

The Lesser Of Two Evils

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The Lesser Of Two Evils

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Summary

Iago just wants to live a nice, cozy life going on treasure hunts with the King of Thieves, and now some chump shows up looking for Jafar? What is this, don't these people know Jafar's DEAD?

Notes

(Psst: I have this assigned to two of my accounts currently while I try to decide which one to host it on, so that's why it has the same name on it twice. Disregard.)

This is planned to be a much longer fic than 13 chapters, but 13 chapters are what I currently have finished. I worked on this for Camp Nanowrimo last July, and ended up with a draft that started off good and petered off into not much- so I'm in a lengthy process of rewriting about two thirds of it. Perhaps your comments will guide me, turning this humble street rat of a fic into something that's actually finished!

Anyhow. While I did watch and will reference the TV series, I tried to write this fic so that you only need to have seen the three movies (Aladdin, Return of Jafar, and King of Thieves). You should be okay if you haven't seen every episode of the show, but you'll be very confused if you don't know who Cassim is. Other Disney characters will pop in to the story later on, but Iago doesn't know who they are and you don't need to either. (Although these aren't obscure choices, so I'm sure you'll recognize them!)

Oh, and one more, small thing: This fic is in limited third POV, with some very opinionated POV characters, and I just want to say that none of their opinions necessarily reflect my own. Not about other characters, not about society, not about pet ownership...

I plan to post one chapter of this every Tuesday until I run out. Maybe I will finish the rest of the story while I'm doing that.

A fool off his guard can fall and fall hard

It was like watching the horse you'd bet on streak across the finish line. It was like pulling the lever on a slot machine and watching three cherries pop up. It was like finding a sack of gold in the street and no one taking it away from you.

It was like breaking out of jail!

The desert stretched out as far as a guy could see in all directions, and when you reached any of your pick of horizons the next horizon would still be an expanse of sand- sand with the free wind flying across it and screaming, and spraying grit like spit in your eye.

The night air that should be chilling him to the bone was bracing, and the currents tearing through it bore him up though he had never been much of a glider, not really, he always felt a sense of impending doom if he were too still in the air and would start flapping again before going into any kind of glide, and to go into a dive he'd better have a life or death reason or a life or death paycheck at the end of it. But tonight he was sitting on the wind like floating on water, like an albatross or one of those other famous first-rate flyers!

And then the wind dropped out.

See! Even a bird couldn't trust the air. At least he had a good set of wings on him.

Once he started flapping Iago found that the cold and the buffeting of the wind had made his muscles sore and stiff. He coasted in to land on Cassim's shoulder in an awkward flurry of feathers.

"You seem to be enjoying the ride," Cassim said, with that little smile of his- it was so much like Aladdin's but older and with the 'punk teenager' weathered out of it. "May I ask what is so amusing?"

Iago had been laughing. He hadn't even noticed- though an incomparable screecher and incontestable master of loudness, that wind had him beat. A bird's body could fit a lot of air for its size, but not all of the air over the entire Seven Deserts.

But he'd been laughing for some reason. Now he was out of breath, his throat was dry and probably had sand in it, and he had no idea what was funny.

With a brief, vague thought about pillars of salt, he looked over his shoulder. No golden spires of a palace that had cherished him like a viper in its bosom for ages and then spat him out like a chicken bone. Not even the glow of the city lights of the society of accident-prone toddlers, grimy pickpockets and cheating marketplace barkers that was Agrabah.

The laughter bubbled back up from somewhere in his heaving chest and he tamped it back down- Cassim would think he was crazy. And he'd be right! What the heck was so funny?

Cassim was still waiting for an answer.

"Oh, you know," said Iago, after clearing his throat a few times, "it's an inside joke for birds, you wouldn't get it."

"Ah, I see." Cassim kept his thoughts pretty close to the vest but he got the feeling the King of Thieves didn't buy that weak answer. Too bad; he didn't have a better one.

Iago had the sudden urge to take wing again, and he thought it was because the horse, which was already, to begin with, quite a bit slower than a motivated parrot, had slowed even further. Iago was no speed demon and a firm believer in conserving energy. What had gotten into him? Sand mites?

He settled for shifting restlessly on Cassim's shoulder. "Why did we slow down?"

Cassim patted the horse's thick, ropy plank of a neck. A parrot sitting on a guy that was sitting on a horse, they must look like one of those mouse-on-a-cat-on-a-pony acts. "I don't want to tire her," said Cassim. "We have many miles yet to travel."

"Oh, sure. Good idea." A thoughtful guy, that Cassim. Iago didn't know a lot about horses himself, but this horse had better not give out on them in the middle of the desert.

How long did that horse have to hold up, anyway? "You have any idea where we're going yet?" Iago asked. "Because let me tell you, I've been dragged all over the known world, I know every good spot in the entire Seven Deserts, and I never forget how to find a place, so you just talk to me."

Cassim nodded, and Iago thought he kinda sorta looked appreciative. "I may take you up on that. I do have a final destination in mind, but we'll need places to stop along the way."

"I am a master of stopping along the way." That was how a parrot traveled; you flew a little way, you found a snack, you took a little break... that was the sensible way to travel. Aladdin and his pals ramming through the desert for twelve hours were the unreasonable ones...

"No regrets, I hope."

He snapped back to the present. "What was that?"

Cassim looked serious, and Cassim didn't look serious over nothing. "Soon we may be too far away for you to fly home."

Did he want to get rid of Iago or something? What was this? "Why would I go back?"

"Why do you stay?"

Because he'd gone nuts! Happily nuts- more like he was high, really. Like the time he'd eaten a whole poppy without realizing what it was, but without the puking and near-death experience. So far.

"Because," Iago said, instead of bringing up the poppy, "I like money, and you like money. I think we understand each other." A human had this little elbow-nudging gesture that conveyed 'I like you but not enough not to knock you around' very nicely- a bird didn't have elbows, just cute little wings, but he tried the nudge as best as he could. Cassim would probably just feel a brush of feathers against his neck.

Cassim smirked at him. "I understand perfectly, you little turkey."

What Iago didn't understand was the note of affection in his voice. Sure, he'd helped Cassim out, but he knew better than to think that that made a guy like you.

"But," Cassim continued, "I meant what I said- no more thievery."

Iago wondered exactly how easy this guy thought that was going to be. It wasn't like Cassim was some shmuck, he was the King of Thieves, and you didn't get that kind of title from being bad at your job, especially in a field where everyone was literally trying to steal it from you. And when you were good at something, really good, it was hard just to give it up. It would be a shame to give it up, even.

But okay, sure. "I didn't say stealin'," he said. "There are a lot of legitimate ways to get filthy, stinkin' rich for a smart guy who knows his way around, you know what I'm sayin'? And safer, too." It had not been pleasant, to live in the palace under the threat of execution upon discovery. And it was all well and good for that guy to talk about a formal beheading; a big rock was all you needed to get rid of a parrot. Actually, a foot with a shoe on it was all you needed to get rid of a parrot. "If you don't steal it to begin with, nobody knows you have it to steal it back from you. Me, I always consider stealing a last resort."

"Is that so."

"Oh, yeah." It was true, really- the only thing was that what Iago considered as his standards for justifying the 'last resort' weren't always the same that a given human might be using. Aladdin, for example- sometimes stealing to keep yourself from being hungry was okay and sometimes it wasn't, and for some reason whether you'd last eaten two hours ago or three days ago mattered? What was that about? Hungry was hungry.

"What do you have in mind, then?" Cassim asked.

"There's all kind of treasure and riches out there. It's ancient. People forgot about it. It's just sitting there and your kid couldn't be bothered to go and get it." And now they could go and get it without Aladdin getting all judgmental and then taking the reward to give it to a princess whose father had an entire treasure room.

"I will confess that I am intrigued."

"Just show me a map sometime and I'll show you all the treasure spots I know about." Humans were so weirdly helpless sometimes. Iago didn't need any map but Cassim sure would need the map, his kind didn't even know which way was north without using some gadget.

"I'll make a note of it."

The cold was settling in now and Iago wondered how long it was until sunrise. The stars and the moon were bright enough to make the sand seem to glow blue, but they gave no warmth. Cassim might have an inkling, but he seemed to be done talking and Iago wasn't such a pain in the neck that he would nag the guy with 'Is it dawn yet? Is it dawn yet?'

He'd gotten real close to believing his own line. The fire in his blood, the dizzying giddiness that was making him act like a moron, that was all just greed, right? Not that he'd ever felt quite like this before, when he'd had plenty of opportunity to explore greed in every form, but this was... advanced greed, or something.

His beak opened and he blurted out: "You've never heard of a guy named Jafar, have you?"

Cassim must have answered right away, but it felt like time dragged on forever while the fever that was 'advanced greed' rose past laughter and crossed into a choking breathlessness, with little pressuring pains inside to go with it. He'd seen a dissected pigeon once, in a jar in Jafar's lab, and it was full of pouches that- Jafar explained as Iago retched and whined- served the function of filling a bird with air and making it light enough to fly. Ergo, Iago was full of hot air, in a very literal and functional sense, which was no end of amusement to Jafar, who was way too into puns.

So why did Iago always feel like he couldn't get any air?

"No," said Cassim, now, and his voice was so light, like it was nothing! "I've met a person or two with that name, of course, it's not an uncommon one, but there was no one memorable." Like it was nothing, like they were talking about the weather. Like Jafar was nothing. Like he wasn't even real. "Ought I to have heard of him?"

"No, you shouldn't have heard of him!" The feathers around his neck were all fluffed up in a vain effort to protect him from the wind that shrieked a wail of mourning across this dunes.

These dunes that he'd crossed once before.

Twice.

Three times.

"That's quite a wind," said Cassim, "it sounds like a woman crying."

Why a woman? Why did they always talk like only a human could have something to cry about?

The stars above, the scents in the sand, the winds themselves and the faint tug of the earth were all shouting at him.

Cassim's horse plodded along the route that a burning trail of light had traced out for another human on another horse. The stars that had seen the Cave of Wonders spelled out its location like a middle finger in the sky. Iago's own treacherous, greedy little heart was throwing itself against his ribs in an attempt to escape that would just leave it cranky and still trapped.

The horse stopped.

"Why are we stopping?!"

"What on Earth is the matter?" Cassim asked.

Iago realized that he had not so much asked the question as screeched it. "I- I don't like stopping in the desert," he said, "there are marauders."

"Ah, yes... it's true enough. We won't be stopped long. I have to water the horse."

"Oh. In that case. There's a well just over that way."

He pointed with his wing and quickly had to draw the wing back again before the wind could rip it off of his body.

"There's a well," he repeated uselessly. "Been there before."

"Aha. That's quite a stroke of luck."

"Yeah. Luck."

The horse ambled towards the well with a rocking, trotting motion that wasn't kind to a nervous stomach.

"Your good spirits seem... deflated," Cassim said.

"I don't do 'good spirits'. That was manic energy and now I'm tired."

"I see. If you can find a secure perch, feel free to sleep- I don't need you to drive the horse."

"What a concept. Thanks."

There was that stinking well. "Wait a minute," Iago cried, and he flew to it- the wind had gotten gusty, and a flight of just ten feet was a tricky affair.

He perched on the freezing stone edge of the well and looked down into it. Nothing. Blackness. No lamps, no genies.

Iago was careful climbing down to the ground and finding a sheltered spot by the well. That wind could pick him up and throw him around the way the ocean tossed a piece of wood. It could throw him in the well, too, and it'd be a hard job flying a straight vertical to get out.

He watched, shivering, as Cassim tied the horse, picked up the bucket, lowered the bucket... all things his big old human arms did without any hesitation at all. There was a trade-off, of course; five of Iago could fit in that bucket the guy was tossing like nothing, but Cassim would never fly.

Cassim hauled the bucket back out of the well and set it down. He took a swig or two from his canteen, then dumped it out and filled it up fresh. He let the horse drink from the bucket.

Iago stood on one leg to tuck the other one up into his warm feathers.

Wait, had Cassim said something? "Huh?" Iago yelled.

Cassim raised his voice over the wind. "Do you want to make camp?"

"Here? No!"

"You seem entirely unnerved, my friend. There are no marauders here now!"

"It's the sand," Iago said. The miles deep of choking sand, buried alive. "It's the wind." The wind that didn't know why it was screaming but screamed with all its might anyway. "I don't like the desert!"

"Still," said Cassim, "you'll feel better after a rest, and it's unlikely we'll be able to leave the desert before we must stop."

"It's a bad idea. You'd never make a fire- it would scatter. And staying still, we'd freeze. And don't you think bandits know there's water here? If that horse can still carry you, you'd better make it go!"

"Hmm. There's some sense in what you say." Cassim looked thoughtful. "I'm not accustomed to fearing bandits. I used to have thirty-nine bodyguards, you know- but now I don't. Perhaps I should take the advice of a creature that knows how to stay alive without them. A few more miles, then, the horse can handle it."

"Yes! He sees sense!"

"But if we are moving on, you'd better take a drink."

"Oh, yeah. I guess so." They were in the desert and he was parched.

Iago crept closer, staying low out of the wind, and used the hanging handle of the bucket as a step up onto its edge. He leaned over and took a beakful of water. It tasted like lamp oil. No it didn't! It didn't taste like anything, it was too cold to taste.

Get a grip, he told himself, with an agitated flip of his wings- this, unfortunately, created an opening for the wind to slap at him, and yet- instead of tumbling in a ball across the sand and whacking into the stone well, his back hit with a firm thump against a warm human palm.

Aladdin? No. Right.

"You're shaking!" Cassim said, with a note of alarm, as he gently steadied Iago on his perch.

This was a surprise to him? "Yeah, it's cold! I'm an icicle over here!"

"Well, so you are. I apologize, Iago, I had not given a thought to that."

Iago turned to get a better look at his face. Cassim had a slight, concerned frown. "Of course you didn't think of that." Why should he give a thought to Iago's comfort? Why was he

apologizing for not thinking of it? "Look, I'm used to it-"

"Someone your size could get hypothermia in an instant," said Cassim.

"I could, I could get pneumonia, too, but that's fine." He bent down to drink.

"You ought to have said something sooner."

Iago swallowed the water that did not taste like genie lamp, and said: "Well, it's not like you can do anything about it. You can't heat up the whole desert."

"I could carry you in my cape out of the winds. It seems an easy solution."

"You would- you'd do that?" That would put him in real close contact with Iago and the small down feathers that came loose from his body at regular intervals and his loud voice and any ticks or mites he might have- but didn't have. But no one ever took it on faith that he wasn't covered in fleas.

"It would hardly be a chore," said Cassim. "You're not heavy. I've seen men freeze to death at night in the desert, I don't believe a bit of caution is unwarranted."

"I- I guess," said Iago. He didn't get a lot of offers to cuddle, even in a strictly utilitarian sense. "I am pretty cold. I guess it's not any... weirder than riding on your shoulder."

"Excellent." Cassim was holding out a hand to him. Iago just stared at it, like an idiot.

"Come here, then." He beckoned, as if this was just a normal thing to offer.

It wasn't weird, so Iago shouldn't make it weird. "Yes, sir." He stepped onto the offered hand. Cassim picked him up and tucked him into the folds of his cape, as promised. It was cozy in here, tucked against the King of Thieves' broad chest. Quite an improvement over being blasted by winds.

Don't tire the horse, don't let the parrot get chilly. Cassim was a bit too nice, maybe. It bore keeping an eye on. Could be a problem. But at the moment, not a problem. He wasn't going to complain about not being allowed to shiver in the cold.

"Is that better?" Cassim asked.

"Yeah... much better. Thanks, boss."

Cassim did not reply until after a moment or two had slipped by, and then he said: "Very well, then... onward we go."

BEFORE: They'll Find Out There's So Much More to Me

Chapter Notes

This story has two types of chapters, which will be alternating every week. Week 1 was the A plot, today is the B plot and next week will be the A plot again.

Although he was dressed plainly and making the greatest effort to look impassive, the commoners still turned their heads and lifted their eyes in distrust at the approach of Jafar. Ratty children peeped at him around corners because they dared not peep openly, women glanced at him from under their veils and looked away again, gathering their goods or their children closer to them, and even the barkers in the marketplace studiously gave their come-hither speeches to the space next to Jafar, as if he were not the only person crossing the square; those who were more honest stilled their tongues entirely until he had walked past.

One might point out that he, himself, were a commoner; one would be only partially correct. Surely, to be truly common, one would have to possess a common intellect and... a common height.

It was, no doubt, the length of the shadow he cast as he moved through this wretched town that first drew the timorous gazes (or even more timorous aversions thereof). It was something those gazes found in his face that kept them timorous. He had not a clue what it was. Perhaps they'd never see a man wear kohl in dark rings about his eyes before- the protective qualities of it were perhaps too complicated for the Agrabanians to understand, or perhaps they couldn't apply it without poking themselves in the eye.

It was a relief from more than just the sun when Jafar found the proper building and ducked inside.

The apartment was sparsely furnished. Father had been an ascetic.

Jafar glanced at the bare floor and at once he got down on hands and knees to check for hidden compartments.

Father had been more enigmatic than a very addle-brained sphinx. It was he who had chosen to send Jafar away to study and enrich his natural aptitude for academia and alchemy, and it was he who had taught Jafar his first spell, a simple glamour. Where the line had appeared between 'allowable' magic and 'abomination' Jafar did not know. Why, after evicting Jafar without ceremony or without so much as an allowance at the callous age of sixteen, Father had since had some sort of distant change of heart and left him all of his worldly possessions instead of finding an amenable prostitute to leave them to, Jafar did not know.

He may have been impelled to come here and deal with the estate due to a certain sudden lack of friends back in Egypt- and previously, in Greece- and he would accept it if he found nothing here but a safe place to stay for a time, but he would not accept it happily. Father must have been hiding something here. No sorcerer of any kind would die and leave nothing- not even a scroll.

Thus far 'nothing' was all that he had found.

The curtain that hid the apartment's only window was performing the useful function of blocking out a token amount of the day's heat, but Jafar moved it aside in the hopes that more light would, er, shed light on the situation.

Behind the curtain was a view of golden spires, rising out of the sand-colored city like a mirage, appearing to weightlessly stretch towards the sun.

Jafar's face tensed, despite himself. Ah, yes, the benevolent Agrabanian dictatorship. Lacking the panache of the Pharaoh or the audacity to claim godhood, yet exercising just as much authority.

Of course Father had a view of the palace- the better to worship the Sultan with.

Jafar let the curtain fall back into place.

