivious as her unconscious form dove towards a jagged pile of scree at the base of the cliffs.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *al ruhk* - a mythical beast in Arabic legends. It's a gigantic bird of prey (a raptor to be precise) that was large enough to carry off elephants.
A/N: This has been an exiting week. Lovely fellow Aladdin fic writer, Quicksiluvers, author of Second Will Never Be Enough and Sickness of the Heart, and a few more people from Tumblr, such as We-Have-Jaams, posted links to this story, and it generated like 500 hits in like three days. So, be dolls, and go read those two stories and then follow them on Tumblr and sate your Aladdin fix. To those who got the word out and made such great recommendations, thanks a million for your help. You guys are some amazing readers!

COMPLETE 180 DEGREE SEGUE

This made me cry. Nothing I have written has EVER made me cry. I feel like I just survived a trauma. That is all I have to say. I have no words left. They all died alongside my heart. Go. Leave me. Leave me. (shoos you all away to die alone in the shame of what I have done)

The escaped cry of her name shredded his throat as it echoed off the stone bluffs. She was there, and then she wasn't. In the safety of his grasp one moment, then gone in the span of a blink. Gripping the edge of Carpet, his nails tore into the fabric so fiercely he could feel the individual threads pressing into his fingertips. Or, rather he would have, had he been able to process anything beyond the shape of her falling body getting smaller as the silks of her gown whipped around her extended limbs. Ducking his head lower, he snapped Carpet like a set of reigns, and the rug dropped into a near vertical dive. But, despite his fleet maneuvers, Aladdin knew he wasn't going to make it in time. He had to think, act fast.

In the end, all he could do was trust.

Releasing his vice-like grip, his hands lifted under the rush of fast moving air, followed by the rest of his body escaping gravity as he left the security of his seat atop Carpet. Free falling towards the ground, he stretched his arms toward Jasmine's closest hand. So close. He could almost reach. Narrowing his shoulders, cutting the air like a blade, he stretched to his full extent, one knee digging into the back of the other as he drew into the smallest possible line.

Slipping loose from her shoulders, her veil took flight, wrapping around his face. Clawing at the obstruction, he tore it from his face, sending it flitting on an upward draft into the night. Almost. Nearly there. Then, he clamped his hand onto her wrist. Yanking her into his chest, he wrapped himself around her, cocooning her body and twisting himself beneath her to shield her from the impact. Clenching his teeth, he closed his eyes, kissed Jasmine on the crown of her head, and braced for the punch of jagged stone piercing into his body.

It never came. Instead, familiar worn material caught him like so many storefront awnings had before.

A sharp exhale exploded from his chest, lungs burning from breath withheld. Immobile from shock, he slowly opened his eyes to confirm what he'd known by touch alone — cradled tightly against his chest, Jasmine was securely in his arms.
He'd caught her.

No, they'd caught her. Slipping his hand from around her waist, he moved it from her only enough to gently pat Carpet before his eyes closed again, heavy with relief.

"Thank you, old friend," he whispered.

Sending a silent prayer upwards to the heavens above his prone form, he thanked Allah too.

Panting, fighting to return his breathing to a normal rhythm, Jasmine rose and fell with every heave of his chest. But, she wasn't moving on her own. Yes, they had caught her. She was soundly in his arms. Yet, she was far from safe.

Skidding to a halt across the floor of the Great Hall, guards jumped into action and staff assembled, all drawn by the chaos and distress echoing through the palace halls. Hands were reaching for them to offer assistance, lifting him to his feet, helping him to walk as he carried Jasmine in his arms. But, Aladdin didn't want to be touched, to be helped. He wanted them to fucking move.

Cutting to the front of the clustered mass, Hakim shouldered and shoved his way through, mouth agape, eyes wide at the sight of his Prince clutching his languid Sultana. Offering to take the burden of her weight from Aladdin, Hakim tried to slip his arms under Jasmine so that Aladdin could re-compose himself, gather his wits.

"No!' Sneering as he jerked Jasmine's body away from the well meaning Captain of the Guard, Aladdin growled very much akin to her other protector, an angry snarl that sent the crowd back a few steps. "Summon Jibril! Immediately!"

Pushing forward through the mass, the guards scrambled about at Hakim's orders as Aladdin pressed the slack body of his wife tighter against his chest, taking the stairs two at a time. Some guards followed behind him, along with a few members of the palace staff. Maryam and Nasreen had been the first to follow Aladdin.

No guards were posted at the door of their quarters to open the doors — an unnecessary waste of manpower when the royal couple were not inside. Arms occupied completely with his unresponsive wife, Aladdin raised his boot and thrust the door open with a smash. Rocking into the adjacent walls with a crash, dust trickled down from cracked plaster and tile, the wood around their hinges splintering.

Darting around him into the now open room, Nasreen threw back the soft down blankets to prepare the bed for the Sultana, and Maryam disappeared into the bathing chambers, returning momentarily with a basin full of cool water and several towels.

With none of the hostile regard he had shown to every person and obstacle between him and the bed, Aladdin delivered Jasmine to the mattress. Gently, reverently, he lowered her down, slipping his hands from where he had cradled her shoulders and knees. Free to finally examine her, his hands moved quickly, checking her again for fever, moving clothing to inspect her covered skin, placing his ear to her chest afraid of the silence he might find instead of the comforting beat that had lulled him to sleep earlier that day. Blessedly, she was breathing, but it was barely perceptible. Other than that, she hadn't moved since she had slipped from his grasp.

