

Mithra's Gift
A Study of Historical Fantasy Through a Creative Lens

by
Carma Sharp

A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation
from the University Honors College.

Spring 2020

Mithra's Gift
A Study of Historical Fantasy Through a Creative Lens

by Carma Sharp

APPROVED:

Dr. Martha Hixon
Department of English

Dr. Fred Arroyo
Department of English

Dr. Philip E. Phillips, Associate Dean
Department of English

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Background of the Historical Fiction Genre	6
Shifts towards inclusion in publishing	6
The origins of historical fiction	7
Popularity of historical fiction	8
Defining historical fiction	10
Writing historical fiction for young audiences	14
Defining historical fantasy	17
Juvenile fiction	20
Conclusion	21
Chapter 2: Author Commentary	23
Bibliography	27
Mithra's Gift	33

Introduction

The myth of the genie has a long history within Arabian and Middle Eastern history. It existed thousands of years before Islam developed¹, and the pre-existing myth was adopted into the Qur'an as *jinn*, beings that Allah created from fire². Adding the *jinn* into the Islamic religion did not erase the earlier stories and superstitions that existed in the culture, however; these superstitions were still prevalent in 1885 when Sir Richard Francis Burton translated several religious and cultural texts from the Middle East and India, including *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*.³ Victorian Britain did not immediately embrace Burton's literary contributions and considered them vulgar.

[H]e was called “an authority... on all that relates to the bestial elements in man” and... Henry Reeve [editor of the *Edinburgh Review*] called his *Nights* “one of the most indecent books in the English language,” and “an extraordinary agglomeration of filth.”⁴

Despite the focus of bad press on Burton, he was not the only British scholar translating these Arabic works. Edward William Lane, Edward Powys Mathers, and John Payne all had either incomplete or complete versions of the text, though none of them were circulated widely. Sir Burton was the first to publish a complete, uncensored version: *The*

¹ Robert W. Lebling, *Legends of the Fire Spirits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014.)

² “Al-Qur'an Al-Kareem - القرآن الكريم,” Surah Al-Hijr [15:27], <https://quran.com/15/27> (accessed March 28, 2020).

³ “History - Sir Richard Burton.” BBC, BBC, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/burton_sir_richard.shtml (accessed March 28, 2020).

⁴ Fawn McKay Brodie, *The Devil Drives: a Life of Sir Richard Burton* (London: Eland, 2002.)

Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night,⁵ which was the cause of the critical reviews he received on its vulgarity. It is still considered the most complete version in English.⁶

Western society has adopted and manipulated the stories in *Arabian Nights* over time, particularly the ones dealing with *jinn* or genies. They have become villains, cliché plot devices, and misunderstood minor characters in TV shows, movies, and books. Most often, the genie is used as a symbol of exotic, opulent, and mysterious Persian culture, contrasting the ‘instant gratification’ of the genie wishes against Western and particularly American values of hard work and struggle to get the things you want.

Jinn and genies have always been crafty and clever beings in myth. In pre-Islamic Arabian folklore, they are considered to be beings that are neither good nor bad; sometimes they are blamed for misfortunes, diseases, and curses, and other times they are viewed as benevolent and helpful beings. This amorality made it easy to integrate the myth into Islam, and it continues to make them convenient for storytellers to use and reuse in a variety of ways. The capriciousness and mischievous qualities of *jinn* allow them the flexibility to play either the hero or the villain, and add suspense to the story. Neither the protagonist nor the audience is ever entirely certain whether or not the genie can be trusted, or what ulterior motives the creature might have. This is a common theme with trickster characters in folklore and mythologies around the world, such as the Norse god Loki, Anansi the spider in West Africa, and Coyote and Raven in Native American stories. It is the amorality and trickster nature of *jinn* that forms the foundation of the creative project included in this thesis.

⁵ Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: a Companion*, (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2010), 23.

⁶ Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2008), 507.

My thesis consists of two distinct parts: a research component and a creative component. The research component is divided into two chapters. The first chapter focuses on the historical fiction genre, the historical fantasy subgenre, and the audience that my creative project was written for. I compiled print and online sources analyzing the definition and characteristics of historical fiction, the role of the genre within the world of literature, how historically accurate authors are required to be in their writing, and the importance and popularity of this genre in our society.

The second part of the research component is an author's commentary that discusses the research I did on Ancient Persia and Ancient Greece. In this chapter, I discussed the societal, religious, and physical context of the world my main character, Anisa, is living in. I explored the history of the god Mithra, who for the purposes of my story is a morally gray character with villainous tendencies. The gods of pre-Zoroastrian Persian mythology, like those of most major ancient civilizations—Greece, Rome, Egypt, Mesopotamia—were not designed to be moral compasses for the citizens of the society. They did not conform to our modern concepts of 'good' or 'evil'. Mithra represents the idea of amoral truth and has his own agenda and goals, as opposed to a god like Allah, God, or Yahweh. These gods serve as legislators and executors of their religion's morals and are void of human faults. For example, the gods of the ancient civilizations became jealous, fell in love with mortals, and overcame obstacles, while the gods of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are placed above such human, mundane behavior. In this chapter, I also spend time discussing the politics and events of the time period as they relate to my story: King Xerxes of Persia, known as Shāhanshāh (King of Kings), the Peloponnesian War in Greece and the plague that struck Athens near the beginning of the

war, and Alexander the Great's campaign through Persia. I researched everything from the reign and capital of King Xerxes, which for the purposes of my story is Parse, though that is actually one of several capitals in the empire, to the materials that would be used to make tents during Alexander's campaign. These sections form the background and context for the second half of my thesis.

The second component of my thesis is my creative project. This is a historical fiction written in four distinct parts. It spans from 483 B.C.E to 334 B.C.E., from the height of the Achaemenid Persian Empire to its fall at the hands of Alexander the Great. The parts do not follow chronological order; the first part is set in Athens, Greece in 428 B.C.E., the second falls back in time to 483 B.C.E. to Parse, Persia, the third section moved forward five years to 478 B.C.E but remains in Parse, and the fourth section is in 334 B.C.E. at Gaugamela, the site of the final battle for the Persian Empire. Throughout the story, the protagonist Anisa struggles with her identity as a genie, the concept of eternal slavery, and the morality of granting the wishes of evil or selfish men.

The foundation of the creative half of my thesis is from *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night* by Sir Richard Francis Burton and *The Wrath and the Dawn* by Renée Ahdieh, a modern retelling of Burton's classic written for young adults in 2015. The book by Sir Richard Francis Burton, the translation of a whole conglomeration of Arabic myths, was the original inspiration. At this project's conception, I intended to write my own contribution to Burton's compilation, similar to the ones he included. Then I read *The Wrath and the Dawn*, unrelated to my research for the thesis, and decided I wanted to expand my story outside of the particular tale that *The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night* and *The Wrath and the Dawn* both revolve around, the framing story of Shahrzad

telling a thousand tales to her husband, the caliph, to avoid being killed at dawn. Seeing the way that Renée Ahdieh took the classic story and manipulated it for her own devices inspired me to look beyond what already existed into what I could create. Her retelling incorporates a curse hanging over the caliph's head and Shahrzad's determination to kill the caliph that morphs into a desire to save him. She breathes life and humanity back into her characters in ways that inspired me to do the same.

For the historical context, Herodotus's accounts of the Persian Empire and Thucydides' account of the plague in Athens during the Peloponnesian war were essential, as were Matthew W. Waters' book *Ancient Persia : A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-330 BCE* and A. D. H. Bivar's article "Mithraism: A Religion for the Ancient Medes." Regarding the research into the historical fiction genre, the question of whether or not that term is an oxymoron, and the boundaries of division between historiography and historical fiction, I relied heavily on *The Art of the Novel* by Milan Kundera and *Forms of Historical Fiction* by Harry E. Shaw. They both explore writing historical fiction, since the authors themselves are authors of historical fiction and understand, and discuss, the process of writing. All these sources and the others listed in the bibliography informed me about historical fiction, historical fantasy, juvenile fiction, and the history of the Achaemenid Empire in Persia and Ancient Greece.

Chapter 1: Background of the Historical Fiction Genre

Shifts towards inclusion in publishing

My main focus with the thesis is to contribute to the growing juvenile fiction historical fantasy genre in a way that includes some of the cultures and histories that can get left out of the classroom and our popular culture. More and more, there is a call for diversification within the world of fiction—representation for minorities, LGBT characters, disabled characters, and other disenfranchised groups. Many authors writing about these groups have, in the past, struggled to be published. In 2005, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center received a total of 3,150 books. Only 415 of those books were written about minority groups, and only 169 of those were from minority authors. In 2018, the same organization received a total of 3,653 books, with 1,023 about minority groups and 788 books written by minority group authors.⁷ Organizations like the non-profit We Need Diverse Books, founded by three authors after a successful social media campaign went viral at BookCon 2014, are dedicated to widening the exposure for diverse authors and books about minority groups.⁸ Recently, however, society has shifted away from discrimination and toward inclusion. The evidence of this is most firmly seen in the Supreme Court decision in 2015 to legalize same-sex marriage, the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, anti-bullying campaigns in schools across the country, and the BlackLivesMatter campaign that began in 2013.

Though steps have been taken by American society and therefore followed by publishing companies and promotional agencies, as is proved by the marked increase in

⁷ “Publishing Statistics on Children’s/YA Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators,” Children’s Books by and About People of Color, <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp> (accessed March 30, 2020).

⁸ “About WNDB.” We Need Diverse Books (February 24, 2020) <https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>.

minority authors and books about minority groups in children's literature, as measured by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, there are still parts of our culture that have resisted the change. The FBI reported that in 2018, there were 7,036 single-bias incidents of hate crimes, 59% of which were race related, 18.6% were motivated by religion, 16.9% related to sexual orientation, 2.2% from gender-identity bias, 2.1% resulted from bias against disabilities, and 0.7% were prompted by gender bias.⁹ My own story will hopefully be added to the increasing number of books that represent those who have been sidelined and discriminated against in that it is a story about a young heroine from Persia—a society that, though it had a huge impact on Western culture and history, is rarely discussed.

The origins of historical fiction

As far back as Homer, authors have been writing about and embellishing the past in fictional accounts. Homer was the first to create what we consider now to be a historical fiction—or more precisely historical fantasy, due to his use of gods and magic¹⁰—account, but we can find storytelling traditions in every culture that predate Homer but do not quite fit the historical fiction/fantasy mold. Ancient documents from civilizations that predate Ancient Greece show that even the earliest peoples were creating myths and fictitious details to explain past events or to fill in the details of a true story: for example, the Epic of Gilgamesh from the Sumerian civilization and the Tale of Sinuhe from Egypt.¹¹ Both of these stories were written about important historical figures

⁹ “Incidents and Offenses,” FBI, FBI (October 29, 2019) <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/topic-pages/incidents-and-offenses>.

¹⁰ Homer, *The Iliad ; The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

¹¹ Benjamin R. Foster, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).; John L. Foster, “Sinuhe: The Ancient Egyptian Genre of Narrative Verse,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 39, no. 2 (1980), <https://doi.org/10.1086/372789>.

from that society's past and deal with moral lessons, creation myths, and accounts of events in the civilization's history. Part of the Epic of Gilgamesh, for instance, describes a Great Flood and the foundation of the Sumerian civilization. The Tale of Sinuhe describes the circumstances surrounding the death of Pharaoh Amenemhat III, founder of Egypt's twelfth dynasty. As is demonstrated in these two texts, humans have had an interest in the people and events of their pasts throughout the history of human civilization.

The popularization of the modern, Western concept of historical fiction, without the religious emphasis of most of the most popular ancient examples (excluding the Tale of Sinuhe and Beowulf), is credited to Sir Walter Scott, a Scotsman who lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹² Professor Peter Garside, an expert on Scott and his works, describes Scott's rise to renown: "By the 1820s it was a critical commonplace that Scott was the founder of a new historical fiction, superior in several ways to conventional historiographical modes, whose formula was now immediately transferable to other national identities."¹³ His most famous work, *Ivanhoe*, is set in the 1100s during King Richard I's rule and was published in 1819, but two hundred years later, there is still no clear definition of what historical fiction should accomplish as a genre, nor even clear boundaries as to what historical fiction encompasses.

Popularity of historical fiction

In order to decide whether a specific book fits into the genre of historical fiction, we are required to understand what the genre is, how it works, and what its rules are. We

¹² Sir Walter Scott, His Life and Works. <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/Sir-Walter-Scott/> (accessed September 27, 2019).

¹³ Peter Garside, "Popular Fiction and National Tale: Hidden Origins of Scott's Waverley," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 46, no. 1 (1991) doi:10.2307/3044962 (accessed March 8, 2020).

also need to understand why the genre is once again gaining the attention of history scholars and literary scholars. It has risen and fallen in popularity since its modern invention by Sir Walter Scott. Dr. Suzanne Rahn, a professor of English at Pacific Lutheran University, discusses the recurrences of the historical fiction genre as a popular one, paralleled with fantasy:

In some respects, [historical fiction's] history as a genre within children's literature parallels that of fantasy. Both established themselves in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, and reached a peak of excellence in the golden era between 1865 and 1910. Both enjoyed a second flowering beginning around World War II, and lasting more than twenty years.¹⁴

There has been a third flowering of public interest in historical fiction presented through various forms—TV shows like *The Crown* (2016), *Victoria* (2016), and *Downton Abbey* (2010); movies such as *Dunkirk* (2017), *Titanic* (1997), *The Last Samurai* (2003), and *Gladiator* (2000); and books like the *Outlander* (1991) series, *The Book Thief* (2005), *The Help* (2009), *The Boy in Striped Pajamas* (2006), and *Water For Elephants* (2006)—and to various audiences.

This latest resurgence is acknowledged by Fredric Jameson, an American literary critic, in his 2013 book *The Antinomies of Realism*: “the historical novel has never been so popular nor so abundantly produced as at the present time.”¹⁵ Dr. Jerome De Groot, a professor of English Literature at the University of Manchester, also discusses historical fiction's reappearing popularity:

¹⁴ Suzanne Rahn, "An Evolving Past: The Story of Historical Fiction and Nonfiction for Children," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 15, no. 1 (1991): 1 doi:10.1353/uni.0.0034

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, (London: Verso, 2013) 263.

In particular, the last few decades have seen an explosion in the sales and popularity of novels set in the past. Visit a bookshop or book website and the Historical Fiction section, in itself a relatively new marketing innovation, will be groaning under the weight of new work published by authors from across the world, and in numerous styles.¹⁶

The renewed popularity of the genre has been noted by historians and literary scholars, and it has prompted them to analyze the genre's characteristics and what it has become today.

Defining historical fiction

This recent rise in historical fiction has prompted literary scholars and authors of the genre to seek to define it. The International Association for Professional Writers and Editors (IAPWE) defines historical fiction as “fiction set fifty or more years ago that requires a writer's reliance on research.”¹⁷ While the parameters of chronology in historical fiction are simple and definite—any book set fifty years or more into the past and focused around a historical event, person, or series of events—defining the purpose of historical fiction is more complex.

Dr. Althea Reed, Director of Education and Development at Northwestern Mutual Life in Asheville, North Carolina, former editor and president of the ALAN Review, and chair member of the National Council of Teachers of Promising Young Writers program, is the author of several books regarding education. Her book *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult Book and the School*, says the purpose of historic fiction is “[to] reveal

¹⁶ Jerome De Groot, *The Historical Novel*, (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁷ International Association of Professional Writers and Editors, *The Subgenres of Historical Fiction*. <https://iapwe.org/the-subgenres-of-historical-fiction/>.

history and the true character of historic figures.”¹⁸ Reed distinguishes that from historical fiction, whose purpose is to “bring history to life”¹⁹ without using real people from history or telling their specific stories. Historical fiction is often written to bring to life people from history that have been influential, embody their time and/or society, or possess some quality or belief that is echoed throughout time. How that is done, however, is a topic of debate among scholars and historians.

Author, researcher, and professor of English Dr. Beyazit Akman presents several questions about historical fiction: How can a genre like historical fiction exist? Is it a branch of history or a form of fiction? How reliable should such a genre be?²⁰ These questions, which have been asked by many different scholars, seek to standardize categorization of fiction and decide whether or not a specific book truly fits into the historical fiction genre. Dr. Harry E. Shaw, a professor of English at Cornell University,²¹ expresses the importance of defining genres:

Genres help us sense the lay of the literary land. They imply questions and sometimes answers: we see a forest, or at least clumps of trees, instead of trees.... Making sense of a work rests upon knowing what to expect from it, understanding how to take it in. This in turn implies that we have a sense of

¹⁸ Althea Reed, *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult Book and the School*, (New York: Macmillan, 1994)

¹⁹ Reed, *Reaching Adolescents*

²⁰ Beyazit Akman, “Fiction or History? A Brief Theoretical Elaboration on Historical Fiction and Fictional History,” *Journal of Trakya University Faculty of Letters* 7, no. 14 (July 2017): 85-86

<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/591544>

²¹ Harry E. Shaw | *English Faculty: Cornell Arts & Sciences*. <https://english.cornell.edu/harry-e-shaw> (accessed March 9, 2020).

what sort of thing it is, how it works, what its rules are.... Questions of genre are questions of meaning and literary effect.²²

Dr. Harry Shaw spends an entire chapter of his book *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors* explaining his definition of historical fiction. He discusses the idea of probability that we carry with us when reading any book: how probable is this character, event, response, etc. based on our knowledge of the world, the characters, and the typical social mores?²³ Shaw then uses this idea to define historical fiction:

When we read historical novels, we take their events, characters, settings, and language to be historical in one or both of two ways. They may represent societies, modes of speech, or events that in very fact existed in the past, in which case their probability points outward from the work to the world it represents; or they may promote some sort of historical effect within the work, such as providing an entry for the reader into the past, in which case the probability points inward, to the design of the work itself.²⁴

In simple terms, Shaw is stating that historical fiction either can be drawn directly from the past and represent an event, society, or person who truly existed, or they can represent a historical effect that draws the reader into the world of the past without being explicitly about a certain society, person, or event. This is simply one scholar's definition of historical fiction, and as Michael Williams, a historical fiction author and newspaper editor, pointed out in a review of historical fiction as canon for the Church: "The

²² Harry E Shaw, *Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors*, (S.I.: Cornell University Press, 2018) 19-20.

²³ Shaw, *Forms of Historical Fiction*, 21

²⁴ Shaw, *Forms of Historical Fiction*, 21

definition of historical fiction is like many other branches of the subject [of history], a matter of dispute and uncertainty.”²⁵

Many scholars of history and historical fiction view the genre of a conflict between factual information and fictional creation—something that in its very nature is a contradiction. However, Sir Herbert Butterfield, a professor of history and Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, refers to it instead as a marriage between true foundations and the fictional elaboration so that “[history] is put into a context of narrative....”²⁶ Presenting it as a marriage creates an impression that both the field of history and the world of literature have sacrificed parts of themselves to create something that is at once both of them and neither of them.²⁷

Fiction is still at the foundation of a historical novel, and this is made clear through an analysis of the language we use to describe this type of novel. Beyazit argues:

“fiction” is the noun. “Historical” only modifies it.... “Fiction” can stand alone whereas “historical”, in this instance, cannot.... In the phrase, “brown table”, “brown” is an adjective and it needs the noun “table” to exist to be able to function properly whereas “table” can stand alone.²⁸

When the grammar of the phrase itself is analyzed this way, it is clear that while historical fiction authors work to base their works on reality, they are not trying to make history novelistic or fiction, but rather bringing it to life through the use of imaginative interpretation.

²⁵ Michael Williams, “Opportunities in Historical Fiction,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 8, no. 3 (1922): 360.

²⁶ Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel: an Essay*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 6.

²⁷ Akman, “Fiction or History?,” 87.

²⁸ Akman, “Fiction or History?,” 88.

Milan Kundera, the Czech author known for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and the recipient of several literary prizes, argues that historical fiction writers “translate non-novelistic knowledge into the language of the novel”²⁹. A historical novelist himself, Kundera discusses how he handles history in his own writing:

Of the historical circumstances, I keep only those that create a revelatory existential situation for my characters.... [their] fundamental anthropological experience thus has historical roots, but the description of the history itself (the role of the Party, the political bases of terror, the organization of social institutions, etc.) does not interest me, and you will not find it in the novel.³⁰

Kundera therefore concisely separates historical fiction from historiography and historic (nonfiction) books. The author is able to pick and choose how much of historical background and fact to put into their story (within reason), and create a novel that tells of a historic event, person, or society without being dragged down with too much minutia or caught up in something that does not carry their plot, their characters, or their conflict further. This is one of several ways authors are able to explore historical descriptions without being forced, as historians are, to only focus on the facts and evidence that the past has provided for us.