A rose by any other name

Chapter Notes

I'm trying to sneak in other Disney characters where possible instead of making bland inventions, but Fatima the innkeeper is just an OC. I needed someone very specifically tailor-made to the plot. I wanted to point that out right up front because I didn't want anyone to start guessing that she's some other, better character in disguise and then go 'oh'

In this story, different historical eras are jumbled across the globe and Shakespeare exists. This will be more relevant later. I don't care to justify it, it's just so I can introduce whatever crossover cameo I want at any time. (Within reason) (stitch won't show up at any point)

"Cassim, we gotta get you a magic carpet."

"I'm a simple man," said Cassim, with a shrug and only the faintest hint of irony. "A fine piece of horseflesh is enough for me."

"Now that just sounds wrong," Iago said.

The horse bobbed her head and whickered- he'd never been all that good at 'Horse', too much of it was visual with the ears going back and forward and that kinda stuff. A parrot's ears were hidden under their feathers and certainly did not move around, so what was he supposed to do with that? He thought she'd said something about horses being better than carpets, though.

Even the horse liked Cassim. Everyone did.

Iago readied his next argument, but before he could speak- the faint sound of another traveler's hoofbeats approached from around the next bend. He held his tongue.

A woman on horseback appeared, trotting along on a leisurely pace on one of those beige horses with the black feet. The horse paid them no mind at all, and the woman only deigned to give Cassim a polite nod and Iago a curious glance- and that only because parrots didn't usually live in the desert, and people didn't usually carry around parrots. There was no gawking.

Iago waited for the horse lady to be out of earshot, and then he continued, lowering his voice a little just to be safe. "But those carpets, they're fast..." They also did draw some gawkers, but Cassim would be less flaunty than Aladdin with his, right?

"You see the countryside traveling on the ground," said Cassim.

"But the countryside is just sand!"

Cassim smiled and shook his head. "You contrary little thing, I know you've enjoyed the trip."

That was a classic *argumentum ad hominem*, right there. Or maybe that was *ad avium* in this case. Whatever. "Me? Enjoy? Enjoy wandering the Seven Deserts for weeks?" Enjoy hanging out on horseback with a legendary bandit king who'd taught him six ways to pick a lock without a pick when he'd complained about not having Abu's lockpicks around? Enjoy stopping at inns where all they did was get a meal, get a room and sleep without any freakazoids showing up to get revenge on any punk kids or any monsters showing up because they smelled djinn magic? (It smelled like pepper and mint, but not peppermint.) Did Cassim think he enjoyed taking in the scenery without any prattling shapeshifting genies constantly begging for attention from the kid and drowning out any chance of any other conversation-

Iago wasn't gonna answer that argument. People didn't think a bird was smart enough to know what logical fallacies were, but he did, and he wasn't going to dignify one with a response.

"But you could fly," he said instead. "You get a great view from the air. They're decent guys, too, those carpets. As rugs go. They can't talk, you know." Wait, that was an open invitation for criticism of things that could fly and talk. Iago steeled himself for an insult.

"Where would we get a magic carpet?" Cassim asked instead. "Isn't my son's magic carpet the only one?"

Absence of evidence was not evidence of absence. "There could be more," Iago said. "He had to come from somewhere."

"Where do magic carpets come from?"

"Beats me." He knew the Carpet had been found in the Cave of Wonders, but that didn't mean he'd somehow germinated there like a seed or something. He'd never know if the Carpet had been anywhere before that. Rugs couldn't talk.

"Where do magic parrots come from?" Cassim asked.

Iago squinted at him. "I ain't magic- unless you count being really cranky as being magic."

"Intelligent parrots of mysterious origin, then," Cassim conceded.

"Why do you want to know? What, you want more of me? You wanna start breedin' parrots?"

Cassim shook his head. "I don't believe the world is ready for such an enterprise."

"It sure isn't."

"No, my friend, I simply wished to get to know you better, that's all. If you're seeking a profit motive, well... it is always profitable to know a partner in crime inside and out. I knew my

men quite well... or I thought I did."

"Oh, I get it." Funny, Aladdin had never bothered to ask about Iago's past. He probably thought he knew enough about it. "Well, you won't get to know me that way. Birds don't get hung up on where they grew up like humans do. What you see is what you get over here."

"Is that so." Cassim fiddled thoughtfully with his beard. "You'd hardly be the first thief to have no past. Very well, I won't pry."

"There's nothing to pry into. Really, it doesn't matter."

Another passerby was coming closer. Iago turned away to stare vacantly into the sky.

"Well," said Cassim, "if you'd rather discuss the present, I suppose I might ask why you're so quiet among strangers. I doubt you're shy."

The guy passing on the horse gave Cassim an odd look, and Iago gave Cassim a "shut up" look.

"I can talk to a bird as much as I want to," said Cassim, and the guy on the horse kind of rolled his eyes a little.

Once he was safely gone, Iago said: "You notice anything, Mr. King of Thieves? People don't pay much attention to us unless you start having a conversation with your pet parrot!"

"You didn't seem to care about not drawing attention when you were with Aladdin."

"Yeah? Aladdin had a genie, a monkey, a flying carpet, he wasn't trying to lay low. You know it's bad enough that you have a parrot at all. I stick out like a sore thumb. I guess traveling with a mob of thieves you don't usually go the stealth route, but it's time to learn!"

Cassim frowned. What, had Iago made him mad? He wasn't trying to make him mad. Why were humans so thin-skinned? "Iago, you do have a point, but I don't want my company to render you mute."

Iago snorted a little. Was that all. "You'll get used to it."

Cassim was silent. It did seem like he was kind of mad about something. What, he was going to make Iago guess what it was? Was it the 'mob of thieves' thing, was Cassim sore about that? Why?

Forget it, Iago didn't have much patience for trying to figure out what he'd done wrong based on no information whatsoever. He changed the subject. "Are we there yet?" he asked, to break up the quiet, and as he asked, the horse turned a corner, and over the edge of the cliff lay a neat little town- past the town, the shifting haze of the ocean. So he had smelled a whiff of salt!

"We are there, actually," said Cassim. "Does that suit you?"

Iago landed on the horse's head to get closer for a better look- the ungrateful nag tossed him off and he retreated to Cassim's shoulder. Sure, carry a man all day but a bird was too heavy for your head.

"It's a little small, isn't it?" he asked. It looked small enough for a parrot to be able to fly to anywhere he might need to get to without knocking himself out. "And there's no palace, I mean, the last city I lived in had a palace." No palace, no Sultan with the mind of a baby and the absolute authority to have anyone he wanted killed, force-fed moldy crackers or thrown into the dungeon for life on a whim.

"I'm glad you like it," said Cassim.

Iago scoffed. "It's picturesque." It was, though, those sandstone buildings piled up against the coast. And if anyone ever suspected that Iago had a sense of aesthetics, may he be deep-fried and served up at a picnic. He looked away. "A seaside town! What are we, gulls now?" A seaside town with access to imported goods, news and trade, treasure hunting expeditions, and probably pirates. Pirates might be good. Cassim had already said a few things about how maybe stealing from other thieves might be theoretically okay. Pirates were thieves. Rich thieves.

"You love it! Good," said Cassim.

"What if they don't like us, wise guy? I mean, what if that friend of yours we're supposed to meet isn't there anymore? What will we do then?"

"I suppose it's prudent to take nothing for granted, but I have severe doubts that anything could have befallen our contact. She is as permanent as the ocean itself and as implacable."

Iago watched Cassim out of the corner of his eye. So this was a woman. Cassim hadn't mentioned that it was a woman.

Maybe it'd be fine. Cassim was a sharp, level-headed guy. Maybe he was able to talk to women as business contacts and equals. He wasn't anything like Jafar, after all. More like a way smarter Aladdin, and Al was an idiot around only one woman.

Cassim guided the horse around the winding road leading down towards the town. Sounds were floating up from it now- chattering people, braying goats and clucking chickens, the whoop of children- it sounded a lot like the Agrabanian marketplace, only with the addition of seagulls calling. And somewhere, an accordion player. No place was perfect.

"Cassim-" He tapped Cassim's arm, an arm as thick around as his own body and much more solid. "What if your friend don't like me?" It was meant to be a pure logistical question- what if that inn she was running didn't allow parrots? Because not all of them did and usually Iago just hid in Cassim's cape until they got to the room, but that that was gonna be hard to pull off long-term. That was all he meant, but the question got a wheedling, babyish note slipped into it somewhere on the way out, as if Iago cared about not being liked or something.

"What's not to like?" Cassim answered.

Was that supposed to be funny?

His vision went black as they stepped into the dark inn from the bright outside. Closing his eyes to let them adjust, Iago bit back an undignified squawk of resentment. No parrot liked the dark unless he was sleeping or up to no good, and right now he was the respectable traveling companion of a paying customer.

Sort of. Cassim was out of money, but he seemed really sure this wouldn't be a problem. They'd had a few discussions about whether or not Cassim should have hit up the treasure room before leaving Agrabah (the Sultan wouldn't ever have missed a couple of big handfuls, come on). But he hadn't done it and now he was broke. *They* were broke.

In the darkness, Iago heard the gruff mutterings of a bustling tavern. Through selective attention he sussed out phrases like "sail at dawn, if everyone can wake up for it", "best price for sail canvas", "my ale's gone flat"- nothing helpful or interesting.

The smells were of tobacco, cooking meat, and something he didn't know all that well- it was a nice smell, fresh. Some kind of plant?

He opened his eyes and saw a crowded establishment that you could charitably call rustic. Many of the tables and chairs were made out of wood- that was the smell! They must get wood imported at a good price here. A sign of a decent local economy! There was sawdust on the ground, too.

Cassim strode through the crowd, aiming at one of only a couple of empty tables. Iago was no great judge of human aesthetics, but in his entirely humble opinion, he thought Cassim looked a lot more put together, confident, snappy, well-preened, take your pick, just higher quality than any of these guys. Especially that guy by the bar with the wart. A lot of them looked like sailors, maybe even pirates. Dirty striped shirts, long coats, gold teeth-

A piercing squawk rent the air. Iago half-opened his wings and looked around for the source- that wasn't him. That wasn't his squawk. Did some bird get in here?

The source of the noise was a speck of green on the shoulder of a particularly piratical fellow near the entrance. Iago squinted at it through the haze of pipe smoke. The other parrot looked his way and met his eyes.

Iago suddenly realized how bad he needed to preen his back feathers- look at these, what a mess. Sand, grit in here, the little fuzzies on the sides of the feathers weren't locking together right, how was he supposed to fly like this? Must be all that sea air or something-

"Do you want to go say hello?" Cassim asked.

Iago stared up into his face. What, to the other parrot? Was that a joke?

Cassim's eyebrows rose and he blinked. "Ah, never mind, then."

Iago cleared his throat and went back to preening. So there were other parrots around here. Of course that one over there, he was probably just passing through, that was a pirate he was perching on. If there were other parrots Iago wouldn't look so out of place, so that was good, yes! How many other parrots was he going to run into, though? What did other parrots talk about? Feathers?

Iago let himself be jolted out of this by the soft impact of Cassim sitting down at a table. He'd taken a table by a window. It looked out onto the sea, that big, frothing, stew of monsters and corpses and treasures.

"Aha," said Cassim. "There she is. Watch, my little friend, and you'll see a master at work."

Iago looked in the direction Cassim was looking in, and saw the old lady. She tottered towards them, leaning on an old stick. She was tottering wrong. Too coordinated, and though her face was all wrinkly like any old human, her eyes were bright and cold.

Iago stood up straight and his feathers all slicked down against his skin like they were trying to be armor.

"Cassim, my lad," said the old lady, in a voice that was quavered dramatically. "Are you finally back again, you naughty boy?"

"Grandmother!" Cassim stood and spread his arms out. "How good to see you!"

If he was looking for a hug, the old lady was either pretending not to notice or turning him down flat. All she did was poke his leg with her cane a little bit. "You're not here because you're in trouble, now, are you?"

Boy? Was Cassim young? He was Al's dad... how old was that kid again? Al wasn't old. Parrots took about a year to grow up, what was it for humans?

Not important! Iago leaned forward to get a better look at that staff the old lady was holding.

"Trouble? I, the most honest man south of Athens?" Cassim asked, as Iago took in the carvings on the staff. Yeah, those weren't for decoration. Cassim had mentioned something about his friend and appearances at some point... he'd said it while they were eating breakfast, and Iago had been mostly just paying attention to breakfast, so he didn't remember the exact words. But Cassim must know this old lady had some kind of disguise on, both of them were laying it on too thick, and it was obviously a game they'd played before. Did Cassim know about the magic part, though?

He looked up from the staff and ran right into the old lady's stare. "Cassim, you have made a tiny friend!" Her voice was still all nice and grandmotherly, but the way her eyes locked on his was not at all grandmotherly.

Iago squawked.

Cassim reached up to lightly touch his wing. "This is the grandmother who runs this tavern, an old, a very old friend of mine." He winked. "Perhaps you would care to introduce

yourself?"

Iago would not care to do that. He fidgeted and tried to look vacant.

"Ah," shrugged Cassim, "he is a fine, handsome bird, but not fond of strangers."

Flattery was accepted anytime, but would not get Iago to do anything he did not want to do, no sir. He looked away pointedly.

"Where are your other little friends, Cassim?" the old lady asked. "Am I about to be swarmed and robbed blind?" She chuckled.

"My friends are... less adept at avoiding trouble than I, I am afraid," said Cassim.

Iago looked out the window at that big old rolling ocean. Cassim's ex-pals were under that ocean somewhere.

"But there is much to catch up on, Grandmother," said Cassim. "Perhaps if you have a few moments at the end of the day..."

"I always have a few moments for my favorite grandson. Come along now, dear, I shall put on a cup of tea." She turned away, clearly expecting them to follow. She had placed a faint emphasis on the word 'now'.

"Cassim," Iago hissed as they threaded through the crowd, following the back of the old woman.

"Yes, my friend?"

"She's a witch, you know."

"She is, indeed. I didn't expect you to notice so quickly."

"I know a thing or two," said Iago, "about sorcery."

"Noted."

They followed the old lady up some stairs and into a small, shadowy room- there were quite a few things in here with funny shapes, but without more light all Iago could identify at the moment was the bookcase Cassim was standing next to.

The old lady set down the staff with her glamour spells carved into it and rose out of her stooped posture, turning towards them. She had made an unbelievable metamorphosis from an old lady into... a less old lady. Amazing. Just incredible.

"Fatima," Cassim said, "my old friend-"

"The bird." Her voice was husky, commanding and without even a hint of grandmotherliness.

"The bird?" Cassim's tone was mild. "This bird, I suppose?" He held his hand up to Iago. "Come here a moment, my friend."

Obviously, he was planning to hold Iago out for inspection. Iago took a half-step backwards on Cassim's shoulder and shook his head slightly.

"No?" Cassim said.

Fatima looked straight into Iago's eyes. There was a big, gnarled scar indenting her cheek- it looked to him like someone had tried to stab her eye out and missed, or been dodged.

"You are not fooling anyone, bird," she said. "I see ordinary parrots every day in my tavern. I know what you are and what you are not." Her voice was firm and not very emotional- just stating facts. "I can impel your true form, if it comes to that-"

True form!

Iago barked out a nasty laugh. "You think I'm not a real parrot! Hoo! Someone go to the rainforest and tell my mother, boy, she's in for a shock!" He might not remember a whole lot before Agrabah and Jafar, but may he be stuffed and served up for dinner if he ever forgot Ma. And Ma had without a doubt been one hundred percent parrot.

"I have been given no reason to think that Iago is anything other than a rather unusual parrot," said Cassim. "He is rather... opinionated. But he is trustworthy. He saved my life once."

'Trustworthy' was such a strong word. He wouldn't say that in front of the judgey lady, though. "I did save his life," he said instead.

"I have seen none of your men," Fatima said. "What of the forty thieves?"

"I saved his life *from* the forty thieves," Iago said. "If you're asking."

Cassim cleared his throat. "Ah, yes. It is a complicated tale."

"Saluk turned on you at last," Fatima droned.

"That is a part of my complicated tale, yes. But, there is much good in it!" Cassim turned on his heel and began pacing. Iago vacated his shoulder for a perch on the bookcase to avoid getting motion sickness.

"My son lives, Fatima," Cassim said. "He is a fine young man, an upstanding young man! An honorable lad with a good head on his shoulders and a noble heart. And successful, too! Would you believe that not a month ago I witnessed his wedding to the princess of Agrabah? I... I left him nothing, and he has risen to become the future Sultan." Cassim smiled sadly. "He must get it from his mother."

When Cassim talked about the kid, his eyes shone and his hands waved. The pride radiated off of him like a glow. Meanwhile, Aladdin was probably off somewhere whining about

being related to an icky thief... life was so fair that way. Fine, if Aladdin wouldn't appreciate his dad, other people would do it for him.

Fatima leaned forward. "Prince Aladdin of Agrabah is your son?"

"You have heard of Aladdin!"

"I have. They say he keeps a djinn, a djinn that is free and stays with him merely out of respect."

"It is true," said Cassim, his head thrown back. "I have seen this djinn, a powerful, noble, and rather odd creature. He has powers beyond any human and he counts my boy as a friend and equal."

"They say Aladdin has conquered ifrits, hydras, dragons... powerful sorcerors." Her eyes fell on Iago again. Why'd she have to look at him that way? "And they say he keeps a parrot with the tongue of a viper. I suppose this bird was a gift."

"In fact, he was not," said Cassim, standing up straight and sober with his hands tucked behind his back. "Iago is here by choice. He is not property, and I would advise you to treat him as you would any of my human allies."

Iago realized that his beak was hanging open. He closed it and turned away. If Cassim talked up his thieves like that, no wonder he'd had such a big crew following him around for so many years.

Oh, hey, Fatima had a book on sand magic. Not to Iago's taste, really, sand magic, but sometimes a guy needed to know a thing or two about it, it was good to know this was here.

"I see," said Fatima. "Iago is his name, is it?"

"Yeah, that's right," Iago said, still keeping his eyes on the books on the shelf. A lot of useful stuff here. "You've heard about me, have ya?"

There were a lot of good things she could've heard. Hero things. Why did he have the feeling she wasn't about to say any of those things? Gee, maybe because she'd started things off with 'tongue of a viper'.

"I have heard much about you," said Fatima. "I do not know what is true. Many rumors come through this tavern, much of it idle chatter."

"Nice answer! Downright political, I'd call it." She had a book of collected Shakespeare stories. The spine didn't say what was in the collection. Maybe she'd just read Hamlet and the Merry Wives of Windsor.

"I trust Cassim as a judge of character more than I trust rumor," Fatima said. "Or namesakes." She'd seen him looking at the book. Cute. "Although there was Saluk..."

"Give him some credit," said Iago, "he tried to have Saluk offed. It just didn't work out at first."

Cassim shrugged. "I suppose fate had different plans for me."