An irrational void, his mind swirled with questions and accusations. Inside his own chest was an emotional wasteland of misplaced anger and debilitating fear. Jasmine's saving grace — the adrenaline that had given him such acute focus and agility — was waning. In its absence, cortisol leached into his veins, keeping him on edge without any of the benefits. Sweat beaded on skin
twitching from overstimulation. Muscles formerly as taut as an overtuned oud string now ached with fatigue. Ears primed to discern the lowest register, every sound was a cacophony. Pupils dilated, all light was a blinding effusion.

Dropping uselessly to sit at her side, one hand shielded his eyes, the other squeezed her small hand. It felt lifeless and cold despite the fever. Guilt traded hands with confusion. Nothing made sense. They'd all taken such careful precautions when working with the sick, remaining covered, cleaning themselves before entering the palace. Besides, they were repeatedly checked for signs of the illness.

No, this was something else. Jasmine didn't have the plague. She hadn't left the palace since the day of the dedication. *It had to be something else.*

"Your Highness?"

Remembering the others in the room, he acknowledged the use of his title by raising red eyes just above the edge of his index finger. Nasreen peered back at him, worrying her hands.

"She'd be more comfortable if we removed her gown and dressed her for bed." He could tell from her apprehension she was anticipating an outburst like she had seen when Hakim had tried to render assistance. "The physician will be able to attend to her much easier that way."

"I will help Nasreen, my prince." Maryam stooped next to him. "Here. Drink this."

Pressing a cup of sweet smelling date wine into his hand, he hadn't even realized she had pried it from Jasmine's own. Steeling his nerves, it took every ounce of control he could muster not to slap it from her hand. It was irrational—these women were loyal attendants to Jasmine. They had done nothing wrong. Striking against Maryam and Nasreen would fix nothing. But, inside, he was screaming for answers, for someone to pay. Gazing into the amber liquid, it rocked in the cup, and he gripped it tighter to steady his hand. Throwing it back, he downed the rich wine in one long pull. When he lowered the cup, Jibril was standing in the wrecked door frame inspecting the path of destruction that Aladdin had left in his wake.

Instantly at his feet, he met Jibril halfway. "I don't know what's wrong with her — she's unconscious, she has a fever... she fell. She just crumpled over and fell."

"Ladies," Jibril nodded to the young women who stood by silently on the verge of tears. "Continue seeing to the Sultana while I speak to the Prince."

A gentle hand at his back began steer him away towards the open air of the balcony.

"Forget about me!" Aladdin shouted, flinching away from Jibril's touch. "Why aren't you looking at her?"

Pausing on the second step of the balcony, Jibril swallowed, taking a deep breath to collect his words before speaking. "...Because I don't need to examine her. I already know of the Sultana's condition."

It was the courtyard of the madrasa all over again. Liquid fire raced through him, and he pressed his boots into the tiled floor to keep from launching at the physician.

*Jasmine doesn't have the plague. She hasn't left the palace. She hasn't been exposed.*

Disbelieving, he stared at Jibril, memories coming back to him, information collecting, coalescing a revelation in his mind.
When he had run into Jibril, it had been an unexpected surprise. With the exceptions he had made for council meetings, the physician did not like the leave the bimaristan unless he was ordered. He had returned earlier that day because Aladdin had been under duress. Only an unavoidable emergency or summons from the Sultana would have urged him to return a second time in a single day.

Another piece of information loosened from the recesses of his mind.

Something had been wrong with Jasmine. When he arrived she seemed stunned to find him, even a bit confounded as she tried to explain the circumstances that had brought the physician back to the palace. He had never seen Jasmine comport herself with so little poise.

Another piece.

When he'd apologized, the expression he'd mistaken for resolve had been something else. He had seen it before, but not here on the steps of this balcony when he had offered her a chance to escape, to show her the world. He'd tried to forget, to repress ever having to see that look of despair on her face, but it came rushing back to him like a scene from a nightmare. Eyes lined with unshed tears she refused to spill, an ardent look pleading with him from the depths of her soul for him to stay beneath the mask of a princess who knew the dream must end with her beloved fast-talking thief having to walk away.

The last piece— so obvious if he had only been willing to truly listen to what she had tried to say.

You were right, Aladdin. I should have stayed in the palace...

I should have stayed. Not I should stay. Not a sentiment of agreement, but rather an admission of guilt.

The empty cup clattered to the floor as his body went completely slack. The physician's hands caught him by the shoulders, keeping him on his feet.

... no.

No.

No. No. No. NO!

Wincing to conceal the tears, he whispered, "When?"

"Only just today," Jibril replied, a tone practiced in the art of delivering bad news.

"That's impossible!" Aladdin sobbed. "It takes days for symptoms to appear."

"When the infection is spread by vermin, yes. But, when the Sultana heard you talk about the samaritans from the mosque refusing to help, it was the last her conscience could withstand. She confided in me, said that she felt guilty that she was willingly standing by while others fought to save her people. Unbeknownst to anyone, she slipped out of the palace while you slept to deliver food to the sick trapped in their homes."

