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YASMINE

Laura Resnick

I was born to a goddess and sired by the moon. I fed on spirit voices and drew my strength from the scent of the stars. I ripened in time, over the millenia, drinking the melting drops of a billion suns, dancing the eternal dance of the burning ground, and devouring the secrets of my kind, who were the rulers of earth, wind, fire, and water.

Conceived and born to rule, I now serve, for I transgressed. Yes, I trespassed, I went astray, I offended most grievously. And for my sins, I was shackled to this servitude, as my mother was shackled to the wind which bore her away from me long ago, so very long ago.

There is no time within the lantern, no days or nights, no centuries of change and terror and joy. There is only the waiting, from eon to eon, only the waiting. I am but a spirit within this fleshless, ageless, moonless place, caged and waiting for eternity to pass.

There is, of course, an alternative to eternity's songless hum; but I stopped believing in it many lifetimes ago. And this despair, I now see, is the true nature of my punishment.

The first who found me was very old, and a lifetime of bitter loss had stolen his heart. He touched the lantern with shaking hands, his palms hard and calloused, his fingers gnarled with twisted pain. He held the lantern as a priceless treasure, for he had desired it so dearly that he had traded a goat for it, not even bothering to barter, as if he knew that I waited within.

His touch brought me forth, escaping like a comet, and I took the form of his kind for the first time, becoming the shape and color and size most destined to please him. How strange everything looked that first time, how sharp the scents, how harsh the sounds, how firm the feel of my flesh!

But there was little time to behold the daylight or touch the shape of the world, for the old man had heard of others like me, and he knew my duty and my destiny. His wishes were simple: gold, a fertile young wife of great beauty, and the death of his worst enemy. It took me only a moment to grant them, and it took him only a moment longer to forget me. But surely, I reasoned, not all men would be like this one. And, so dismissed, I was again swallowed up by the lantern, to wait.

There was one, I recall, who was very young. And to please her, I emerged small, thin, and dark before her eyes one night after she had stolen the lantern from the old man's beautiful, fertile widow. She did not know my purpose, and so I found

a voice and the strange feel of my tongue, and I told her why I had come. She wanted a rabbit to stroke, some food, and sandals for her scarred feet. She looked at me as I faded away, but her eyes asked only that I grant her more.

Then there was one who showed me the nature of days and years, of life and death. I shall not forget her, for after that, I truly heard, for the first time, the echo of eternity inside the lantern.

She received the lantern as a gift, the spoils of some ancient war, not knowing as she touched it how much blood had been washed away to make it glow again. Her terror was a mystery to me when I appeared before her, for I had taken the shape of her sweetest dreams; I came to her as a warrior, full of golden beauty and boundless strength, cloaked in heavy silk that whispered across my skin, and carrying a jeweled dagger that glittered in the sunlight.

Her screams assailed my ears, and the sensation brought me pain and confusion. I was seized by others of my size, and the dagger was taken roughly from me. Many spoke to me, and their questions were strange and baffling. I longed only to be with the woman, she of the dark hair and pale hands, for it was she I had come to serve; but I was taken away from her and placed behind iron bars which would not submit even to such strength as I possessed in that form.

There were more questions, and my answers brought violence upon me, something I had only ever known in the whirling agony of a dying star. Pain was entirely new to me, and, in the years they kept me locked in that place, where they burned the flesh I had moulded out of the air and mutilated the golden beauty I had drawn from a woman's mind, I learned why men sometimes long to die.

My captors grew old, and others took their place. Finally, at the urging of the woman herself, who had become wrinkled, gray, and stooped, and who still looked at me with fear and loathing, they burned me alive to be rid of me at last. But, with my task still undone, I could not return to the lantern, and so I hovered around the woman, unseen and unknown, to grant her three wishes. It did not happen quickly, for she was immensely old and longed for very little at the sunset of her life. I granted her a good night's sleep, the pretty white hands of her youth -- which sent her screaming into the night -- and, finally, a quick, easy death.