Probably it had. Iago had seen too much to not believe in fate and what absolute depths of cruelty it could sink to.

Cassim was smirking. "Tell him the tales you have heard of the King of Thieves, my friend."

Fatima sat at a small table in the back of the room. There was a crystal ball standing on it, dim and dusty in the shadows. The ball was just for show, of course, a knick-knack. Future-telling required a lot more equipment than that. "I have heard," Fatima intoned, "that once upon a time, a poor woodcutter lucked into learning the location of the den of the Forty Thieves, and the password phrase with which they open the entrance. He stole a small amount of gold coins and returned home with them. This man's brother discovered what had happened, and went on his own to rob from the thieves. He was able to gain entrance to the den, but forgot the magic words before he could leave. The thieves found him in their hideout on their return, and this unfortunate man was cut into pieces and displayed at the cave entrance as a warning."

Iago turned to look at Cassim. He was chuckling.

"Did you?" Iago asked.

"No! I would never have a dismembered man at the entrance to my home. Too many flies."

"Oh, yeah, of course. Way too many flies."

"What makes it even better," he said, "is that people seem to think the man killed was named Cassim. You see, my friend. A lot of stories are out there."

"And I have heard another tale," said Fatima.

"Do tell," Cassim said.

"I have heard that the King of Thieves has no money, and expects to stay in my inn for free."

"Ah. Not for free," said Cassim. "There are many useful services-"

"The crystal ball shows me," Fatima interrupted, "that I will be talked into it by the golden words you reserve for days when you have no golden coins. We may as well save some time." She rose to her full height in a very theatrical manner, with the ease of someone who no longer needed to think about the theatrics to pull them off.

"I am very grateful," said Cassim.

"Yes, when I think of a more substantial use for your gratitude I will tell you. But you have traveled far, so I will allow you to run up a tab in my tavern and then I will show you to your room."

Sounded like a good deal apart from the thing about finding a use for Cassim's gratitude.

"You sure you wanna write a blank check to this lady?"

A crop full of food usually put Iago in a- maybe 'good' was the wrong word, but a less bad mood than usual. Especially if it was free food. But this wasn't free food. This was 'pay later' food.

The sounds of the tavern came up through the floor of the room, muffled into background noise- it wasn't unpleasant. Total quiet would have been a little unnerving.

"She owes me, actually," Cassim said, taking off his cape. He seemed unconcerned, but he was unconcerned about too many things. Part of the time it had to be a front. "I saved her from being burned at the stake once."

"What a public service."

"Try not to be too much put off by her direct manner," said Cassim. He spread the cape over the sleeping mat that lay to the side of the room. "A gruff exterior often hides a warm heart."

It wasn't a huge room, and there wasn't a lot in it. The two of them were gonna be rich enough to buy the whole city eventually, so this was fine, for now. It was better than Aladdin's hovel. Less drafty. No cozy carpets, though.

"You sigh," Cassim said. "Perhaps you don't agree." He had that look he got, like he was thinking of some private joke. A King of Thieves must have seen a lot of stuff over the years, there must be a lot that reminded him of old jokes.

"Cassim, buddy..." He sounded tired and hoarse to himself. "Some people are just not good news. You know, you're starting to worry me. Maybe this lady is okay, I don't know. But not everyone's okay."

"Oh, let me put you at ease, then. I certainly did not mean to imply that everyone is a good person. Only that appearances can deceive- it works the other way, of course."

"A man may smile and smile and be a villain?"

"Indeed."

He did have a point. A flashy turban and a title didn't make a man a good ruler. A sheltered, pampered princess didn't have to turn out as a dainty little flower. A cold, nasty heart could beat in the soft warm breast of a bird.

There was one window, and the light shining through it was powerful enough to blast right through the thin curtain that tried to hold it back and cast a bright square onto the ground, even though it was nearing the end of the day. It made the room warm, but not uncomfortably warm.

"Birds can yawn, I see," said Cassim.

"Yeah... we can do that."

"She has no assignment for me yet. There is time to rest, and we will be glad if we take it."
Cassim took his shoes off and lay down on his cape. "Good night."

Iago's own shoulder made a pretty good feather pillow, if he did say so himself. "Good night, boss."

"The monkey! Grab the monkey!"

Iago was standing in a plain, dark little cube of a room. The only light was a square of pale moonlight on the floor. Was this jail? Was he in jail? The Sultan had put him back in jail?

He was deeply out of breath, as if he had flown a long way.

Something moved, a shape rising up, just barely visible outside of that square of light. A gleam of metal. A knife.

Iago cried out and jumped into the air. He could only see to fly to the windowsill, so that was where he landed. But that put him closer to the guy with the knife. But there was nowhere else to go-

"Where is the monkey?" Cassim asked, lowering the knife.

"What? What monkey?"

"You were yelling something about a monkey."

A cool breeze ruffled his feathers, and the scent of the ocean was on it. Right. The ocean. The inn. The witch.

The monkey was back in Agrabah.

"Uh, that, that was nothing. I, uh, I talk in my sleep sometimes." Iago swallowed. Panting for breath had made his throat dry.

Cassim was still for a moment. There wasn't enough light to see his face. "I have noticed," he said simply.

"Hey, I can't help it."

"No, I know you cannot. Regardless, I am now wide awake, so you may as well tell me what dream was so alarming."

"It was nothing."

"I am awake, and I would like to know."

Iago eyed the bit of metal still gleaming in his hand. "What's the knife for?"

"This? Oh! You talk in your sleep, I have my own habits." The knife vanished. Where it was hidden, Iago didn't know.

"Habits," he stammered. "Yeah."

"You were dreaming about a monkey?"

Iago shut his eyes and inhaled the salt air. Cassim wasn't gonna let this one go. He'd let a lot of other things go. It wasn't really fair to make him let everything go, so, all right. Fine. "The monkey. Uh, Aladdin's monkey. He was fallin' off a cliff."

"Oh?" Cassim sounded surprised.

"Yeah, and instead of grabbin' him the Genie was just making all these cheap jokes. Like, uh, 'prices falling on monkeys!' 'Abu's living on the edge now!' And he was just standing there like a moron! And I..." This was sounding even stupider out loud. "You can stop me! I know other people's dreams are boring, I'd understand."

"No, please, continue."

"Uh, that was pretty much it. I was really far away."

"Far away?"

"Yeah."

"So you couldn't help the monkey," said Cassim.

That was obvious, wasn't it? "No, I was too far away!" Iago looked out at the stars, a sprinkle of lights against a dark blue background. He'd know how to get to this place forever now. He was getting to have a pretty big mental map. A lot of places. "Is that all you wanted to know, boss?"

"I suppose I am curious why you call me 'boss'."

"Uh- do I call you that?"

"Yes- you just did."

There wasn't any special reason for that. Aladdin was the kid, Abu was the monkey... Iago called things what they were. "Uh, because you are the boss? What do you want me to call you? I ain't calling you Your Highness."

"I hope you don't think I'm as pompous as that! I suppose I am simply surprised to receive a term of respect from such a willful person as you."

"Respect? No, that's not respect, that's just... well, you are the boss." Iago was repeating himself, but it was the middle of the night. "If I called you 'the human' it would be way too general. You know. I can be the parrot, there's only one."

"I see. I suppose that's logical. While we are on the subject, may I ask who 'Your Rottenness' is?"

"What?" His heart went whap-whap. "Where did you hear that?"

Cassim's voice was gentle. "It is another thing you say in terror in your sleep."

Iago's throat got kind of tight and he couldn't come up with anything to say. Geez, he didn't usually clam up like this. Maybe he was coming down with something.

"An oracle only answers one question," said Cassim. "You have deigned to answer two of them. I will not be greedy enough to pressure the third. In the interest of fairness, I will ask instead- is there anything you wish to know of the King of Thieves?"

"Is there?" Iago asked himself, looking out at the town's quiet buildings that gleamed in the moonlight. A pair of humans was meandering hand-in-hand down there on the beach. For a moment, Iago assumed it was Aladdin and Jasmine... but it couldn't be. "Uh, how'd you get to be King of Thieves?" he asked. "Is that a dynastic thing?"

"Oh, that. I killed the former King of Thieves."

"Oh! I don't know what I was expecting."

"He was not a nice man," said Cassim, who was proving to be quite a master of understatement. Iago could imagine what 'not a nice man' might really mean, and he decided he didn't want to imagine it. "I have no regrets. Not about that, anyway."

"I forgot that your code ends in death."

"Perhaps it is time to revise my code. My circumstances have undergone quite a change."

Yeah, Iago could get on board with a code that did not end in death.

He yawned. Speaking of death, that yawn was a good sign that it was time to not hang out in this window anymore. If he fell asleep here, that was just asking to be eaten by an owl- or a cat that was a particularly good climber.

He hopped down to the floor inside the room with a little landing-softening flutter, and found a nice place to huddle in the corner. "Uh, good night."

"Good night."

"Uh, wait, Cassim?"

"Yes?"

"I've killed people too," Iago said.

"Ah. It can be inevitable, sometimes," said Cassim. Iago couldn't tell whether he believed him or not.

"Well, good night," he said again.

"Yes. Have pleasant dreams, I hope."

Maybe.

BEFORE: I'm afraid I've been thinking - a dangerous pastime, I know

A languid breeze brought in more heat than it dispelled, and rustled the scrolls, as well. Perhaps Jafar ought to board up that window... or make someone else do it.

"Jafar! Jafar!"

Jafar deigned to lower the scroll for a moment, looking over the top of it at the chubby youth in the doorway. He was holding another box of scrolls that no one would buy and Jafar would mainly discard.

"Set it there," he said, gesturing to the last box, which he had not yet unpacked. It was just too hot.

The boy set the box of scrolls next to the other box of scrolls. "Uh, do you need help unpacking, sir?"

"No, no, dear boy," Jafar intoned. The child would simply make a mess of Morgiana's organizational system, and then, despite the fact that she was the one to blame for hiring an incompetent as Jafar's only assistance, it would be Jafar's fault that everything was in its improper place. It would be if she ever bothered to drop in on this dead-end enterprise, in any case.

It was also Jafar's fault, somehow, that this magic shop- located in an area where the locals were too superstitious to practice spellcraft and too uneducated to read scrolls- this magic shop that had been failing long before he was hired- was not turning a profit.

The child was still standing there looking eager to help, even though he had proven long ago that he was utterly unable to provide any useful assistance that extended beyond picking a thing up and putting it down in another spot. And sometimes he put it down in the wrong spot.

"You may be off early," Jafar said with a wave of his hand. He would also take himself home early. His apartment was not a great deal cooler than the magic shop, but he could remove his outer layers of clothing there, and there was no reason to be here. No one came in to the shop on most days, and they certainly would not come in on a day this oppressive.

The boy scattered with a beaming smile. It must be so much more pleasant to live on an intellectual level where such simple things as the prospect of idleness gave one a real sense of joy.

Jafar gathered the scrolls he had planned to study and loaded his satchel with them.

As he picked up the last scroll, he heard the front door creak open.

Had Morgiana returned? Jafar quickly secreted the satchel behind the boxes of scrolls that he had never dealt with, and he strode into the next room to receive his unexpected guest.

A slim young woman with a timid air stood in the doorway.

"Good evening, madame," said Jafar, composing her face to hear her request without overt annoyance or laughter.

"Good afternoon, sir," she said breathlessly, with a bob of her head that was the proper greeting for a man of his power and education. A better start than most. "I seek a spell."

"Yes, milady," he said with utter gentility. "This is a spell-shop. Please, continue."

"My husband and I-" she started, then stopped. "It is- a common thing," she started again, and stopped again. She was blushing faintly. "You see, I-"

A coarse robe covered her figure but could not hide the lines of it entirely. He found them more appealing than the "yearning heifer" look in her eyes.

"Sir," she said, in a voice that quavered but was more definite than her previous stutters, "my husband needs an heir, and I..."

There it was. "Say no more."

Jafar turned away, affecting a look of thoughtfulness to hide his deep desire to sigh and close the door in her face. It took years, nay, decades of study, not only in magic but also in the human anatomy and physiology, before one could even consider casting a fertility spell. Jafar himself would not attempt it on anyone he wished to remain alive. What this woman ought to look for was a physician, a potion-brewer, an herbalist, an alchemist, even a seller of good-luck charms. For pity's sake, she would be better off consulting her Zodiac than coming here.

"I have tried all else," she mewed, as if she had guessed his train of thought.

Had she, though? Had she really tried all else, or had she just tried the most obvious things and a few words of advice from her mother, and then seen the sign of the spell-shop and gotten a 'clever' idea?

Whatever. "I have just what you seek, milady," he said. "Say no more. Wait here."

He walked into the back room, picked up a scrap of blank paper, and dashed off some nonsense words that vaguely resembled a spell. This would not harm the woman, it may dissuade her from continuing to seek well-intentioned self-destruction, at least for a time, and- as this particular trouble was one that could sometimes be solved merely with confidence and peace of mind- it may even aid her.

And, most importantly, she would take it and leave.

He brought his non-spell back to the counter and held it out with a smile. "Two dinarii, if you please." The spell was worth less than that, but if Morgiana happened to hear any rumors that Jafar was giving away anything for free, she would have his head. If Jafar was in charge, he

would consider it a clever advertising ploy... but he had all the work of being in charge with none of the freedom, naturally.

This false spell was not in the inventory lists, however; he considered it an acceptable risk to send the coins the woman passed him into his voluminous sleeves instead of into the till.

As he absently waved farewell to the woman, who departed bowing and scraping and whimpering her gratitude, he wondered: Was this to be his fate?

Always to toil, gaining ever more knowledge in a world where it was not prized and most of it could not be used. What compelled him onward? A mere dislike of idleness?

Perhaps Agrabah was not the place for him. He was running out of locations to flee to, and running out of coin to flee with. For now, he simply picked up his scroll-burdened satchel and walked out the door.

Looking up, he could just barely see the golden spires of the palace rising above the buildings. Distance and heat made them hazy and ethereal.

Thinking out of the box

Abu was the only one who'd believed that Iago was really planning to leave and not come back.

Aladdin had had this smirk on his face. He never bothered hiding those tell-tale smirks and things. Maybe he thought a bird was too stupid to notice, or maybe he was just a bad actor, but anyway, he'd smirked and he'd also said 'Sure, Iago' way too many times while they were saying their goodbyes.

Jasmine was way more subtle. She was a politico, she was a trained diplomat, and she was getting pretty good at it by now. You had to know her pretty well to know that the small, vacant smile on her face wasn't because she was a million miles away or just an airhead, it was the face she put on when she didn't want anyone to know what she was thinking. Uh, but he did know her pretty well. 'Don't forget to write to us, take care of yourself-' she didn't care. She was just giving him a rote goodbye and not bothering with anything more because she didn't think it would take.

Maybe the Genie thought he was really leaving. Maybe that was what the endless litany of jokes was getting at. Iago never knew what the Genie was trying to say, or what he really felt. He was an immortal, he thought different. There was no point in even trying to guess if there was anything under all the wisecracks.

The Carpet... well, it was really hard to tell if a guy with no voice or face was being sincere. Carpet had gone through all the right motions, at least. Points for being polite.

But the monkey...

The monkey had gotten mad at him at first. He'd spouted off about Iago just walking away after everything they'd been through, or something like that.

Iago had had some excellent counterpoints, of course. "You bet your lockpicks I'm gettin' outta here after everything I've been through with you people!"

And Abu had said Iago was an ungrateful jerk.

"Yep!"

And Abu had said: fine. No one was gonna miss Iago anyway, Iago smelled like dust bunnies and took forever to pick a lock and he yelled real loud and he splashed water everywhere when he took a bath and his jokes weren't funny and his mom was a fat pigeon.

"What did I say about insulting my mother?!"

Abu had said it again: Iago's mother was a fat pigeon.

Then they started fighting and Iago had had to make a break for it, sans a couple of feathers.

And that would've been a good note to end on. Perfect, even. A nice don't-let-the-door-hit-ya thing. But then, Abu had had the audacity not to leave it there.

Iago had been waiting outside on the balcony, keeping an eye out for Cassim's horse. He'd been pretty sure Cassim would show up for the wedding, but he hadn't been completely sure, because you could never be completely sure that a guy wasn't gonna change his mind at the last minute. He couldn't just fly away, because if Cassim did come back, and Iago missed it, everything would be over. So he was stuck there, and along came Abu.

He'd asked if Iago was really going away forever.

"Forever and ever." Cassim was a wanted man. They wouldn't be back.

Abu had just looked at him for a minute, and after a little fidgeting, Iago had said: "Cassim has two shoulders, ya know. You might have more fun if you came with us..."

Abu had shaken his head.

"You're the best pickpocket in Agrabah! Don't you want to use that?"

Abu had said that he could not leave Aladdin.

Of course he'd said that. "Well, it's Aladdin's dad, so it's not really leavin', you feel me?"

But no dice. And then Abu had had the gall, the nerve, the spleen, the liver, the absolute sheer stinking simian audacity, to say-

To say-

To say that he hoped Iago would be happy someday.

Iago snatched a pebble up in his beak and threw it into the ocean.

That hairy little scumbag with his creepy little monkey hands! What was he playing at, getting all touchy-feely? And right when they were never going to see each other again?

A rough, breathy noise escaped from his beak. He scoffed to cover it up, and he grabbed another rock and threw it after the first one. Maybe they'd be friends down there. Together forever. Under the waves, suffocating.

He started mimicking Abu's monkey chatter. Mr. 'I can't leave Aladdin' had known every cuss that existed, and used 'em right in front of everybody without getting in trouble. Then if Iago translated a single word, he was the one who got in trouble.

"-and your mother flings somebody else's shit and misses," he finished. That one was very... culturally-specific, one might say. Abu had known a lot of 'your mother' jokes. He'd probably made an effort to collect more starting the minute he found out it was the one thing Iago genuinely hated hearing. That was the kind of thing Abu did... he really got to know his friends.

Jerk!

Iago stretched his neck down to pick up another rock and he froze in place.

He had very intentionally landed well away from those seagulls, and he hadn't moved any closer to them, so they were the ones moving closer to him. The proof was in the looks they were shooting his way. They probably thought they were subtle.

Iago glanced up at the sky. Pale- still pretty early. Cassim was probably still asleep. If he wasn't, he was still waking up and in one of those moods where a guy wanted some peace and quiet. Iago wouldn't head back yet.

Instead he fluttered down the beach a ways, putting some distance between himself and those gulls. Okay, now where was he? Right, right. Sulking about Abu. 'I hope you'll be happy someday'. What kind of thing was that to say to a guy, what did that even mean?

There was a soft thumping noise and Iago was face-to-face with a seagull. He stumbled backwards with a squawk.