At Jibril's words, a spike drove into Aladdin's heart, haunted by Maryam's words after serving his meal.

Shortly after leaving you to sleep, she returned to her study, shutting the doors and commanding that she was not to be disturbed. He'd known then something was amiss. Jasmine never shut out
"To her credit, Her Majesty tried to take precautions."

"Then what happened? I still don't understand how it can develop this fast!"

"There was a young woman with two small girls… Jasmine was helping to feed one. The little girl coughed up blood. The Sultana had removed her covering…" Closing his eyes, Jibril sighed. "Once it enters the lungs, the infection spreads much faster."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why did you begin treatment immediately?"

"She insisted on telling you herself. I was to remain with Hakim at the palace, close at hand. I figured she had until morning. Besides, we both know there is nothing I could really do but make her comfortable and let the illness run its course."

Head heavy, Aladdin turned back to the bed. Nasreen and Maryam were pulling the blankets back over her. She looked as if she were only sleeping. There was a numbness creeping in, finally dulling his senses, blunting the emotions that were impaling his heart. Unmercifully, in the raw fabric of his soul he had felt everything and nothing all at once.

"There is something I'd like to try. I've been reading about the healing properties of fermented liquids…"

The words reached him. His mind processed them. But, nothing Jibril said truly registered… until suddenly it did.

"... the council will be here early, and I'm sure the nobility will be banging down the palace walls once they receive news of your appointment."

Eyes still trained solely on Jasmine as she slept, he shook his head to clear the fog, and asked Jibril to repeat himself. "My what?"

"Your appointment." He repeated. "To Regent."

Jerking sharply back to the physician, his response was nearly inaudible. "Wh... what?"

"Your Highness," Jibril furrowed his brow. "The Sultana is incapacitated, and the elder Sultan remains on his diplomatic trip to Sherabad. As Prince Consort, you're the only member of the Royal Family left who can serve in the capacity of Sultan."

Was it possible to choke on air? To strangle on nothing? Aladdin's throat closed up. His chest was compressing, restricting. The room was spinning out of control, yet he wasn't moving. A deep terror had taken up residence in his gut, emanating impending doom.

"That's… no… it's impossible. I can't! You can't expect me—"

"In the morning, once you have slept and eaten, we shall handle this," Jibril encouraged, a hand on his upper arm, giving it an affirming squeeze. "Together."

Aladdin shook his head. "Please… don't leave."

Embracing the shaking Prince, Jibril whispered, "She is strong, Aladdin. Have faith in her. She came into this world fighting, and she hasn't stopped since."

Releasing him, Jibril bowed, and stepped away, motioning for the women to follow him out. Slow,
measured steps brought Aladdin back to her bedside.

His father. His mother. Sunil… Jasmine.

One more person he loved was going to leave him. Once more, left behind, alone in a world that
did not want for him. A sobering truth he was finding inescapable — to be loved by people was
only temporary. Love for him was not meant to be permanent. In the end, it was only ever him. He
was the only constant who remained.

Now, he was losing his princess. His last wish had freed his best friend. His second wish had
spared his own life, granted, it had occurred with some unauthorized assistance. But, his first wish,
had been for her. The words he had spoken— Genie, I wish to become a prince — had only been
directions to be followed, a means to an end. The wish he held in his heart even Genie could not
grant.

*Please… let her love me.*

A princess who loved a thief. Who married him, and made him a prince. It seemed almost as
impossible as surviving the plague.

Collapsing to his knees at her side, his knees hit the tile so hard either bone or ceramic cracked.
Drawing her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles, pressing it to his cheek, he pulled it to his chest
as he slumped into the bed, tears soaking the sheets as he sobbed into the mattress.

*Habibti… you promised.*
Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter took forever b/c I could not make executive writing decisions on what needed to happen next. (Seriously, I recycled like six pages of rewrites and scratched out material.) I feel like this story is getting sooooooo long, and I'm scared you're all getting bored and anxious for me to get to the premise of the plot. I teased dark Aladdin and magic and djinns and I have really yet to deliver on that. In the end, I felt like there was so much angst in the last chapter, and Aladdin suffered such a blow, I needed him to rally. Guess you can call this the calm before the storm, because I'm not going to be so nice to him in the next chapter, and that is what is going to finally send him over the edge.

In other words, if you're reading this b/c you love it, and you want it to be long... congratulations! There is no way I can finish this story any time soon simply because I feel like there is still so much that has to happen. I started writing a scene with the first dark magic the other day, but it felt like it was a few scenes too soon. I think I need one more scene between this one and that one. So, I ask of you, my loyal readers, could I please get some feedback in your reviews on the pacing, and tell me if I'm moving too slow?

Love and thanks to all you who have left reviews and given kudos so far, and the over 1400 of you who have read, and re-read, and re-re-read waiting for me to update. Your encouragement is what keeps me writing, and your praise of my writing feeds my soul like gasoline to a fire. A thousand thank yous, oh patient, loyal ones.

Enjoy.