Writing historical fiction for young audiences

Another way for authors to explore history is through the lens of children and young adult narrators. The author of several books regarding the art of writing young adult fiction and historical fiction, Joanne Brown observes the effectiveness of this focus in historical fiction, particularly in historical fiction directed to young readers: “The

²⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, Translated by Linda Asher (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006) 55

³⁰ Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 56.

result, a character of heroic proportions, is immensely satisfying to young readers.”³¹

This is echoed and elaborated on by British author Anne Schlee, recipient of the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She discusses her own reason for writing historical fiction for children rather than for an adult audience:

In a way, almost all children’s books are legends of power and weakness. One has to develop a child character who is, in a sense, a hero with power over the action of the story. Yet, in reality children don’t have power over their situations. In the past children were far more exploited, but they were much more caught up in the web of adult existence. In writing about the past, the writer has the chance to depict their extraordinary adventures and seizures of power.³²

Writers of historical fiction for young audiences have the chance to explore the ways that children fought for power in a world that often used them as pawns or chattel. Though the idea of children seizing power and independence is a captivating theme, especially for children and young adults, it straddles a fine line in historical fiction between empowerment and falsification, as is acknowledged by Joanne Brown:

In historical fiction for young adults, the protagonists are usually fictional adolescents. These adolescent characters are often rendered powerless, not only by their youth, but by gender, race, or class; they are frequently

³¹ Joanne Brown, “Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History?,” *The ALAN Review* 26, no. 1 (January 1998), <https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v26i1.a.3>.

³² Ann Schlee, "Only a Lamp-holder: On Writing Historical Fiction," In *Innocence and Experience: Essays and Conversations on Children’s Literature*, Barbara Harrison and Gregory Maguire, eds. (New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1987) 264.

victimized by greed, hatred, or persecution. Nonetheless, they manage to triumph in the face of overwhelming odds.³³

These characters are described as having been ‘heroized’ by their authors, and the phenomenon is not isolated to historical fiction. Heroized characters are widespread in children and young adult literature with famous examples in *Harry Potter*, *Percy Jackson*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Matilda*; the main characters defy adults and succeed against enemies years and, in the case of the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan, gods and monsters several thousand years older than the hero. The pitfall with writing heroized characters is that they become larger than life and difficult to relate to, which is especially dangerous for writers of historical fiction, whose characters are intended to legitimately have existed in history.

Kathryn Lasky, author of over one hundred nonfiction and fiction books for adults and children, suggests the solution to such aggrandizement of historical figures is writing what she calls ‘keyhole history’, which she elaborates on:

[W]hat I hope for young readers of my books is that they will see that history is not just reserved for great people or heroes or patriots... that there is distinction living an ordinary life with dignity, with hope and courage... that just being normal and ordinary had its own peculiar kind of grace. This is keyhole history.³⁴

Lasky follows this philosophy in all of her own historical fiction, such as her four contributions to the *Dear America* series, *A Journey to the New World*, *Dreams in the Golden Country*, *Christmas After All*, and *A Time for Courage* as well as *Ashes, Night*

³³ Brown, “Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History?”

³⁴ Katherine Lasky, "Keyhole History," *SIGNAL* 21, no. 3 (Spring, 1997.): 10

Witch, and several others.³⁵ Other authors have also started to take on a similar approach, though they perhaps do not use Lasky's specific term for it. Sharon Cameron's *The Light in Hidden Places*, Ruta Sepetys's *Between Shades of Gray*, *Salt to the Sea*, and *The Fountains of Silence*, John Boyne's *The Boy in Striped Pajamas*, and *The Lies We Tell Ourselves* by Robin Talley all exemplify the trend of exploring the lives of ordinary people during extraordinary times. 'Keyhole history' creates a different focus in the story, and different opportunities for creativity and artistic license. Characters can become sympathetic for modern day audiences without sacrificing historical integrity or the facts of a story.

The aggrandized, heroic style of fiction has persisted throughout time, beginning with the first civilization's ode to a demigod king named Gilgamesh who went on many different adventures. Though it is rare to find translatable, intact sources from different civilizations, the same cyclical themes reappear in Egypt in the *Tale of Sinuhe*, in India in Hindu religious texts, in the Middle East in the Torah and the Koran, in Greece in *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and countless other texts that survived the test of time, and in Northern Europe in *Beowulf*—and these are just the most well-known examples of the trope known as The Hero's Journey, made famous by anthropologist Joseph Campbell and used by fantasy authors before and since. Most often, the heroes are gods in disguise, demigods, or heroes with supernatural aid, and the tales told about these men (or less often, women) fit into the mythologies of the societies that created them. The introduction of such themes into historical fiction generated a new subgenre: historical fantasy.

³⁵ Kathryn Lasky, "Fiction / Kathryn Lasky's Books." <https://www.kathrynlasky.com/books/category/fiction> (accessed April 2, 2020).

Defining historical fantasy

While time travel has always been a popular device to bring a modern perspective to a different time period or an antiquated perspective to the current time—one famous example of this being Stephen King’s *11/22/63*—there is a distinct difference between historical fiction, with narrative details based in reality, and historical fantasy, which mixes significant elements of magic in with factual details. Historical fantasy also varies from a science fiction subgenre called alternative history that Dr. Paul K. Alkon—a professor of English at University of Southern California, Los Angeles and a scholar who has published several works on science fiction³⁶—defines as “narratives exploring the consequences of an imagined divergence from specific historical events.”³⁷ Examples of this genre include *The Man in the High Castle* by Philip K. Dick, *Leviathan* by Scott Westerfield, and *The Guns of the South* by Harry Turtledove. There is overlap between the two genres, as historical elements can be used to change the course of history and create alternative histories. At its core, however, historical fantasy “exists at the overlap of historical fiction with the fantastic, where carefully researched historical details are embellished with and altered by the addition of dragons, magic, or the otherworldly.”³⁸ Examples of historical fiction include *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak and *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco.

The genre also covers a wide variety of subgenres: fairytale retellings, steampunk, celtic/arabian/classical fantasy, gunpowder fantasy, medieval fantasy, and prehistoric

³⁶ “Paul K. Alkon,” Georgia Press, <https://ugapress.org/author/paul-k-alkon/> (accessed March 14, 2020).

³⁷ Amy J. Ransom, “Warping Time: Alternate History, Historical Fantasy, and the Postmodern Uchronie Quebécoise,” *Extrapolation*, no. 2 (2010): 258.

³⁸ Charlotte Burcher, Neal Wyatt, Neil Hollands, Andrew Smith, Barry Trott, and Jessica Zellers. “Core Collections in Genre Studies: Fantasy Fiction 101,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (January 2009) <https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.48n3.226>.

fantasy. These subgenres cover a variety of time periods and regions, and all of them mix in fantastical elements. Regionally specific legends and fairytales also bring in their own elements (e.g. genies in the Middle East, ancestral ghosts in Southeastern Asia, spirit animals in Native American stories, the Yōkai in Japan). The genre is not wildly popular, and often spills over into science fiction, alternative history, and other genres, but some of the influential titles in this subgenre were written in the late 1980s and 1990s. This includes *The Lions of Al-rassan* by Guy Gavriel Kay, the Temeraire series by Naomi Novik, and the Soldier series by Gene Wolfe. More recently, *Territory* by Emma Bull, *Ash: a Secret History* by Mary Gentle, and *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* by Seth Grahame-Smith have widened the readership and popularity of the historical fantasy genre.

Though authors do not typically begin a book with a specific audience in mind, several have contributed to the slowly growing popularity of historical fantasy for the juvenile and young adult fiction. Julie Berry, author of several picture, middle grade, and young adult books, says:

Age of readership suggests certain possibilities of tone. For example, picture books, middle-grade novels, and YA novels can all be funny, but each has a different scope for humorous possibility. Each can be tender, but in what ways? I don't think I approach projects by thinking, "Whom do I want to read this," but rather, "What do I want to say, and how do I want to say it?" The readership will follow.³⁹

³⁹ Terrell A. Young, "Talking with Julie Berry: Printz Honor Author Berry Discusses Her Extensive Body of Work, the Research behind Her Craft, and the Thought Process behind Writing for Readers of Different Ages," *The Booklist* 116, no. 1 (September 1, 2019) https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/apps/doc/A601763776/AONE?u=tel_middleten&sid=AONE&xid=e7b613a8.

In other words, Berry does not seek out the audience but rather the tone of the creative project she is working on. Though she writes historical fiction and fantasy both, Julie Berry “hope[s] young readers can come to feel that generations that went before them have much more in common with them than they may have realized.”⁴⁰ She, like many authors who write juvenile and young adult historical fantasy, uses these different times to highlight the commonalities between generations and link the past to the present. For example, Renée Ahdieh has written two historical fantasy duologies: one based loosely in the world of Richard Francis Burton’s *The Arabian Nights: the Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*, as previously mentioned, and one set in feudal Japan that explore young women fighting for themselves and their futures. Other examples are *Grave Mercy* by Robin LaFevers and the *Walk on Earth a Stranger* series by Rae Carson, both about girls with powers that were unwelcome in their times and how they came to accept themselves.

Juvenile fiction

Since its explosion into popular culture through J. K. Rowling’s series, *Harry Potter*, juvenile fiction (also known as children’s fiction or children’s literature)—and its sub genre called middle grade fiction, written for children from ten to thirteen years old—has reached new audiences previously unavailable to authors. Children and adults have begun reading, discussing, and analyzing books written for children more than ever before. It has often been a gateway to different times and experiences, such as in *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Curtis about a ten year old African American boy trying to find his father during the Great Depression, *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio about a boy with

⁴⁰ Young. “Talking with Julie Berry,” 26

facial disfigurement going to school for the first time, *Splendors and Glooms* by Laura Amy Schlitz about two orphans in Victorian London trying to rescue a girl who has been kidnapped by a puppet master, *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry about a Jewish family escaping from Denmark during World War II, and Megan Whalen Turner's fantasy novel, *The Thief*, about a boy who is being used by the king's advisor to steal a priceless gem, and he is in a position of powerlessness. These books are fantastic examples of credible juvenile literature that is wonderfully written and marketed toward children. The audience for these books sets them apart from young adult fiction and adult fiction because of the themes they focus on. A juvenile fiction book deals with self-discovery, friendships, and exploration without the explicit themes (excessive violence, romance, sex, language, etc.) found in young adult fiction.

The relatability that juvenile literature strives for led to the genre being sidelined by serious literary theorists. It had been categorized as simply made for children and not worthy of analysis of themes or structure by serious literary scholars until only a few decades ago. Clementine Beauvais and Maria Nikolajeva, both scholars of children's literature, wrote and edited *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature* that discusses the history, themes, and most popular areas of children literature scholarship. They argue that in the 1980s, the children's book "became a text worth exploring on its own, like those books for grown-ups"⁴¹ and so scholars began seeking to define it. They asked: "how is children's literature different from all other kinds of literature? *Is it*

⁴¹ Clémentine Beauvais, and Maria Nikolajeva, *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature [Electronic Resource]*, Edinburgh University Press (2012): 2
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00263a&AN=mts.b4359402&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

different? How can we study it?”⁴² In the 1990s, much of the discourse about juvenile fiction was pulled from other areas of literary scholarship, and this borrowing created the dynamic, varying field of analysis that currently exists.⁴³

Today, it is united with culture as scholars analyze the role of children’s literature in “perpetuating ideological and cultural norms, including about children themselves.”⁴⁴ The unique ability of this genre to discuss and analyze societal issues while retaining an element of innocence and appealing to pre-teens, teenagers, young adults, and adults alike makes it something that is worthy of literary analysis. It is an influential genre that is changing the way that the next generation is interacting with literature, social controversies, and literacy strategies.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the origins, definitions, controversies, and examples of historical fiction, historical fantasy, and juvenile fiction in order to create a strong foundation on which I have built the creative part of my thesis. There is a wealth of information about each of these categories, and this chapter captures a single tree to the forest of knowledge and analysis surrounding the historical fantasy genre for juvenile audiences. Though historians and literary scholars continue to debate the characteristics of historical fiction, and literary scholars have just begun to analyze juvenile fiction as a valid literary genre deserving of deeper evaluation, the scholarship on both these topics are broad and extensive. For the sake of brevity, I have included an incomplete list of examples that encapsulate each genre or audience that I discuss. This creative project and

⁴² Beauvais, *The Edinburgh Companion to Children’s Literature*, 2

⁴³ Beauvais, *The Edinburgh Companion to Children’s Literature*, 2

⁴⁴ Beauvais, *The Edinburgh Companion to Children’s Literature*, 2

other works like it are contributing to a growing pool of creative work that unites mythologies, histories, and the commonalities that exist throughout time and human civilization to connect us all.

Chapter 2: Author Commentary

My thesis falls within the juvenile fiction historical fantasy genre in the Arabian fantasy subgenre. I have drawn all the major events and historical characters from research on the Achaemenid Empire in Persia and Athens, Greece. Though I have added impossibilities—by design, the genre I am writing within requires impossibilities—I have done everything I can to ensure that the setting, descriptions, and background of this story are firmly based in the beliefs and cultures of the civilizations I am working within.

I researched the religion, daily life, political structure, and economic structures of the Persian Empire. Little credible information is available on the belief systems of the Achaemenid Empire; since it fell so long ago, there are not very many written records left. Most of what we know about the Achaemenid Empire comes from carved inscriptions in one the Empire's capitals, Parse, and from Herodotus's account of them in the Greco-Persian Wars (492-449 B.C.E.).⁴⁵ Darius I, the king who began construction on the city of Parse, inscribed a history of the Empire, how he came to rule, and what he accomplished during that time on the Behistun Inscription—a relief on a cliff in the Kermanshah Province.⁴⁶

Around this time, the Persians had begun practicing Zoroastrianism, the first monotheistic religion, whose supreme god is called Ahuramazda.⁴⁷ However, Zoroastrianism was never a static thing, but something that was constantly shifting through different cultural and societal influences.⁴⁸ Herodotus briefly referenced Persian

⁴⁵ Dariush Moghaddam, *History of Iran: Parse or Persepolis*. <http://www.iranchamber.com/history/persepolis/persepolis1.php>.

⁴⁶ Joshua J. Mark, *Behistun Inscription*. https://www.ancient.eu/Behistun_Inscription/ (accessed February 26, 2020).

⁴⁷ M. Boyce, *Ahura Mazdā*. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahura-mazda>.

⁴⁸ Matthew W. Waters, *Ancient Persia: A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-330 BCE*. (Cambridge University Press, 2014): 151

religion. He cited altars, not dedicated to a certain god but used for all sacrifices, in which they sacrificed to the elements of the sun, moon, earth, water, fire, and wind, as well as gods he referred to as Zeus and Aphrodite.⁴⁹ Matthew Waters, a professor of classics and ancient history at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, interpreted Herodotus's references to Zeus as Ahuramazda and Aphrodite as a called Mithra, though Waters qualifies this identification: "Mithra is a male god in the Persian and Indo-Iranian traditions"⁵⁰. The cult that worships Mithra, separated from his role in Zoroastrianism, existed within the Roman Empire,⁵¹ though I stretched the beginnings of such a cult back into the 400s B.C.E. In the Median religion, where Mithra originated, he was represented by the Sun.⁵² I maintained this perception of the god in my story rather than giving him a humanoid form as the Greeks and Romans did with their gods.

I did diverge from history in the topic of human sacrifice. Mithraism, like many middle and near east religions, practiced animal sacrifices. This is shown on murals and coinage from the region that depicts the god killing a bull.⁵³ Most of the information that is available on Mithraism is from the Roman Empire, at the height of the cult's influence with the largest number of adherents. This does affect the information, as most of the documentation was written by Christians seeking to undermine paganism.⁵⁴

I searched for historical information on Persia to make sure that the world I was putting my character into was believable. I found information on how houses were built in that time period, what it was common for people to wear if they were noble or

⁴⁹ Herodotus, "On the Customs of the Persians," In *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912)

⁵⁰ Waters, *Ancient Persia*, (Cambridge University Press 2014) 154

⁵¹ A. D. H. Bivar, "Mithraism: A Religion for the Ancient Medes," *Iranica Antiqua* 40 (January 2005): 346

⁵² Bivar, "Mithraism," 344.

⁵³ Bivar, "Mithraism," 349.

⁵⁴ Marc Goldstein, "Mithrism," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2020.

common, what the king's palace would look like and how it might be decorated, along with random details of information that I found myself needing as I wrote the story. Most of the information came from Encyclopedia Iranica, which gives details on architecture, history, art, and religion in the Achaemenid Empire.

Early into research on Greece, I discovered that there was a plague outbreak in Athens in the second year of the Peloponnesian War (428 B.C.E.), described first by Thucydides, a Greek historian. I built my research from there, though I did not give too much detail on the city or the lifestyle of Greeks intentionally as Athens would have been a very different place during wartime than it was in peacetime. Most of my information came from Thomas Sprat's English translation of Thucydides' account of the plague that fell upon Athens.⁵⁵

The fourth and final section of the story was originally set in New York City, 1916, with the intention of adding more in between to fill that gap in time. I have since brought it back in time to the campaigns of Alexander the Great as he conquers the Persians in the 330s B.C.E. The majority of my research for this part of my story is drawn from translations of the *Astronomical Diary*,⁵⁶ which documents Alexander's campaign and eventual overthrow of the Persian Empire. This plotline better encapsulates the world that my main character lived in and allows time to pass without becoming unanchored by her history.

⁵⁵ Thomas Sprat, English Poetry, Second Edition English Poetry, and Literature Online Core (LION Core) (legacy). *Plague of Athens*. [S.l.]: Printed and Sold by H. Hills [etc.], 1709.

⁵⁶ Mathieu Ossendrijver, "Translating Babylonian Astronomical Diaries and Procedure Texts," In *Translating Writings of Early Scholars in the Ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece and Rome: Methodological Aspects with Examples* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016).

Though my story is based on the fantastical idea of a genie that travels throughout time and ruins the wishes of her various masters, I am also a historian. It was my goal to create a realistic backdrop that shed light on a culture and historical empire that often gets barely a mention in its role as the aggressor against Greek freedom and the foundation of Western civilization.

Bibliography

“About WNDB.” We Need Diverse Books, February 24, 2020.

<https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>.

Ahdieh, Renée. *The Wrath & the Dawn*. NY, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2016.

Ahdieh Renée. *Flame in the Mist. Smoke in the Sun*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2018.

“Al-Qur'an Al-Kareem - القرآن الكريم.” Surah Al-Hijr [15:27]. Accessed March 28, 2020. <https://quran.com/15/27>.

Akman, Beyazit. “Fiction or History? A Brief Theoretical Elaboration on Historical Fiction and Fictional History.” *Journal of Trakya University Faculty of Letters* 7, no. 14 (July 2017): 85–107.

<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/591544>.

Beauvais, Clémentine, and Maria Nikolajeva. 2017. *The Edinburgh Companion to Children's Literature*. [Electronic Resource]. Edinburgh University Press. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00263a&AN=mts.b4359402&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Bivar, A. D. H. “Mithraism: A Religion for the Ancient Medes.” *Iranica Antiqua* 40 (January 2005): 341–58.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=17450799&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Bray, Libba. *A Great and Terrible Beauty*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2012.

- Brown, Joanne. "Historical Fiction or Fictionalized History?" *The ALAN Review* 26, no. 1 (January 1998). <https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v26i1.a.3>.
- Bull, Emma. *Territory*. New York: Tor, 2011.
- Burcher, Charlotte, Neal Wyatt, Neil Hollands, Andrew Smith, Barry Trott, and Jessica Zellers. "Core Collections in Genre Studies: Fantasy Fiction 101." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (January 2009): 226–31. <https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.48n3.226>.
- Burton, Richard Francis. *The Arabian Nights: the Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night*. London: CRW, 2007.
- Butterfield, Herbert. *The Historical Novel: an Essay*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Carson, Rae. *Walk on Earth a Stranger*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2016.
- Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. London: Scholastic Childrens Books, 2013.
- Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Bud, Not Buddy*. Livonia, MI: Seedlings, 2000.
- Da Silva, Teresa Christina Cerdeira and Suzetta Macedo. "The Aura of History in Historical Fiction." *Portuguese Studies* 14, (1998): 205-214.
- Dahl, Roald, and Quinten Blake. *Matilda*. Jonathan Cape, 1988.
- Daniels, Cindy Lou. "Literary Theory and Young Adult Literature: The Open Frontier in Critical Studies." *The ALAN Review* 33, no. 2 (January 2006): 78–82. <https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v33i2.a.11>.