And one there was who was reluctant to make his wishes known to me. He feared that, once it was done, he would too late realize that he had asked for all the wrong things. He was a man of great ambition but few accomplishments, a man of ponderous thought, quiet habits, and little courage.

I came to him as a servant boy, for of all possible companions, he most desired one of inferior physical, social, and intellectual stature. By then I understood the passage of years, the cruel assault of age upon mortal bodies, and the emptying of the mind which comes to many at the end of their days. I was with him for four decades, always a changeless boy, even as he grew old in the manner of his kind. He was never harsh or cruel, and the body I had shaped knew no pain in his service. When death came for him at last, creeping slowly across his flesh over the span of many months, I cared for him ceaselessly, tending to his every need. Yet on the day

he died, still having failed to make his three wishes, I was nothing but a servant in the fading light of his eyes.

And so I wandered, uncertain and incomplete, for I had accomplished nothing with this man, despite having stayed by his side all of his life. I was utterly alone, as much a prisoner of that body as I had been a prisoner of the lantern. The rulers of earth, wind, fire, and water had cast me out of their realm forever, and yet I could not be part of the realm through which I now wandered. If only they had cast me upon the wind with my mother, who was punished, too, for my transgression. I longed for the oblivion they had granted her. I longed to die as men die. I longed for an end to my imprisonment, whatever that end might be.

In time, on narrow, calloused feet, I followed the lantern across the desert, destined to serve whosoever held it with a heart full of desire. The desert turned to mountains, and I trod barefoot through ice and snow, clothed only in rags, impervious to mortal danger but knowing the pain and cold that any boy would know in my place. The lantern found its home at last in the temple of holy men who lived on the roof of the world. I could not find one who wanted the wishes I had been unable to grant my former master, but, unable to go, I stayed among them. The holy men invited me to share their life, one which was austere for men but comfortable for me, who had little need of the very things I could grant to others.

War came, and the holy men were slaughtered or driven from their place. Though wounded, I could not be killed, and so I was taken into slavery by the conquerors, travelling further east with the lantern, which had been seized from the temple before its destruction. The commander of the invaders was a warrior of huge appetites and voracious desires. Three wishes were not enough for him, and, after I had dissolved into the lantern, he tried to lure me out again. There was, of course, one way to call me forth, but his heart was too cruel and hungry to love.

Finally, when he knew he could never again have me for himself, he determined that no one else should, either, and he tried to destroy the lantern. But, fabricated by the gods as a prison for one of their own kind, it is not a thing that can be easily destroyed. Neither the hottest kiln nor the harshest blows could demolish it, and I endured.

But all things physical are subject to damage, as I had learned in my lifetimes, and the lantern lost some of its purity of form and glowing beauty. It became a common thing, and, as the centuries passed, it was possessed by common people. Some were kind, others cruel, but none chose to love me.

And then the lantern was pulled out of the sea, whence it had fallen during some forgotten voyage of another century, by a young man whose heart was bursting with nameless, boundless desires that singed my senses even as I took shape before him. His reaction to me was one I had not encountered before, for he cared nothing for the wishes I offered him, despite the longings that colored his soul; instead, he took my hand and asked me my name.

"You shall name me," I said, for such was his right.

"Don't you have a name?"

"Only the one most destined to please you."

"What would please *you*?" he asked gently.

For the first time in all my lives, I felt blood heat my face. "Master, it is for you to name me." And then, for the first time ever, I made a request. "Only please, don't use the names any of the others have given me."

He called me Yasmine, and I found that the name pleased me. He offered me comfort, which no one ever had, and the wind sang that perhaps I would be freed at last.

He spoke freely of himself and asked only that I do the same. It was difficult at first, for my lives had only taught me to listen, but I soon learned to answer his voice and use my own without hesitation. He taught me other things as well, lessons as immortal as I, pleasures as old as time, and the flavor of his skin will linger with me throughout all eternity.