The rough tread of Rajah's tongue grazed the right side of Aladdin's face, rousing him from sleep. Upon opening his eyes, he regretted the decision immediately. Reflecting off the polished stone floor, the mid-morning sun brightened the room violently. Despite closing his eyes, he could still see colors dancing in his vision. Wedging his rotund head between Aladdin and Jasmine in the bed as if he were a common house cat, the tiger flopped his chin down onto the swell of Jasmine's hip with an indignant chuff. Reaching out blindly, unwilling to open his eyes again, Aladdin walked his fingers across the tiger's striped fur until he could feel the bridge of his nose. Trailing his fingertips gently up and down the slope, Rajah huffed out a contented sigh and relaxed the full weight of his head on Jasmine, snuggling down into what little space there was between Aladdin's chest and Jasmine's back as they spooned.

Taking a cue from the great lumbering cat, Aladdin tightened his arm around Jasmine's waist, drawing her closer with the arm not subduing her infamous protector. Burrowing deeper into the mound of pillows on which he was propped resulted in a monkey tail smacking Aladdin in the face. At the smack, his eyes popped open again, and he groaned as the light stung his eyes. The monkey stretched his tiny limbs in all directions with a squeaky yawn before rolling over in the nest of pillows he'd made himself above Aladdin's head. He couldn't even really be mad at them, smiling at his slumbering little family. They just wanted to be close to the people they loved. Aladdin squeezed Jasmine — could he really fault them for that?
Aladdin could stay here all day, relishing the feel of a mattress beneath him rather than slats of dry rotted wood under a moth eaten rug. Besides the luxury of a soft mattress and sheets, Jasmine was far warmer than the cold desert chill that swept through the crumbling walls of the loft in the middle of the night. Sleeping with her in his arms was like driving off the chill by cuddling a campfire. And, today, she was especially warm and inviting.

It was odd for Jasmine to sleep in, and even odder for the servants to let her, usually interrupting to deliver urgent messages or get her ready for whatever important engagements she had lined up for the day. She must have said something to Maryam about letting them sleep after their late night adventure last night. When she had taken the time to do it, he didn't know, since he had surprised her with the carpet ride…

Panic, like a bolt of lightning, splintered through his entire body. For the third time, Aladdin's eyes opened as he shot up in bed, sending Abu scrambling and Rajah jumping to attention.

The carpet ride. Jasmine falling. A look of profound pity on Jibril's face as he delivered the devastating news. All at once it came slamming back into his mind with an intensity far greater than the brightness of the sun, leaving him with the feeling of being completely scraped out, hollowed until nothing but a carcass remained.

Jasmine had broken her promise. She'd caught the plague. He was on the verge of losing her forever… just like he'd lost everyone else.

"Aladdin?"

It was hoarse, barely audible, but he'd heard her. At the sound of her strained voice, he took her up in his arms again, pressing his lips to her forehead, curling his entire body around her like she would float away if he lost his grip.

"Thank Allah," he whispered, lips grazing her still feverish forehead. "Habibti, you scared the hell out of me."

"How…When did we get back?"

"Just rest. You're very sick."

"Call… call Jibril." Her voice was sand grains against glass.

"He's already come, last night after you… when you…"

Shoving himself away, he rolled to sit at the edge of the bed. Dragging his hands down his face, he wiped away tears, and dried his hands on yesterday's sirwal he hadn't bothered to change, now rumpled from sleep. Moving towards the other side of the bed, he poured water from the pitcher Maryam had left at Jasmine's bedside. He kneeled down, and lifted the glass of water to her lips.

"Drink slowly," he warned when she tried to gulp the water, obviously dehydrated from sweating with fever.

Once she had her fill, she clumsily pushed the cup away. For several seconds she didn't speak or move, she just held his gaze for a moment, that look he recognized as her working through a particularly hard decisions, made harder by a sluggish, sick-addled mind.

"I don't… "She inhaled sharply, like even just speaking was exhausting, like no matter how deeply she inhaled she could never get enough breath to fill her lungs. "...don't expect you… to… to forgive me, but I'm so-sorry I… that I… I know, I promised."
Her words were a red hot blade slicing apart the chambers of his heart. He wanted to protest, tell her that in his eyes there was nothing she could do that was unforgivable. He wanted to take what may be his last opportunity to say all the things he could never truly express, lavish with her with praise and love, and make her understand that no matter what she had done, he could never believe she would betray him.

Even if the dark voice inside his head was doing everything he could to remind him that was exactly what she had done.

Either way, it didn't matter if he spent time time chastising her or conveying the depths of his heart. Even if it was his last chance to say any of it, he could tell from the daze in her eyes she was only semi-lucid. She wouldn't stay awake for long, let alone remember anything from the conversation. He couldn't decide whether that was a relief or not. He recalled the fever dreams that had haunted his mother, and the conversations she'd had with his father, speaking to nothing but memory and empty space. In the end, she had thought Aladdin was a shayteen who had come to possess her corpse. The last memory he had of his mother was of her screaming, "Demon leave me be!" and recitations of prayers for Allah to protect her.

"Just get better," he replied. Gently brushing away the dark strands sweat plastered to her flushed cheeks, tucking them behind an ear, he fell back on the old habit as a gesture meant to comfort them both. "Then I won't have anything to forgive."

In that moment, Aladdin honestly didn't know if he was talking to Jasmine, or begging for mercy from a higher power. He might be able to absolve Jasmine, knowing that she'd broken her promise based on good intentions, but if he lost her, forgiving Allah wouldn't be so easy. Not when his creator had the power to spare her, and didn't.