"Hello, there!" Seagulls sounded like foghorns but at least their speech was easy to understand, and who was a parrot to judge, really? "So, uh, what you got there, is that food?"

"No," said Iago. "Unless you eat rocks."

"Do you eat rocks?"

Iago took a deep breath and let it out. "No. I don't. But if you all could go *kick* rocks, I'd appreciate it."

The seagull waddled closer, staring him down. "Are you from a pirate ship?"

Oh, yeah, sure, parrots all lived on pirate ships and ate crackers. Couldn't this guy see that Iago was stewing? A human on this beach wouldn't have gotten pestered with conversation. "No," he said, "I'm not a pirate, my name ain't Polly, and I don't have any food. Buzz off!"

The seagull rolled his eyes and spread out his wings. "Oh watch out, we got a charmer over here!"

There were two seagulls on each side of Iago now. He'd never seen a lone seagull. And they all guffawed at each other's jokes every single time, of course. Must be easy to sound funny when you had some confirmed groupies to laugh at everything you said.

"Yeah," said Iago. "I'm charming, polite, and honest. Almost as great of a guy as a seagull. Listen here, I ain't no tourist. I live here now, and you'd better start stayin' out of my way, got it?"

The head seagull started circling Iago. He was the head seagull for the current five minutes, anyway. Iago was less than interested in the political structures of seagulls but this guy would probably be out when he stopped making his cronies laugh. "Oohoo! Real tough guy, are ya?"

"You have no idea."

"Pretty Polly gonna bite us?"

"Maaaybe." A bite from a parrot was no joke, he shouldn't be so dismissive. Okay, okay, okay- what did seagulls want, usually? Unfortunately, his options were pretty limited. Food. They just wanted food. Iago turned his head. "What's that over there? Is that- food?"

It was the most obvious trick in the book but all the seagulls' heads turned. Iago angled his body that way as if he intended to fly. "It is! It is food! I'm gonna go get it!"

"Not if we get it first!"

"Ours!"

"Saw it first!"

The seagulls took off. "That's what I thought," Iago grumbled. Abu was the only other animal he'd known who'd ever been able to see through stupid stuff like that. Well- Rajah wasn't all that easy to trick into things, but that wasn't a brains thing. Rajah just wanted to chomp Iago more than he wanted anything Iago had to offer him.

Iago ran his claws through the cold, grainy sand, making little criss-cross patterns, until he realized that he looked like a little red hen scratching for seeds, and he started wandering down the beach. He should go back to the inn. The seagulls might get bored and come back.

Someone was walking towards him, a human. Was it Cassim? No, it was the inn lady. She didn't look like she was just taking a walk, she was obviously aiming right at him. Maybe Iago should leave.

Curiosity held him where he stood. If she made a wrong move he could fly away.

She stood over him now. Boy, she was tall. To him she was tall, anyway.

"Iago," she said. She said his name like a judge pronouncing a sentence and he had no doubt that she knew what he had been named for.

"Fatima. To what do I owe this lovely visit?"

Fatima folded her hands in front of her. "Cassim is used to a world where the physically strong have nothing to fear from the weak," she said. "He sees your small frame and thinks that you could pose no danger."

"But? I feel like there's a but." She might also be underestimating Cassim a bit, the guy had a brain. But that was none of his business.

"I know differently, Iago," she said. "Brute force is only one way to ruin another's life, and not the most effective way."

"Okay, I'm with you so far," Iago said. "And the reason why you're having this conversation with me is..."

She said nothing.

"So," he said, "you can be all mysterious with me if you want to, but, uh, I don't wanna fight with you. Cassim likes you. Maybe you oughtta be straight with me." He wasn't going to be able to get rid of her by pretending to see a breadcrust down the beach.

Fatima steeped her fingers. "I hear many rumors in my line of work." He'd bet she did. "I have heard that there was a man in Agrabah who controlled the Sultan, a man with a bird living on his shoulder like a second head. The man died. The bird lived."

"So far," said Iago, "so good."

"Then it is Prince Aladdin, who came from nowhere, who carries a bird on his shoulder."

It sounded like she had an inflated picture of how much the kid really listened to Iago, which was: not much. "Aladdin's doing pretty good for himself," Iago said.

"Why have you left Agrabah under the cover of darkness with the King of Thieves?"

The waves crashed, and behind Fatima, on the rocks, some seagulls watched with goggley eyes. They could watch all they wanted, they were wuss bags who wouldn't come over here while a human was talking.

So.

What did she want from him?

Obviously, Fatima liked Cassim, even if she tried to pass her off as some emotionless seer type. Maybe she had a thing for him, even. And Cassim, he was too trusting, he'd been betrayed before. So this lady wanted Iago not to ruin Cassim's life, and she must also want Iago not to cause trouble for her business or her clientele. All he needed to do was convince her that he didn't want to do any of that. Of course there was gonna be a little more to it than just saying 'oh no I don't want to do that I swear', since she didn't trust him (and she shouldn't- he didn't care whether she lived or died).

"So the kid has everything he ever wanted. The princess, the genie..." Iago paced back and forth on the sand. His shadow trailed faintly around with him in the soft morning light, like a flat, skewed reflection. "Along comes his dad, the dad's having a few problems. He's lost his crew, he's a wanted criminal, there's something to work with there."

"You are claiming altruism?"

"No, no." She would never believe that. "Altruism is a dirty word to a bird like me. I just, uh, I fix problems. I need something to do."

"You manipulate people for fun?" she asked.

"Yes! Exactly! I mean- maybe?" He tapped his primary flight feathers together, imitating what she was doing with the fingers. The breeze tugged at the other layers of feathers- brisk. He folded his wings behind his back where they'd stay nice and warm. "Uh, that's not always a bad thing. I mean, what would I get out of Cassim being worse off? He buys my food."

She watched him for a minute.

"Very well," she said. "I have made my decision. Let us speak with Cassim." She turned towards the inn.

"Hey, not so fast!"

She stopped. "Do you have more to say?"

"Uh-" He looked back at the inn. Sure looked far away from here. "That's a long walk, when you're my size, I mean, and it's- it's too windy for flyin' now, so..." So he'd never asked for permission to perch on somebody before and he didn't know how to go about it. Just, he didn't wanna get smacked if he tried to land on her shoulder without asking. She looked like a smacker.

"Ah," said Fatima. "Of course." She looked around at the sand. He began to think that mayhaps subtle hinting had not made his point. Now she was crouching down to pick up stuff.

"Or you could stay out here and collect shells all day," he said.

She was holding a stick. "You will perch on the stick and I will hold the stick."

Iago stared at her.

Well, he'd heard a thing or two over the years about his own moral character and that of his associates and his mother. He'd been kicked and strangled and smacked and tied up and dumped into lava and a handful of people had pinched his beak shut. He'd been thrown into vases, cages, dungeons, lamps, whatever was too small for a bird to spread his wings inside of, Iago had been inside it.

But no one had ever refused to let him touch them before.

He felt his tail feathers fan out. "What, do you think I have fleas? You think I never take a bath? Fine! I'll sit on your stupid stick!" He jumped up onto it. "But," he said, "I'm gonna remember this! Forever!"

For the first time she looked disconcerted.

"Just take me back to the inn!" he snapped.

The stick was all rough and barky and it was wet. It smelled moldy. The one good thing about it was that he could grab it as tight as he wanted and dig his claws in if he felt like it. And he

did feel like it.

As soon as they were inside and out of the wind he jumped off of the stick.

She'd brought him into the kitchen. He steered around the human sticking bread into the oven, the sacks of grains and coffee beans, whatever was boiling on the stove, and out into the tavern area.

Not too many people here this early. Cassim stuck out at his little table in the back even more than he did already just for being the most neatly groomed man in town.

Iago landed on the table, next to a cup with the smell of coffee radiating out of it. The good news was with no one around to see, he could talk as much as he wanted. The cook in the kitchen might hear, but if that guy worked for Fatima he was probably in the know on everything.

"Good morning," said Cassim.

"Can I have some a' that?"

"The last time you tried my coffee you nearly died."

"So coffee makes my heart race. I could have a little bit."

"I'll compromise," Cassim said, pulling the coffee closer towards him and away from Iago. "I'll order you some tea."

"That's not a compromise." He flew up to perch on Cassim's shoulder. Now, this was the natural habitat of a parrot- cozy, soft, warm, and he could see Cassim's face. It was a nice face too, had some character- high cheekbones, neatly trimmed beard, intelligent eyes.

"Were you touring the kitchen?" Cassim asked.

"No, I went out to get some fresh air. Came in the back way. By the way, your witchy friend wants to talk to you. Whatever she says? Not my fault." He turned to preen the feathers that had been discombobulated by sea winds and irritation.

"Ah. Thanks for the warning."

Here she was now, hobbling towards them in her old lady disguise. "Cassim, my boy!" she said. "Granny needs your help."

"Anything for you, Granny!" He laid it on a little thick, but- Iago thought he did detect a hint of genuine affection for the broad.

She pulled up a chair and sat down, folding her hands over the top of her cane. Quietly, in her normal voice, she said: "There's a ship in port called the Davy Jones. There's an enchanted box in the hold. I want it. Steal it."

"Easily enough," said Cassim, with a little spark coming to his eyes. He shook his head. "But, I've sworn off a life of crime-" Oh sure he had.

"Don't worry, it was stolen to begin with," she said. "Besides, you're not going to take it- he is." She pointed at Iago. Drat. "The ship would be easy for a small, flying creature to enter and exit undetected. And no one would bat an eye to see a parrot near the docks, since so many sailors keep them." Iago wouldn't say anything because he didn't like giving credit to people who were on his bad side, but she was making absolutely reasonable points here. Also, she was testing him.

Cassim raised an eyebrow at Fatima. "Now, Granny. I agreed only to provide my own services. I don't believe my companion agreed to do anything for you."

Too nice of a guy by far! No wonder Saluk had betrayed him in the end. To someone who was really dyed in the wool mean, a soft heart was just an easy place to stick a dagger. Iago almost sighed aloud.

"He's going to have to earn his keep just as much as you do, Cassim," said Fatima. "You told me to treat him as one of your men."

"Yes, but he eats as little as a bird!"

"Uh, yeah," said Iago, "can I get some breakfast here before I have to go flapping all over town to be your errand boy?"

Fatima looked like she was about to say no.

"I can't get your stuff if I faint on the way," Iago snapped.

"What do you consider a proper breakfast?" she asked.

"I want a banana."

"Very well."

"And, uh, and an almond."

"Fine."

"And a cup of coffee."

"I advise against the coffee," Cassim said.

"Fine, fine! Fine. Tea. I'll go get your thing after I eat, I'll have it for you by evening- Cassim here will make sure I go do it."

Fatima nodded and hobbled away.

"I will go with you," said Cassim.

"No you won't."

"No?"

"Cassim, she's testing me, she doesn't like me. She's not gonna be happy if you do this for me, she'll just find another test."

"Well," said Cassim, with an agitated wave of his hand, "she is being controlling, and she ought not to press all of my chosen associates through the wringer." Hmm, Iago got a distinct feeling that this had been an argument before.

"Not to be devil's advocate," said Iago, "that's not really me, but... I do live here now. And I expect to eat here. And she'd better let me." Also he'd provoked her, maybe. Tried not to, but did.

"At least let me provide moral support."

"I'm touched. Really." He picked at a loose thread on Cassim's cape a little bit before realizing that he was going to make it ratty. He didn't want to make the cape ratty, he just saw a loose thread and he wanted to pull on it, maybe it was a bird thing. "You'd let me go on my own if I was a man, wouldn't you?"

Cassim got all quiet.

"Uh, I mean," said Iago. Boy, Cassim really did need some help. He was a little too much like Al after all, wasn't he? "I'm just saying whatever will make you let me go. I don't mean any of it, it's how I operate."

"But it is a fair question. I would let you go alone if you were a man." Cassim sighed. "It is easier to harm a bird than a man."

"Sort of. If they catch me, yeah. It's harder to catch me, I have these wing things." He cleared his throat. "Look, boss. I'm a coward. Ask anyone. I'm telling you, this would be easy. I wouldn't volunteer to do anything that was actually risky."

"A coward, are you?"

"It's like my defining trait. Right behind-" Well. Cassim already knew he was greedy and loud, and would find out that he was selfish, mean and amoral soon enough. "Yes, I'm a coward. So will you let me go?"

"I..." Cassim ran his fingers through his head. "I suppose I must. I can't hover over you every time there is a task that's better suited for you than myself, can I?"

"No, you can't." Of course, if he'd been pressing Iago to go do the job, Iago would have come up with three dozen reasons why he couldn't do it, didn't want to do it, shouldn't have to do it, and Cassim couldn't make him. He was a contrary little twerp. That was another thing about him that Cassim would have to discover.

"So," she'd said as he was leaving- "not going to bring Cassim?"

"Why," he'd said, "and put him in danger? Never!"

"Of course," she'd said, with a poison smile.

Getting into the hold of the ship hadn't been hard, but now he'd searched the whole place and there was no sign of any enchanted box. He'd found a few plain sandalwood jewelry boxes, that was it- now he was sifting through them, in case he'd overlooked the charmed one... it was kind of stuffy in here and the ship bobbed a little with the swell of the tides. Iago had remembered that he got a little seasick sometimes. He'd just have to suck it up, this was a job, here, and he was on his own, so no kicking back and whining for someone else to take over. The good part of that was that no one was going to distract him-

"Awk!"

Oh hell no.

Iago pretended desperately not to have heard the other parrot, and she simply repeated her contact call. She wasn't a human. She would have no qualms about yelling for the rest of eternity or until he answered. Kinda like the Genie, come to think of it.

"I'm a little busy over here!" he called.

Of course she took that as an invitation to land right in front of him. A blue and gold macaw- she stood head and shoulders over Iago, who looked like a scarlet or a green-winged at first glance but wasn't one.

Fatima wasn't a mastermind. She couldn't have planned this, didn't even know that it would irk him, probably- but he was going to blame her anyway.

"What are you playing with?" The parrot bobbed her head up and down. "Is it fun?"

"I ain't playing, I'm working," he said, backing up a little.

"Work?" She cocked her head to look at him with one eye, her pupil rapidly expanding and contracting. She sure was hyper. Iago wondered if he came off this way to humans. "What's work, are you looking for food? Hey, humans work. Birds don't work."

"I do." He picked up one of the plain boxes at random. "I'm working my tail off, here- do you mind giving me some space?" As an afterthought he added: "Please." As if 'please' would work on a parrot. Many before him had wished it would and been disappointed.

"Why do you work and say please? Are you a human?" She seemed young, which was no excuse.

"Do I look like a human?" Iago grunted.

"No, but you're weird."

"I'm also busy! Do you know what that word means? BUSY!"

He flew off a little ways, still holding the useless box, which definitely was not enchanted. A human wouldn't have had to deal with this. A human wouldn't have been able to fly up here to perch on the shipping crates, either, though.

The macaw was unfortunately also able to perch up here. He'd been kinda hoping her wings were clipped, as horrible a thing as that was to wish on a bird. "What kind of parrot are you?" she asked. "You're little and fat. Why is your beak so big?"

"Yours is pretty big too."

"Yours is pretty big too."

"Oh, geez," Iago said, covering his face with his wing. "Not this crap."

"Oh, geez. Not this crap."

He rounded on her, and found that he was trembling- "Okay," he said, switching from Parrot to fluent human speech- "You wanna mimic me? You think it's cute? Go ahead, sister, mimic this, how about this?" He put on his most snobby-sounding voice. "Put money in thy purse; follow thou the wars; defeat thy favour with an usurped beard; I say, put money in thy purse. And what's he then that says I play the villain? When this advice is free I give and honest, probal to thinking and indeed the course-" He broke off.

The macaw was staring him down. "That's weird," she said. "You're soooo weird!"

"I know."

"Are you going to play with that?"

"No."

"I want to play too!" She fluttered off to the other boxes. She picked one up in her claws and started chewing on it. She was probably going to destroy all of them. People who thought parrots made cute pets usually didn't know that macaws like her made their nests in trees and could do some serious damage with those beaks.

Iago turned away. What a headache. He looked down at the box he held. It wasn't enchanted in the least. Iago knew what an enchanted box looked like, and this wasn't it.

But he did know what one looked like.

He could fake it! He'd spent hours looking at runes and stuff when he'd been left alone all day with Jafar's scrolls and there was nothing else to do. He could fake a magical inscription! So he'd just take this box and get out of here.

"Bye-bye," the macaw yelled as he flew off.

"Farewell," he said snootily.

The box had a plain wooden surface. Iago tilted it and examined it in the bright noon sunlight. It soaked into his feathers enough to balance out the cool breeze, but not enough to be oppressively hot.

He looked up. From the roof of the inn he could see the white stone buildings of the town, shining in the sun, and he could distantly hear the babble of people in the marketplace. And there was the glimmer of the sea to his left, of course. It would be a nice place to set up operations if he didn't screw this job up.

Right- he hadn't needed to think about the mechanics of magic too often with the Genie around to do things for him, but it was all still there in his head. Iago had a good memory for spells. Never forgot a voice, never forgot a place, never forgot a spell. There was a whole subset of magic for bewitching things by carving symbols into them. Fatima would see the right symbols on the box, she'd have to admit that this was an enchanted box, and screw her when it didn't actually work. She should steal her own crud.

She hadn't said what spell was supposed to be on the thing. A simple anti-theft one should work. How to carve it, though? He didn't think much of the odds of him stealing Cassim's knife without him noticing and he thought less of the odds of being able to use it with the necessary precision. That knife was longer than he was tall.

He thought of that macaw chewing the boxes he'd left behind, and he sighed. Okay. He would use his beak, but he would not enjoy it.

Maybe it was a little bit fun to chew something up and not get in trouble for it. Other birds got to do it, Iago just got yelled at because he had the capacity to know better, and was that fair?

Well, they looked a little rough but those were the right symbols, all right; time to turn it in and get this over with. He picked up the box and flew in through the window. It was nice and cool inside- the sun had gotten a little bit oppressive after the breeze had died down, after all.

This box felt so much heavier than it had before he'd bitten a few chunks out of it, somehow. He'd never wanted a nap so bad in his life. He blamed the blue and gold macaw from the ship, stupidity made him tired. And he'd missed lunch, too.

Fatima and Cassim's muffled voices came from her workshop at the end of the hall. He flew a bit closer and landed just outside. He could see Cassim's shoulder and his hand on a cup of something. They hadn't noticed Iago, so naturally he hung back to eavesdrop a little.

"It's hard to start from nothing," Cassim was saying.

"You do not have 'nothing'. You have your son, your contacts..." With some frustration she said "I suppose, if one is to be sentimental, one could say that you have me..."

Iago rolled his eyes.