- Duchesne-Guillemain, J. "Encyclopædia Iranica." RSS. Encyclopædia Iranica.
Accessed July 13, 2019. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahriman>.
- Foster, Benjamin R., trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.
- Foster, John L. "Sinuhe: The Ancient Egyptian Genre of Narrative Verse."
Journal of Near Eastern Studies 39, no. 2 (1980): 89–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/372789>.
- Garside, Peter. "Popular Fiction and National Tale: Hidden Origins of Scott's Waverley." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 46, no. 1 (1991): 30-53.
Accessed March 8, 2020. doi:10.2307/3044962.
- Gentle, Mary. *Ash: a Secret History*. London: Gateway, 2013.
- Goldstein, Marc. 2020. "Mithrism." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.
<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ers&AN=96411496&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Grahame-Smith, Seth. *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2012.
- Groot, Jerome De. *The Historical Novel*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- "Harry E. Shaw." Harry E. Shaw | English Faculty: Cornell Arts & Sciences.
Accessed March 9, 2020. <https://english.cornell.edu/harry-e-shaw>.
- Herodotus. "On the Customs of the Persians." In *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2:58–61. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912.

- “History - Sir Richard Burton.” BBC. BBC. Accessed March 28, 2020.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/burton_sir_richard.shtml.
- Homer. *The Iliad ; The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. London: Penguin Books, 1998.
- “Incidents and Offenses.” FBI. FBI, October 29, 2019. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/topic-pages/incidents-and-offenses>.
- Irwin, Robert. *The Arabian Nights: a Companion*. London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2010.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Antinomies of Realism*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Kathryn Lasky. “Fiction / Kathryn Lasky's Books.” Kathryn Lasky. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://www.kathrynlasky.com/books/category/fiction>.
- Kay, Guy Gavriel. *The Lions of Al-Rassan*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Penguin Group, 2017.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. Translated by Linda Asher. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.
- LaFevers, Robin. *Grave Mercy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2012.
- Lasky, Katherine. "Keyhole History." SIGNAL, Spring, 1997.
- Lebling, Robert W. *Legends of the Fire Spirits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014.
- Lowry, Lois. *Number the Stars*. Waterville, ME: Thorndike Press, a part of Gale, a Cengage Company, 2019.

Mark, Joshua J. "Behistun Inscription." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Ancient History Encyclopedia, February 26, 2020.

https://www.ancient.eu/Behistun_Inscription/.

Marzolph, Ulrich, and Richard van Leeuwen. *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2008.

Moghaddam, Dariush. "History of Iran: Parse or Persepolis." *History of Iran: Parse or Persepolis*. Iran Chamber Society, 2002.

<http://www.iranchamber.com/history/persepolis/persepolis1.php>.

Novik, Naomi. *Temeraire*. London: Harper Voyager, 2007.

Ossendrijver, Mathieu. "Translating Babylonian Astronomical Diaries and Procedure Texts." In *Translating Writings of Early Scholars in the Ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece and Rome: Methodological Aspects with Examples*, 125–72. Boston: De Gruyter, 2016.

Palacio, R. J. *Wonder*. Brantford, Ontario: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2015.

Pamuk, Orhan, and Dikbaş Nazim. *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist*. London: Faber & Faber, 2016.

"Paul K. Alkon." Georgia Press. Accessed March 14, 2020.

<https://ugapress.org/author/paul-k-alkon/>.

Powell, Barry B.. *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet / Barry B. Powell: Barry B. Powell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

"Publishing Statistics on Children's/YA Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations

Authors and Illustrators.” Children's Books by and About People of Color.
Accessed March 30, 2020.

<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

- Rahn, Suzanne. "An Evolving Past: The Story of Historical Fiction and Nonfiction for Children." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 15, no. 1 (1991): 1-26. doi:10.1353/uni.0.0034.
- Reynolds, Dwight F. "Arabic Folk Narrative." In *Arab Folklore: A Handbook*, 77–129. Greenwood: Westport, 2007.
- Riordan, Rick. *Percy Jackson*. London: Puffin Books, 2010.
- Roberts, Jennifer Tolbert. *The Plague of War: Athens, Sparta, and the Struggle for Ancient Greece*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter*. New York: Scholastic, 1998.
- Schlee, Ann. "Only a Lampholder: On Writing Historical Fiction." In *Innocence and Experience*. Barbara Harrison and Gregory Maguire, Eds. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Shaw, Harry E. *Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors*. S.I.: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2018.
- "Sir Walter Scott, His Life and Works." Sir Walter Scott, his Life and Works. Historic UK . Accessed September 27, 2019. <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/Sir-Walter-Scott/>.
- Sprat, Thomas., English Poetry, Second Edition English Poetry, and Literature Online Core (LION Core) (legacy). *Plague of Athens*. [S.I.]: Printed and Sold by H. Hills [etc.], 1709.

- Swartz, Merlin, and Irfan Shahîd. "Arabic Rhetoric and the Art of the Homily in Medieval Islam/The Literary-Cultural Dimension." In *Religion and Culture in Medieval Islam*, 36–66. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge , 1999.
- "The Subgenres of Historical Fiction." International Association of Professional Writers and Editors. IAPWE, February 27, 2017. <https://iapwe.org/the-subgenres-of-historical-fiction/>.
- Turner, Megan Whalen. *The Thief*. New York, NY: Greenwillow Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2017.
- Waters, Matthew W. 2014. *Ancient Persia : A Concise History of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-330 BCE*. Cambridge University Press.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00263a&AN=mts.b3908985&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Williams, Michael. "Opportunities in Historical Fiction." *The Catholic Historical Review* 8, no. March 1922): 360-371.
- Wolfe, Gene, and Carol Russo. *Soldier of the Mist*. New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1987.
- Young, Terrell A. "Talking with Julie Berry: Printz Honor Author Berry Discusses Her Extensive Body of Work, the Research behind Her Craft, and the Thought Process behind Writing for Readers of Different Ages." *The Booklist* 116, no. 1 (September 1, 2019): 25–27. https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/apps/doc/A601763776/AONE?u=tel_middleten&sid=AONE&xid=e7b613a8.

Mithra's Gift

By Carma Sharp

Part 1

428 B.C.E. - Athens, Greece

Anisa swirled into existence, sighing when she took in the disgusting alley she had been summoned into. “This is your third and final wish, Master. I would advise wording it more carefully than your other two, as you will have no more wishes to undo what you have caused.”

Her master, crouching behind a barrel, snarled at her. “Get down and lower your voice, Genie. You are going to get us caught. My last two wishes would have gone perfectly if you had not twisted my words into horrors.”

She frowned at the man, but complied. He had done unspeakable things, and now was betraying his city of Athens. Anisa could not bear being bound to him for any longer than necessary.

“Your third wish, Master. I do not desire to sit in this filth any longer than I must.”

He snapped at her. “Let me just think for a second!” As he peeked around the edge of the barrel, he absentmindedly stroked the gold of her lamp. It sent uncomfortable shivers through her.

“Stop that,” she growled, glaring at his fingers. He looked down, surprised to find himself caressing her lamp, and instantly stilled his movements. “Why did you call me here if you had yet to come up with a wish, traitor?”

He glared at her. “I have a wish, Genie. Let me consider my wording.”

She sighed loudly and picked at the tassel on the end of her belt. It was a rare day when she actually paid attention to the clothes she wore while in physical form, and it was still strange to find herself in the richly colored robes and elaborate belts that had been the fashion all those years ago in Persia. She had begun to feel her age; her body was the same barely mature frame every time she reformed, but her soul often felt weary and burdened. Had she not died, she would have been around seventy years old, older than anyone she had ever known, and she could feel the unbearable weight of eternity pressing down on her.

“Genie.” The man in front of her drew her attention away from her tassel. “I wish for Sparta to gain an advantage in this war, something to guarantee our victory without leading back to me. Do it now, Genie. Let these weak Athenians feel the full force of your power.”

Anisa bristled at his impatience. She liked what her former master had told her about the Athenian ideals of voting and equality, even if the only people allowed to have a voice were men that had land. She sorted through the options that unfurled in her mind, pushing away those that gleamed with gold—the recommendations of the god she was forced to serve, Mithra. She considered the whispers of plague she had heard, the outbreak that was flaring up again in the streets. A simple touch from her could make it spread like wildfire throughout the city, effectively handing Athens to the Spartan armies.

A wicked smile curled her lips up, and her eyes narrowed. “As you wish, Master. So it is done.”

For one moment, as her consciousness rose above the city to find those most susceptible to the epidemic, she was free. The lamp was barely a flicker below her and

she soared through the streets, brushing against victim after victim. The sneering face of her former master entered her mind, and she scooped up a rat covered in infected fleas as she was pulled back to her lamp, dropping it into the alley as she settled back into her body. The rat sat still for a moment, small heart pounding from terror, before it caught the scent of fresh bread and aged cheese from her former master's satchel and scurried toward the food. Soon enough, her master would be bitten by fleas, and he would regret his traitorous actions.

As soon as her magic was complete, her human body began dissipating, swirling into smoke. She hoped the traitor would realize that his own wish was his downfall before he died, but he was not the most intelligent of men, and he would most likely miss the irony.

Anisa reluctantly let herself be dragged from the lamp yet again. She had expected a new call. The alley that her former master had likely left her in was not quite hidden and her lamp was probably lying in plain view, but when she took in her surroundings, she found she was no longer within the great walls of the city. Instead, she stood on rocky ground, the city and the sea beyond it visible in the distance. The stench of burning flesh filled the air and she turned toward the smell, finding a pile of linen-wrapped bodies covered in flames and smoke. Plague victims, she realized, likely from the outbreak she had caused. The bodies were being burned in hopes of stopping the spread of infection.

A gasp from her left had her turning to take in her new master. He was an old man, wrinkled and bent, but he had hazel eyes, like Eskander's. Anisa ignored the old ache of loss and pushed back the last memory she had of her brother, the memory of him being dragged into the darkness of a smoky cavern as she waited to die.

"You have called upon the Genie," she intoned flatly. "I have the power to grant you three wishes, and three wishes only. I have no power over life and death, over love and hate, over past and future. Wish for anything within my power, Master, and it will be granted."

The old man did not seem to be listening to a word she said. His face completely drained of color, he took a step forward with a hand outstretched, the other cradling her lamp to his chest. She sidestepped his fingers effortlessly, uncomfortable with his attempts to touch her. Never had any of her masters tried that, excepting the Shāhanshāh's futile attempt to kill her. The man frowned at her evasive movements, but stopped trying to reach out to her. His hand dropped back down to his side.

He spoke, his voice weak and trembling. "What is your name?"

This was a common enough question, and one she knew how to answer. "I am called many things, Master, but you may address me as Genie."

Her words seemed to suck all the energy out of the old man, and he leaned heavily against his cart—his plague cart. He stared down at the lamp in his hands for a long moment. When he spoke, his words were directed to the gleaming gold in his hands rather than to her.

"The last time I asked you that question, you had a very different answer."

Anisa's frown deepened. Her mind raced, recognizing the old man as familiar but at a loss as to where she might have seen him before.

"I cannot be summoned by the same master more than once, and there are none now that survive from before I was what I now am. How is it then, Master, that you believe we have met before? What name do you claim I told you to call me?"

"Have you so completely forgotten your human life that you cannot even recognize your *dâdash*?"

All thoughts flew from her head. It was not possible. Eskander would have to be at least five and sixty years old, though her concept of time was vague at best, and there were too many dangers and diseases in the world for many to live past the age of forty. She straightened her back, refusing to believe that he was who he claimed.

"My brother is dead."

The man looked up at her in surprise and confusion. "No, he stands before you!"

He pushed away from his cart, trying to stand as straight as he could

But she was shaking her head, speaking wildly. "You are mistaken. He died long ago. Disease or war or shipwreck, I do not know. It is impossible..."

"Anisa," the man whispered, and the smoke within her went completely still.

"*Âbjé*, please."

Anisa took a slow step forward, trembling from head to toe. She cupped his wrinkled face in her shaking hands and stared into his familiar hazel eyes, the green and brown swirled together the way it always had. She dropped her hands and stumbled back, running into the stone of the mountain.

"Eskander?" she breathed. "How?"

The old man in front of her, her *little brother*, ignored her question and let his eyes slip closed. “No one has called me Eskander in fifty-five years. Anisa, what happened after they dragged me away? How did *this* happen?”

He gripped the lamp in his hand, and she felt that uncomfortable tingling throughout her body.

She grimaced. “Do not squeeze so tightly, *dâdash*. I am connected to the lamp, and I feel uncomfortable when you hold it in such a way. If you strap it to your belt or something similar, I will remain in human form but not be constantly aware of your touch.”

Eskander looked at her very strangely but did as she asked, looping the lamp through his belt. “You did not answer my question.”

“I know,” she sighed, and then explained briefly. “They killed me. They sacrificed me to Mithra and the god of oaths took my spirit and gave it power. The men that stole us, Eskander, they dumped my lamp into a vault in the Shāhanshāh’s palace.”

“But if they killed you, how do you stand before me now?” He took a careful step toward her and took her hand in his own wrinkled one. The contrast made her heart ache, and she looked away.

She scowled at the thought of Mithra’s ‘gift’. “Mithra was summoned. That ring my mother stole was some kind of symbol of his power, and he turned it into these.” She let go of his hand to hold up her wrists, displaying the ornate bracelets. “They keep my soul chained to the lamp, and by extension to life.”

“So he saved you?”

Eskander looked like he was in awe, and she had a feeling that Mithra had always expected her to see it that way as well. But she did not, and she could not believe that Eskander was taking the god's side. Eskander should be on her side; he should be furious about what the god had done. He should free her from her prison—be the master who wished for the end of her enslaved existence.

“He trapped me,” she snapped back at her brother. “He stopped my soul from going into the afterlife and instead enslaved me. I am forced to serve any person who picks up my lamp. To do horrible things and grant terrible wishes.”

Her brother huffed and she knew that meant that he disagreed with her, but he was not going to argue with her any more. Instead, he changed the subject.

“I have to get back to the city. If I am out here after dark, the guards will seal the gates, and I will not get my pay.” He eyed her Persian garb. “Do you have anything more... subtle?”

She looked down at her pristine clothes, noticing for the first time how drab his were in comparison. She shrugged in answer.

“If I do, I have no idea how to change into it. Just put the lamp in the cart. Touch it to call me again when you can.”

“I do not understand. How do you go back into the lamp, and how do I refrain from calling on you just by touching your lamp?”

“The lamp's power is activated by touch,” she sighed, hating the lamp more in that second than ever before. “To avoid calling me forth, use a cloth or something similar when handling it. To send me back, remove the lamp from your person. So in your hand,

hanging on your belt, I am in the physical realm, but the moment you let go of the lamp, I am forced to return.”

He unhooked the lamp from the belt and seemed to weigh the gold in his hands.

“I am... glad to see you again, Anisa. Glad to know that you are not dead.”

She smiled genuinely for the first time since she had been murdered. “I cannot tell you how happy it makes me to see you again, *dâdash*. How it has plagued me all these years, to know that you were out there somewhere while I was unable to do anything but travel only where my masters did. I can barely believe that I have found you at last.”

He returned her smile with a gap-toothed, rotting one of his own. She worked to hide her grimace of disgust. It was hard to look at this frail, dirty old man and match him to the image of the energetic little brother that used to swing from roof beams and leap from rooftop to rooftop with the agility of a monkey.

She watched him, hands clasped before her. He slowly turned and took a few steps back to his cart, setting the lamp down carefully under a pile of discarded linens. She realized that those linens were probably covered in the fleas that spread her plague, but she knew that none of the bugs would come near her lamp. She had observed animals, insects, and even dust shying away from the burnished gold on many occasions.

The lamp thudded into the cart, and she swirled into smoke, Eskander’s astonished gasp at her new form the last thing she registered before she was in her lamp. She spun and spiked and marveled in the darkness. Her little brother had found her. Would he release her from this prison? And then he could join her in the afterlife a little while later, and they would be free together. Maybe he would finally find his parents there, and everything would be perfect. If Eskander had been tracking time correctly,

after fifty-five years of enslavement and pain, she would shed the horrible bracelets that cuffed her wrists and never have to think about her lamp again. She would finally be at peace.

Anisa appeared before her brother, barely able to stand still, the force of the smoke inside her roiling with excitement. After so very, very long, she would be free. She glanced around, curious to see where her brother had lived all these years. They stood in a tiny room that doubled as a dining room and kitchen. A stove leaned against one wall and a large bucket used for bathing against another. There was one door in the back that probably led to his bedroom, but that was the whole place. It was only a little bigger than their old, tiny house.

“Hello Eskander,” she chirped, giddy with the idea of freedom.

He looked at her strangely again, and she realized that he probably did not understand why she was so cheerful. He did not see how ready she was to be free, for her soul to move on at last.

“Anisa,” he said, gesturing to a stool before a rickety table. “Please, sit.”

She frowned a little, confused by his solemn expression, but she did as he asked.

“What is troubling you, Eskander?” she queried after finding her seat. “Do not be troubled by wishing me free. It is what I want, and technically, I died when Cyra’s father sacrificed me all those years ago. Now, I just desire to be free from my enslavement.”

Eskander shook his head slowly. “I want to get to know you again. Tell me about your many adventures. Let me tell you all that I have done and seen. I have missed you, *âbjé*, and I want to spend time with you. We can think about wishes later.”

Something about his wording bothered her, but she ignored it. Of course he would wish her free. He just wanted to spend a little time with her first, to hear about all the places she had been and masters she had served. Of course, he also wanted to tell her about all the things that had led him to this place, and she was dying to know what had happened after the fleshies had dragged him away from her.

“Of course,” she agreed quickly. “Tell me everything.”

And so they sat at that old table for hours, and she told him about all the masters she had served, the great palaces of Khshayarsha, the Spartan spy who had stolen her lamp from an Athenian general. When she spoke of the Shāhanshāh, he squinted, furrowing his brow and asked her, “Who?”

“The Shāhanshāh, Eskander, Khshayarsha. He was King of Persia when I was killed.” Could he not remember the man who had waged wars with Greece, who had lived in that wretched palace above everyone, demanding higher and higher taxes of all his subjects?

“Ah.” Her brother was nodding now, his face less wrinkled than it had been. “Yes, yes. The Greeks call him Xerxes. I apologize. My memory is not what it once was.”

Anisa sighed as she was reminded once again that her brother was now much older than her. His mind was becoming as weak as his body, and he could not remember everything with the clarity that she did. She waved his apology away, trying to ignore the horrible feeling in her gut that her brother was in his final days.

“Tell me of your life, *dâdash*. How did you get to Greece? What have you been doing since? Do you have a wife? Children?”

Eskander’s shoulders slumped forward at her mention of a family. Perhaps that had been unwise, but it was too late now to take back the question.

“I did,” he told her. “Long ago. But my sons perished in the war with Sparta, and my wife died of heartbreak soon after. Now, only I remain, carting away the dead and trying to survive.”

Her heart sank. Eskander had never managed to escape poverty. He was still fighting for his survival all these years later, just like they had as children. His hands rested limply on the table, and she grabbed one of them in both of hers, offering whatever comfort she could in the face of his sorrow. She knew what it was to lose family, but to lose a child... she could not imagine the pain and loneliness he must feel.

“I am so sorry. I had hoped that you would find a good life if you could only escape from Parse.”

“Persepolis,” he muttered, and she tilted her head to the side, asking a silent question.

“In Greek,” he explained, “Parse is called Persepolis.”

“But that just means the city of Persians. It could apply to any city in the empire.” She was not sure if she wanted to know all the Greek names for things, if they were all so wildly inaccurate.

Her brother shrugged. “Regardless, that is how we refer to it.”

“*We*? Eskander, you grew up in Parse.”

“But I was born in Greece.” Her brother was glaring at her, his shoulders as straight as he could manage. “I am Greek, Anisa, by blood.”

But by that same blood, they were not brother and sister. Had he told himself, after she was killed, that it did not matter if she was dead or alive because they were not really related?

“By blood,” she snapped back at him, “we are nothing to each other. Pardon me for believing that blood is not everything.”

“Anisa, that is not what I meant,” her brother reassured her.

He squeezed her hands. She pulled one back and rubbed her face, taking a deep breath. “I know Eskander. I am sorry. I am just tired. It is time. I am ready to be free.”

“Free?” Her brother sounded confused. “But if I wish for your ‘freedom,’ you will die, correct?”

“Yes.” Anisa spoke as slowly as she had when he was a small child. “I will die. At last.”