She tapped the cup again, and he brought it back up to her lips. But this time, she didn't heed his warning, and choked from drinking too quickly. Sputtering, she shot up, pushing him aside and throwing him off balance, spraying the water across the bed. But, it wasn't just water she expelled. Splatters of red speckled the sheets. It blotched across the fabric of her sleeping gown. It trailed, dark and fresh, from her trembling lips. Eyes fluttering, she fell back into the pillows, gasping. Suddenly, there were two more sets of hands moving around them, one cleaning up the blood from Jasmine's face, the other trying to pull him from the floor where he had landed on his ass. Blinking at the offered hand, he realized he'd just been staring at Jasmine in shock. Nasreen was speaking, but the words were traveling through honey before they registered. Eventually his brain caught up with the speed at which the rest of the world was moving. Glancing back at Jasmine, Maryam was collecting the used rags from last night and the ones that she had used to clean the blood from Jasmine.

"Did you hear me, Your Highness?" Nasreen asked as he finally took her hand and came back up to his feet with her assistance. "The council is assembled and await your arrival."

The handmaiden turned to help Maryam remove the sheets, pulling them up into a bundle in her arms. Aladdin just stood paralyzed, watching uselessly as Jasmine fell back asleep, chest still heaving. When she realized that he hadn't moved yet, she stepped forward to break his line of sight.

"Your highness!" She snapped to break him from the trance he was under. "You must go! She is in safe hands, but same cannot be said of Agrabah. It needs a leader."

"Nasreen, I… I can't … I can't do this by myself."
With an exasperated huff, she shoved the blankets into Maryam's arms and spun back to the prince.

"You are not in this alone." Taking his hand in hers, she held it up between them like they were making a pact.

Everything about the moment reminded him of Jasmine. They were the same words he'd said to her a few weeks ago, in what felt like another life, when she was worried about ruling without the safety net of her father. Nasreen gripped his hand the same way Jasmine had taken hold of his when they'd made their deal on the balcony.

"Here's the plan — I will worry about the state and politics and trade and all the other official nonsense... and you, just take care of the people... because honestly, they couldn't be in better hands."

But, it wasn't supposed to be this way. She was going to run the kingdom, and he was going to take care of the people. Now, everything depended on him. Every contract he could barely read. Every speech he could barely give. Every decision he could barely make. Hamed was still a week's travel away. And, Jasmine was... dying.

"Alone or not, I can't do this."

"You can, and you will," Nasreen squeezed his hand. "Because, she need you. We need you."

"I'm just a thief who pretended to be a prince..."

"Then be a thief!" Nasreen exclaimed. "Steal my hope, because I believe our Sultana is stronger than any disease. Steal my faith, because I know that there is nothing you won't do for her. Steal my courage, because I believe you are the bravest, most honorable man in all of Agrabah."

Shoving him in the direction of the bathing room, she added, "Now, go wash your face, put on some clean clothes, and don't come back out until I can recognize the famous Prince of Thieves that every child of Agrabah will grow up hearing legends about."

Stumbling into the bathing room, everything felt like slow motion at first. The simplest feat felt like an insurmountable task. But, the water also felt refreshing on his face. And, clean clothes felt more comfortable against his skin. As he took one last look in the gilded mirror, he tried to reach down into himself and pull out what everyone insisted was there.

A thought struck him, and the irony was enough to make him laugh. In facing the chasm between what he was and who he would need to be to win the heart of a princess, he'd convinced himself he would never be worthy. He still wasn't convinced — his ego had never recovered. But, all his life, he'd wanted people to look closer, convinced there was more to himself than just the street rat they saw at first glance. And, now finally they were, and he was telling them what they saw was wrong. There was value in what he had to offer.

In his heart, he knew he was a good man.

After all, he was the diamond in the rough.

As he exited the bathing room, Nasreen and Maryam had dressed Jasmine in clean sleeping clothes and changed out the blood stained sheets. Now they stood at the foot of the bed, facing the bathing room door as he approached, each holding the side of a dark wooden box.

"We thought you would need this," Maryam offered.
Lifting the lid, Nasreen revealed the contents inside. On a silk cushion, a white turban with a glistening teal gem, sat as pristine as the day it had first been gifted to him and laid upon his head at his coronation. Aladdin rarely had occasion to use his crown, having done so only a handful of times. He had never been comfortable wearing it. He had accepted his title as prince, albeit reluctantly, but parading around, wearing a crown, it was like calling attention to how ridiculous it was that he'd ever become a prince at all.

"May I?" Nasreen asked.

When he nodded, Maryam took the box in fully into her hands so Nasreen could remove the Crown of Prince Consort from the box. Titling forward slightly, he closed his eyes, overcome by the memory of Jasmine's wide, proud smile as she had placed the crown on the head of her chosen prince.

"There he is," Nasreen smirked. "There is the Prince of Thieves."

"Now I see why Dalia chose you to replace her," Aladdin said biting back an embarrassed smile.

"My cousin and I share more than just a family resemblance," Nasreen shrugged.

"She would be proud of you."

Nasreen's gaze drifted to the sleeping form tucked into the bed. "As the Sultana would be of you, my prince." Straightening, Nasreen took a deep, stabilizing breath, and ignored the tears gathering in her eyes. "The council is waiting."