"And a few hours ago," said Cassim, "I had a parrot."

"Ah. Yes."

"If he is not back in the next hour I will have to insist on searching."

"He's probably failed and is sulking somewhere," she dismissed.

Now seemed like a good time to swoop in.

"Think again!" Iago called. He flew over and dropped the box on the table a few inches from Fatima, landing beside it. The look on her face was priceless. "One enchanted box," he said, "as ordered. And you didn't think I could do it."

"Well!" said Cassim. "I see I needn't have worried."

"What..." Fatima picked up the box. "What is this?"

"Your thing that you wanted, you're welcome," said Iago. "You can tip the bird, you know. I'm flexible, I take money, seeds, fruit... praise works but you have to mean it." He studied his flight feathers. They were gorgeous, if he said so himself. These weren't just blue feathers, dare he say, they were sapphire. Azure, maybe, even.

"There wasn't any enchanted box," she said, absent-mindedly, "I sent you off on a fool's errand to see how you'd react."

"What?!" So that explained it! "You jerk!"

Cassim frowned. "That was unfair."

"That was-" Iago looked up at him. "Yeah, it was unfair. Thank you!"

"And if you were tricking him," said Cassim, "what did he fetch?"

If Iago wasn't supposed to get anything at all, then would Fatima be extra impressed, or would she catch on that he was a liar immediately? Right now she looked uncomfortable more than anything. "I don't know what this is." She turned the box in her hands, scowling at it. "It's an Agrabanian spell, but it's... crude. It looks like a first-year apprentice whittled it with a pocketknife."

"They can't all be winners," Iago grumbled. He flutter-jumped up to Cassim's shoulder.

"What a strange energy," she said. "This is..."

"What? What's wrong with it?" Iago asked. He hadn't accidentally picked up a cursed box thinking it was normal, had he?

"A mysterious treasure, is it?" said Cassim.

"Oh, it's trash," she dismissed. "In itself." Gee, thanks. Maybe it was something he knew was useless, but he'd gone through a lot of trouble to get it. "But it... I don't think a human did this. It's not elemental magic, either. Not... quite."

"That's ominous," said Iago. "Well, anyway, I'm mad at you and I missed lunch. So-"

Fatima opened the box and it snapped itself closed. Iago fell silent.

"It doesn't have very good hinges," Cassim said.

"That's the spell," said Fatima. "The box shuts itself on anyone but the caster."

Cassim raised an eyebrow. "Why not simply make it unopenable?"

"Because it's funny when it snaps on someone's fingers," said Iago. "But maybe this one is just the hinges. Try it again."

Fatima opened the box and it closed itself.

"No, no, no way!" Iago flew down to the surface of the table. "Let me take a look at this thing."

Fatima set the box down. She was looking at him funny. Well, let her look. He flipped open the lid of the box and it stayed that way.

"Oh," he said. "It didn't work. No, no, wait, I should be able to open it!" He closed the box. "Cassim, try to open it."

Cassim opened the lid of the box and it slammed shut, nearly trapping his fingers. Iago opened the box. "It obeys me!" he giggled.

"It seems not to recognize a parrot as a thief," said Cassim.

"It recognizes the parrot as the caster," said Fatima.

"What?" Cassim asked.

Iago opened and closed the box and opened it again.

"You didn't find any enchanted box," said Fatima, folding her arms over her chest, "so you took a normal one and bespelled it. How cleverly disingenuous."

"I didn't think it would really work!"

"Why not?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. He'd done all the right things to it. There had been no reason for it not to work, except... well... he was a bird. But look at this- one bona fide enchanted item! "It works! I did it! Look out, world! One of you try to open it! Go on, go on!"

Cassim opened it and it snapped shut on him.

"It's not yours!" Iago told him. "Oh, oh, I know a lot of other spells. I can do them too! After dinner, I mean. Cassim!" He flew up to Cassim's shoulder. "I bet I can curse people. Who should I curse? Point me at 'em!"

"Is this," said Cassim, looking across the table at his friend, "a good thing?"

"What do you think?" Fatima asked. She stood up. "We should feed him, spellcasting must take a toll on someone his size."

Iago felt terrible, come to think of it. It was only three in the afternoon but it had been one long day. But who cared? "Cassim, do you think I could make a magic carpet?" He turned and pressed his beak against Cassim's cheek- then he realized what he was doing, and tried to pretend he'd nuzzled Cassim by accident.

Fatima stared him down. She sighed. "The bird stays."

"The bird stays!" Iago repeated. She left the room as he realized- "Wait, that was in question? What the hell!"

Cassim shook his head, smirking slightly. "She's intrigued by you, but she doesn't care to admit it. I am as well, for that matter. What else are you hiding?"

"Nothin'," said Iago.

"Of course you're not."

"No, really."

"Mmhmm," said Cassim, walking out of the room.

BEFORE: The Meet Cute

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"This is not an orange. It is a tangerine."

The fruit vendor leaned forward, brows furrowed and head tilted downwards, he looked like a bull about to charge. He'd never liked Jafar. "I tell you, sir, those are oranges- I have the word on the honor of the man who sold it to me!"

"Then he had no honor." Jafar tossed the object aside. What did he care? "Enough of this, just give me an apple." He pulled the requisite coins from his sleeve and proffered them.

Crunching the apple, he made his way through the marketplace, winding his way home. His coin would have gone much further on other foodstuffs, but he was feeling dangerously as if he had nothing to live for lately.

He navigated unconsciously, letting his feet find a path he'd trod so many times before. The stench of the animal vendor brought him to a pause.

He took another bite of the apple. Odors no longer affected his appetite, there were too many of them in this city. From camel dung, to scents that were being sold because they were novel and not because they were in any way appealing, to cats that had died of heatstroke and not been discovered until some time later.

Maruf's stand housed a few boxes of chickens, which clicked and clucked with an air of recalling an ancient memory in the throes of senility. A few sheep, as well, standing around chewing on things or lying on their knees. A bird cage hung from a hook at the side of the booth, usually with a canary, sometimes with a pigeon- supposedly one trained to carry messages. If Maruf had caught two pigeons, there were sometimes two cages. Every so often, if he were very bored and in need of expanding his knowledge of the inner workings of living things, Jafar bought one to dissect.

Today, there was something red in the cage. It cried out in a gravelly squawk. "Polly want a cracker!"

"Hush, Polly!" Maruf sounded a touch frayed.

There were so few amusements in this city that Jafar lowered himself to go and look at a bird.

The bird in question was about the size of a pigeon. Its feathers were a deep blood red, with contrasting blue on the tips of the wings- and rather disheveled. There was a big bald spot on its chest.

Its eyes were bright yellow, like those of a cat or a crocodile, and it fixed Jafar with its gaze as if it would like to destroy him.

"A-ah!" said Maruf. "I see you have noticed my parrot!" The desperation in his voice was more, Jafar thought, than the usual desperation for coin.

"A parrot, is it?" The beak, large and rounded and with an awkward zig-zag curve, could certainly give a nasty bite but it had been designed by nature to crush seeds and open nuts-not rend flesh. But the gaze above the beak belonged to an animal that wanted to rend some flesh.

Jafar tried an experiment. He touched his fingertips lightly to the bars of the cage, which were too closely together to admit the beak through them.

"That is- not advisable," said Maruf. "The parrot is- easy to alarm."

"It bites," Jafar translated.

"No, no, it, ah..." Maruf had bandages on his fingers, Jafar noted.

"Awk," said the bird, fanning its tail feathers. "Back off. Awk."

"But- but he can talk!" the vendor babbled. "A fine, intelligent bird for a thinking man!"

Jafar was thinking that he wanted to keep his fingers. He tapped the cage.

"AwwwWWK!" The parrot hunkered down on its perch. "Back off, buddy. Awk!"

Jafar withdrew his hand.

"Speak, Polly," said Maruf. "Go on."

"Speak, Polly, go on. Awk."

Magic items did appear, now and then, in the marketplace. Mostly they were useless dross, or had spells too unstable to be safely used. A live animal with the touch of enchantment on it had never yet appeared.

Jafar had not blinked since catching the parrot's gaze and neither had the bird. His eyes were getting quite dry.

The cage was quite small, Jafar could hang it in the window of his apartment and barely notice the loss of space. The bird inside was even smaller. But Jafar did not need a pet!

"He is tame," said Maruf. "As tame as a lamb. He will sit on a hand or a shoulder."

Jafar had no desire to walk around with a tiny fluffy thing on his shoulder and also no desire to let the parrot within biting range of his face. That bird would stay in its cage- and the cage was going to stay in the bazaar because Jafar didn't need a pet!

"What does it eat?" Jafar asked. "I am afraid I have no crackers."

"Anything you eat, my friend!"

Holding the bird's gaze, Jafar took a bite of the apple that he had nearly forgotten was in his hand. The bird now looking yearning as well as angry.

"Ah, he's fond of fruit," said Maruf.

Apples were expensive.

Jafar finally blinked. Once he had, the bird did too- and then turned away to rub its eyes.

Jafar's teeth clenched. "...Fine!" he spat. If the bird ceased to amuse him, became too expensive to maintain or up and died, Jafar could dissect it to expand his knowledge of sorcery. "How much is this lousy pest?"

"Oh generous friend! The price of the lousy pest is two dinarii."

"Two dinarii for a mangy bird?"

"He is an imported bird," said Maruf. "From the west."

Jafar didn't care about the west. "It looks wretched," he said. "Am I to invest in an animal that may not survive?"

"He is not ill, he is only-"

"One dinar."

Maruf looked at the bird, looked at his own bandaged fingers, and sighed. "Very well."

The bird yelled. It was a very cheated, very hurt, very human yell.

Jafar passed over the coin and took the cage off of its hook- being very careful of where he placed his fingers. "And now, my irate friend," he said, although one ought not to dignify an animal by speaking to it, "I shall take you to see my humble abode."

The parrot hissed like a cat, and for the first time in quite a while- Jafar laughed.

The little thing was just so incensed! So willing to bite the hand that fed it, so convinced of its own right to self-righteous indignation. This was not a creature that cared a fig for such things as palaces- or Sultans.

Eyes followed him on the way back to his apartment. The denizens of Agrabah had finally grown accustomed to Jafar's tall, sweeping figure, but now they were curious to know what was in the cage. Jafar moved quickly to escape the attention.

Once in the apartment, he hung the cage in the window and crouched down to make eye contact with its inmate. "So you can talk, can you?"

"Awk. You can talk, can you?"

"I'm a learned man. Most parrots can learn a small set of words. They are not able to effortlessly repeat anything that is said to them."

The parrot opened its beak, and then a look of horror slowly stole over its face. It closed its beak and huddled on its perch.

"What are you really, bird?" Jafar asked. "A shapeshifting Ifrit? An elemental? A sorcerer who has attempted a foolish experiment?"

The bird stared back at him, its soft chest heaving up and down. A glazed look came over its eyes. Jafar thought it had retreated to an internal space and he was about to speak again to draw it back out, when the glaze disappeared, and the spark that he had seen in the marketplace came back- and roared into a blaze.

Jafar had once accidentally set off a magical explosion that had left his ears ringing for three days afterwards. It had almost been as loud as the explosion that came out of this bird.

"No, I'm not a shapeshifter! What the hell is wrong with you people? What, what is it, you think because you're tall and creepy you're better than me? What gives you the right? Hey, jerk! What gives you the right to haggle me down to one lousy coin, huh? HUH?"

Jafar took a step backwards. His hands rose before his chest as if one could physically ward against noise.

"I'm talking to you, chump! One coin? You think I'm some second-rate bargain bin bird?" The bird jumped up, grabbing the bars of its cage with its claws and pressing its body forward. It shrieked- not the condescending 'Awk' of before but a cry that was piercing and feral. "You get shoved in a cage you can't even spread your wings in, stuffed in a cargo hold, shipped across the ocean, fed garbage, put up on a hook in the sun to be gawked at by any idiot that walks past and we'll see how good YOU look after that!"

The parrot heaved for air.

"I," said Jafar, "meant no disrespect."

"You meant no disrespect?"

"No, I-"

"One coin ain't disrespectful? Tellin' a guy I'm only worth half what he wanted for me ain't disrespectful? Implyin' I ain't a real parrot because I'm too smart to be a parrot ain't disrespectful?"

Stunned and slightly off balance from the force of the parrot's outburst, Jafar said the first unfiltered thing in his mind. "You mean 'isn't'. 'Ain't' is not a word."

The parrot looked dumbfounded. "Well, excuuuuuse ME, jackass!"

"If you want respect," said Jafar, "you are going to have to show a command of the English language that demonstrates to all who hear it that your capacity for speech is more than a party trick, instead of squalling insults at the slightest provocation."

The parrot's beak hung open.

It probably did not understand words like 'provocation'. Many humans did not. Jafar would have to think of a simpler wording...

"You're one of those guys who thinks it sounds smarter to use five three-syllable words just to not say 'jackass', huh?" the parrot said. "Oy. I can't reason with this." It touched its wingtip to its head in a very recognizable gesture of frustration.

Yet its tone was losing energy and its eyes said it was exhausting its supply of rage.

"You are truly only a parrot?"

"As far as I know."

Jafar turned away and walked over to his shelf of scrolls. Perhaps he had something that would explain this odd creature somewhere in his collection (mostly pilfered from the shop).

"You're just done with me, huh?" the parrot said. "You haggle me down, you drag me here, and now you ignore me?"

Its voice was gravelly, nasal, quite loud, and had a certain edge to it. The edge was... disdain. An audible sneer.

Jafar tried to imagine the state of mind and heart that would allow one to be less than a foot tall and confined to a cage, at someone's utter mercy, and still sneer at them. He could only imagine that such a one must feel utterly and completely superior. Based on absolutely nothing but one's own ego.

"I will speak to you again when I have something to say," said Jafar.

He thumbed through the scrolls. Peaches, pears, plague... nothing about parrots. Maybe there was something under 'B' for bird.

He heard a creaking noise. He turned his head. The parrot was swaying back and forth in its cage.

Let it amuse itself in a relatively quiet fashion. The scrolls. B for bartering, botulinium, Byzantium... perhaps there was something under 'A' for avian.

Another creak- a crash. Raucous laughter.

The birdcage had been knocked from its perch and lay on the floor with the door broken open, and the feathery miscreant was now wandering about on the floor like a pigeon looking

for discarded trash.

It flipped a wing at Jafar in an ironic approximation of a salute. "See ya, sucker!" Laughing, it flapped into the air- and tumbled into a somersault, smacking into the wall and falling to the floor.

Jafar looked down at it. It looked like a feather duster. He was just wondering if the bird had broken its neck when its head shot up. "Oh no. No, no!" it cried. "No, it can't be. Oh, please!" It held out one wing and stared at its feathers. Jafar noted that only one primary at the end of the wing was intact- the other flight feathers were squared off at the ends and much shorter. The bird's wings had been clipped. "I can't fly?" it said. "I can't fly! Look! Look what that bastard did to me!" It covered its head with what was left of its wings, sucking in deep, panicked breaths and quivering. "No, oh no, no... look at me. Look at this mess!"

Certainly, it had known that its feathers were cut?

'A cage you can't even spread your wings in', it had said. Ah... it had known that it had been clipped, most likely, but had not had the opportunity to see what that meant.

Jafar stood over his cantankerous acquisition. He could not resist saying: "Explain why I ought to have paid more than one coin for a bird that can't fly... jackass."

The bird looked up at him. "Can't you see I am wallowing?" it snapped.

"My heart weeps for you," Jafar droned. "You chose to make a fool of yourself trying to escape. For one thing, you could have knocked the cage out of the window and dashed your brains out on the street."

"I aimed away from the window, thank you, I am not stupid."

"Aren't you? Where were you going to go if you got away from here?"

"Somewhere else!"

"Brilliant idea. Truly, you are a master of strategy."

"And if someone locked you up and dragged you home for their own amusement," the bird said, "I guess you'd just sit there."

"If you came here straight from the hold of a cargo ship from parts unknown, as you claim," Jafar said, "you know nothing of this country. You don't know how to feed yourself, and you are likely to be eaten by a jackal."

"What's a jackal?"

"Exactly."

The bird's entire body drooped. It looked defeated. How... disappointing.

Jafar rolled his eyes. "Oh, buck up, you ingrate. I'll keep you and feed you and if you're still fool enough to want to leave when your feathers have grown back in you can leave."

He turned back to his scrolls, letting the parrot shiver in the corner.

Chapter End Notes

Iago has some obvious strong feelings on the practice of wing clipping in this story- I know that the practice can be controversial among people who own and care about real birds in real life and I just wanted to say that I, myself, do not own a bird or have a personal relationship with one, and don't have a strong stance on the matter. If you own a bird and you feel your bird is safer with clipped wings, good on you for keeping your bird safe. I definitely am not implying any criticism.

Unlike a real bird in real life, Iago has human-level intelligence and the full capacity to understand language, and he can communicate with people about why he shouldn't fly into the stove, so for him the situation is somewhat different and there's no cause to take away his ability to fly without his say-so.

As someone told me lately "Everyone deserves the chance to fly!"

The bad news was that when Iago had hinted that Cassim should be let off the hook for his own errands now, Fatima had just laughed in his face. The good news was that she'd dug out this cushy pillow when Cassim had mentioned the bird not having a perch or a bed.

He listened to the chatter from the tavern coming up through the floor and couldn't pick out Cassim's voice. Too muffled, too many other noises. He was still down there, though. He'd still been having fun regaling "Granny" with his exploits when Iago had realized he was about to pass out on Cassim's shoulder, and had excused himself to go pass out somewhere more private where he wasn't going to fall on the floor and get stepped on. Boy, he was wiped...

He was on the verge of comfy unconsciousness when an odor seeped into the room. Pepper and mint, but not peppermint. And a hint of burning sage... and wet ashes.

It couldn't be.

Iago opened one eye. Half the room was filled with gauzy blue vapor, and it was grinning at him. "So you *are* awake!"

"What," Iago croaked.

"You look like you still have all your limbs and feathers, that's good. Al's been worried about you, pal, we really expected you back by now." The genie had now settled into a form that was almost solid, or gave the the illusion that it was.

Iago sat up. Genie... here. Talking to him. "Everyone's stuck in some death trap and I gotta go bail them out, that's it, isn't it?" he moaned. "I knew it. I knew you people would fall apart without me! Is the monkey alive?"

"Slow down, little fella! Everyone's fine! And experiencing twenty percent less ear pain since you left, at that." The Genie looked at his wrist. Some kind of band had appeared on it. Ugh, it was dizzying when he shifted around like that. Sure, cosmic being with no set form, sure. But could he stay in one shape for the length of a conversation, at least? "At least, they were fine five minutes ago." He gave an impression of biting his lip. "Hmm, I think I had better make this quick."