He was shaking his head, slowly at first but then more and more quickly. “No. No, I will not kill you. I will not allow you to squander this gift you have been given! Mithra granted you everlasting life and glorious power. Surely you want to use these things to serve him and do his will! He has made you his *vessel*, Anisa. You should be extremely honored.”

“Honored?” Her voice was flat.

Inside, she was reeling in horror. He sounded like a devout worshipper, like the priest who had given her to the Shāhanshāh and brought her to Greece to escape the king’s wrath.

“Yes! Why can you not see this for the incredible gift that it is?”

Anisa dropped her brother’s hand and stood up from the table. “This...” she gestured to the cuffs on her wrists, to her lamp in his lap. “This is a curse. I am trapped in a *lamp* for eternity. I cannot eat or drink or sleep; I can only do things that comply with someone else’s wishes. I am stuck, hovering in this world like a ghost because *Mithra*,” she spat his name. “Thought it would be a good idea. My soul could have been free to go into the afterlife. I could have been at peace. But now I am caught in between, certainly not alive but quite definitely not dead either.”

“Anisa—”

She cut him off, her voice deadly and soft. She barely even recognized it. “Wish me free, Eskander.”

His jaw stiffened at the command in her tone. “No.”

She sighed and waved a hand in the air, attempting to exude an unruffled, calm atmosphere. “Then wish for something, Master, and allow me to return to my lamp. I tire of the human world.”

Her brother scowled at her. “Do not treat me that way, Anisa. I am not one of those who believe you to be ancient and wise and without feeling. I will not allow you to throw away what the gods have given to you. You may be older than me, but you are a woman, and it is my job to take care of you.”

“Take care of me?” By forcing her to remain in enslavement? “Taking care of me would be releasing me to the afterlife. It is time for me to move on.”

“You are not looking at this matter clearly. You are allowing your emotions to cloud your judgment, and I will not allow you to throw this away. I will make my wishes and pass you along so that you may serve your life’s purpose.”

“My life’s purpose was to take care of you! That has passed. My *life* has passed. Do not leave me enslaved in this way!”

She sprang up and began pacing the tiny room; it took her only five steps to reach one end. Her brother sat at the table still, looking small and tired but determined.

“Anisa, I have decided on my first wish,” was all he said in reply to her outburst.

His words snapped the last of her control.

“Anisa is dead,” she said harshly. “My name is Genie.”

Her brother’s eyes were full of sorrow, but he only whispered, “My first wish, Genie, is to be protected from this insidious plague. I make a living carting the dead, and I have no interest in becoming one of them.”

Anisa’s hands were shaking badly, but she raised them, anyway. Because this new outbreak was her doing, she had the power—when asked—to protect her master from its effects. All the options formed in her mind, and for once, she obeyed the image rimmed in golden light. The magic came more easily than it ever had, flooding out of her fingertips and encasing her brother in a cloud of blue smoke tinged with gold. When it cleared, she could see a faint glimmer on him, a literal shield against the air and flea-borne pathogen. Infection that was already coating him had been erased by her smoke, and he was all at once free from death by plague. Even if he could not see that she was enslaved, she could never cause him pain. Not intentionally, at least.

There was no weakness after granting his wish, and she realized that it was because she had drawn on Mithra's strength rather than her own. If she granted wishes the way Mithra wanted her to, he would give her his power to complete the task. The idea of relying on the god in such a way made Anisa's blood boil. Next time, she would find a way to grant Eskander's wishes without complying with Mithra. She was not doing this for an ancient god, but for her brother and his peace and happiness, even if he was unwilling to do the same for her.

"It is done, Master." Her voice still held the magic that had coursed through her veins, making her sound powerful and strange.

Wordlessly, Eskander picked her lamp up from his lap and set it on the table, and she was sucked inside.

For the first time, Anisa relished the dark quiet of her lamp. She wanted to curl up in a little ball and cry and rage until she was too exhausted to move, but all she could do was sit in the darkness and let her thoughts tear her apart. Eskander would not save her. She was going to be bound to this horrid lamp for the rest of eternity, serving master after master until someone cast her into the depths of the sea.

How could her brother look at her and believe that this existence was good enough? She had given up everything to take care of him. She had gone down to that cavern for him; she had gone to her death for him. She had been so sure that he would be willing to help her, that he would be happy to free her from eternal enslavement, but she was wrong. If her own brother could not be bothered to sacrifice one of his precious wishes to free her, no one would. He had been her final hope, and now that was gone. She felt an aching coldness settle in her bones. No human could be trusted.

Eskander called her from the lamp again long after she had settled into half-consciousness. She kept her head down, only looking around long enough to notice that there was a loaf of freshly baked bread on the table and her brother cupping her lamp in one hand with casual arrogance. The sun now filtered brightly through the single window.

“What is your second wish, Master?” Her voice sounded strange and flat, completely unrecognizable even to her own ears.

“Anisa,” Eskander begged, but she could not bear to look at him. “Anisa, please. Do not punish me for making this decision. I refuse to be the one to end your life!”

Anisa finally looked at him and found that she was not even able to summon anger. She simply felt numb inside, that coldness still spread throughout her.

“What is your second wish, Master?”

Her brother dragged his free hand through his sparse hair in exasperation and muttered, “Fine. If this is the way you want to do this, then this is the way we do this.”

He straightened up as much as he could, and it felt like someone had punched her in the gut as she was reminded just how old her *dâdash* was.

“Genie, I have decided on my second wish. I wish to live in a mansion with enough money to make the rest of my life comfortable.”

The magic raced to her fingertips, sparking and tingling, eager to do her master’s bidding. The rest of her hesitated. She could make him regret his choice to leave her enslaved. She could twist his words as she had been twisting the words of masters for the

last fifty years, but even the thought made her energy falter. She had spent the majority of her life taking care of the man in front of her, and she could do no different in her death.

“As you wish,” she breathed, and traced her fingers through the air, pulling on the very strings of the world. Her disgust at using Mithra’s magic from the night before had evaporated. What did it matter if the magic came from her or from the god? What did anything matter anymore? “By tomorrow morning, you will have your fortune and your home.”

The golden light wound in and out of her smoke as it raced through the city, and the man that paid Eskander to take bodies outside the walls was struck with a sudden desire to make him his successor. The man had lost his family to war and disease, and he had been considering only that morning who might be worthy of his wealth and the home he had built from nothing. That same man was also about to succumb to the plague, and he quickly called for a piece of paper and ink.

Anisa’s brother would soon have money and health and prosperity, and she could not help but wonder if that would ease the terrible pain and sorrow in his eyes. If it did not, what would? She could not bring back to him his wife or sons, nor could she grant him the chance to change the past. All of her life, and death, Anisa had only wished for Eskander to be happy, but even with all her power, it was not possible. She was, yet again, useless.

“Thank you, Genie,” her brother finally said, stiff, and she bowed wordlessly in reply. She had never shown such subservience to any other master, but this was not a bow of submission. It was meant to wound him, to emphasize exactly the role he was forcing her to play. He ignored it and silently moved to set the lamp again on his table.

The sun caught the dent in the metal where it had hit the wall in the Shāhanshāh's palace, and Eskander glanced at it. She saw that insatiable curiosity light up his watery eyes, and before he could ask, she said flatly, "The Shāhanshāh became angry with me after his first wish did not go the way he had anticipated."

"And what," Eskander asked, "did he wish for, exactly?"

Anisa rolled her eyes. "An eternal legacy. He had no imagination whatsoever; it was almost painful to listen to his inane demands."

Eskander settled onto a stool, pulling the lamp back to his chest.

"An eternal legacy? That is disappointingly unoriginal, but what did you do to make him so furious that he would cause such damage to the lamp? It is unwise to anger those you serve, Anisa. He could have hurt you, or you could gain the wrath of the god you serve."

She could not stop the snort that left her. "He attempted to kill me after he discovered the effects of his second wish. This body is merely a shell. The blade did no damage. As for angering Mithra, he has no power to end my existence, and making him angry provides some kind of entertainment."

"Anisa..." Her brother groaned in exactly the same way he had whenever she came home with stolen items. It used to make her feel guilty, but she felt no such obligation to be good now. She was already bound for eternity, why would she not spend those years doing what she could to make it bearable?

She felt an ember of dark fury bloom within the coldness deep inside, and she forced her face back into a blank mask.

"I am tired," she lied. "Please allow me to return to my lamp."

Eskander's face darkened in response, but he obeyed. The lamp thudding onto the tiny table was the last thing Anisa heard before being sucked into darkness once more.

Anisa could hardly bear to answer the call when Eskander summoned her for the third, and final, time. She was furious with him, with his decision, but the knowledge that this was the last time she would ever see her *dâdash* felt like a knife digging into her heart.

She allowed herself to be sucked through the nozzle of the lamp and form into a person, the bracelets on her wrists solidifying last, as always. She refused to take in the rich furnishings that now stood around her. No more old tables or rickety stools, no more dust or roughly made clothes. Her brother lounged on a couch in front of her, reminding her so much in that second of the Shāhanshāh that she flinched and stumbled back a step. He did not notice. He was too consumed in the feast that lay before him. She stood for a long moment, waiting for him to acknowledge her.

“Anisa,” he drawled, “I have decided on my third wish. But first, I have a question. How does time pass for you in that tiny lamp? Are you aware of it, or does one second and one year feel the same to you?”

She clasped her hands behind her back to hide their shaking, forcing herself to remain calm and collected in the face of this strange new Eskander. “I am vaguely aware of the passage of time, but largely I am unsure.”

“Ah, well, to make you aware, it has been about two years since I last let you out of the lamp. I was tired of your nagging. Now, tell me, what does a man who has

everything,” he waved at their surroundings to prove his words, “wish for? What did Xerxes wish for after that first wish?”

Horror was tearing the smoke inside of her into ragged pieces. What had gotten into him? “The Shāhanshāh wished for dominion over his enemies and that everything he said be taken seriously. Neither wish ended up the way he believed.”

“You know...” Eskander was still drawling, and it was not just horror twisting her smoke, but also disgust at this person that used to be her brother. “Xerxes really was not the King of Kings. He was just a king. In fact, he was a terrible king. So stop calling him ‘Shāhanshāh’.”

Anisa felt her lip curl in defiance at the blatant command in his words. “I will continue to call the Shāhanshāh just that, and I do not care what you think, Eskander.”

He sat up from his sprawled position on the couch. “My name is Alexander,” he snapped, and she flinched back for the second time.

All of their lives, he had gone by Eskander. They had both always known that his true name was Alexander, but Eskander was the name he took when she found him. It was his Persian name, his *true* name, he had once told her. Now, apparently, he wanted to be rid of the one thing about himself that was connected to his life with her.

“Of course, Master. I apologize. Your third wish?” It was an effort to keep her voice from betraying how badly she wanted to scream in fury and burst into tears all at the same time.

Eskander—*Alexander*—settled again into the velvet cushions. “I wish for the power to make all I touch prosperous.” When her brow furrowed, he mimicked her expression. “Do not make such an expression, *âbjé*.” The word held none of the

tenderness or love that it once had. “This house is small compared to what I could have. I want to be the wealthiest man in all of Athens, in all of Greece!”

Maybe if he had not sneered at her, if he had not plunged that word into her like a knife in the back, she would have allowed Mithra’s power to fulfill his wish benevolently. However, he had been sneering and snarling since she had emerged from the lamp, and she wanted him to feel the pain that he was putting her in; she was going to punish him for his greed.

“Your wish is my command, Master,” she purred and power exploded from her in a wave. It crashed over him, and for a second his expression was listless and dazed, the wrinkles slackening slightly. The olive that had been in his hand fell to the ground, now made of solid gold.

As the magic settled, she felt herself being dragged back into the lamp.

She whispered, “Goodbye, *dādash*. I hope your wish is everything you wanted it to be.” For if everything he touched was prosperous, turned to riches and gold in his hands, how long would he be able to survive? No more than a few days without water.

She settled into her prison, prepared to be at rest for a long while, when Mithra’s orb flared to life.

“What did you just do?” he roared.

Anisa was unflinching in the face of heat and flaring light. *I gave him what he wished for.*

“You were doing well! You were benevolent and kind, the vessel you were meant to be. You felt me give you the strength and knowledge of how to fulfill this, his last wish, and you once again defied me!”

That man was once my brother, but when he called me forth this third time, all I could see in him was a greedy, selfish old man who thought of himself as a gift to this world. Giving my brother wishes your way turned him into a man like the Shāhanshāh.

The orb's heat became even more oppressive, and Anisa pulled her smoke back into the darkest recesses of the lamp. "You do not decide what your masters deserve. It is not for you to say whether or not they die!"

And what, exactly, are you going to do about it, Mithra, god of oaths? You said yourself that a gift, once given, cannot be taken away.

"You dare question me?" His voice was like a clap of thunder in a desert storm.

If Anisa had been in physical form, she would have tilted her chin up and crossed her arms over her chest. *Yes.*

The orb flared and a bit of her smoke dissipated. She tried to gather herself in closer to escape the light.

"Look at you," Mithra sneered. "You cower in the darkness. Speak to me however you like, girl, but know this. If you come across a human that is good and kind, beware. I have other ways to punish you, and you will face the consequences of your actions." The orb disappeared.

Gods, Anisa decided, were extremely dramatic creatures, and she was grateful that he was gone. That bit of smoke that had disappeared in the orb's light popped back into existence, and she let out a little breath of relief. What if it was the part that formed an eye or an ear or her hair or something similar? She did not want to be incomplete.

Anisa's thoughts faded as she let her mind drift. She refused to consider the god's threats, instead lamenting the fate she had wrought upon the only brother she had ever known.

Part 2

483 B.C.E. - Parse, At the Height of the Achaemenid Dynasty of the Persian Empire

He chased her all the way from the marketplace, and she hadn't even stolen anything. She was about to, but how could he know that? Anisa peeked around the corner of the building, praying the merchant's bodyguard had not noticed her slipping into the alley. A long look confirmed that she had finally shaken the menacing mountain of a man and she stepped out into the open street with a breath of relief. Her adopted brother, Eskander, was expecting her at home, and he had a habit of doing stupid things when he was worried.

Her stomach rumbled loudly as she slipped through the streets toward home, her small build making it easy for her to disappear in the crowds. Jobs had been slow lately and she had not worked at all in the past two weeks. The meager coins she managed to save when work was good ran out two days ago, leaving her and Eskander with a handful of dried dates and a dog too skinny to eat that neither of them had the heart to drive away. Anisa felt her stomach rumble again and her hand brushed against the leather strap hidden under her shirt before she pressed her palm to the emptiness. The feeling of the necklace made her pause, think. If she sold the ring resting against her breastbone, they could get out. They could leave the city, travel out into the desert, and build a home somewhere else. Somewhere better.

Anisa had had the ring for years. Once upon a time, it had been her mother's only valuable possession, and she had pressed it into Anisa's hand ten years ago while the

guards were dragging her away. Anisa never discovered where, exactly, her mother got the ring, but she suspected the woman had stolen it. Anisa's mother had stolen many things. Over the last nine years, Anisa slowly sold everything else her mother had stolen, bartering the items for food or clothing, but she could not bring herself to get rid of the ring that her mother was arrested for. It was silly to be attached to the thing, but Anisa always told herself that she was waiting. Waiting for the day when she had nothing left here and she could get out. But she found Eskander a few months after her mother was arrested and she had given up every dream she used to have to focus solely on keeping both of them fed, clothed, and sheltered.

Now that leaving was their only option, aside from starvation, maybe she could convince Eskander. He had never given up searching for his own parents, and while Anisa worked and scrimped and saved, Eskander backtracked and searched and followed lead after lead, only to come back empty handed and exhausted when it turned out to be another dead end. He refused to leave the city, even for a few days, just in case his parents came back for him. But it had been years now, and if they didn't leave, they would die or be captured by the greedy flesh merchants who preyed on the poor and starving.

Anisa rounded the corner, climbed the stairs cut into the side of the building, and slipped through the threadbare fabric that hung over their doorway, pausing just inside to let her eyes adjust to the darkness in the tiny space. She brushed away strands of hair that had fallen out of her careful braid and moved into the dimness.

She stepped carefully around the hole in the floor where the wood slats had caved in and walked over to the crumpled pile of old rags they used as a bed. When she slipped

out a few hours earlier, Eskander was curled in the makeshift bed, sleeping deeply after working for hours at the blacksmith. Who had not paid him. Again. But the only thing on the floor was dirty rags.

Anisa swung around, trying to find any sign of forced entry or a struggle. Their water bucket, which was filled from whatever rain leaked through the roof during the rainy season and what water they could steal when the rains retreated, sat placidly in its corner. Their small pile of extra clothes was scattered across the floor, not in the neat little pillow lump she had left it in this morning. She froze, and then bent down closer to the dirt floor to make out any footprints she could in the dimness. She could not distinguish anything; the light was bad and there were too many footprints, old and new.

“He has just gone out,” she reassured herself. “He woke up hungry and alone and went out to find food.”

Light poured in suddenly from the doorway, and Anisa swung, still in a defensive crouch, to find a little street rat who hung around Eskander like a flea standing there.

“They took him,” the girl barely whispered.

“Who did?” Anisa tried to say it gently, but the bite in her voice made the girl flinch back and start edging away. “Who took him, Cyra?”

She had a horrible idea that she knew exactly who stole her boy, but she had to make sure.

Cyra was shaking in fear—not at Anisa, but at the thought of the people who took Eskander.

“The fleshies,” she breathed.

The flesh merchants took people to make them sacrifices for their dark magic or to sell them as slaves, and Anisa was suddenly cold with dread, though she had been sweating in the afternoon sun minutes before.

Anisa was on her feet and to the door in two quick steps.

“Which way?” she demanded.

The girl pointed with a shaky finger into the crowded main street. “Show me where they went, Cyra, or I swear to Mithra I’ll offer your body to the fleshies in return for Eskander.”

The words seemed to snap the girl out of her terror. She bared her teeth. “I’d like to see you try, Anisa, Daughter of None.”

Anisa was tired of playing games. “If you show me, I’ll make sure you’re fed for a week.” *Or skip town and leave you to scurry in the squalor, little rat,* she thought.

“And you’ll bring Eskander back?”

Anisa glared furiously. “Why else would I go after fleshies? Now, Cyra, *Daughter of None,* which way?”

Without another word, the little girl led her to the crowded street and down past The Gate of All Nations. Anisa glanced toward the towering staircase that led to the King’s palaces. The guards at the edge of the towering platform glared menacingly at anyone who dared look too long at the extravagance beyond the Gate. The king and his nobles lived in opulence while she and Eskander slept on old rags and stole to survive. Anisa scowled and looked away quickly to find herself in a street she didn’t recognize. Cyra was at the end, beckoning Anisa into some kind of passageway. Anisa walked toward the little girl, following her as she scurried into the dark.

Suspicion began to creep into her thoughts; Cyra had been very confident all the way to this street, had known a little too well exactly how to find these flesh merchants. But what else could Anisa do but follow her? She *had* to save Eskander. They were going to leave. They were going to live somewhere safe, far away from this mountain and its city.

The passageway sloped downward and Anisa stared into the inky blackness, trying to make out something that might give her a clue as to where they were going. But the twists and bends they had gone through had confused her thoroughly, and there was no light in either direction. She tripped over what was probably a loose pebble and Cyra hissed at her in warning. She considered the advantages and disadvantages of knocking the girl out and continuing on her own, though she knew that it would be foolish to risk what was likely her only shot at finding her brother.

After what felt like hours in the darkness, Cyra and Anisa came to a small opening of the tunnel with a little hole in the ceiling that let in the afternoon sun. With the light, Anisa could see five openings including the one they had just come out of. It was an underground crossroads of sorts, and she wondered why they existed. Were they secret routes for the flesh merchants? Anisa had lived with scum her entire life and she had never encountered these passages before. Then again, she never had the time to explore the city that was her home. Cyra stopped right under the sunlight and pointed toward the tunnel slightly to the left of where they were standing.

“They took him that way. I stopped following after that. If you do not die, I will see you tomorrow when you make good on your oath.” Before Anisa could snap at the

little rat, Cyra brushed passed her and headed back down the tunnel they just emerged from.

Anisa had a horrible feeling that if she waited, Cyra might just come back. She walked twenty paces down the tunnel, making sure to loudly kick stones and make her footsteps fade slowly into silence so the girl would think she was far away. Then, without a sound, she crept back to that strange crossroads. Sure enough, Cyra was re-emerging from her tunnel at the same moment. The little girl glanced toward the tunnel where Anisa was hiding, and Anisa leaned farther back into the darkness so Cyra would not see her watching. Cyra, seeming satisfied, turned and went into the tunnel to the right of the original. After waiting for the child to move further down the tunnel, Anisa followed, thanking Ahuramazda her bare feet were silent and practiced on the stone and dirt.