"We will not leave her side until you return." Maryam promised.

Nodding, he walked around the bed, kneeling once again at Jasmine's bedside.

"Here's the deal," he whispered into her ear. "I'll take care of Agrabah, and you… well, if I can't give up, neither can you, habibti. I love you far too much. I refuse to lose you too."

Aladdin pressed a long kiss to her temple, thanked the girls, and left to face the council.
I'm really angry at myself. I had every intention of updating this weekend to give you guys time to read, but I left my notebook with half the chapter in it on my desk at work. I wrote the end of this a while ago, and I thought it was as home, so I didn't bother bringing the notebook home after typing up the first part on my lunch break on Friday. Then, after tearing up my office and cursing profusely, I realized I was mistaken, and the other half was in fact in the notebook and not on one of my legal pads at home. Needless to say I was pissed, but I managed to get this finished on my lunch break today.

I was very excited to FINALLY get to this chapter, but I feel disappointed with the result. I'm worried b/c I wrote it in pieces, it feels too thrown together and compartmentalized. So, I apologize if it feels choppy.

Lastly, a shout out to Ohsupernaturall for help with translations, and in general, making me feel better about all my insecurities.

Enjoy the beginning of the end, my friends.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two guards opened the doors to the Sultana's study as the Prince Consort approached. Inside, the five who men sat around the table all stood as he entered the room. Choosing not to sit, he stood next to Jasmine's seat at the head of the table. He did so partly from the fact that it just did not feel right to sit in her chair, to take her place — he wanted her absence to be felt. He had always stood at her side when ruling, and having to serve in her stead made that no different. This was her kingdom, and it always would be.

The other reason was that as long as he remained standing, the others could not sit. That was a trick he had learned from his wife. She had employed it in negotiations when she was dealing with particularly difficult people. Of course, she would parlay that power move into a means of making her demands. He didn't have the steel embedded in his wife's veins to pull off such a bold move, but at least they would see they weren't dealing with a complete amateur here.

All their eyes were on him, waiting. Words escaped him. What was he supposed to do now?

Across the table, a map of the city was spread and marked by his own hand to indicate the areas most affected by the sickness. He stared at it blankly, hoping something would come to mind. He hadn't planned out what needed to be discussed, nor had he come here with a list of tasks to be dictated and delegated. He had been more than happy to be her boots on the ground in the city, but in this capacity, he felt woefully unprepared. A sense of awkwardness loomed as the council members waited anxiously to hear whatever he was going to say. If only he knew.

"If I may, Your Highness?" Hakim asked, throwing him out a lifeline. "Many of us are anxious to hear how the Sultana is fairing."

He offered Hakim a grateful half smile. "Sleeping mostly. Her fever persists, but she was able to
speak with me for a few moments this morning."

"Elhamd le Allah! Allahu Ackbar!" Ibrahim declared, raising both his hands up one each side of his head in praise.

"We all know of the Sultana's unparalleled strength." Jibril added. "I know the odds of recovery better than anyone, but I remain hopeful."

"Yes, each of us prays for the restored health of our Sultana," Navid agreed. "Just the same, as for the fate of our sovereign, Allah aalam. We must consider the circumstances in which we find ourselves."

Perhaps it was just the scattered state of his mind, but Aladdin wasn't following.

"What do you mean?" Aladdin asked as dull ache began to creep in between his eyes.

"I'm sure I speak for everyone when I wish the Sultana a quick recovery." The word wish tugged menacingly at Aladdin's gut. "Yet, it is prudent of us to prepare for the worst."

"There is no need to catastrophize," Ibrahim said. "As you said, it is in the hands of Allah, and we are not privy to his grand design."

"It would be irresponsible of us to ignore the reality of the situation, blinded by false hope." Navid countered. "The facts are these: The Sultana is deathly ill, and while we all know the Prince Consort to be a capable and noble leader, he was not raised nor schooled to be Sultan. Even once Sultan Hamed returns from his diplomatic mission to Shirabad, we still face a potential crisis — the Sultan will not live forever and the Sultana does not have an heir."

"That may be, but it is irrelevant to the purpose of this council!" Hakim warned. "We were called upon by our sovereign in Agrabah's time of need to offer our expertise in handling the plague, not sorting out the future of the crown."

"Hakim! Open your eyes!" Navid shouted. "We are the hands holding up Agrabah. I think the purview of this council has well exceeded managing the plague. Are we to sit idle while our country grows as sickly and weak as our reckless Sultana?"

A fist slammed down onto the table, scattering all the markers placed on the map, sending them to roll about. Five sets of wide eyes met Aladdin's in the silence that followed.

"The last time a man spoke of controlling my wife's throne, I had a personal hand in the curse that befell him." The Prince's tone was measured, but his mahogany eyes were aflame. "Clearly, that was not enough of a deterrent, so to what extent will I have to increase the next punishment to discourage usurpers? ...Or, are you so naive as to believe there are lines I will not cross when it comes to protecting my wife and my kingdom?" Aladdin leaned forward, both hands flat on the table, as if it were the only obstacle keeping him from crawling across it and throttling Navid. "She is Agrabah's ruler, but I am it's protector, a role I do not take lightly. While I am serving as regent, I will do whatever is necessary to protect this country, even from itself."