"Yes, quick! Yes! Why are you here in the first place if no one's dying and you don't need me?" The Genie had a funny idea of what was and what wasn't a problem. Iago wasn't gonna calm down just yet.

"When you didn't come back after a day to make a raid on the Sultan's treasure room we kinda got to worrying that you might be the one in a death trap, birdy boy."

Iago gestured at the cozy room and the nice cushion he was sitting on. "Does this look like a death trap to you?"

The Genie glanced over the walls and the ceiling. He produced some kind of metal rod thing out of the vapor and held it up to the windowsill. "Well, I'm not sure it's completely up to code..." He floated around the room. "But it's not a prison cell, which is always a plus."

"You thought I'd been arrested already? Some vote of confidence, thanks."

"It's been a couple of weeks," said the Genie. "Have you ever gone that long without being arrested before?"

"Yes," Iago said sullenly. "Lotsa times." So they thought he couldn't make it on his own. Nice. Classy.

"Say, what's this little gizmo?" The Genie was looking at the anti-thief box, which was lying next to Iago.

"That's, uh, mine," said Iago. He thought maybe he should name the thing. 'Chomper', maybe? Was naming a wooden box a weird thing to do? "It's bespelled." Also, he had stolen it. The base of it anyway. He would not tell the Genie that part.

The Genie leaned in closer. "Hey, it is bespelled! Mind if I take a look?"

"Well, yes, I mind. But take a look anyway."

The Genie picked up the box and studied it- its rough corners looked strange against his round, boneless hands. "That's a cute little charm."

"Cute? That spell ain't cute, it's mean and nasty!"

The Genie opened the lid and it snapped down. "Well, it's a very impolite spell, anyway," said the Genie. He held the box out in front of him and looked from it to Iago. "Hm. It has your eyes. Are you a good witch or a bad witch?"

"Ha! You tell me!" Would the Genie tell the others? Would he tell everybody? Maybe he'd tell the monkey.

"The bird's gone for two weeks and now he's a sorcerer." The Genie set the box back down and Iago could breathe again. "There's a pithy quote in there about how time flies..."

"Time only flies when you're having fun," said Iago. "But, wait- it doesn't surprise you that I did that?"

"Should it?" The Genie looked so calm, like he didn't know why this was even a question.

"I guess... not?" Iago said. "But anyway, I'm fine. I haven't even gotten Cassim into trouble, he's livin' it up downstairs, go see for yourself- or don't." The Genie could wreak a lot of havoc in a tavern. "You don't need to go down there, I'm sure you're busy."

The Genie took another look around the room. "You two aren't in the dungeon, nothing's on fire... I guess there's no reason for me to stay."

"Not unless you want to watch me take a nap." Wait, he shouldn't have said that. The Genie was weird enough to take him up on it!

"Naaah," said the Genie, "not when I could watch all the paint dry in the universe if I wanted to." He leaned forward, bracing his elbow on nothing and propping his cheek on his hand. "So you're not pining to come back home with me?"

"Did I stutter when I said I was moving out for good? Did I not speak up enough? Maybe I was too quiet. Sometimes people tell me I'm too quiet."

"I'm happy to see you too, pal."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm still waitin' for that bad news." He held up a wing. "Don't give me any bad news. Forget to give me the bad news and leave before you remember, won't you?"

"There's no bad news. Al and Jazz are having a great time on their honeymoon, and everyone's in one piece. Good luck with your illustrious life of crime." Genie swung a leg over the windowsill. He had legs now, and he was small enough to fit in the windowsill instead of taking up half the room. Watching him do this stuff was like looking through a kaleidoscope on crack. "I'll tell the kids there's nothing to worry about."

"Good, yes. You do that."

"And now," said the Genie, "to infinity-"

"Wait, wait!"

"Hmmm?"

Iago shook out his feathers. *Shut up*, he told himself. *Shut uuup*. But he didn't shut up. "Look, is the monkey okay?"

"What monkey?"

"The monkey, Aladdin's monkey! Abu! Is he holding up okay without me? I was the only one on his level, ya know. I understood the little guy. And without me he won't know what's worth stealing and what's not, so..."

"Oh, that monkey! It's- it's not like you like him, or anything!"

"No, I don't like him at all," said Iago breathlessly, "that's right, I don't, how's he doin' though?"

The Genie winked at him. Like a star twinkling. "Don't worry, he's fine. I don't think he even remembers your name."

"Doesn't remember my name?! Oh, that little..." Iago took a deep breath. "Fine. If you see that flea-bitten furball you tell 'im..."

"Yees?"

"You tell 'im from me..."

The Genie leaned forward. "Yeeeeeees?"

"I hope he's happy," Iago said in an acid tone. He clacked his beak. "Now get out." His voice was husky and quivering, and it disgusted him.

"Awww," said the Genie, beaming.

"No aww, get out of here! Isn't it- what's that you always say, ten minutes to Wapner?" Whatever that meant.

"It is ten minutes to Wapner! Gee, I had better get going if you have no other last-minute confessions."

"Not a one."

"Gotcha. Good-bye, Oggs. Have a nice life. I mean that!"

He dispersed. The room was empty, now- empty and mundane, and the feeling of the veil of reality trembling and allowing glimpses of something too big and powerful to imagine was gone.

Iago let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding, and flopped down on the pillow on his chest. He closed his eyes. Watching the Genie's form morph and change always gave him a headache. It wasn't just hard on the eyes, it was hard on the mind. No one around Iago ever seemed to grasp the implications of what they were looking at. Or maybe they just didn't dare bring it up.

There was a knock on the door. "Whoozit?" Iago barked, half expecting it to be the Genie, because jumping out the window and then showing up at the door a second later was exactly the kind of thing he would do.

"It's only me."

"Cassim?" Iago blinked. "This is your room, why are you knocking?"

"It seemed polite." Cassim entered the room, softly shutting the door behind him. "Were you talking with someone? I thought I heard another voice."

"Oh, you heard that?" He had almost convinced himself already that it hadn't happened. Being with the Genie always felt like a fever dream, maybe this time it had been. But if Cassim had heard him... "Uh, I was practicing voices." He didn't want to explain the Genie. He couldn't explain the Genie.

But he hoped Cassim wouldn't ask him to show off the voice. The Genie's voice was one that could never be imitated or duplicated. When you first heard it, it sounded normal. Just a guy. A guy with a warm, exciteable voice, smooth and likeable. Easy to listen to. But it also sounded like someone you used to know and hadn't seen in years, someone you'd loved once but couldn't remember the name of. And it also sounded like someone you hadn't met yet,

someone you'd be good friends with for a long time. And it sounded a little like thunder... a little like the sound that ultraviolet light would make if it made a sound... and a little like crackling embers.

Uh, Iago was a pretty good mimic but he wasn't that good. He remembered taking a shot at it now and then when only Abu was around to hear, and it sounded so far off that Abu would start laughing.

"Practicing?" Cassim asked.

"Oh, you haven't heard me do it, have ya?" He brought out Al's voice. It was one he knew pretty well, and Cassim would sure know it. "Parrots are pretty talented birds."

Cassim froze. Maybe Al was not a good choice?

"Uh," Iago said, as himself, "or I could be the landlady." Her voice was a little husky but not hoarse. "Cassim, clean your room and take out the garbage," he made her say.

Cassim looked him over. "That... is uncanny." He stroked his beard. "You have only known Fatima a day and a half, and I would not be able to tell the difference. How long does it take you to learn a voice?"

"Depends on the voice." People who sounded at all similar to Iago were the hardest ones, actually. Too easy to slip back into himself. "I can do sounds, too. Comes in handy."

"Yes... I can see that it might." From the serious look on Cassim's face, it sorta seemed like he might already be thinking of some specific case in which it might be handy.

He wasn't forthcoming, so Iago changed the subject. "Did you have a good time at the party?"

"Yes, we talked and made merry. I pretended to drink."

"You don't drink?"

"Not in a public setting, it clouds the mind." He sat down on his mat. "My men would have enjoyed the celebration."

He looked and sounded just a little bit down. Knowing Cassim was a master of understatement, that probably meant he was severely down.

Iago's honest opinions on these things usually made people mad. And, while most of the time he considered that it was not his fault if some human was too sensitive to put up with what he had to say, he didn't want to make Cassim mad.

"You have my sympathy," he said stiffly.

"Do I, you turkey?"

"Yes," Iago said, and somehow, he didn't think this was working out too much better than honesty. If he couldn't win either way, he might as well be blunt. That was how it usually

worked. Vice and virtue paid out equally well and vice was more fun. "Look, it stinks to be down a partner, but those guys were traitors. Sometimes you just gotta make a clean break."

"I have no choice, in this case."

"Good! No way you can go back."

Cassim looked away. His expression was hard to read, even though humans had those soft, squishy faces that usually showed up all their feelings like fingerprints in dough. "They were not traitors. Saluk's lies-"

"Cassim, it don't matter. People lie in our kind of work. They shouldn't have bought it without seeing you turn on them with their own eyes."

Cassim got up from the floor and walked across the room to stand by the window.

Iago should drop this, maybe. But now it was bugging him. He knew he was right, was the thing. "I know you don't like hearing it," he said, "but this stuff happens. When it's over, it's over."

"It will take some time."

"Of course, of course," said Iago. "No one's telling you to dance on their graves or anything, just ease up on yourself, won't you?"

Cassim leaned on the windowsill. It was nearly dark now. Iago yawned and quickly hid the yawn behind his wing. Cassim was a more reasonable guy than most, but no one liked it if they thought you were bored by their problems. (Which, in other circumstances, could be very funny if you didn't like the person with problems.)

"You think I give too many second chances, I suspect," said Cassim.

"Boss, you give too many first chances. But, uh, what do I know anyway?"

"Fatima agrees with you."

"Well, maybe I'm wrong, then."

"Do you recall the tale she told yesterday, about the King of Thieves?"

"Uh, yeah." Iago fidgeted a little to try to wake himself up. This cushion was comfortable and Cassim's voice, smooth, calm and deep, was a voice you could fall asleep to. In a good way. "You chopped up a guy. I mean, it's not a real story."

The sunset was behind Cassim, making the shadows so deep on his face that he had no visible expression. "In the story, there are two brothers: virtuous Ali Baba and greedy Cassim. In reality, there was only greedy Cassim, and he trapped himself in the thief's hideout on purpose. A risky gamble."

"But a high payoff, huh?"

"I told you the previous King of Thieves was not a nice man. In reality, I am not so sure. I didn't wait to find out for myself before I challenged him to a duel."

"Hostile takeover, eh?"

"I knew only his reputation, and I have seen since how a reputation can play false. I was nineteen then," said Cassim. "A brat, really. How did Aladdin turn out so virtuous?"

Aladdin had lucked out with a genie and never had to make the kinda choices Cassim had, but implied criticism of his son was the one thing Cassim would never tolerate. That was obvious. Even to a loudmouth parrot. "So you think you're a terrible person because one time you didn't check a guy's references before you killed him?"

"It was more than one time," Cassim said.

"And? You can't un-do that. This was years ago. What, you're gonna beat yourself up forever because you did stupid things before? Now, if you do it again, come talk to me."

"Your view of morality is... interesting, Iago."

"Yeah, so I've heard."

"I imply no criticism," said Cassim. "Your pragmatism is rather refreshing, actually."

Tact personified, that one. "Look- really bad people don't even think about this stuff, Cassim. We wouldn't be having this talk, you would have just told me you were right until you got me to shut up. I think you're gonna be just fine." He yawned again and quickly hid it, but not quickly enough.

"I apologize," said Cassim. "I shouldn't keep you awake simply because you are interesting."

"Yeah, boss," he said. "We'll talk later."

"I look forward to it." Cassim paused, and even with the shadowy lack of face, he seemed thoughtful. It was in the tilt of his head, maybe. "I believe we will have a very fruitful working relationship, you and I."

"Yeah. I can be pretty useful, not to brag. Uh, good night."

"Good night, my friend."

BEFORE: Unappreciated again

Jafar headed home at a brisk pace, ignoring all the distractions of the marketplace. Once there he hurled open the door to the apartment, walked in and dropped his satchel on the floor.

"Bird!" he bellowed. There was no answer. "BIRD!"

A pile of red feathers rose up off of the only cushion in the room- also red, it made for excellent camouflage- and blinked at Jafar. "I'm up, I'm up."

It had been napping... quite a shock. The lazy thing did nothing but sleep and shed feathers when Jafar was at work- and occasionally knock over its water dish because it had the filthy habit of bathing where it drank. Did it think Jafar would always be able to refill that dish? They lived in a desert. Jafar would have complained more, but he was quite grateful that the bird did bathe itself without being commanded to do so, and had no obvious objectionable odor as a result.

"Move aside," said Jafar, and once the cushion was vacant, he sank onto it himself. "I am surrounded by ungrateful fools and wretches, bird!"

"Unappreciated again, huh?"

"I took it upon myself, without extra pay, to reorganize the entire filing system-"

"See, there's your first problem, why bother?"

"Because not everyone has the luxury of being a layabout animal," Jafar snapped. "And because that boy keeps messing things up. I thought, perhaps, a more foolproof system would lead to fewer mishaps."

"Okay." The bird took a few restless steps, its claws clicking lightly on the floor, and sat down. Loose skin and feathers gave it somewhat of a puddley appearance. "So you put in a filing system..." It turned to preen its feathers.

"And instead of receiving thanks for it, when scrolls turn up missing I am accused of theft!"

"Scrolls? Like the ones you bring home every day?"

"Those are borrowed," said Jafar with a wave of his hand.

"You don't bring 'em back never. Look at that pile we got."

Jafar looked down his nose at the bird, which continued to be more interested in arranging its feathers than in listening. "Are you going to let me finish, or are you going to wallow in the intellectual inferiority granted to you by your superb skill with the double negative?"

"I'm just showing that I'm paying attention, go on."

"The trouble in question did not stem from the scrolls that had actually been stolen," said Jafar. "That boy left a box of them in the road. He simply forgot it!"

"What a moron."

"An indefagitable moron!"

"So, what, you're fired now?"

"No, I'm not fired. If I were, I could no longer afford to feed you and we would be having a very different conversation."

"I stand corrected," said the bird.

Jafar rubbed the bridge of his nose, sighing. "I spent the better part of the day tracking down the box in the blazing heat. The incompetent boy is the one who should have been fired... and he has not been. Perhaps he is somebody's nephew." Or perhaps Morgiana knew that no one more intelligent or competent would be able to serve as a replacement.

"Life ain't fair," said the bird.

"Not in the least." Jafar stared up at the ceiling. "Has the ennui of living in an unfair world oppressed you as well, parrot?"

"Uh, no, I don't really go in for that stuff. Existential dread, I mean."

"By your standards, you are nearly subdued. You haven't raised your voice to me once since I walked through the door. Are you ill?"

"Oh, uh me? You noticed? I- I guess I don't feel too good. It's just the molting thing, I'm all itchy." It ambled closer to Jafar and looked up at him with its yellow gaze. "So, why do you work in that place? You obviously hate it and it doesn't even pay well. Can't you work somewhere else?"

"Knowledge, Iago... knowledge." Jafar gestured to the carefully maintained hoard that the little pipsqueak dared to call 'that pile they got'. It consumed half of the apartment and was painstakingly alphabetized. "Knowledge is power."

"Huh," said the parrot. It cocked its head. "Okay. You finally found a word I don't know. What's an iago?"

"Ah." Jafar had not been quite sure he was decided on the name, but perhaps it had now attached itself too well in his mind to discard or change it. "You are."

The parrot considered this a moment, and finally ventured: "So it's an insult?"

"Only if you cause it to become one. It is your name, bird. If you are to dwell with humans you will have to have something better than that screech and a whistle you call a name."

"Hey, it's a good name! It's a parrot name! My mother gave me that name!" The bird rolled his eyes. "But okay, you can't pronounce it. So... Iago? Well, that's not too bad. That's kind of pretty. I was afraid you were going to call me Feathers or something. Or even just Bird." A brightness had returned to its small face. It thrived on attention, the vain little creature.

Jafar thought the name a clever one. Iago the ensign was a deviously clever puppet master, one of the most compelling villains produced by Shakespeare. Iago the parrot was a squawking amusement at the mercy of anything larger than an ant. And yet, he was the most intelligent being Jafar knew. How depressing.

"Come here," Jafar said suddenly, holding out his hand.

Iago had cool, scaly feet and weighed hardly anything despite having the outward appearance of a sandbag. He huddled awkwardly on Jafar's hand.

Jafar carried him to the window and threw aside the curtain.

"Hey, you're lettin' the heat in," said the parrot.

"Do you see those golden spires rising above the city?"

"Yeah. That gold's expensive, isn't it?"

"More than you can imagine. Would you believe that a man lives there who controls every detail of what is allowed to the humans who live in this city? He is an ordinary man like myself, and probably less intelligent. Yet due to the station of his birth he wields absolute power."

"I wouldn't ever call you ordinary," said Iago. "So someone in there tells you all what to do and you guys just do it? You don't laugh at him and leave?"

"Humans are demented creatures, aren't they?"

"Well, I wasn't gonna say that out loud, but..."

Usually, communing with his foul-tempered fowl friend shook off the sense of listlessness, but it wasn't taking effect this evening. Perhaps Iago's lack of energy was to blame.

He was starting to look rather comfortable with perching on Jafar's hand. Jafar sat him down on the windowsill.

The bird click-clacked around in a small circle and sat down. "So-" he said. "If any ordinary guy, so-called, can be in charge, why aren't you in charge, Jafar? I mean, according to you you're the smartest man alive."

"Why am I not in charge," Jafar muttered. "Indeed."

He drew the curtain to block the view of the palace.

Part Two: Follow me to a place where incredible feats are routine every hour or so

Chapter Notes

Just a note: there's a reference in this chapter to a character named Sinbad. That's a reference to the original Arabian Nights Sinbad and a slight nod to Iago being named Sinbad in concept art (according to the wiki page) - it is not a reference to the Dreamworks Sinbad.

I would not have a problem referencing characters from movies from other studios that have a similar feeling to them as Disney flicks, but in this case I think the Dreamworks Sinbad is clearly set in its own world that doesn't fit into the Disney Renaissance stew, so this is not that Sinbad.

Part Two: Follow me to a place where incredible feats are routine every hour or so

The sun was just at the right angle to blind anybody who happened to be looking up this way. Now was the time to get going, in other words. The unfortunate part was that he couldn't see either and had to trust his ability to remember the location of the window while approaching it from midair.

He found out that his guess was right when the surroundings went from hot and bright to dim and cool, instead of him just slamming into a wall.

Instead he slammed into the floor.