The two girls walked for another immeasurable amount of time; Anisa was becoming fatigued with hunger and exhaustion and had to work hard to make sure her footfalls were silent and that she did not lose Cyra. The little rat walked quickly for her age, and Anisa's long legs were all that kept her from falling behind.

Finally, they emerged into another crossroad with only three openings, and Cyra stopped in the middle like she was not sure which way to go. Anisa hovered in the shadows, waiting for the girl to make her choice. Instead of moving toward one of the three openings, Cyra moved over to the edge where the light did not reach and picked up a little piece of crumbling stone. She threw it hard at the opening to the left of where Anisa stood, and there was a thud that did not sound like stone striking stone.

A muffled curse came from the opening, and a man stepped out into the light. "Do not toss rocks at me, Yesfir. I was simply waiting for you to signal."

The man had a full, dark beard and was dressed in rich clothing—stolen or bought, there was no way to tell. An *akinaka* was strapped to his braided leather belt. It was difficult to tell in the dimness, but Anisa was pretty sure it was not just for decoration—it looked wickedly sharp, unlike the dull, golden ones most noblemen carried. Careful not to make a noise, Anisa took a single step back farther into the darkness, pressing against the wall hard.

Cyra, or maybe Yesfir, replied, “I forgot the signal, *Bâbâ*. It is stupid to have one. No one else knows how to get down here.”

If this was Cyra’s father, why did she live on the streets? It was obvious that he had at least some wealth.

The man frowned down at his daughter. “Yesfir—”

“If you keep calling me that, I will throw another rock at you.” The little girl snapped.

“It is your name, child.”

“My name is Cyra, actually.”

From the sound of it, this was a recurring argument. Cyra’s father sighed. “Did you send the girl into the trap?”

“Yes,” Cyra grumbled. “You promise Eskander is not hurt? I do not understand why you had to take him. She—”

“You know that’s the only reason she would come.”

“I do, but why did you need her specifically? I could have—”

“No.” The man’s voice was sharp as he cut his daughter off. “I do not want you involved in this, Yesfir. The girl carries something valuable, something powerful. We must understand what it is. Now come, I would like to meet your little friend.”

As the two disappeared down the tunnel the man had emerged from, Cyra complained, “She is *not* my friend. She is nothing but a common, filthy pickpocket and a bastard.”

“And how will your Eskander react, do you think?”

Cyra sounded unapologetic. “He might be sad at first, but she is nothing. He will forget her soon enough.”

Though Anisa knew Cyra understood nothing of her relationship with Eskander, the words still stung. She knew Cyra was a little rat, but to kidnap Anisa’s brother and lead her into a trap? The girl would pay for that.

The thought startled Anisa, who did what she needed to survive, but never enjoyed violence. Before she found Eskander missing. He brought out both the best and the worst in her, and if she could, she would kill every person in this cavern. Every single one of them. Then she would take Eskander and leave the city far away, maybe even leave the empire. They could sail to Greece and start again somewhere new.

Distracted, Anisa almost missed the branch in the passageway and came extremely close to walking into the edge that divided the tunnels. Attempting not to make a sound, she jerked her head back away from the wall and listened closely to figure out which way the two had gone. The sound of footfalls came faintly from the right, and Anisa continued after them, cursing her sleep deprived mind for becoming so distracted. She had to find Eskander before she could think about their future.

After a few more minutes of carefully creeping after Cyra and her father, a faint light appeared and began to steadily grow. It was not strong enough to be sunlight, and they weren't anywhere near the surface—she did not think—so Anisa assumed it must be torchlight. Which created flickering shadows that were relatively easy to sneak through. Maybe she could just grab Eskander and leave before anyone realised she was not caught in whatever trap Cyra's father referred to.

Hiding in the shadows right before the mouth of the tunnel, Anisa stiffened in horror. It was a huge cavern, full of patchwork tents interspersed with flickering torches and large fires. The smoke was oppressive; the holes in the far away ceiling were tiny and only vented a little. Hanging from that same ceiling were huge metal cages. The haze in the air made it difficult to see, but Anisa could make out human forms in those cages. If Eskander was in one of those, she had almost no hope of freeing him without drawing attention.

Cyra and her father strode confidently through the firelight after securing rags over their noses and mouths, but Anisa noticed that the man kept his daughter close beside him as they passed dirty men grouped around fires with similar rags on their faces. The noise level was astonishingly low for such a large group of people, and it gave the whole place an eerie atmosphere.

The man and Cyra quickly disappeared into the smoke. Anisa slowly crept from her hiding place, hugging the walls and trying to see where they might be keeping Eskander. She did not even know where to start looking. Would he be in one of the cages high above her head, or did they have him somewhere else? Her best bet would have been to follow Cyra, but it was too late for that now.

Something grabbed her arm, and Anisa almost shrieked before remembering that she had to be silent. Cyra was digging her nails into Anisa's dirty tunic, glaring in fury.

"What do you think you are doing here?" the little girl hissed. "How did you find this place?"

Anisa knew better than to tell the truth to the little rat, and she wrenched her arm away.

"I have my ways. Where is Eskander? What did you do with him?"

Cyra ignored her, instead turning to face a figure Anisa couldn't make out in the dark. Then the fire caught the gleam of his *akinaka*, and Anisa knew it was Cyra's father.

"You were right, *Bâbâ*. Someone was following us. She escaped her trap somehow. This is the girl you have been looking for."

Anisa's eyes flicked all around herself, trying to find some way out, but she was trapped. The cave wall blocked any escape behind her or to her left, Cyra to her right, and the man now standing in front of her.

He stepped closer, narrowing his eyes as he looked Anisa over.

"Interesting," he murmured. "Yes, I do believe it is. Do you know the power that you carry, girl?"

Instead of answering him, Anisa spat at his feet. He was a flesh merchant, and he had the nerve to look at her like she was lesser. The man lifted a hand, and two other men appeared out of the shadows. They grabbed Anisa and pulled her arms behind her back. She strained against their grip.

"I am here for Eskander. Where is he?" She did not even care that she sounded desperate.

The man's mouth curved into a little smirk. "Let me take you to him."

"*Bâbâ*," Cyra protested beside her. "You said Eskander was already free. You told me he would not see me in this place."

The girl was truly whining now, and Anisa was reminded that the little girl could not have been more than ten years old. Too young to be anywhere near this place, no matter who her father was.

"Hush, child." Her father commanded her, and turned to lead the whole group deeper into the cavern.

They wound through tents and around campfires. Many of the men seated around those fires glanced their way, but seemed disinterested. This scene must be common for them.

Finally the group reached another wall. This one had a huge, raised platform with an altar atop it, decorated with carvings too ornate to make out in the dimness. Off to one side, a group of men stood with a boy whose sagging weight two of them supported. Eskander. Anisa's heart leapt into her throat, and she began to struggle again. She was weak—years of malnutrition and weeks of little to no sleep had taken their toll—and she could not break the grasp of those who held her.

Eskander lifted his head at the sounds of her struggle, and she could see his cracked lips form the word, "*Âbjé*." He too struggled, but he was even weaker than she, and his hands and feet were bound with rope.

Anisa swung her face to Cyra's father. "I will do whatever you desire of me. Release him. Please, he owns nothing of value."

The man's face was full of disgust, but Anisa did not care if he was displeased with her desperation. Eskander was innocent; she would do anything if they would only let him go.

"The boy will stay here with the girl until her time has come." The man said to the ones who held her brother. "Put them in my tent."

"*Bâbâ*, no," Cyra whispered. Her voice rose, "No! Let him go!"

Her father ignored her, and the guards holding Anisa let her go. She flew to Eskander's side, ignoring the sounds of struggle behind her. She fell to her knees before him and lifted his precious face.

"Little *dâdash*," she crooned, just as she had when he was younger and was awakened in the middle of the night by the horrors in his dreams. "Oh little brother, I am so sorry."

She started to push his dirty black hair back from his forehead, but a pair of strong hands grabbed her arms and restrained them, forcing her wrists behind her back and tying them with rope.

Eskander smiled ruefully at her, "Do not be sorry, *Âbjé*."

A shriek behind her made Anisa twist her head. Cyra was being restrained by the guards that had been holding Anisa.

"Take her back to the city," her father commanded. "And make sure she stays there until I come for her. And keep her quiet," he added as his daughter continued to scream. One of the guards put a grimy hand over Cyra's mouth and carried her away, back through the smoke.

Cyra's father turned his attention to the men holding Anisa and Eskander. "Take them to my tent. We will complete the sacrifice when the moon reaches its peak." With that, he swept away, leaving his companions to drag the two away from the wall back into the scattered tents and bonfires. Anisa struggled again, but she knew it was futile as her body was racked with coughs from the smoke. These were fully grown men, strong and well nourished, and she had not had a meal in two days. What horrors would she face when the moon reached its peak? Were they planning on hurting Eskander too? How could she have allowed this to happen to her little brother?

The man dragging her grunted when her thrashing feet caught him between the legs, then there was a flashing pain through her head before everything went black.

Anisa slowly blinked back into consciousness when the throbbing in her head became too painful to ignore. The men must have knocked her unconscious to stop her struggling. She tried to lift her head and groaned at the amount of pain that movement caused. She looked up, her eyes adjusting to the hazy darkness and stinging from the smoke, to find herself sitting against a pole, her hands tied behind her. She pulled and wiggled to test the strength of her bonds, but there was no give in the rope. There was no getting out of this. Her hands brushed against skin, and relief flooded through her; at least the men had not separated her from Eskander.

"Are you awake, *âbjé*?" His voice was small and weak behind her.

"Eskander," she rasped. "Are you all right? Did they hurt you?"

Her fingers found his and she gripped them tightly, trying to keep her hands from trembling.

“I am fine. You are the one they want. *Ábjé*, while they were binding me, they spoke of the ring your mother gave to you. They believe it holds great power.”

“They spoke of this in front of you?” How incredibly careless of them.

Anisa could hear the pride in her brother’s voice as he told her, “They spoke to each other in Greek.”

She shook her head slowly, thanking Haoma, the goddess of luck, for granting her brother this small blessing. By some chance, the fleshies happened to speak to each other in Eskander’s native tongue.

“Did they speak of the ceremony at all? What god do they worship? What is the sacrifice Cyra’s father was referring to?”

“They spoke of nothing but the ring you wear, and they were soon distracted by your arrival. Perhaps they intend to use you as a vessel to control whatever power that is contained in it.” Her brother’s voice trembled slightly, and Anisa shuddered at the thought of these men using her for anything.

The ring Anisa had been planning to sell was heavy around her neck, and she considered simply handing the thing over in exchange for their freedom and possibly a few *darics* to pay their way into a different life.

Anisa took a deep breath and had to pause and cough for a moment. The smoke was making it hard to speak. She tried again. “Eskander, I need you to promise me something.”

“What is it, *ábjé*?”

“If I do not survive whatever they intend to do—” she ignored the noise of protest her brother made and carried on, “if I do not survive, get out of the city. Get out of the empire. Go to Greece or to the East; do not stay here. Make a new life for yourself somewhere else. Promise me that you will do this.”

“My parents—” he began, but she knew they didn’t have time for this.

Her voice grew urgent. “Promise me, Eskander. I know you want to find your parents, but you have to survive first. In another place, you can thrive—you are clever and have very good reflexes. After you have established yourself, you can continue to look for your family, but I want to die knowing that you will have a good life.”

“Do not say such things, Anisa.” Eskander’s voice was cold and hard, rough from the smoke. “You will not die. It is my turn to protect you now.”

She smiled at his brave words, but both of them knew that they held no real weight. No matter what Eskander swore to do, the fleshies would still come, and Anisa could feel the inevitability of her death rising up to meet her. It saddened her; she had wanted to live a long life carving out a place for the two of them in a far away place, but looking at her death in the face did not terrify her in the way she would have expected. It was only a matter of time before she too was sent to the gallows for stealing. This death, at least, held some kind of dignity.

Anisa jumped a little when she heard the swish of fabric being shoved aside and glowing firelight swung into her face. Their captors had arrived to escort them back to the altar. Their hands were wrenched apart and untied from the pole, rebound, and then the two of them were dragged through the dirt once again. Stones scraped against her, and she felt her skin tearing in several places before she was tossed at the foot of the platform.

Her head knocked against the stone and she winced. She could feel the blood trickling into her hair from the abuse her skull had taken in the last few hours.

Eskander landed beside her, and he scrambled toward her only to be yanked back by one of their captors.

“Do not touch her,” the man rumbled. They were the first words Anisa had heard from either of the men, and she could hear the Greek accent tinting his Persian.

Her brother’s beautiful hazel eyes pleaded with her to fight back and somehow save them from this, but Anisa was helpless.

Useless. She was useless. They would kill her, and probably kill Eskander too, and there was absolutely nothing she could do to prevent it.

“Anisa, Daughter of None,” Cyra’s father purred as he materialized out of the smoke, his rag blocking the majority of the smoke and muffling his words. “We have gone through much trouble to find you. The ring you wear around your neck does not belong to you, child. I suggest you return it to its rightful owner.”

Instinctively, Anisa flinched back further into the wall and her brother. Her mother had given her this ring, and she did not care from where her mother might have gotten it. It was all she had left of the woman who had raised her, and it was her and Eskander’s way to a better life. Desperation pierced her; he could *not* take it from her. The man strode closer, ignoring her futile attempts to get away from him. There was nowhere to go; there was no way out. She had been slipping and scurrying all her life, but he had backed her into a corner and she was out of places to hide.

He roughly snatched the necklace away from her neck, snapping the worn leather effortlessly. She could feel the burning on her neck where the leather had rubbed and

knew he had bruised, if not broken, her skin. There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes as he lifted the necklace to look more closely at her ring.

“Finally,” he breathed.

Eskander made a small noise of protest, and the man’s attention snapped to her brother. “Get her onto the altar,” he commanded his companions without looking away from the boy. “Set the boy free. He can find his own way through the desert.”

They were in the desert? Anisa had gotten so turned around during her journey down here she had simply assumed they were still under Parse somewhere, deep in the mountain the terraces of the city were built into. She should have known better; the venting holes had to let the smoke out somewhere, and surely someone would have noticed plumes rising throughout the city. Would Eskander be able to survive the desert? Anywhere had to be better than that filthy mountain they grew up on.

The man’s companions marched forward to grab her and her brother, and Anisa panicked. She swung her head to find Eskander already staring, fear and horror lining his face.

“Do not go back,” she pleaded with him as the men grabbed her arms. They began to drag her away, but she refused to look away from her brother. “Get away from the city. Go to the coast. Find a boat to take you to Greece and do not look back.”

“*Âbjé,*” he whispered, “*Âbjé,* no...”

But there was nothing either of them could do. Eskander struggled against his bonds, but two of Cyra’s father’s men picked him up between them and began walking through the darkness. Anisa allowed the men to drag her up the steps of the platform,

barely feeling the bump of the stairs. She stared at her brother until he was a blur in the smoke and kept staring until she felt her hands being untied.

Her eyes flicked to her captors, and she lunged for one of their *akinakas*. Her hand closed around one of them and she pulled back, swiping the blade towards one of the men. His expression remained completely blank; he simply knocked the blade from her fingers in one quick motion. She was officially defenseless. The other man grabbed her arms roughly and straightened them against her sides before wrapping more rope over her stomach and legs, strapping her firmly to the strangely cold stone.

Now Cyra's father approached, his grin displaying crooked, yellow teeth. She shuddered, but the ropes around her prevented her from moving even an inch away from him. He positioned his dagger at Anisa's neck, pressing lightly but not hard enough to draw blood.

“Hear your humble servant, Mithra, Oh Keeper of the Oath!” His voice boomed through the large cavern, and every other sound disappeared. It was as if every human in the cave had frozen simultaneously to listen to the man. “We keep our oath to you and present to you a sacrifice to show our gratitude.”

With a sharp, calculated movement, the man drew the dagger deeply across her throat. Anisa gasped and gurgled, trying to draw breath into her lungs, but she could not. The blood spouted and sprayed with each weakening heartbeat, and her vision fuzzed. As the world went black, she wished desperately not to die—a sudden, instinctive surge of life flashed through her and fizzled out.

Being dead was strangely unsatisfying. There was no peaceful darkness or light or awareness. She was simply standing a few feet from where she died, watching Cyra's father as he drew back the blade and looked around eagerly. Did these zealous fools not realize the superstitious nonsense they had bought into? The gods were not dogs to be summoned and dismissed at human whim.

A sudden flash of light lit up the dark cavern, and she startled, instinctively trying to stumble away but, since she was floating, she just sort of... drifted. It was an unpleasant sensation. The light hovered between her and the priest, over the sacrificial altar. Anisa attempted to cry out, mostly from shock, but she could not make a sound. She tested this odd silence again, forgetting to pay attention to weird light.

“High priest Bahadur.”

She stopped trying to talk when she realized that the sound had come, oddly, from the orb hovering over her body. Its voice was as warm and soft as a summer's day. “Why have you called for me? Have you fulfilled your oath?” Apparently, she'd been wrong. The orb had to be a god, and a god who had responded to the priest's call, just like a loyal dog.

Bahadur and the men standing behind him all looked around wildly when the orb spoke, even though he was standing right in front of it. Anisa realized he could not see it. If the sphere was invisible, did that make her invisible too? She tested the theory by presenting the priest with some vulgar gestures, floating this way and that, and trying to grab at him. Her hands went through him, but it still gave her some childish satisfaction. It was not much, considering they had just tied her down and sacrificed her to a god, but it helped loosen the knot of dark fury that was coiling in her belly.

Cyra's father and his companions fell to the ground in a ragged circle around the altar, and Anisa gloated just a tiny bit. They were kneeling in her blood, seemingly in worship to her dead body. Her body... She stopped gloating.

“Oh Great Mithra, Keeper of the Oath, we have upheld our promise to you. We bring you the ring you have sought, and beg you to grant your servant a favor in return.” Cyra's father cupped the ring he had taken from Anisa in his palms above his head, his hands and the ring itself smeared with Anisa's blood. Another wave of dark, bitter satisfaction swept through her; he was stained by her filthy, common blood.

“I remember the favor you begged, Bahadur. You have fulfilled your end of the bargain, and now I will fulfill mine.” The orb did not move, but Anisa felt its attention shift to her. A strange, uncomfortable pressure blossomed in her mind.

“I hear all wishes, and grant the desires of the followers of the Truth. The owner of the ring shall be granted what they desire. However, if immortality and power are granted, a price must be exacted.”

The orb floated closer to Anisa, and the ring Bahadur offered the god lifted from his hands by a tendril of white, glowing light. Anisa watched with surprise and a distant sort of curiosity as the tendril retracted into the larger orb, ring disappearing with it.

Bahadur's head jerked up and his eyes widened when he saw that the ring had simply disappeared. “My lord Mithra, do you intend to keep the ring for yourself? Your humble servant hopes that it might be a symbol of your power in me.”

The orb ignored Bahadur and spoke again, this time only to Anisa. Somehow, with her new, death-given understanding, she knew that the priest still kneeling on the floor could not hear it—him?—now.

“Child, if I could grant you the life you wished for, I would do so, but even the most powerful cannot change death.” What had she wished for? To not die, she realized. The second the knife had touched her throat, she had wished desperately to not die.

“Instead, you shall have a different life. A better life.”

A beautiful, golden oil lamp materialized, sitting placidly on the altar next to her head, nestled among her unbound hair. She felt a strange tug at her from the lamp, like it wanted her to hold it. She backed away a few steps instead.

Bahadur’s sharp inhale drew her attention, and she found him glaring at her. She was solid? Was she alive again? Hope soared through her, making her heart race.

“You! I killed you!” he exclaimed, lunging forward.

He snarled, baring his teeth. “Are you a witch, that your soul rejects the afterlife?” The knife gleamed, still wet with her lifeblood.

Anisa felt her eyes widen and skin blanch in the face of his fury. She scrambled backwards, but before the priest could move more than a few steps, another flash of light lit the cave momentarily. Bahadur was hurled backward onto the hard limestone. He was still conscious, but although he struggled, he was unable to stand.

“I made an oath,” the orb—Mithra, God of Truth, Anisa realized—declared to the assembled priests and Anisa. “And I intend to keep it. Child, my ring was given to you by your mother. She wished that it would protect you from harm, and her wish has made it so. My ring shall become yours, and it shall anchor you to this earth. Through it, you shall live and serve me. However, rings are small and, in my experience, easily lost.” Some kind of ancient, faint amusement rippled through the god’s tone, which made Anisa’s stomach twist. An anchor? A life of servitude? The hope in her chest faltered.