Staring down Navid, he pushed away from the table to stand at full height again. Inside, he felt imbued with a renewed sense of audacity he had not felt since he was scraping by on the streets. The absence of that steely resolve he had lamented when he had entered the study now filled him with renewed determination at Navid's words. Jasmine had treasured the respect these men had shown and the trust they had given her. Yet, as to be expected in a society who undervalued women, in her first moment of weakness, Navid had leaped at the opportunity to undermine her.
Did the other three feel the same way? Had they all just waiting for the opportunity to strike?

"Until further notice, this council is disbanded, and you are dismissed," Aladdin growled as he narrowed his gaze on the map again, refusing to meet their eyes.

"Your Highness, you misunderstand... I— "Navid tried weakly.

"I said go."

A beat passed before it seemed to truly register that the Prince Consort had truly given them leave, and slowly Jibril, Ibrahim, Navid, and Hakim moved. As he heard the doors shut, he dropped ungracefully Jasmine's chair. Collapsing his face into his hands, Aladdin fought the urge to scream. Anger was boiling beneath his skin, tightening his chest. How dare Navid. Jasmine was fighting for her life just a floor above their heads, and he had the arrogance to decree they should be given the right to run Agrabah.

"My prince?"

A hand on his upper arm startled the anger out of him. Hakim stood just to his left, his hand still hovering just above Aladdin's arm. In his fury, Aladdin hadn't noticed he had stayed behind.

"My apologies for disturbing you," he bowed his head.

"What is it, Hakim?" He spat, no patience left, even for his Captain of the Guard.

"On the day of Jafar's coup, my loyalty was tested, and I was found wanting. To this day, I still carry guilt knowing that had our esteemed Sultana not stood so bravely against him, I would have thrown my lot in with Jafar. Never again do I want the royal family to question where my loyalty lies. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Even I was intimidated by Jafar's remarkable show of power, but I have learned the harsh lesson that power and authority are very different things, and only the worthy are capable of wielding both. There are no two people I deem more worthy than the Sultana and her Prince."

Fist to his chest, he saluted. But, oblivious to anything after Hakim's personal confession, and as unintentionally dismissive as it was, Aladdin's head was already spiraling in another direction.

...power and authority are very different things, and only the worthy are capable of wielding both.

Aladdin had authority. He'd been given title and privilege, and lived with an entire palace at his beck and call. Through Hakim, he had the backing of an entire army of soldiers and guards. He had the trust of the people. Now, for the second time in his life, he had been considered worthy.

Worthy of power. Worthy of magic. A terrible plan formed in Aladdin's head.

"Thank you, Hakim," Aladdin clapped the man on the back. "Thank you."

As he rushed out of the room, he didn't even bother to answer the man's shouted question of where he was going. Jasmine was still asleep when he entered the bedroom. Maryam and Nasreen jumping up as he burst through the door.

"How did it go?" Maryam asked.

"Everything alright?" Nasreen squinted at him cautiously.

Dropping down on his side of the bed, he fished around until his hands touched the books he had
stashed there the day prior. Climbing up on the bed, he crawled over the tangle of sheets, pressing a soft kiss to Jasmine's forehead, the heat of her fever warm against his lips.

"I'm going to fix everything." He whispered. "Just hang on for me."

Jumping off the bed, he dashed over to this wardrobe, pulling out articles of clothing until he located his satchel. Dropping the books inside, he grabbed it and a change of clothes before disappearing into the bathing room.

"Your highness?" Nasreen called from just outside the doorway. "Are you feeling well yourself?"

When he appeared again, he had shed all the trappings of his princely visage. Dressed in more common clothing, the stachel slung over his shoulder, he looked reminiscent of the boy from the street whose satchel would have been filled with stolen goods rather than spellbooks.

"For the first time in a long time, I feel like myself." He replied, handing off the stack of folded princely garments literally crowned with his turban to a confused Nasreen.

"Stay with Jasmine. There's something important I have to do."

"Of course," She nodded. "Take care of whatever you need. We'll be here as long as you need."

Shouting his thanks, he ran from the room like a madman, barreling down the stairs. Descending deeper into the depths of the palace, retracing his steps from weeks ago, he veered from his objective only to collect a few bottles of lamp oil. Once again standing before the locked door in the dungeons, he made child's play of the lock, and it dropped to the ground in a cloud of dust.

Passing through the threshold, he set about lighting the room. Some small part of him was unsure whether this plan would work. He had intended to test out a few spells, to practice them until he felt confident actually attempting a ritual, but Jasmine's illness had accelerated his timeline now. Hakim was right — there was a difference between power and authority. If he was truly worthy, this would work, and he would have weapon against anyone who intended to take advantage of their weaknesses.

Unlike the other rituals he had studied, this one did not require things like a particularly timed moon phase or obscure ingredients to perform. As long as all the steps were observed in the proper order, and he was able to exert enough will to incite the ritual, in theory, this should work even without having performed a successful spell yet.

After all, all he was doing was summoning forth a part of himself.

Opening the *djinn* book to the correct page, he laid it out open on the work table. The word *qareen* taunted him between the lines of black calligraphy. Dragging his finger down the page, he made a mental list of the things he needed to find. Combing through the shelves, he retrieved the items, and laid them out next to the book.