Iago bit back a cry of dismay. Stealth, dummy! It was stealth time! A guy with bright red plumage and a voice like his wasn't designed for stealth, devious nature or no. This stuff took some doing.

He picked himself up and dusted himself off. Having just come into the dark room from the outside, his surroundings were hazy. He didn't see anything moving and he didn't hear any cries of 'hey look a parrot'. He could barely make out the outlines of a table, so he hopped up onto it. Still no 'look a parrot'- or its more demeaning cousin: 'a bird got in here, shoo it out'. Or even the dreaded: 'a pigeon came through the window, where's my blunderbuss?' Nope-nothing.

No one should be in here. Cassim was really good at doing what he said he was going to do. A smart group would have left a lookout if an unnaturally charming stranger showed up to invite everyone out for drinks, that was all. Most pirates weren't smart, but it was best to check.

It looked like he'd lucked out this time. No one was here and this table he'd randomly jumped on had a big stack of maps on it.

Iago flipped through the papers. Gag, everything smelled like rum. Okay, Madagascar, Madagascar... here it was! A map of Madagascar, with a big, beautiful red X.

He took the map, rolled it up real tight, folded it in half and wedged it under his collar. It would chafe a little, but it was easier carrying it this way than trying to grab onto it the whole time he was flying home.

Cassim usually gave him a nice long time window. He was good at small talk and had an intimate knowledge of what would amuse a gang of thieves- and if he'd taken the guys to Fatima's place, she wouldn't be able to resist also getting in on the act, playing out her granny shtick. Even if the pirates did come back early, now that Iago had what he came for, he could fly off the moment he heard someone coming. In other words, there was time to look around. Pirates with one treasure map usually had another one.

Iago glanced at his surroundings- nothing moved. Apart from this table, there wasn't a lot in here besides a few pairs of boots and a bunch of sleeping mats. Even the stupidest pirates didn't keep their good loot in a public inn room.

He went back to rifling through papers. Hm, hm, nothing. Typical cutthroat stuff. Trade routes with the best targets, blackmail material... Cassim had a strict no-blackmail rule, even if the target really deserved it. Would've been a nice buck on the side every so often, but a risky one, so... fine.

Why had Iago felt like he needed to look around the room just then? His paranoia, or his birdy prey-animal instincts? Either way, he was usually right about being uneasy. He was usually right about most things, really, but especially about being uneasy.

He didn't see anything out of the ordinary right now, though... danger-wise or useful-wise. Here was another map, but he'd researched this place and concluded that there was nothing on it. Oh, but here was another one. Iago had never heard of this place. So far this group was one for two on having useful maps, so there was a fifty-fifty shot of this one panning out. It would be worth his time to look up the location and see if anything was there. It went next to the other map, shoved against his neck. If thievery and treasure-hunting ever stopped paying off, Iago had a very promising future as a messenger pigeon.

Nothing else looked good in this heap, so he tidied up the pile, though not too much- it had been none too tidy when he found it. He checked around for any tell-tale down feathers that might have fallen off while he was looking around. He didn't see any. If any were mixed up in the papers, it was too late to get 'em out now.

Now he had two rolls of paper rubbing the feathers off of his neck, in addition to the weight of the small medallion that also hung from the neck band- he was used to carrying it, but it was still something to consider, there was only so much a bird his size could hold and still be able to fly. And there was that jangling paranoia. Or instinct. Both? Neither? He was uneasy, that was the point. And yet... he still didn't see anything moving. And those boots were a

pretty common stashing place for pirates who thought they were sneakier than the other pirates. It wasn't pleasant to check them, but it usually panned out.

The first boot he looked in had a flask inside it. Iago didn't like rum, Cassim didn't like rum, and most pirate rum was pretty bad stuff that Fatima wouldn't pay much for to buy off him for the tavern. These flasks were also slippery, heavy and hard to carry. Iago left the rum where it was. The next couple of boots, nothing but foot fungus. But the fourth one- jackpot! A little bag of coins.

Fishing it out was not a pleasant affair, but he was rewarded with a nice fat pouch of coins. Even if they were all coppers, not bad for free money! And they probably weren't all coppers, if the owner had wanted to hide them away from his crewmates. A pirate who was stingy enough to risk his reputation with the cap'm over mere copper coins did not last long in his business.

Iago turned to check the last couple of boots, and then he saw the cat.

She was under the table. She'd been right underneath him all that time. Now she was looking at him with huge round eyes, and her butt was doing the pre-pounce wiggles.

Iago took off into the air. Something snagged his tail feathers and he thumped to the floor. The cat had gotten his tail, and now she had a paw on his throat.

These jobs. They went south so fast.

Iago dug the most intimidating voice he knew out of his head. "Get off me, fleabag!" he sneered, and wasn't surprised to hear that he'd pulled up Jafar's snarl.

The cat leapt away out of the shock of hearing a human voice come out of a bird. She'd damaged his tail feathers and now he might have trouble steering, but he'd just have to deal with that. He jumped into the air.

He was knocked down again and tumbled across the floor, juggled by her paws. There was no pain, that would sink in later if he survived this.

"Release me," Iago hissed. And then he barked like a dog.

The cat had gone into one of those tail-twitching intrigued pauses. Her eyes burned with curiosity. His trick hadn't worked- she could see for herself that as noisy as he was, he was still just a bird. And she thought it was *interesting*. "Talky bird!"

"Yes, talky bird!" He resorted to pleading with her in his rusty Cat. "Let go of talky bird. Smart bird, pretty bird is not food?"

"You sure smell like food." She whapped him, let go long enough to let him flap around, so unsure of what was up or down or left or right that he only succeeded in dragging himself along the floor, and then she pinned him again. A cold, wet nose lightly kissed the back of his neck. Next, her teeth would either tear open his veins and let his blood run out or just go right to snapping his head off.

He wrenched his neck around and he bit her face. She jumped backwards.

Iago dragged himself to the windowsill. Something was heavy. Somehow, the bag of coins was still in one of his claws- he had a death grip on it.

It's heavy. You need to fly home with a screwed-up tail. Let go of the damn thing or you may never have a chance to see another coin again, said the voice of self-preservation.

And the voice of greed said:

No.

He jumped out the window, not giving in to the urge to see what the cat was doing. She was trying to kill him, that was what she was doing. Now to find out if she'd broken either of his wings. In the middle of the blinding supernova of panic, he wouldn't have felt any pain- his wings would take his weight now or he'd drop like a rock.

His wings beat once, twice, three times and he held his spot in the air instead of folding and falling. He found his way across the street to land on another windowsill, this one boarded over. Steering was a little tricky, but the tail wasn't as bad as he'd feared.

Now he could look back.

The cat sat in the windowsill, her tail lashing. She was a smooth, pretty calico with green eyes.

A cat that didn't get her prey always looked so cheated, almost offended. This one was also bleeding a little from a gash on her nose. Not so fun, was it, when the prey fought back? When she saw him seeing her in defeat, she turned away and started licking her paw to clean the blood from her face with it. All false nonchalance.

"See you in hell, cat!" Iago screeched- then all of a sudden he had to turn away to catch big, terrified breaths.

Miraculously, the maps were intact, if very rumpled. The whole incident had only taken a few seconds.

Iago was mostly intact too, just a little bruised up and with scratches along his sides that blended into the red down covering his body. Not great, but a lot better than what could have happened. Even the chewed up tail feathers weren't so bad after carefully being preened out. A dip in the birdbath would help too... Cassim was real nice about keeping that dish full.

First, though, there was nothing so comforting as money!

The coin purse disgorged some lovely, shiny gold pieces. A blessing upon pirates and their squirrely urges to hid the best loot from their fellow men. These were beautiful!

The door opened. Iago jumped a little bit, which stirred up some soreness along his sides.
"Cassim, you're back!"

"Yes, finally," said Cassim, rolling his eyes heavenwards. "They were formidable talkers. I now know much about port town women of the night that I need never have learned. And I see you came back in one piece as well."

"Check out this loot! Can I deliver or what?"

"Money? Well, well! You seem to have had a productive outing," said Cassim, drawing closer. "I'm glad my torments were not in vain."

"I was thinkin' an 80-20 split," said Iago, "since I was the one risking my neck and all."

"As you wish. And two scrolls, I see?"

"Yeah. There's the one I was supposed to get and an extra for a place I've never heard of. You heard of it?"

He started making piles of coins, four coins in one pile to every one in the other. They had a nice, satisfying weight to them.

He heard rustling paper as Cassim picked up one of the scrolls. "Hmm, this place is unknown to me."

"It might turn out to be something, it might not. It was there so I grabbed it."

"Intriguing. But this-" More paper rustling. "This is it! Excellent!"

"Am I good or am I good?"

"You are phenomenal!" He reached down to tousle the feathers on the back of Iago's neck.

"Aw, go on!" But he arched his neck into Cassim's hand and submitted to being rumped up for a minute, before Cassim took his hand away. It wasn't a very long minute...

The coins were sorted out. Cassim's pile looked pretty small. Hey, he'd done all the cushy work, fair was fair. Cassim hadn't gotten juggled across the floor by Miss Kitty or anything.

"It's very detailed," said Cassim, his footsteps creaking across the floor as he paced, "but I'm not certain what all of these symbols mean. Do you recognize them, Iago? You are more of a scholar than I am."

He must mean the little scribbles all across the map. "Those things? No, I don't know 'em. Maybe you know someone who can explain 'em? They're probably important." They were probably warnings about hazards and booby-traps, was that they probably were. "Uh, what about that friend of yours down at the docks? He's old, he knows ships. You know, old what's-his-face."

"Sinbad?"

"Yeah, him. Probably."

"Yes, I should ask him. I believe we are on the point of arranging transportation, as well."

"Oof, that's your job."

Cassim's contacts sure could be useful. He'd probably come back with an explanation of all the symbols on the map as well as a list of options for sailing out. Maybe he should get just a few more coins in exchange for letting everybody talk his ear off? Just to keep him happy.

Iago redistributed the piles of loot.

"This will be quite a score," said Cassim.

"I know!"

"We'll have the opportunity to make a major investment. What do you say to a sailing ship of our own?"

"You're into cruises now?"

"No, it would be our transportation. No more having to arrange these trips and seek out trustworthy men- a ship of our own would pay for itself!"

"Hey, yeah! That's a good idea you got there." An idea worth a few more coins, even. "We'll call it the S.S. Midas. Hey, if you ever feel like you have too much self-respect, we could get rid of some by turning pirate."

"Ha."

He and Cassim had equal-size coin piles now. Weird how that happened. Eh, who expected a parrot to know how to count? "Here, boss, take your loot."

Iago shoved Cassim's share of the coins across the table and sat down on top of his own pile. The cool, smooth metal felt nice pressed into his feathers.

Cassim was smirking down at him.

"What?" Iago asked. "Is something on my beak?"

Cassim shook his head. "Iago, you may not look very much like a dragon, but I dare say anyone foolish enough to disturb your hoard would be lashed with a tongue of fire."

"And you'd be right. Nobody touches the stash!"

"Do you recall our first meeting?"

What was that, three, four years ago now? "Uh- sure."

"I had never been threatened with violence by a bird before."

Iago had done what? He didn't remember this at all. "I meant it, too," he said, though, because he knew he had meant it- whether he remembered doing it or not.

"I know you did." His voice was affectionate. "I'm going to see Sinbad. Will you come along?"

"Nah, I've done enough work for one day, thank you."

Cassim frowned. "No?"

"Did you need me for something?"

"No, you're free to stay home, but you rarely pass up an outing. Did everything go well?"

"Uh-"

So the question was whether or not to admit to being used as a cat toy because he'd stayed for a little extra payout after finding and taking the map.

"I'm fine, don't worry about me," said Iago. "I'm just tired."

"If that's all it is."

"Yeah. Oh, uh, Cassim? Can you take my collar off before you go? I don't want it to rust in the birdbath." Iago was capable of taking his own collar on and off, but it was just easier if Cassim and his nimble pickpocketty fingers did it.

"Of course," said Cassim. He removed the collar- warm fingers brushing the down on the sides of Iago's neck- and laid it on the table. The small medallion hanging from it and the hand embossed onto its face glinted prettily in the afternoon light.

"Thanks." Iago fluttered over to the birdbath and landed next to it, wincing on impact.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a little sore after carrying all that money all the way here- it sure was worth it, though!" He took a sip of the water.

"I'm going while the day is young," said Cassim. "Enjoy your bath."

"Oh I will."

The door closed. Iago hopped into the dish with a splash. Ah... much better.

The sun, a different breed of sun from the one that baked the desert dry, cast a dramatic shadow before him as he traveled towards Sinbad's dwelling. Seagulls dipped and called over the ocean, and in the distance a pelican swooped. It was so open, that ocean. There was

something so free and mysterious about it- and of course, it was full of riches. Perhaps in another life Cassim would have been a sailor. Even a pirate.

It would have been nice, he thought, not for the first time, to have been born with wings. Perhaps after the next score he would go and seek out that magic carpet he had been so subtly advised to purchase so many times.

He passed a family with children playing in the sand. They looked up as he passed by, the children in awe, the mother with wariness. The father gave Cassim a polite nod, which he returned.

That, too, could have been his life once, but that was long gone. He had a better chance of living as one of those gulls now.

Here was Sinbad's hut. It emerged out of the rocks lopsided and weathered, but somehow cheerful. Perhaps it only seemed that way to Cassim because he had spent many a pleasant hour here hearing of the old man's adventures.

Sinbad kept a donkey outside that did the job of alerting for any visitors. Cassim usually brought an animal friend of his own when he went out visiting, and usually at this point, when the donkey began to bray, Iago started to harangue the poor creature in its own tongue. Today Cassim's entrance was much quieter. Much duller, too.

Sinbad appeared in the doorway.

"Good afternoon," Cassim said with a bow.

"Cassim, my friend! Come in, come in."

He entered the quiet coolness of the shack. Sinbad's elderly tabby cat looked up at his entrance, casting her keen eyes at Cassim's shoulders- seeing them unoccupied, she returned to the important task of cleaning her soft tiny paws.

"Have a seat," said Sinbad. "Are you here for business, or pleasure?"

"Both, I hope," said Cassim. "I have a very intriguing map here that I'd like your opinion on."

He handed over the hard-won prize. Sinbad took it into his knobbly hands and smoothed it out with great reverence. "Aha, I've heard of this. Planning another adventure, I see." There was the faintest hint of wistfulness in his eyes. Cassim was not too young to imagine a day when he himself was the old man in a hut, advising those who still had the energy on how to go about their adventures instead of going about them himself. He would not know until the day came if he would appreciate the rest, or envy the young.

"Do you recognize those symbols?" Cassim asked.

"I believe they were invented by whoever owned this map previously. Whoever you bought it from, I assume." There was a light ironic emphasis on the word 'bought'.

"Oh, the map was a gift," said Cassim. A gift from someone he had asked to steal the map for him. "Then you don't know?"

"I can guess," said Sinbad. "They're very similar to others I've seen." He tapped the parchment. "This here looks like it's likely a warning that dangerous wildlife lives in the area. What kind, exactly, you will have to discover for yourself while I sit here in comfort, eh?"

"And on that note," said Cassim, "I'll need transportation."

"There won't be many ships leaving. Winter is coming, you know."

"Ah, that it is. All too quickly."

"A man of your infinite patience will wait to depart until spring, I expect."

"Well... there are considerations besides patience."

"Of course," Sinbad chuckled.

It was true, in fact. Spring was when Cassim's partner in crime went into his annual molt and became a surly, lethargic hermit for weeks.

Also, Cassim might burst if he put off the trip that long- or do something reckless to discharge his extra energy. He would lose his chance at the treasure permanently if he were in jail or dead.

Sinbad folded up the map. "Come back tomorrow, Cassim. I will have these symbols charted as well as I can and I'll have a list of what ships are set to depart before the end of the month."

"Thank you, my friend. I am still waiting for you to call in my many favors. You know where to find me if you ever need the slightest help."

"One of these days perhaps you will take me with you."

Cassim winked at him. "Be careful what you wish for, I may grant it."

He stood.

"Ah, but before you go," said Sinbad, "I am curious- there was a man inquiring after you in the square. In Greek attire. Did you speak with him?"

"Hmm? No, if he was looking for me he hasn't found me."

"Consider this a warning, then." As an afterthought, Sinbad added- "At least, I believe it was you he was looking for. He asked for a tall, bearded Agrabanian with a red parrot on his shoulder."

"I am hardly the only man who fits that description in these parts."

"I suppose not," said Sinbad. "You are one of rather few who meet that description and are also permanent residents, however. But perhaps it is nothing. Be careful, anyhow."

"I always am. Thank you for the warning, friend."

As he left, Cassim pondered who might be looking for him. The most obvious answer would be a vengeful pirate, but none of the pirates he had dealt with lately had been Greek, and all had parted with him on good terms, thinking him a friend. Aladdin had told him in one of his letters a while back about a man named Mechanicles, could that be it? As far as Cassim knew, Mechanicles was in the palace dungeon, but the palace dungeon was escapable.

It was, perhaps, unlikely that the person he sought was still in the square, but Cassim believed in addressing a problem as soon as it arose, and so he turned towards the village instead of the tavern.

The market square was crowded and bustling this time of day. Cassim was good at staying out of people's way, but today he nearly knocked a basket off of a woman's head. There simply wasn't enough room.

No one looked particularly out of place, aside from perhaps the old man with the red stocking cap who was feeding pigeons in the middle of the square; he was probably drunk and likely to be trampled. But no mysterious man in a toga. Cassim was being paranoid, perhaps-wariness came naturally to a thief, but even for a man with many enemies, wariness could go too far.

Ah, well- while he was here he may as well pick up some of the things he would shortly need for his trip.

Iago landed on the bar counter in a heap.

Conking out like a light in the middle of the day was a great feeling until you had to wake up. This was like being drunk without any of the fun part. "Barkeep!"

Ben turned towards him, dull-faced as ever. Iago had wasted so many hours trying to get that guy to get mad, failing that, smile, a smirk, anything, and so far he was harder to crack than a macadamia nut and tougher on the beak, too. He wasn't in the mood to take a shot at Ben today. But someday... someday he was going to make that man react.

Iago tossed his pair of coins down on the counter. "I want a coffee."

"No coffee for birds."

"What, my money ain't good here? My tab's all paid off, I'll have you know." The only thing more fun than getting free food was paying it off and knowing you didn't owe anyone anything.

"No coffee for birds," Ben repeated. Look at this- finally enough money to get whatever he wanted and still no one would give it to him. Something about coffee stopping his heart.

"Fine, fine," Iago said. "Get me a tea then. And a couple of walnuts."

Finally, Ben took the money and walked off.