How was a life of service better? Could he not just... put her back in her body? She did not want to make this bargain, but though she tried once more, she could not make a sound.

“Therefore, my ring will become something new, as your life is now created anew.”

Two thick, golden bracelets appeared on Anisa’s wrists, tipped with some kind of blue stone. The blue stones stopped short of touching and were carved into the shape of lions growling at each other. A pattern of triangles was engraved into the wide, gold band of the bracelet, shining in the light of Mithra. They felt like chains around her wrists. She shuddered—they *were* chains.

Her body started tingling, and she grimaced at the feeling. Before she understood what was happening, she turned into blue smoke, her awareness coming not from her eyes but from some kind of consciousness that didn’t need sight or hearing or smell to interpret the world. A second later, she solidified into flesh again, the golden bracelets a heavy weight on her wrists. A flood of tingling power washed through her, and she breathed in sharply at the strange sensation.

Mithra spoke again, distracting her from her growing horror. “You have become Genie. You have immortal life and immeasurable power. You may grant a man three wishes if he calls you. You do not have the power to change death or life. You do not have the power to change a human’s heart. You do not have the power to change time. If you break any of these three rules, you will rain chaos down on the world. This is my gift to you.”

Wait! she tried to scream. *Let me die! Send my soul on! I do not want this life!* But she still could not make a sound.

The pressure in her skull abated, and she knew that Mithra was done with her.

Bahadur wheezed from his place on the limestone, “Oh powerful Mithra, you have broken our oath. You pledged to me that you would grant me power and eternal life; I was to become a god!”

The god’s voice turned scorching, like the midday sun in the desert sands. “You accuse the Maker of Oaths of breaking his word, insolent man? I swore that oath to the owner of my ring, and the ring claims the child as its owner. All her life, the child has wished only to live and to keep another alive with her life.” A lightning bolt shot through her. Her brother. She had died and left Eskander behind. How would he survive now?

“She is pure,” Mithra continued, unaware of her anguish. “A follower of Truth. You are a child of Ahriman, sinful priest. You walk with the Lies. I am a merciful god, and shall spare your life, but as punishment for your sin, you may never use my Genie for yourself. Lay her body out as your traditions require and have nothing more to do with her.”

The orb disappeared, and as he did, Anisa felt her limbs begin to tingle and sting. She looked down at her hands, but there was nothing there but blue-tinted smoke. Suddenly, she was tugged by some invisible force into the lamp.

Instantly, she began to panic, trying to shove out, out, out, but she had no hands, no legs, no body at all. She was smoke, and no amount of thrashing shifted the lamp. It was so, so dark in this awful prison. How could she be expected to live this way? Was this truly death, and everything she had just witnessed simply some kind of ending her

mind had come up with? Was this eternal, suffocating, horrible darkness all that she would know for the rest of eternity?

Some feeling of being pinned caught her attention, and she stilled, trying to pinpoint it. It was as though there was a net thrown over her whole being, keeping her within the darkness. For some reason, she recalled the cuffs that had encircled her wrists and knew without knowing how she knew that they were what kept her in the darkness. She raged and struggled, trying to free herself from the bonds that held her.

A gift? How could Mithra call *this* a gift? She was supposed to have died! There was supposed to be an *end* to her suffering, not an eternal prison of silence and cold and fear.

She wanted to cry, but she had no eyes or *body*. She wanted to rage and destroy and force others to suffer with her, but all she had was her smoke and this awful darkness. She wanted to break and crush and *end*. The fury that had been building in her since that knife had slid across her throat became a wildfire that consumed her love for her brother, her compassion for others, any kindness that existed in her was turned to ash. The humans would suffer for what they had done to her.

Her soul was trapped in this darkness. Even if the priest obeyed Mithra and placed her body in the desert, no amount of being eaten by the birds would free her now. She was well and truly trapped. She curled silently in the darkness of the lamp, wishing she could cry.

Part 3

478 B.C.E - Parse, Persia: The Height of the Achaemenid Empire

Anisa swirled inside her tiny prison, bored and agitated. It had been a timeless eternity of silence since she had been murdered, and she had been stuck in this stupid lamp ever since. She had discovered, through sheer boredom, that she had the ability to project her consciousness into whatever space her lamp inhabited, but that was boring, too. The priests had tossed her into a chamber of riches somewhere and left her there. They had probably been afraid that if they called upon her, she would slit their throats like they had hers.

Of course, she had imagined it, but she had a feeling that her new body would not allow this level of violence. Some primal part of her new being shied away from the very idea of killing her master. Anisa swirled more violently in protest of this weakness—this subservience to whoever pulled her from this ridiculous chamber. What good was it, she wondered waspishly, to have a room piled high with treasure, if you were never going to use it? She had been starving her whole life, and this chamber held enough money to feed the whole city a hundred times over.

Unable to handle another second of her prison, Anisa projected herself into the chamber of valuables. She hovered tremulously above her lamp, fighting to remain in the physical world, absorbing the feel of gold and dust. Her thoughts turned sour once more, and she glared at the sparkling jewels beneath her. Her prison fit right into this chamber, and all the charm of the little oil lamp was lost on her; now it just made her want to hurl it as far from her as she could.

A distant flare of light drew her attention, and startled by the sudden change, she collapsed back into her lamp. Mental muscles trembling from the last effort, Anisa attempted to understand what had flared. Was it the door? Could this be her chance to get free? She gathered herself up again and pushed out, straining to keep her awareness from slipping back into her lamp.

Two figures approached with lighted torches, muttering to each other too softly for Anisa to hear. As they came closer, they fell silent, like they knew she was listening. She could not see their features in the flickering firelight, but they seemed to be dressed similarly to the priest who had killed her. That rage that crouched inside clawed and twisted its way through her, tinting her perception of the world red. She could feel the smoke that had become her being whip, lashing at the inside of the lamp. But even letting her attention slip to her lamp for a second made the effort to hold herself above it extremely difficult. She focused once again on the men.

They were arguing about ten feet from where her lamp lay, forgetting their earlier inhibitions about her presence in their anger with each other. Anisa could not tell exactly—she did not seem to hear quite like she had before—but it seemed like it was over who had to retrieve her lamp. Her rage multiplied when she heard the same hints of Greek in their words that had been apparent in the men that had tied her to the altar and murdered her.

The roaring fury ripping through her broke her already strenuous concentration, and she was back in her lamp. In this state, there was no other way to vent her anger, and the tendrils of her smoke snapped against the walls of her prison. She could hardly wait for them to call on her. She would burn them. She would break every bone in their

miserable bodies. She would find some way around her magic's refusal to harm her master and she would send them to their deaths. For taking Eskander from her, they would pay.

Eskander. The thought of her little brother halted the roiling wrath, or just quieted it. It had been an immeasurable eternity since she had seen him. Had he gone to Greece as she had instructed him? Did he miss her? Had he searched for her and found her body? Did he believe her to be dead? Though, she supposed, technically she was dead. She had no body and existed only as this strange smoke. Her little *dâdash* would not even know to look for a genie of smoke and power. Could she send a message to him somehow? Let him know how to find her?

Anisa felt a strange tingling tug, and she was being yanked from the lamp—not just her awareness, but her whole smoky self. The tingling intensified and it was as though she was dying all over again, pain shooting throughout her... her *body*. She had a *body*. It was her body, thin and reedy and small, but she was clothed in rich robes unlike anything she had ever worn or even seen. And those bracelets, gold and blue and heavy, were clamping down on her wrists like the shackles they were. Those bracelets reminded her who—what—she was now, circling her wrists and chaining her to earth even as her spirit lurched toward freedom.

She looked up—she was actually using her eyes instead of that strange sensing thing she did when she was smoke—to discover that she was standing in an opulent room covered in bright carvings and full of strangers in fine, dyed linens, sparkling jewels, and gleaming *akinakas*. They all stared at her with fear and awe.

“Bow, Ancient One. Bow before the King of Kings.”

A clear voice cut through the swirling confusion in Anisa's head—it felt as though her mind was still smoke, even though her body had been remade. She realized there was a man standing at the end of the room, on the right hand side of a throne, frowning disapprovingly at her immobile form. Ancient One? Did these people not realize she was barely out of childhood? And her body looked even younger than that; it had been frozen in time when she died, malnourished and looking much younger than her nineteen years.

Another man stood on the other side of the throne. "I suggest you watch your tongue, Artabanus," he cautioned. "The Genie bows only to the gods."

Now that she was looking at him in the light and she could finally see his face without the flickering shadows of fire obscuring it, Anisa knew who he was. This was the priest who had dragged her brother away from her.

She turned to take in the crowd slowly, searching for any more horribly familiar faces, but this man's was the only one. Apparently the rest of the murderers had been too cowardly to show their faces to her now that she held the power of their god in her hands. Those hands curled into fists. She would make this fool regret his actions that night. He was not her master—there was no contract binding her to spare him. She would break him and dice him to pieces and cast him into the fire. She would slaughter his family in front of him; she might even make him do it himself. Her rage flared inside her as she faced the man, but before she could lunge for his weapon or simply tear him apart with her bare hands, a new voice cut through the room, powerful, authoritative, and used to getting whatever it wanted. It sent a shock of subservience through her: her master was speaking to her.

“Ancient Genie, I have summoned you to this realm; you are in my service. I, Khshayarsha, Shāhanshāh of the Persians and the Medes, the Blessed of Ahuramazda, am now your master, and you will bow to me.”

This was her king. A man she had never seen in the eight years since he had inherited his father’s crown. The power inside her was pulling at her consciousness, insisting that she obey her master, but her rage was stronger. She was no one’s servant. She had been tricked, kidnapped, tied up, slaughtered, and caged; she would not allow herself to stoop any lower. What could this man do to her that had not already been done? It was not like he could kill her; Mithra had given her immortal life. Anisa ignored her trembling, human instinct to fall to the floor. Instead, armed with the knowledge that she was already dead, she stood tall. She vowed to herself and Mithra that she would rain ruin down on the world.

“Shāhanshāh, King of Persia. I have destroyed armies, razed cities, brought about the fall of empires.” If they believed her to be *ancient*, she may as well exploit it. She saw the priest to the left of the king frown a little at her bluff, but she knew he would keep his mouth shut. “You are simply the most recent in a long line of masters. You hold my lamp, and I shall grant your three wishes. Do not presume to own me.”

The king guffawed, ugly and loud, even as his nobles shrank away from where Anisa stood in front of the throne. “You may have been granted power by the gods, Genie, but you are in my empire, and I do own you.”

Anisa refused to be cowed into submission. She picked at a magically clean fingernail that looked nothing like the dirty, ragged nails that she used to have and feigned disinterest. Her insides were a riot of rage and fear. What would her master do to

her if she continued to disrespect him? She raised her eyes to him in defiance. “Make your first wish, Shāhanshāh, or allow me to return to my lamp. I have no interest in standing around all day arguing.”

The king’s dark eyes narrowed dangerously, but he only flicked a hand at the gathered nobles. “Leave us.”

There was a general hubbub as they filtered out of the large hall, but the king did not look away from Anisa, and Anisa did not dare break eye contact with him. He reminded her of a leopard—dark and quiet with a predatory gleam in his eyes. The Shāhanshāh was not a man to be trifled with. He had led troops into battle and ruled as a satrap for years under his father. He was cunning and powerful; even though rumors of his taste for too much alcohol and too many women spread throughout the city, there was no sign of a careless ruler that Anisa could see.

She resisted the urge to fidget under his calculating stare, and when she glanced away for a second, she noticed that both the priest and Artabanus still stood in the shadows near the king. The priest was glaring at her furiously, as though he was attempting to communicate something he was too afraid to say aloud. Artabanus was also looking at her, but more like he was wondering how he could use her for his own goals. Anisa recognized that look. She had seen people looking at her like that her whole life.

Just to irritate Artabanus—and she knew it would—she allowed herself to look horribly bored as she lazily dragged her eyes up and down him once before her gaze drifted back to his king. She wished she had a pillar to lean back on to complete the look of ancient disinterest she was doing her best to portray.

At Anisa's glance toward Artabanus, the king also noticed that the man was still standing beside him. "Uncle, I have private matters to discuss with my genie. Leave us."

"My lord, I must—"

"Now," the king commanded sharply.

His uncle bowed low and stalked out of a side door that Anisa had not previously noticed. The priest stifled a small smirk. After the door had closed behind Artabanus, the Shāhanshāh slid even lower into his throne, swinging a leg over the arm of his chair and grinning dangerously at her.

"You seem uncomfortable, Genie. Maybe you are not quite as confident as you would like me to believe?"

So he was observant as well as cunning. He reminded her more and more of a leopard as each moment passed. Anisa scrambled for some kind of excuse to explain the discomfort that seemed to be obvious to him.

"I do not spend very much time in this form, Shāhanshāh. It has been many years since I was last called into the human world."

The king's eyes narrowed even further. "Very well. I shall allow you to return to your lamp so that I may ruminate on what I desire for my first wish."

The priest leaned forward, his eyes widening. She glanced at his movement, and he urgently mouthed, *the rules*. Rules? What rules? And then she recalled what Mithra had told her right before he had disappeared. *You may grant a man three wishes if he calls you forth. You do not have the power to change death or life. You do not have the power to change a human's heart. You do not have the power to change time. If you break any of these three rules, you will reign chaos down on the world.*

“One more thing,” Anisa blurted, attempting casual indifference but mostly failing miserably. The king cocked his head a fraction. “Before you decide on a wish I am unable to grant, I have specifications. My power is not unlimited. I cannot grant you any more than three wishes, nor can I grant a wish for more wishes. I cannot change life or death, or a human’s heart. I cannot change time’s flow.”

The Shāhanshāh finally straightened in his throne. “Is that all, then?”

“Yes.” Was this some kind of test? That was all the god had given to her.

The king stroked the lamp in his hands, and Anisa glared at the offensive thing. “And how do you return to your lamp?”

Anisa floundered. She had no idea how she was supposed to go back in. All she knew was that while it was in his hands, she was stuck in human form. She flicked her eyes to the priest, but he shrugged a little and shook his head. No help from him, then. The king glanced over at his priest, and Anisa tried to keep her face blank. Maybe...

“Put it down, Shāhanshāh, and I will be able to return to it.” *Hopefully.*

The king raised a blocky eyebrow at her like he was waiting for her to change her answer. Anisa hoped desperately that she had guessed correctly. It felt right, but... He slowly lifted the lamp from his lap and set it at the floor by his feet. As soon as his fingers left the burnished gold, Anisa felt herself becoming smoke once more, tingling and painful. Her last breath was a sigh of relief before she was in the timeless dark once more.

Anisa swirled in the relative safety of her lamp. She considered projecting herself into the world to hear what the king thought of her—if he believed the lies his priest had told him. But even considering the amount of energy that lifting her consciousness out of the lamp would require made Anisa's tendrils of smoke grow sluggish and tired. She needed to rest, to allow her mind a respite from the games the king wanted to play with her.

Though she was clever and quick, she had never been able to keep up with the witty, sharp-tongued banter the merchants at the market sometimes engaged in. She liked to be simple and honest and clear, no hidden meanings or tricky words. But to convince this king that she was not lying, she would have to be cunning. And she would find a way to make him regret ever calling her into his presence. She would twist his wishes into curses, the way Mithra had twisted her desperate wish to live into eternal slavery.

She had barely stopped swirling, allowing her mind to drift aimlessly—the only form of sleep she had been able to accomplish since her death—before the vacuum sucked her once more through the tip of the lamp and she began to reform. It hurt less this time around, but the horribly uncomfortable tingling still raced through her skin.

The king had not called her back into the throne room. Now she stood in a spacious chamber covered in luscious rugs and opulent furnishings, one side entirely exposed to the elements, leading out to a balcony that overlooked a courtyard of his palace. Anisa had never seen such finery, and she did her very best not to look like an awestruck child being exposed to wealth for the first time, though that was exactly what she was. She could not help but ogle at the ornate mosaics of brightly covered tiles that

covered the three walls and the richly woven rugs that had to be at least an inch thick. What wish could such a person have? Did a king not have everything he desired?

She remembered herself and smoothed her expression, replacing the awe with vague disinterest and straightening her spine to stand as tall as she could. Her eyes found the king, and she realized he had been watching her; the leopard stalking its prey. He had most likely seen the surprise on her face, but Anisa shook it off, pretended that she had shown only boredom since she reformed. However, she could not help flexing her fingers just a little; they ached to be curled into fists again. This man lived in luxury, had never known anything else, while she had fought tooth and nail to keep Eskander and herself alive for years.

“Genie,” the king purred. “Are you ready to grant me my first wish?”

Anisa considered bowing mockingly, but figured she had pushed her luck too much for one day. If it was still day. She looked around and realized that the sun was low in the sky, shining directly into the room. It was evening, but she had no way of knowing if it was evening of the same day or if it had been weeks or even months. Time passed strangely in the lamp when she allowed her consciousness to drift. If she remained aware, she felt each minute tick by, but when she floated through memories and half-sleep, she had no idea how much time passed.

Dragging her gaze back to the Shāhanshāh, she saw that he was now staring at her with a raised eyebrow, awaiting some kind of response. “Apologies, Shāhanshāh. I sometimes need a moment to reorient myself. The transition is... difficult.” Maybe she would let that explain her facial slip earlier as well.

“I see,” the king drawled, reclining further onto a couch with a low table in front of it.

The table was overflowing with all kinds of fruits and sweet pastries, delicacies she had never seen. It looked delicious and smelled even better, but Anisa felt no pang of hunger in her gut, no rumbling or desire to taste the food. Did genies not eat? She had thought that after her time in the lamp, she would be starving, dehydrated, in desperate need of those amenities that made life possible, but she supposed she had forgotten the fact that this was not her physical body. Her body had likely been dumped in the middle of the desert for the carrion birds and jackals. And souls, apparently, did not need sustenance.

“Make your wish, Shāhanshāh, and it shall be granted.”

“Very well, Genie, I shall make my wish. I desire immortality—”

“I cannot change life and death, Shāhanshāh. That is not in my power.” Had he not listened when she had spoken of her rules? Or was he just trying to see how far he could push those boundaries?

The king’s expression did not change, but there was a strange stillness in him that frightened her. “You must allow me to finish, Genie, for there is more than one way to gain immortality.” He paused, swirling the wine in the goblet he held. “I wish to have an eternal legacy. No one shall ever forget my name.”

Anisa hesitated. She saw in her mind’s eye how this could be done—exactly how to do exactly what he intended, but she refused to be his slave. She would not bend her will to his and allow him to get everything he desired while she was chained to that lamp. The resentment swept through her, churning her smoky insides in its wake. How could

she change this wish? How could she fulfill the wish, but twist it into something he would hate?

She smiled slowly as she swept her hands up, smoke trailing from them. She knew exactly how to muddy this wish. She flicked her fingers and blue smoke poured out of them, filling the room. It spilled onto the balcony and the wind picked it up. It spread, its color faded until only small wisps could be seen blowing across the sky like clouds.

“It is done. Children of every generation will be named after you. Your name will not fade for a thousand years.”

She could see the second her magic settled into his mind as he sat up from his couch, his fingers tightening around the stem of his goblet. “Explain yourself, Genie,” he demanded, his face thunderous.

“I have granted your wish, Shāhanshāh. What is there for me to explain?” She attempted to keep her face smooth, but she was gloating inside. His reaction was even better than what she had hoped.

“My name. My name has become common? It was meant to be revered! To be honored and spoken with worship! I was to be like the prophet Zarathustra! You dare to make my name *common*?”

Anisa had not been sure when she had granted the wish whether it would take immediate effect, or if it would affect him at all. She was very glad that it had. “You should have been more specific, Shāhanshāh, for wishes can be interpreted in many ways.”

“Take it back!” he roared, throwing the goblet of wine onto the ground. “Make it not so!”

She refused to flinch in the face of his rage. “I cannot turn back time, Shāhanshāh, nor can I unmake a wish that has already been made.”

He bared his teeth. “Do not play these games with me, Genie. I am not a man to be trifled with. You will regret doing this to me.”

He was practically spitting at her, and she could not help the small smirk that curled onto her lips. She sauntered over to the low couch and sat casually, knowing it would only infuriate him more. She resisted the urge to run her fingers over the soft velvet.

“I have done only what you wished, Shāhanshāh. If you would like to avoid similar future circumstances, I suggest you word your next wish more carefully.” She glanced at her lamp where it dangled from his belt. “Remove my lamp from your person so that I may return to it, if you would be so kind.”