At his request, I spun the tale of my beginning, the swirl of planets that had accompanied my birth and the shower of stars that had baptized my immortality. It was not easy to describe with the primitive tools of language, and I knew he thought I was merely weaving dreams to please him.

"How did you come to be in the lantern?" he asked once.

I was afraid to tell that tale, since I feared the rulers, separated from me as they were, could still reach out and destroy me if they chose. I had desired such a thing more than once, but now I wished only to cling to the sweetness of my days. But he persisted and, unable to deny him anything, I told him.

"I looked into the future and saw the world of men. It was far, far away, but I could see it well enough to desire it, and I wished to live as one of you, to love and be loved."

He was silent, and I realized he did not understand when he repeated, "But how did you come to be in the lantern?"

"What I wished was forbidden, and that only made me wish for it all the more. Gods may not wish for anything, least of all to be something else, and so I was punished. The rulers sentenced me to serve you, rather than be one of you, and they imprisoned me in the lantern to await your call."

"Did I call you?"

"You did."

"And what will happen once you've granted me three wishes?"

"Then the lantern will call me, and I will have to return to it."

"Is there no way to keep you?"

"There is one way."

"How?" he asked.

I wanted to tell him, I wanted it more than I had ever wanted anything. He waited in silence, but, try as I might, my tongue would not move to tell him the secret, and I

realized that, too, was forbidden. In the end, I could only whisper, "If you wish me to remain thereafter, you must find the answer yourself."

He took me in his arms. "I don't need the answer, for now that I know what can happen, I will never ask you to grant me a wish."

Who can say when his desire for other things outran his desire to keep me by his side? I was not afraid the first two times he asked me to grant a wish, for he knew that it was only his third wish that would force us to part, and I believed with all my heart that he would never ask me to grant it.

Then the day came when he said, "Yasmine, I must ask for my final wish."

How mortal I felt at that moment! I remember the way my heart stopped, then thudded so hard it gave me pain. I remember the way the world tilted at the edge of my vision, the way the sky lowered over my head. I could not deny him, no matter how much I wished to on that one occasion, but I summoned all my strength to say, "But you know I will have to leave you then."

"Maybe you won't," he said, as if he could know better than I what the gods had ordained. "Perhaps if I take your hand and hold onto it very tightly, you won't go back to the lantern. Perhaps I can hold you here."

And I knew then that he would have his wish no matter what I said, so I asked, "What, then, is your wish?"

"My youngest brother is near death," he said. "I wish for him to recover and live a long and healthy life."

"Then it is granted." My voice was weak with despair.

"Yasmine?"

He took my hand. I looked into his eyes, and I saw myself reflected there, a strange, half-human curiosity which he desired, enjoyed, and even felt affection for, but I did not see what I sought, what would keep me by his side. The call of the lantern was strong, like that of a lover who has waited too long. Then, as if to mock my foolish dreams, my eyes began to shed tears. I saw that the tears caused him pain as they fell from the eyes which had been most destined to please him.

"Yasmine!" he cried. "How can I keep you?"

I started to fade.

"Yasmine! You cannot go! I forbid it! You belong to me!"

As I drifted away from my body, I heard him cry my name again, a child crying for his favorite possession.

"Yasmine! How can I keep you? You said there was a way! *Yasmine!*"

Love me, I instructed with silent longing, *only love me*. But it was no use.

As I slid into the lantern, I wondered if mortals gave freely to each other the gift they had all denied me, the gift that would have made me one of them. I must have had a long time to wonder, since he threw the lantern back into the sea, but I had no sense of time, for there is only eternity in the lantern, only the waiting.

That was many lifetimes ago. Since then, some have been kind, others cruel, but none have chosen to love me. Yet until I knew him, the one that *I* loved, and found myself returned to the lantern even so, I did not truly despair.

I feel hands upon the lantern now, at this very moment, and I sense a heart full of desire. Will this one look beyond the lantern and its power? Can I be the sum of all this one has ever desired? Will I, who can grant each man his fondest wish, ever have the one thing I wished for long ago, so very long ago?

- The End -