Many of the books had warned of the need to set out protective measures. A summoning ritual was basically opening a door that didn't exist and hoping the right being would walk through. It was an open invitation for any being passing by at the right time. If the summoner was not careful, or neglected to close that door properly, anything could walk through. The stakes were too high, and Aladdin wasn't willing to take any chances.

On the opposite side of the chamber, Aladdin poured a ring of salt. Humans had used it as a purifying agent for generations, protecting and preserving more than just their meats. To a variety of metaphysical beings, salt was a natural repellent. He hoped it would discourage anything besides
his intended quarry from wandering through the door, but just in case, it could be used to dispel the more vile, evil things that might find their way through. It would also serve to contain the being he summoned until he had managed to subdue it — until he was sure it would serve him.

Around the circle, he set a strange assortment of objects, using a compass to align them to the cardinal directions. To the north, he set a piece of polished lapis lazuli, as dark as the sky at twilight, representing the element of earth. To the east, he lit an incense burner, the winding plume of smoke dancing lazily out of the geometric shapes cut into the box, representing the element of air. To the south, he set a small, unlit, white candle, representing the element of fire. To the west, he placed a brightly colored tea glass with gilded filigree full of the most precious substance in the desert, representing the element of water.

Crouching down, he pressed his fingers to the salt ring, holding the book open in his other hand. Closing his eyes, he imagined a small light igniting in his chest. From the light, he drew energy, forcing his will, his intention into the white circle. In his mind, the ring began to glow like the spark in his chest.

"This circle will reflect. This circle will purify," he whispered, his intention clear and strong at the forefront of his mind. "This circle will protect. This circle will amplify."

And then, the ring in the floor started to glow like the image he had conjured in his mind. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved a simple, iron ring.

"I call on the four elements to aid me in my task." He said, holding the ring in his closed fist, moving his hand to hover just above each of the objects he had set in the four cardinal directions. "Element of earth, I ask that you provide this being with substance and form." His hand moved over the objects with the calling of each element. "Element of air, I ask that you provide a mind for this being to comprehend. Element of water, I ask that you provide a soul for this being to feel." Then he stood, lighting a small scrap of dried wood upon the flame of one of the lamps, and returned it to the last object. "Element of fire, I ask for you to provide the spark of life so that this being may live."

The flame from the wood consumed the wax covered wick, exploding into a wide flame. With one final exertion of will, Aladdin closed his eyes and imagined a form coalescing in the circle before him. First, a small spark igniting in the air above the circle, swirling and warping until it formed the vague dark shape of a human being. Setting the ring in the center of the circle, he invoked the summoning.

"Companion, I call you forth to assist me in my time of need. Present yourself to your earthly master."

"As you wish..." replied a haunting, disembodied voice that sounded like a dozen simultaneous whispers as all the lamps extinguished at once.

Frozen, Aladdin's eyes darted through the inky blackness, searching for the source of the voice. Then, the light in the room began to rise, the flames returning slowly. When it illuminated the space enough to discern shapes, Aladdin could make out a whispy tail of smoke floating just above the circle.

The book fell from his hand with a thud in the sand. He examined the being, maintaining a threadbare but successful facade of confidence. It was like darkness personified — a djinn as black as night, semi-formed, caught between smokeless fire and near-humanity. Recessed in his shadow skin, silver eyes blinked back at him.
"Release me and I may serve you, master." It said.

"Not without this." Scooping up the ring from the center of the circle, he stood holding it aloft, the light of the flame glinting off its dull gray finish. "By the grace of Allah, this ring will bind your form and in turn bind you to me. No harm will come to anyone, nor will you act of your own accord without my consent. You will serve me faithfully and in good faith, without deception or manipulation. Should this oath be broken, the magic of this ring will disperse sending you back to the plane from which you come. Do you accept in exchange for your release?"

Wordlessly, the qareen lifted his hand offering his open palm. Placing the ring in the being's hand, the qareen took it and placed it on the middle finger of his right hand, never taking his eyes from Aladdin. When the ring settled onto the base of his finger, the qareen winced and writhed. A wave cascaded over the qareen, solidifying his form as it moved. His complexion paled as his form took shape, black hair falling across his brow. Materializing in a puff of smoke, black robes draped over his now tangible body. The qareen blinked, and the silver irises drained of their metallic sheen, filled by the deep, rich warm brown of Aladdin's eyes.

In a matter of seconds, staring back at him from within the circle was the near mirror-image of himself. And, it was smirking at him.

It was not a perfect replication though. The lines of its face and the angles of the shadows were sharper, harsher. Despite the transformation, dark circles still shaded the being's eyes and an aura of otherworldliness hung over it. There was something profoundly wrong and inherently comforting about it all at once.

Meeting the sunken, hollow looking eyes of his shadowy twin, Aladdin smiled victoriously. The qareen returned the smile, but it didn't reach its empty eyes. Stepping onto the line of salt, Aladdin pressed down and scratched out the solid line, breaking the circle. And with that, he released his qareen into the world. In a single step, it easily crossed over the broken line of salt.

"How may I serve you, master?"

Chapter End Notes

Elhamd le Allah! Allahu Ackbar! - "Thank god! God is great!"

Allah aalam - Only Allah knows

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!