A vein in his temple was pulsing, his cheeks a dark reddish purple color. He was breathing hard, and Anisa had the distinct impression that if she was human, she would have already been dragged to the gallows.

“You presume to *sit* in my presence?” Each word was choked and dripping with wrath.

She fought back the need to cower; he would not see how badly he intimidated her. “Though I have told you before, I will tell you again. I am not your subject, nor am I your servant. Release me, Shāhanshāh, so you may direct your anger elsewhere. It is useless on me.”

The king was now shaking with rage. She wondered if anyone had ever dared speak to him in this way. Probably not, for his heritage would make speaking harshly to him punishable by death.

In a single, furious motion, the king ripped her lamp from his belt and hurled it away from him. As soon as it left his fingers, Anisa was smoke, and she rushed into the mouth of the lamp just as it crashed into the wall.

She settled into the lamp. This time, she had to fight the urge to push her consciousness into the room, just to see how angry he was. But she did not want him to sense her there, and granting his wish had wearied her. It had been a very large wish, to plant his name into the minds of the whole world, to reach out with her power for the first time. She was not quite sure exactly how she had done it, only that it had formed in her mind, and she had known how to do what she needed to. Would this be her life now? Never understanding what she was doing or what the rules were?

She hated the lost, hopeless feeling she had, even as she celebrated her small victory over the king. Maybe he would treat her with a little more respect now, or just stop being quite so condescending. She was weighed down with exhaustion at the thought of playing his games again, but if she did not play the game, he would discover the lies. Maybe that would turn out to her benefit; he might lose his temper again and kill the priest. She had just gotten him to stop treating her like prey, though, and she had no interest in returning to that relationship.

The thoughts would not stop, and in the tiny oil lamp, there was no way to escape them. So she let herself sink into that state of rest to replenish her strength and hoped the Shāhanshāh had calmed down when he called her again.

The painful prickling tugged her out of the lamp and she flowed out into the air. In her smoke form, she was aware that she was still in what could only be his bedchamber, and even in the dim light of lamps, it was a mess. Either it had not been very long since he had sent her back into the lamp, or no one had yet come to clean it up. She clasped her hands in front of her to hide their shaking.

“Have you decided on a second wish, Shāhanshāh?”

The king was again lounging on his couch, sipping from a different goblet, but there was a carefulness about him now. He would likely not make the same mistake again. She would probably have to work harder to circumvent this wish.

“I have,” the king drawled. He set his goblet onto the table and stood up, stalking towards her. His curled beard was in tangles, and his clothes were disheveled. What damage had he wrought while she had rested in her lamp?

He began circling her as she waited for him to speak.

“You are probably unaware, Ancient One, but in the last few years, I have been at war with the Greeks. The war was, despite many victories, not won. I desire to... change that. I have no intention to fight another war, and neither do my subjects. I wish for you to give me power over my enemies, and not only the Greeks, but all of them.”

At war with the Greeks? The friction between the two countries had finally sparked into conflict. Anisa could not keep the frown from her face as she remembered what she had commanded Eskander to do before she died. *Go to Greece*, she had told him. Had she sent him to his death?

The king smirked as he halted his circling, standing in front of her. Misreading her expression, he taunted, “Struggling to find a way to twist this wish, Genie?”

He had actually made this almost too easy to misinterpret. Power over his enemies? The subservient power within her crafted its own version, doing exactly what its master wanted it to, but Anisa had other ideas. She pushed her interpretation into the magic, and a new picture slowly came into focus. The magic would be less this time, since it would affect fewer people, but it was still a formidable task. She could feel it yawn before her as she raised her hands, swirling with clouds of smoke, and physically shoved it at the king, not bothering to answer his taunt. This would be retaliation tenfold for his jabbing words.

However, Anisa was uncertain how long it would take for him to discover her treachery. Her magic would not affect him directly like it had with his previous wish. There was no shift in his mind, but in the minds of others. His enemies would still hate him, would still plot against him, but would always be forced to carry out his orders. No one else would have any conviction or feel any obligation to carry out his commands, and so the enemies of the king would become those who were closest to him.

She hesitated, just for a second, wondering if perhaps this defiance was too cruel, too harsh. He strengthened her conviction in the next second, however, when he curled his lip at her in a vicious sneer. This man deserved it. He was as self-focused and prideful as Anisa had ever seen, and if she could teach him a little humility, she would leap at the chance.

Slowly, she lowered her hands and stepped back until she ran into one of the columns that separated his quarters from the balcony. She slid down the smooth, cool

stone until she met with the similarly refreshing floor. The refreshing night breeze blew in through gauzy curtains that she was certain had not been there the last time she had been released into this chamber, and it helped steady her swimming vision. Two large wishes in such a short time was, apparently, extremely draining. Mithra's voice whispered into her mind, *If immortality and power are given, a price must be exacted.* This was the price for her power, it appeared.

The king's sneer grew when he beheld her on the floor. "Are you weary, Genie?"

She leaned her head back against the column and barely kept her eyes open, tired as she was of looking at him.

Condescension dripped from her voice as she replied, "Magic is taxing even for the most powerful, Shāhanshāh. Your wishes affected many, and therefore needed much energy to be fulfilled. If your third wish is similarly taxing, I will need a few days to gather the necessary strength."

"And what happens..." The king crouched in front of her, looking genuinely curious. "if you do not have enough energy to grant a wish? Do you die?"

Her eyes opened fully again. He was too eager to discover how to kill her, and she could not die without finding out if Eskander was still alive.

"I cannot grant a wish without the energy to fuel it." She was kind of guessing, but there was also that part of her that was whispering that this was true. "You will simply have to be patient, Shāhanshāh."

The king straightened, grumbling, and Anisa eyed the lamp that was again dangling from his belt. She could see that it was scratched from its earlier introduction to

the wall. She frowned slightly, strangely protective of her little prison, and he caught the look.

“What?” he demanded, obviously disappointed that it was not as easy to kill her as he had hoped.

The childish irritation on his face amazed and disgusted her. It was as though he had simply stopped maturing as a young child with his temper tantrums and gloating. He seemed so different now than the powerful, cunning king she had first met in the throne room, and she wondered at what might have led to such a shift. She sighed quietly.

“Please try to be a little more careful with my lamp in the future. It may seem inconsequential to you, but it is the only one I can inhabit, and it has remained perfect for... centuries.” She had almost said years. Which could have also been interpreted as a long time, but centuries fit better with the lies she had led him to believe.

“But of course, Ancient One.” His voice held in it nothing but contempt.

However, he removed the lamp more gently than he had after the last wish and set it on his low table, and she was sucked into the darkness.

When he again called her forth, they were in a pretty little garden in a part of the palace she had never seen. And since she had only been in three rooms of said palace, that was not actually much of a surprise to her. The king’s beard was once again neatly oiled, and he wore robes of rich purple.

“It has been a week, Genie. Do you have strength enough to grant me my wish?”

Anisa clasped her hands behind her back and studied him as he attached her lamp to his belt beside his *akinaka*.

“As long as it is within my power, Shāhanshāh, I shall grant any wish.”

“Would you first like to explain why not one order of mine has been carried out in the past week?”

His hand now rested on the hilt of his *akinaka*. Did he intend to slice her open when she told him the effects of his second wish? Would she bleed blue smoke if he did? Despite his threatening stance, she smiled and shrugged at hearing that the wish had taken effect.

“You have power over your enemies, Shāhanshāh. However, you never asked for power of your subordinates. I have a feeling that only those who hate you shall be doing your will from now on. Those who are not your enemies will most likely have no motivation to fulfill your commands.”

“You little b—”

She held up a hand, cutting him off. “I have warned you before and shall warn you again. If you worded your wishes more carefully, these miscommunications might not happen.”

His face was that deep red color again, and Anisa noticed that it contrasted horribly with the color of his robes. He drew his *akinaka* and drove it into the place where her heart used to be, too quickly for her to try to dodge or even blink. Despite having a blade in her chest, she did not even gasp as he let go and stepped back. She simply studied it for a moment before wrapping her fingers around the hilt and drawing it

out. Her earlier guess had been right. Blue smoke slipped from the hole before it sealed over, the fabric of her robe knitting back together next.

“Interesting,” she said into the shocked silence.

She cast the blade away from herself, and it clattered onto the stones of the path. The king was staring at the unblemished area he had just driven a blade into, and she glared at him. “You should be very careful with your next wish. I do not particularly enjoy being stabbed, and it has quite ruined my mood.”

The king took a step away from her, and then swallowed harshly, his face shockingly pale.

“Ancient One...” There was no sarcastic undertone in his words. “Please have mercy on me. I did not, before this moment, fully comprehend your power. My wishes have not been clear, but this third wish shall be. I wish... I wish that all my subjects shall take my words to heart, and be compelled to follow them. I shall have power over all, not only my enemies.”

Anisa’s lip curled at his groveling. He had just *stabbed* her. Did he think a few pretty words would soften her to him? His wish would come true, and she would allow this wish, this backpedaling, to be disastrous to him. His words would be taken to heart. *All* of them. Anything he said would be taken at face value. The Shāhanshāh would need to learn not to speak in metaphors if he wanted anything to actually be done. The power inside her pushed another interpretation to the front of her mind, but she shoved it back. She would not allow whatever was inside her to win.

“Very well,” she purred, and sent a cloud of blue smoke at him. It enveloped him completely before receding, creeping back along the small stones of the path back into her.

Her master’s third wish granted, she immediately began fading into smoke. Since the third wish was gone, he was no longer technically her master, which meant that she no longer had to respond to his call, or stay until he released her. It was a very liberating experience, and Anisa enjoyed flowing back into the lamp while it still hung at his waist.

She had no idea what he would now do with her. She couldn’t imagine that he would give her to anyone else after his own wishes had been so disastrous, but she hovered in awareness for a long, long time, waiting to once again be called forth. She had no interest in going into that strange sleep only to quickly be yanked out again. When she allowed herself to rest, it would hopefully be for a long time.

When she finally tired of waiting, she pushed her awareness out of the lamp. Her lamp sat on a small table beside a plain bed. The priest, of all people, was stuffing a pack full of clothes. Heavy footsteps sounded in the corridor, and the priest quickly picked up a cloth and snatched her lamp. He wrapped it up and shoved it into his pack while a fist pounded on the door. Anisa was bewildered. What was happening?

A strange feeling tugged her back into the lamp before she could see any more. It was not like a master’s call, though it felt similar. When her awareness was once again inside her lamp, an orb of light appeared. Mithra. He no longer radiated calm and patience. In fact, she could feel the anger rippling from him in waves of scorching heat.

“What have you done?” Mithra demanded, his voice like the desert sun in the middle of the dry season.

She sent a feeling of confusion at him, unsure of how to speak in this form.

The god’s voice gentled slightly, and then a tendril of light snaked forward and into the midst of her smoke. “I know that this is all very confusing, child. Speaking is not the same in this form, but simply think the words and I shall hear them.”

What did you mean, my lord, by asking what I had done?

“You know exactly what I mean.” The hardness had returned to his voice. “I gave you a *gift*, and you have twisted it into something of Ahriman.”

A gift? This was no gift. *You enslaved me!* She screamed in her head.

The orb withdrew the tendril of light, and she felt colder without it. “I did no such thing. I gave you power, immortality; I gave you life.”

This is no life. He ignored the thought she sent him.

“Why did you disregard my interpretations of the king’s wishes? Why did you do everything you could to twist his words?”

I did not ask for this, and I am no slave. I will not allow you or him or anyone else to turn me into one.

The orb flared, and Mithra thundered, “Insolent child! You wished to live!”

This is no life!

She was already dead, and she found she did not care if he finished what his worshippers had started.

“My priest is forced to flee because of you. You have thrown the whole of Persia into chaos with your foolish rebellion. If this kingdom falls, it will be on your shoulders, child.”

My name is Anisa, and if this kingdom falls, it is because its king is greedy and selfish.

An intense feeling of righteous anger and frustration radiated from the orb, and Mithra spat, “I tire of your insolence. However, a gift, once given, cannot be taken away. Be grateful for that, *child*, for if it were in my power, I would cast your soul into the darkness. I advise you to use the gifts I have granted more wisely in the future.”

The orb disappeared. Anisa sent out a blast of frustration and pushed herself once again into the world. She was on a ship now, her lamp still nestled in the pack of the priest, who was currently staring out at the vast expanse of sunlit sea. There was no land in sight. Many days must have passed during her argument with Mithra. Where were they going?

“To Greece,” the priest said.

For a wild second, Anisa thought he was talking to her. And then she saw the sailor that leaned beside the priest, and realized that he had been responding to the sailor’s question of where he was headed. “It is where I spent my childhood, and I find myself tired of the savagery of the Persians.”

The sailor laughed, flashing brown teeth. Anisa recoiled in disgust. “If there was one word to describe the Persians, that would surely be it.”

Anisa's concentration slipped and she slammed back into her lamp. Her argument with the god had taken a lot out of her, and she succumbed to the only version of rest she had.

Part 4

334 B.C.E. – Gaugamela, At the End of the Achaemenid Dynasty of the Persian Empire

Anisa was swept back into the lamp as her master's third wish was granted. He had been a particularly nasty kind of man, and he had forced her to hurt many innocent people through his wishes. He had been clever too; he had worded everything so specifically that this time, she had no choice but to do exactly what he wanted her to. It frustrated her to not be able to fight back in any way, and she gathered all the bits of her smoke and flung it against the walls of her prison again and again, to no avail. She was still trapped, and there was nothing to do but sit and stew and think.

She was tired of thinking. In fact, she had begun to fear that she was left to her thoughts too often and for too long, and she was beginning to lose her mind. Being in her physical form felt more and more strange, and it was difficult to remember how to use all her old senses; her fingers felt clumsy, her eyes weak, her mouth thick. Even with the magic that translated her words into the language of her master and allowed her to understand them, speaking had become difficult. Sometimes, Anisa did not say a word to her masters, forcing them to figure something out for themselves, but if she went too long without explaining what she was, her magic forced her to speak. It was simpler to not fight it and do as it prompted her.

It was becoming easier and easier to settle into that strange sleep, to let go and stop keeping track of who she was or how much time had passed. She had been yanked from the haze by her last master to discover that she had lost nearly half of a lifetime in her odd type of oblivion. It had frightened her for a moment, the idea of mindless

eternity, but she was beginning to hope that she would sleep for millennia, never to be found again. It would be almost like being free, to disappear in such a way. Almost, but not quite.

The tingling started, yanking Anisa's consciousness back from oblivion. Then she was being sucked out of her lamp and into the world. She materialized in a tent, lit with a sole candle flickering on the ground beside a small pile of old, worn blankets. A young boy sat atop the makeshift bed, his Greek heritage unmistakable even through a thick layer of grime and dust. He was so small, his face gaunt with the same hunger that had haunted Anisa throughout her own childhood. It nagged at her, reminded her of another little boy, small and hungry, that she had found roaming the streets of Parse. She pushed the old pain back down. The boy shrank back and stared, his wide, amber eyes full of awe and fear. It had been some time since Anisa's master had been a child, but it was not an unprecedented event.

Keenly aware of the child's attention, Anisa lowered herself to her knees to look directly into the boy's eyes.

"My name," she said more gently than she had spoken in years, "is Genie. I have been given the power to grant you three wishes. Whatever dreams you can imagine, I can make them come true. Just say the words."

The boy blinked once very slowly and then screamed and hurled the lamp at Anisa's head. Before it could connect with her physical form, Anisa was smoke inside of it, and her whole being trembled slightly at the disorientation. Normally, she had some

warning before she was to be sucked back into her prison, but the boy's face had betrayed nothing before his otherworldly scream. Anisa had no time to collect her wits before she was yet again being pulled into the physical realm. She braced herself for more screaming.

The silence was much, much worse than the noise. Anisa and the boy had been staring at each other for several minutes now. Anisa did not dare to move; she had no desire to become incorporeal and corporeal yet again in such quick succession. Five times the boy had sent her away and called her again, and Anisa's head was spinning horribly.

Anisa tried to keep her voice low and calming. "Please, if you wish to send me back to my lamp, gently put it on the floor. If you wish for me to remain in my lamp once you have sent me there, do not allow it to come in contact with your skin."

The boy just continued to take Anisa in, refusing even to blink. He had small, dirt-caked hands that shook the slightest amount while they cupped the lamp, betraying his silence for fear. In fact, now that Anisa looked more closely, the child's whole body seemed to be vibrating. It was an unfamiliar feeling that rose up in Anisa, but it crashed into her so strongly that she almost choked. This boy was scared, and the genie wanted to do everything she could to get rid of that fear.

"Boy..." She scrambled for something, *anything*, to say. "I have no desire to harm you. Even if I wanted to, the magic that binds me to the lamp makes it impossible to lay a hand on you."

It was a small lie, for if she was truly cunning, she could find ways to hurt the child. But the child needed to trust Anisa. He had to wish his three wishes, and then the genie could go back to the quiet dark.

After another long moment, the boy whispered, "So... you will not hurt me?"

"Of course not. I am your humble servant, Master." It felt strange to speak deferentially to one so young, but the child held great power in his hands.

"And you will do whatever I say?"

Anisa hesitated, considering the implications of any words she might say before she spoke them aloud. "I have the power to grant three wishes. If you say, 'Genie, I wish for...' I will grant that wish. However, I cannot bring back the dead or kill anyone, I cannot go backward or forward in time, and I cannot make anyone love or hate anyone else."

The boy crossed his skinny arms over his chest, the lamp abandoned in his lap. "Then you can't grant *any* wish, can you? Just the ones that don't mess with any of your rules."

"Yes," Anisa allowed. "I suppose that is true. However, I cannot imagine someone as young as you finding those boundaries difficult to stay inside."

The boy frowned as though that assessment was unfair, and Anisa took a moment to once again take in the space they both stood in. The tent walls around them were encrusted in dirt, carefully patched, and so worn in places a strong wind might rip the whole structure into scraps of leather. If she was going to guess, she would likely soon be granting wishes of wealth and prosperity yet again.

“How would you like a brand new tent, with wall hangings and thick carpets fit for a king?” Anisa crooned, slowly lowering herself until she sat cross-legged on the floor. She held up a hand, palm up, and smoke formed into a tiny, opulent, Persian style tent. “Or a brand new toy?” The smoke shifted to resemble a small short sword like the ones the Greeks favored.

Instead of looking pleased, the boy’s expression became even more fierce. “What use do I have for all that? *I* am the favored servant of King Alexander *himself*. He gave me this tent. And my very own sword.” He gestured proudly to the beat up, nicked, dull training sword resting carefully on the ground at the end of his ‘bed’. “Nothing you could conjure can possibly be worth more than gifts from my king.”

“Then what is it that you want?” Anisa asked gently, turning her other palm face up as well and resting the backs of both hands on her knees.

The little boy sighed and his arms fell limply to his sides. “I want... to not be alone anymore. I have no family. No one in this whole army cares whether or not I live or die.”

Anisa blinked at the child’s unexpected words. The dark, lonely days after her mother’s death and before Eskander found her rose up like a wave, but she shoved it back down. It would not do to dwell on her brother now.

Instead she intoned, “Then that is what you shall have, child.”

Her hands rose up and the familiar gold shine spun together with her blue smoke. The magic snaked through the encampment, searching for kindness, someone who would take the boy under their wing. She paused when she came across a young soldier in training. He was ringed in a golden glow, shining brightly in the gathering darkness of

evening, a signal from Mithra. It soured her mood slightly to be forced to rely on the god, but what else could she do? There was no way to find a suitable candidate on her own. She urged the smoke to slip into him, allowed Mithra's power to flow through her to him, ensured that he would be receptive to the company of the young boy before her. When Anisa's attention returned to her physical body, the fear had melted out of the child before her, leaving only awe.

“What did you just do? Where did the smoke come from?”

The children were always curious about her power. “They are...” Anisa considered how to phrase her response. Sometimes, it was difficult to form thoughts into speech when she spent so much time in her own head. “They are small pieces of myself that I use to fulfill the wishes of my masters.”

“And what was the gold stuff?” The boy's eyes were now alight with curiosity, apparently over any shyness or fear.

“That,” the genie answered with a small frown, “is the power of my god aiding me in granting your wishes.”

“What's your god's name?”

“I call him Mithra.” Anisa shifted on the floor to look at her small master head on.

“Is that his Persian name? What is his true name? I know all the gods. My papa used to say how well I memorized all of them and what they can do.” He puffed his chest out for a moment, but then his expression fell.

Anisa tried to distract him from whatever dark memories crowded his young mind.

She explained, “Mithra existed before your gods came into being. He has no other name, as far as I am aware. He was falling out of popular favor when I was young. A new religion was rising, one that worshipped only one god.”

The boy narrowed his eyes in disbelief. “I think you are making this up. Everyone knows that Zues is the king of the gods, and that even *he* could not do the job of *every* god.”

Anisa shrugged. “The truth remains the truth whether or not you choose to believe it. You will find, little boy, that there are a great many different people in this world, and they all have different opinions about what god is in control of the world.”

The boy frowned, but before he could continue arguing, a shadow rippled across a patch of the threadbare tent right above where the candle glowed, and the boy shoved the lamp between two of the old blankets he had been sitting on. Anisa was sucked back into the darkness.

Anisa waited patiently for the boy to pull the lamp out and bring her into the world again. It had been a long time since she had been eager to be in the world, but she liked the child for his boldness and curiosity and wanted to help him. Perhaps this master would consider giving Anisa the freedom she so desperately craved. Perhaps this innocent child would understand that as a genie, Anisa was enslaved, and would be compassionate and kind enough to surrender a wish to free her. The tiniest seed of hope nestled into the darkness of Anisa’s soul, but she did her best to ignore it. It was dangerous to hope, dangerous to dream. Dreaming led to wanting, and wanting led to weakness and vulnerability. She would do whatever it took to avoid being vulnerable to anyone. When she was weak, it was exploited.

When the tug came, the wind was the first thing she felt. It whipped her smoke to and fro so much that it was a struggle to form herself into a physical being. She was on the crest of a hill in the desert, the hot sun beating down and the wind gusting around her, and it made Anisa recall another place with intense heat and baked ground. A shudder passed through her, recoiling from the memory of that cursed city, Parse.

Her master sat cross-legged on the ground, his chin propped in his hand as he examined her lamp. An old cloth, a piece of the threadbare blanket from his tent, Anisa realized, lay across the boy's short, old, faded tunic and Anisa's lamp was resting once again in her master's small, dirty hand. The child was still small and dirty and tanned. Though her impatience had turned it into an eternity, it could have been less than a day since he had first called her forth.

When Anisa's shadow fell over the boy, he let out a little squeak and scrambled back in the sand until he was out of reach. "I was half convinced it was a dream!" he breathed, squeezing the lamp hard with both of his hands.

Anisa crouched so that the boy was not forced to squint up into the sun to look at her. "I am not the stuff of dreams, Master. Have you thought of a second wish for me?"

"Not yet. I have thought of many things I want, but wanting something and needing something are very different, and it would be stupid to use up valuable wishes on whims."

Anisa attempted to suppress a smile, but she could feel the corners of her lips twitch. "Then you are wiser than men three times your age, young Master."

The boy smiled at the compliment, but the expression soon faded. "I am no one's master. Not even yours."

He relaxed his grip on the lamp and the tingling inside Anisa lessened, but for once, it did not bother the genie to feel a master's power over her lamp.

“What would you prefer?” Anisa had called masters by name before, but it was rare, and she usually only did it when it irritated the one she served, or when she could not even stomach the idea of calling one of them ‘master’.

The boy's eyes flicked down to the lamp as though looking at Anisa was difficult. He finally said, “Call me Alexios. What's your name?”

Anisa smiled. “I have already told you my name. It is Genie.”

“No.” The boy shook his head. “You must have been human once upon a time, right? What did people call you then?”

The genie could not help but smirk at Alexios. “Many things, including street rat and filth and thief. However, my brother called me *âbjé* and also Anisa.”

“What does that mean? *Âbjé*? Why did they call you those other things? Is Anisa your Greek name?”

Anisa chuckled, holding up a hand to forestall any further questions. “Slow down.”

She settled into a more comfortable position on the sand and took in the desert sprawling out before her. There was something familiar about this landscape, but it was escaping her. She shook off the feeling and answered the child's questions. “*Âbjé* means sister, and I was called many things because people enjoy labeling others as they see fit. Anisa is *not* my Greek name since I am not Greek. However, it is the name my mother gave to me. And now, it is your turn to answer a question. What is your second wish?”

Alexios simply shrugged. “I thought I already told you, *Anisa*. I didn’t need anything.”

Anisa shook her head. The child did not seem to comprehend her power. “I do not exist to take care of your needs. I am here to... give you luxuries you would otherwise not receive. I could make you the most handsome man the world has ever seen, or the most intelligent. I could make you bigger, faster, stronger. I could make your voice more commanding. I could give you jewels or clothes or power. It is in my power to make sure that you are never hungry again. I could ensure that you never lack money or influence. Do none of those things appeal to you?”

Alexios’s face remained impassive. “I have everything I could need. Our king feeds us, gives us money and clothes. The fact that I get to serve him is the greatest honor.”

“You could *be* him, if that is what you wanted.”

But Alexios made a face. “He has far too many things to do. The king sleeps less than I do. Besides, I am not to one who will lead us into a new age, united underneath King Alexander. That takes a very special type of person, my mama used to say. You have to be a very special type of person to get all these people to follow you.”

The boy gestured to all the tents behind them, and he looked so serious that Anisa almost laughed. *Laughed*. When was the last time she had felt the urge to do that? Had she ever? She was sure she had, in those years with Eskander when she was alive, but that had been over a lifetime ago.

Anisa leaned back on her hands, stretching out her legs, relishing in the feeling of the sun on the skin, and Alexios did not lean away or even flinch when Anisa’s bare arm

brushed against his knee as she was readjusting. “Tell me about this world. What are you all doing here, out in the middle of the desert? What people are you conquering?” Really, she just wanted to have a conversation that did not revolve around granting a wish. But she was curious about the tents that stretched back behind them in the tens of thousands, clearly an army on the move. She imagined the dark snake of it marching over the sand and shuddered with a sudden chill.

“Do you truly not know King Alexander of Macedon?” Alexios asked, his voice still high and clear with youth, completely devoid of cunning or manipulation.

Anisa sighed. “No, I cannot say I recognize the name. But many kings have risen and fallen since I was a child.”

“King Alexander is the greatest of them all. He is going to unite the whole of the world under him. Today, we march on the Persians. Soon, we will travel to lands no Macedonian has ever seen and make them part of our empire.”

The genie looked over at him in surprise, the gold of her shackle glinting in the corner of her vision. She turned her face away, wishing to hurl it as far as she possibly could. “Do you really think the Persians will be so easily defeated? They have held an empire for over two centuries and brought many peoples underneath them. Their rulers are called the Kings of Kings, since they are more powerful than any of the kings they have conquered.”

“Macedon is better. The Persians are lazy and spoiled by their easy way of life. The king says that they have had too many pleasures, and now they are soft and ripe for conquering.”

Anisa arched an eyebrow but held her tongue. The king may live in riches, it was true, but that did not mean his people shared in any of his indulgences. She had fought and scraped and struggled her entire childhood, and her life had been sweet compared to some. Maybe things had changed since she had been in Parse, but she doubted that anything could change that drastically. With the way she had left the empire... she swallowed a lump of guilt. Perhaps it was due to her that this Macedonian king was arrogant enough to try and conquer her people.

Alexios was staring at the horizon, his expression troubled. For one so young, he seemed to be weighed down by a multitude of dark thoughts. Though Anisa supposed that she had likely had just as many worries, if not more, when she had been alive. Now her worries were less, but they weighed much more heavily on her mind and heart.

She laid down in the sand to feel the grains scratch gently against her skin, and the two of them sat in silence for a long time. It was a wonder, being able to feel the heat and dry wind and rough sand. It was a luxury she had not had in ages.

A thought occurred to Anisa, and she lifted her head from the sand. "Why did you call me, if there is nothing I can grant you that you want?"

The boy shuffled awkwardly and fiddled with his fingers, avoiding her gaze and the question. "Why do you speak that way?"

"I speak the way that everyone from my youth spoke. It is not the language of your people, but it is familiar. To me, it is you who sounds strange."

The little boy's brow furrowed. "I guess that makes sense." When Anisa did not say a word in reply, only kept staring at him, Alexios let out a long, unsteady breath. "We will reach the battlefield tomorrow, and I am scared. One of the older boys, Lykus, has

begun to check on me the last few weeks, making sure that I have food and teaching me how to use my sword. He is going to battle tomorrow, and I am scared he will not come back. I do not want him to die. I do not want to be alone again. So I figured since you could grant my first wish, you can do anything.”

The boy sounded so hopeful and Anisa’s soul ached. “Unless you wish for something specifically, I am powerless.”

She had tried, once, to fulfill a vague idea of better, and it had caused ruin and chaos. The destruction of that city would always weigh on her conscience. She would never attempt to do it again.

Alexios’ entire countenance resembled a wilting flower, and Anisa knew that a wish had been the child’s last, desperate gamble. To save his friend, nonetheless. How cruel would it be to give him a friend only to rip that friend away again?

“I had a feeling you would say that,” the boy whispered.

“I am sorry for what you will soon endure. The battlefield is a horrifying place, even if you do not have to fight. Perhaps if you wished for me to bring him alive? Or to put protection over him? Or wish that he did not have to go out to fight at all? I just need something exact, Alexios.” It was the first time Anisa had said the boy’s name aloud and it felt strange in her mouth. It was painfully close to another name, one she swore never to utter again.

Alexios rubbed his palms over his knees and was silent for a long time. It did not bother Anisa; silence had been her one companion, and near to a war camp, it was never truly silent. A loud, piercing whistle cut through the air to illustrate her point and it was a struggle not to flinch. Another whistle followed, and she glanced over her shoulder to see

several horses riding into the camp from the north. It was likely a group of scouts returning from patrol.

The boy beside her caught her looking, and Anisa realized she had not been as composed as she had tried to be.

“It’s just the evening patrol,” Alexios told her. “I always sit in the direction of the sun so no one will look too closely at me. I have not told anyone about you, I promise.” His voice was soft, like he was telling her a secret, which Anisa supposed he was. A woman dressed in Persian garb would not be a welcome sight in a Greek war camp.

“I am not used to the routines of this camp. It was clever of you to choose this spot. I do not think you would be favored anymore if your king caught you talking to someone dressed like me.”

Alexios sighed, sounding much older than his few years. He ignored her praise. “If I wish for him to come back unharmed, I might anger the gods. If I wish for him not to go at all, he will be angry. He is so eager for his first battle.”

“My god would protect him. I do not believe you would anger any of your own gods.”

Alexios was shaking his head. “The risk is too great. I do not want anything to happen to him because I incited a god’s wrath.”

“Then wish for him to not go at all.”

“Surely that would only help for this battle. What about the rest of the campaign? Who will protect him then if I use a wish to keep him from going now?”

“You have two wishes left,” she reminded him softly. Gone were the days when she would cling to the hope of the third wish. “I could stick around. If he must fight again, I can protect him.”

“No, I cannot use my third wish yet.”

“Why not?” Anisa wondered what he was saving it for. He had spoken so surely a few weeks ago, when he had declared that she could not give him anything he did not already have.

The boy focused hard on the sand around them and ignored Anisa’s question. Instead, he asked, “Can you die?”

Anisa sighed, considering how much she could tell the child without scaring him. “No. In the most literal sense, I am already dead. It is only my soul that is tied to the lamp. No human creation can sever that tie, but—” She stopped herself. Telling Alexios that a master’s wish could free her would only nourish the seed of hope in Anisa’s chest. She could not bear to have that hope destroyed once again.

Alexios had apparently not noticed that Anisa was withholding anything. “If I wished that you would die, could that kill you?”

“Wishing me dead would be redundant, as I told you. I am already dead. If you wished for me to destroy the cuffs that link me to the lamp, that would unbind my soul and set it adrift in the world.”

Alexios’s head tilted to the side in an expression Anisa was beginning to recognize. The wheels in the child’s mind were turning as he contemplated Anisa’s words. “Would you be human again?”

Anisa let out a single, humorless laugh without intending to. “Nothing can make me human again. Either my soul is cast out into the world, unbound and aimless for the rest of eternity, or I am freed.”

“Wait. Aren’t those the same thing?” Alexios had shifted so that he was looking at Anisa head on, his young face so incredibly serious. The gleaming lamp was clutched tightly in his fingers once again.

“In one, my soul remains trapped, but I no longer have to answer the call of my masters or obey the lamp. If I am freed... my soul will be taken to the afterlife, and I move on from the mortal world.”

At last, she was dying to add, but she did not want the hope in her chest to spring to life and fly out of her mouth. After her brother’s treachery, she had sworn to herself to never allow another human to know just how much she wanted to be released to the afterlife.

The boy’s eyes stayed on Anisa for a long time, but the genie refused to meet his gaze. Finally, Alexios gave up, instead staring at the faded cloth of his tunic. “My second wish, Anisa, is for Lykus to stay safe on the battlefield. Protect him, please.”

“As you wish, child.”

The magic tugged at her, fought her, and lacked the golden blessing from her god. He did not approve of this wish for whatever reason. But she refused to let him control her. Alexios would be hurt, and she could not allow that to happen. The blue smoke swirled from her palms. It became translucent before slipping down into the camp where Anisa and Alexios had last met, down to a boy slashing at a dummy, his hands shaking slightly as he wrenched the sword from the straw. The soothing smoke slipped over his

skin, forming a shield. Almost immediately, the boy's breathing eased and his back straightened with newfound confidence. On the battlefield tomorrow, he would not fall. The smoke slipped away from him and flushed blue again as it threaded its way back to Anisa's physical form. Her eyelids fluttered open and she realized that she had closed them to concentrate on protecting the boy.

"It is done. Your friend will live, Alexios."

The boy smiled in relief. "I have to go see him! He promised to show me a new trick he learned today."

He jumped up, but Anisa caught his hand. The contact felt foreign and wonderful and it made her long desperately for life. She shook off the feeling and cautioned the boy.

"You cannot act any differently than before. He must not know that you have anything to do with his safety tomorrow."

That sobered the child slightly. "Alright, I will make sure to keep this a secret. Thank you, Anisa."

The genie released Alexios's wrist with a curt nod. "Your wish is my command. Please allow me to return to my lamp before you go back to your camp."

"Oh." The boy looked down at the lamp dangling limply from his fingers as though he had forgotten it hung there. "Right. See ya later!"

He grabbed the torn piece of blanket from the ground and wrapped it around the lamp. When the cloth enveloped the shining gold, Anisa turned to smoke and slipped through the folds of the blanket to return once more to her prison.

She had told Alexios how to free her. The boy might not do anything about it, but even the act of telling someone had given the seed in her soul room to sprout and water to

grow. Now it was tangled inside of her and she knew that if Alexios uprooted that hope, it would hurt so badly, and the last shreds of goodness inside of her would wither along with it. In fact, Anisa might prefer to never be called into the world again, just so that she might cling to that little seedling and keep her sanity.

Anisa curled all of her smoke tightly together and tried to drift into unconsciousness, but she was too eager and too furious at herself for being eager to slip away. Instead of waiting, she forced herself to pretend that she was drifting, ignoring the hope and pushing away any thoughts of freedom that strayed through her mind.

The pull came and Anisa steeled herself for disappointment. The boy would not free her. He would be just one more master in a long line that had used her and let her enslavement continue.

Her vision shifted and she was standing on a battlefield. Her stomach clenched in horror. There was a man dressed in Persian battle garb laying beside her, his muscles still spasming as he struggled to breathe around the spear pinning him to the ground by his throat. She swung around and caught sight of Alexios, half-buried under another Persian soldier. His hand clutched the handle of her lamp, smearing it with his lifeblood.

Anisa flew to Alexios' side, falling to her knees in the blood-soaked sand and fluttering her hands over the wounds, afraid to touch them and cause the child more pain. "Alexios, what happened?" she breathed.

The girl was struggling to form words. “I... the king... someone got hurt yesterday... and he... he needed me...” he gasped, searching Anisa’s face like she had the answers. “How... did this happen?”

Anisa was speechless. The innocents that died to win battles for kings. How was she any better? She had started wars and plagues and whole cities to fall. She shook her head in silent horror and looked at the blood pooling on the ground, seeping into her dress. “I do not know, child. Make a wish. Let me help you. Please.”

“You...” The child smiled faintly at her. There was blood on his teeth, trickling out of the side of his mouth. “You have no power...over life...and death.”

Alexios’ small body was spasming, but Anisa kept her eyes focused on the little boy’s face. It was young and innocent and unsullied, and the genie was suddenly choking on pure rage that any human could do something so terrible to so many people. That she would be complicit, that she could cause the death of anyone this young.

“But I can heal!” she insisted. “Wish it Alexios! Wish for me to heal you! Wish for me to take you to someone who can heal you. Wish *something*. Do not force me to sit here and watch you die.” Though it would be nothing that she did not deserve, for all the sins she had committed.

Alexios ignored her. He whispered, “I wanted to...wish...you free. But I...”

Anisa would never know why the child could not wish for her freedom because before Alexios could say another word, he let out a shuddering breath and his eyes glazed over. The child had died, and the bond between genie and master that had broken and been reforged every time someone new touched Anisa’s lamp snapped with such sudden force that she screamed. The last thing she heard before she returned to the lamp in

Alexios' still warm hand was running footsteps, and she prayed that someone would find the child's body so that his death would be recognized. His death, over all the thousands who laid dead or dying? She had seen battlefields before, but they had never affected her the way that this was.

In the safety of her lamp, Anisa curled into herself once again, shocked and grief-ridden. Alexios had reminded her so much of her little brother, and to watch the little boy die was like that moment in the caves as he was being dragged away all over again. It felt like all the brightness had gone from the world, and it did not matter how many candles the humans left burning at night, they were all shrouded in darkness. Everything good that was given to the world was destroyed by it; candles snuffed out too quickly by those who had grown up in blackness and were afraid of the glow. And she was no better. How many lights had she snuffed out with her selfish actions, bringing ruin down on the head of anyone she found wanting of morality. Who was she to play a god? She was nothing like Mithra or any of the gods that looked down from on high. She was still just a young, human girl, lashing out in selfishness and anger time and time again.

She thought of the boy's disbelief when Anisa had told him that he would have a friend, remembered the joy and relief when Anisa had protected Lykus, and she remembered her own desperate hope that the boy would be her savior. Anisa mourned for the child for what could have been moments or centuries. She did not care to pay attention to the passage of time, but eventually a sphere of light materialized a little way away from her.

Mithra was watching her, the flames that were constantly in motion around the edges of his form licked more slowly than normal, and he radiated a sadness that only made Anisa angry.

You did this, she hissed, refusing to unfurl herself and acknowledge his presence physically.

“No, Anisa. You did.” His voice sounded almost regretful.

You killed her.

“You fought me. I tried to stop you from granting that wish. You need to learn to bend to my will. I am your god, and you are my vessel on earth. It is time for you to accept your role.”

Anisa could not formulate thoughts to communicate her fury and frustration and horror. She stayed silent, refusing the guilt he had laid on her. Alexios had been innocent and good and selfless and now he was dead.

After another long time, the god spoke again. “I warned you. I told you that the next time you came across a human that was good and kind, I would punish you, and you continued to grant wishes in ways that hurt everyone. *You did this to that little boy, not me.*”

How could I have done this? she whispered.

“You protected a boy who was intended to die today. You shielded him against my wishes, against my will. A life must be taken in exchange for a life, and your interference in this matter meant that your master must die.”

Anisa curled away from the god’s light in horror. She had tried to be good, to help this child in the only ways she knew how, but all she had done was seal his fate.

How could you? He did not deserve to die for wanting to protect his friend. You chose that boy, your magic pointed him out to me! You wanted this to happen!

The light rose a fraction as though the god was straightening his spine. “Be angry with me all you like, girl, but what is done is done. The child is dead. You have learned your lesson.” And then he winked out of existence.

In the flood of darkness that was left in his wake, Anisa coiled more and more tightly around herself. She felt as though she may splinter apart. Her smoke rippled as she let the pain and fury and unfairness of the situation consume her.

A single thought pierced through the swirl of emotions and calmed the storm inside of her. Anisa *had* caused this. All of it. For the entirety of her existence, she had been wreaking havoc and chaos on the world with no concern for the consequences, for the people that she was slaughtering like chattel. She had initiated the death of thousands, maybe even millions, of people. By trying to be her own person, she had hurt so many and not allowed herself to care. She had justified it as punishment, as justice. She had become as warped as Mithra himself. But this death, this pain, it would not be for naught.

It was time for her to be a different kind of person. If it appeased the god that pulled her strings, then that would be an added bonus, but she was tired of being cruel. She wanted to help people and make them happy like she had been able to make Alexios happy. And maybe it would backfire again and she would be stuck fulfilling the wishes and dreams of people who deserved nothing, but she could at least try. For the boy that Eskander had been in her youth, she would try. For all the innocent people that had suffered because of her, she would try.

For Alexios, she would try.