Iago turned to look at the tavern at large. Fatima's place was never empty, but the dinner crowd wasn't in yet. There was a quiet murmur in the place, not like the babble of rush hour.

Uh-oh, it was too quiet in here- Fatima was hobbling her way over. She'd picked up a new thing where she tapped around with her cane like she was blind even though she obviously wasn't. Iago thought it was an excuse to poke people she didn't like in the kneecap without getting in trouble.

"Hello, birdie," she quavered.

Iago turned away, pretending like he hadn't heard. Fatima sat down on the barstool behind him, leaning in real close.

"Did you get the map?" she muttered.

"Yes, of course I got the map, I always deliver, don't I?"

"Don't get snippy with me, Cassim never told me if your scheme worked out after I spent an hour I'll never get back listening to those idiots."

"He didn't? He's not back yet?"

"I've not seen him."

"He ran off as soon as he got the map, he wanted to check out some stuff written on it. That was, uh... that was a while ago..." Iago had a pretty good sense of time passing, but less so when he was asleep- the angle of the sun through the window suggested it had been about an hour, though.

"You have wings," said Fatima. "If you worry, go see what he's up to."

She had a point, maybe Iago should go check up on things, but he'd woken up achy and uncoordinated. Cassim was probably just hearing the seven voyages story from Sinbad again. He never got tired of it.

Fatima tapped him on the back, sending off a shock wave of pain through all the bruises.

"Ow! Hey, watch it! Do I just fly up and smack you for no reason?"

"What have you done to yourself, Iago?" She grabbed hold of his wing on the side closest to her and lifted it up to peer underneath.

"Haven't you ever heard of personal space?"

"Haven't you ever heard of wound care?"

She let go with a sigh. Iago took a few steps out of her reach, re-folding his wings. "Hmph. I took a bath, they're clean."

"Don't talk back to me, sonny!" The granny voice was back. Iago peered behind her and saw a guy sitting real close at a table that had been empty a second ago. Wore a toga- not from around here. Also not a pirate.

"Who's your boyfriend?" Iago muttered.

"This nice young man?" Fatima bustled over to him. "Welcome to Granny's tavern! Who might you be?"

A lot of guys melted at the granny act, even the big tough nasty ones. They missed their mothers deep down, Fatima said, and Iago couldn't argue because her place was too popular. But this guy wasn't buying it.

"Who owns that bird?" he asked.

Fatima turned towards Iago with a ghost of a smirk. "Who owns you, dearie?"

"Why don't you come over here and ask me yourself, bub?" Iago snapped, glaring right into the guy's face. "What, do you make a habit to walk up to people and ask them who *owns* them? What's your problem?"

"I have business with your master," said the guy, leaning back a little.

"Master? What do you think I am?" He held up a wing. "You see any cuffs? You see any lamp? I don't grant wishes, neither!"

The guy looked a little like he hadn't expected to argue with a bird, which was how Iago liked it.

"You wear a collar," he ventured.

"This?" Iago touched the coin hanging around his neck. "It's fashionable. It's shiny. It's not a tag. There's no 'if found, bring here' on the back of it." No, no address on the back- just a couple of runes, for emergencies. He looked back at the stranger and picked out a chain reaching up around his neck from out of the opening of the toga. "Hey, you have a necklace too. Do you have a master? No? Get lost!"

"I do have a master, bird," said the stranger, holding up the chain around his neck, pulling the medallion attached to it out of his clothing. It was a stylized skull. "This is his sigil. For my master, I am looking for a tall man, with a beard."

"Oh, nobody like that ever comes in here, dearie," Fatima told him.

Iago glanced at the back of the room. Old Ahab was sitting in the back drinking ale. He was pretty tall with a beard. He had a feeling Mr. Skull Necklace wasn't looking for old Ahab, though.

Ben appeared from nowhere then, with a steaming cup of tea and three walnuts- shelled, even though that cost extra and Iago could open them himself. "Ooh!"

"There a problem?" Ben asked, looking over at the man in the toga.

"Nah, no problem." Iago snatched up one of the nuts. He'd slept through lunch.

Ben shrugged and went off to get work done.

The stranger was holding something in his hands and looking from it to Iago and back again. Fatima peered over his shoulder at it.

"Oh, my," she said, with a note of alarm. She didn't alarm easy, so that was something to pay attention to. "It takes great magical skill, to create such an image."

"It is the same bird," said the guy.

"Oh, sonny! There are any number of red parrots who come through a port town, and they all look alike."

"Red parrots do not all look alike," the man insisted. He was right about that one. "This one has neither green nor yellow on his wings, he is small and fat, and he has a golden beak. And he talks like an irate man!"

"You wanna see the meaning of irate?" Iago's voice was muffled around his beakful of walnut. "Call me fat again, come on." It was true, Iago wasn't a typical macaw. And maybe he hadn't ever run into another parrot that looked exactly like him- unless they were blood relatives and those didn't count- but there had to be more of his type out there somewhere.

The door of the tavern opened and Cassim's silhouette appeared in the rectangle of light created by the open doorway. Phew, okay. Iago had known, really, that he wasn't dead in a ditch somewhere, but... well, everything was fine, obviously.

He tested the tea and found it had cooled to perfect drinking temperature.

"Why do you want to see this man so badly?" Fatima asked.

"It is secret," the guy said. "But it is gravely important. If you are lying, it will go poorly for you in the afterlife!"

Now Cassim was here, drawn inevitably by seeing his two best friends both hassling the same weirdo. "What's so interesting, hm?" he asked.

"A case of mistaken identity, I believe," said Fatima, and she took the picture from the man's hands and held it out where both Cassim and Iago could see it.

Jafar's face loomed out of the picture.

Iago spat out his tea.

"I know the bird, but not the man," said Cassim.

"It could be any bird," said Fatima.

"It could be any bird," repeated Cassim, taking the hint.

The guy in the toga was starting to look desperate. "I need to speak with that man."

"Nobody here knows that guy!" Iago screeched. "Are you deaf? Are you stupid? The lady told you five times already!"

"But I must find him!"

"You're not gonna find him! That sicko's dead!"

"I see," said Cassim. He turned to the stranger. "Have you come here to torment an old woman and a bird?"

"No! Please, he cannot be dead. I must know. You! Bird!"

"Don't talk to me!" Iago yammered.

"You were his familiar!"

"No I wasn't! Never heard of Jafar!" No one else had used his name yet. Dammit! "I don't know nothin, Jafar's dead, what else do you want from me?"

Cassim's tone was measured. "Your question has been asked and answered, and you will learn nothing here. I suggest you leave."

"But-"

"We're going to have to throw him out," Fatima said emotionlessly.

The Greek rose to his feet with a scrape of his chair. "Fine! I go. But Lord Hades will punish all of you!" He stormed out.

Iago stared into his teacup. The faint reflection of a strung-out loser stared back at him.

Fatima was still holding the picture. The guy had apparently forgotten to take it back from her. "So this is Jafar," she said, looking at it. "Ugly fellow."

"What on Earth was that about?" Cassim asked. "Who is Hades?"

"A Greek god," said Fatima. "Iago, were you or the Grand Vizier of Agrabah ever reputed experts on Greek gods?"

"No, I wouldn't know a Greek god from a hole in the ground!"

"As I thought," said Fatima. "Why would he be seeking Jafar then?"

"I don't know, I don't know."

Cassim sat down beside him. "If you know anything, it will be better in the long run if you tell us now. I have met many a man with a checkered past. I won't think less of you."

Oh, wouldn't he? How about the part where Jafar had tried three times to kill Cassim's beloved son, and Iago had watched- cheered him on- helped him out? How about that part?

"Or, you could let it fester until it kills you," said Fatima. She lifted up Iago's wing. "Like these wounds."

Cassim looked horrified.

BEFORE: Allied with my vision and brain

Jafar was going to have to get out of bed, he was late for work.

An hour after he first had this thought, he managed to get up. There was just no point to any of it. Maybe he'd find a nugget of information somewhere that would hold his attention for a bit, and maybe when he got home in the morning, Iago would say something amusingly uncouth. And that was it. That was his whole life. No surprises.

He stepped into the next room and found papery chaos.

Jafar had never given half a thought to what a parrot might do to amuse itself when left alone to its own devices all day, aside from knock over its water dish, or gorge itself on its entire day's allowance of food early in the morning so that it would beg for more the second Jafar got back. Apparently, the odd specks of fluffy crimson down Jafar had found in his scrolls were not a coincidence or a sign that he was losing his mind; Iago sat in the middle of the floor with a mess of scrolls spread out around him, looking as intent as any scholar.

He looked up. "Jafar?" He looked surprised, as he well might look because Jafar was usually well out of the house before the layabout bird stirred from his perch. He didn't have the horror, Jafar thought, of one who was caught in a machination or betrayal. "You're still home? Did you get the day off?"

"You can read?"

"Read?"

"The scrolls," Jafar said, pointing.

"Oh, these." He looked down at the scrolls with an air of naive curiosity. "I always wondered why you spent hours staring at these things and- uh, you just called me a birdbrain if I asked, so I started looking at them too. Uh, but I don't get it. Maybe sometime I'll get it. I put them away when I'm done, so you're not gonna complain, right? So are you going to be home today?"

"No," Jafar said. "You are coming to work with me."

"I am?" He shook his tail feathers. "You mean it?"

Jafar mentally compared the prospect of sitting alone in a hot, dark room in silence reading the same scroll over and over again with the prospect of sitting in a hot, dark room with a garrulous parrot. It was only a minor improvement but it might keep him from falling asleep.

"Yes, you're coming with me," Jafar reiterated. But how to bring him, and how to keep him? A box with air holes in it?

He heard a soft fluttering and felt a slight weight descend on his shoulder. Suddenly Iago was right in his face. He jumped.

"Hey, you're tall!" Iago said from his shoulder. "So are we going right away?"

He seemed far too excited about the prospect of visiting a dull magic shop with no customers, for a bird that displayed his level of intelligence in other matters.

Curious glances followed Jafar as he walked to work with a brightly colored tiny animal pacing across his shoulders and walking over the back of his neck. Iago seemed to have an incredible sense of balance, but this ability at least was to be expected from his species.

The feel of his scaly clawed feet put one in mind of a lizard. A buried memory surfaced- Jafar had wanted a pet lizard as a child, but Mother had been alive then and she had a horror of them.

Feathers brushed his neck. Of course, Iago was not a lizard. A lizard had a calm, dignified air.

Iago was blinking and shading his eyes with his wing. "Boy, it's bright out here, I haven't been outside in a while," he muttered. "Is sunlight supposed to hurt?"

"Hush." He had been categorically banned from speaking where anyone besides Jafar could hear him. Jafar wasn't certain how likely it was that his pet could be confiscated or even killed by someone who was either intensely curious or superstitious enough to think the bird a demon- but he didn't want to deal with that possibility.

"Awk," said Iago, and the manic pacing started up again.

When they reached the shop, Jafar physically removed the parrot from his shoulder.

"Whoa, whoa, hey," Iago said in alarm, looking all around him.

Jafar had never before touched any part of him besides the feet or an accidental brush of feathers. The bird's body was warm, warmer than human skin- as was natural, for a small creature with a hot, quick metabolism- it was so soft, and it twitched, and pulsed with breath- Jafar had a sudden feeling that a bird could briefly give an impression of stillness but could never be still.

He hastily found a spot on the table to put the parrot so he could take his hand away. He wiped his palms on his robe to clean them, although he was not sure why- he had no quibbles with Iago's personal hygiene.

Iago took a moment to re-arrange feathers that Jafar had rumped out of place, and then he turned to look about the place with the quick jerks of the head characteristic to his kind. "This is it, huh? This is where you go every day?"

He had clearly thought very little of the incident, as he was not possessed of any kind of tact and would not otherwise ignore it, so Jafar would ignore it as well. "Indeed," he said. "Behold it in all its splendor."

Iago paced around on the table. "So what do you do around here?"

"Read and sit idle."

Iago took a short flight up to one of the bookshelves to look at it more closely.

Jafar walked up to him. The bird had perched about eye level, and as he looked through the scrolls, Jafar scrutinized the wings folded neatly over the parrot's back- each of them sported long, intact blue-tipped primary feathers. Jafar had missed the significance of the feathers that had littered the floor over the course of a month, distracted by the mess and the unpleasant moods of the bird shedding the feathers. Clearly, he was flight-capable again and had been since molting had ended, weeks ago. He could have made an escape on the walk over here.

Jafar concluded that Iago had seen the benefits in continuing to stay where someone else kept and fed him instead of going off to be eaten by a jackal.

"So what do you read about?" Iago asked.

"Sorcery," said Jafar.

"What kind of sorcery?"

"Perhaps someday I will show you. But for now... come here."

Iago hopped up on his shoulder. Oh, very well. Jafar walked back to the table with him and sat down. He took out a blank scroll and rolled it out on the table. He picked up a pen-

"Hey!" Iago said. "That's a feather!"

It was a quill pen. Jafar hadn't even made the connection. "It is for writing. Behold..." He opened the ink, dipped in the tip of the quill, and set it to the scroll. "This is a letter. This one in particular is called an alif- it makes an a sound. A string of these represents a spoken word. Well, for example..." He wrote his own name. "Jafar."

Iago stared at the paper for a moment. "Oh!" he said finally. "I get it! That's crazy! You can just do that? Put words on paper? That's-" He fluttered down to the table to stare at the paper.

"That's nuts!"

"Indeed." It must be nice, thought Jafar, to be so naive that the mere concept of reading was mind-shattering. He wondered what the parrot would think when he learned that there were symbols that could alter reality itself.

An honorary member of the gang

Cassim woke alone in the room.

Though they had planned at some point to buy a dwelling of their own after a big score- mansions on the hill had been discussed, as well as underground fortresses, castles, palaces, and other, equally improbable things- here they lived still. The last big score had been enough to pay for, if not a mansion, a residence quite large enough for a man and a parrot, and so had the score before that one. And yet after some heady celebration and heated debate, there had just been so many things that were more compelling and more fun to spend that money on than moving out of this cozy tavern.

Cassim washed his face and hands, dressed- one portion of his ill-gotten gains went towards maintaining his wardrobe, a man who knew he was well-dressed was more confident and capable and there was nothing wrong with spending a bit of coin to keep that up- and he went out into the hall. A smell of baking bread rose up through the floor. A rustling sound came from Fatima's library.

Cassim's knife found its way into his hand as if it had a mind of its own- the tavern was well maintained and had protective spells on the windows, but every so often a rat or a magically-competent thief made it in- and he silently moved into the doorway.

"Put that thing away, will ya?" A book lay spread out on the floor. Iago looked more like a vulture than a parrot, the way he hunched over the volume and glared at the page. "You and your knives."

Cassim slipped the knife back into its hiding place. "Good morning, my friend!"

"Mornin', boss..." His tone was distracted but not surly.

Cassim had made it very clear yesterday how little he thought of the wisdom of concealing injuries, and at the time he'd been unable to figure out why Iago had done it. Now he noted how large that book was compared to Iago's small form, and the obvious difficulty the parrot had in turning the pages. What must it be like to have a mind as sound as anyone's, but to be trapped into a body that could be torn to pieces by the soft paws of a cat? Would Cassim have been able to hold his head high and admit to being mauled by something that posed no threat to any of his peers?

If that was the problem... it was incurable. "What are you reading?" Cassim asked.

"Greek myths," he said.

Cassim sat beside him on the floor. "May I ask why you're undertaking a classical education at the break of dawn?"

"I wanna know who this Hades jerk is!"

"Are you so troubled by what happened yesterday?"

"Troubled doesn't even come close," Iago said. "Try frantic."

Cassim wondered how he would feel if someone arrived asking after Saluk. Disconcerted, certainly. Would he lose sleep over it? Likely not. But neither was he as given to passions and near-febrile attacks of feeling as Iago was. "Someone once told me," he said softly, "to let go of the evils of the past."

"Hmph." Iago shook his head. "You think I'm hung up on Jafar, huh?" He sounded tired. "Here's the thing: Hades is a death god. He controls death. Jafar was a pretty powerful sorcerer. Why's a worshipper of a death god looking for a powerful sorcerer? This seems bad, Cassim."

Cassim was on the verge of saying that Hades was just a myth. He ought to be ashamed of himself. Genies, magic carpets, and the hand of Midas were all myths as well. Cassim was having this conversation with a parrot. "I suppose it could be bad," said Cassim. "But the man didn't seem very... intimidating. I didn't feel that he was a threat."

"Your kid ever tell you about a guy named Abis-Mal?"

"Perhaps in passing..."

Iago's wings darted around in the air in time with his energetic words. "Stupidest jerk I ever knew. I don't know how that guy even put his shoes on in the morning. I mean, he was dumb. Absolute idiot. I can't get this across enough. There haven't been words invented that describe how stupid this man was. But he kept finding magical toys somewhere and ruining everyone's day with 'em. Nearly killed me or Al by accident, I don't know how many times. I'm saying, stupid doesn't mean harmless. Sometimes stupid is worse! You can tell what a smart guy is gonna do, he's gonna do the smart thing. A stupid guy might do anything. Don't underestimate the power of stupid." Iago shook his head. "We should've interrogated that guy before we threw him out. I should've said something."

He hadn't said anything because he'd been in a trembling heap on the bar counter yesterday. Cassim was under the impression that Iago might be a little bit more 'hung up on Jafar' than he admitted- perhaps he did not realize it himself.

However, he was making a great deal of sense. More sense than Cassim liked. "I will look for him," said Cassim. "I'm visiting Sinbad the sailor today, and I may as well look around, perhaps ask a few questions."

"Thanks, boss." Iago dully stared at the page. "You know-" He took a deep breath and let it out.

"Yes?"

"Nothing, it's nothing. Did I say anything? I didn't say anything."

"I'm going out now, in fact," said Cassim. "Are you coming along?"

"Little early, isn't it?"

"I plan to walk for a bit to clear my head."

"Eh, I'll stay, I gotta keep reading this crap."

"Very well. I wish you luck."

"I'll need it."

Cassim stood and walked to the door.

"Uh, boss-"

Cassim paused in the doorway. "Yes?"

Iago did not look up from the book. "You're not gonna tell me I'm overreacting or making it up, huh?"

"Am I in the habit of doing so?"

"No, you're not." A pause. "Thanks."

Again, Cassim took the path to Sinbad's hut with no one screaming at the guard donkey from his shoulder.

"Good morning, my friend," Sinbad said expansively as he threw open the door. "I have what I promised, and I think you will be able to find a travel route. Adventure awaits, eh?"

"Excellent!" He took the oilcloth packet, savoring the rush in his head and heart at the thought of taking to the open seas. "I can never thank you enough, my friend." If only Iago were prone to unreasonable fears. It was childish, perhaps, but Cassim did not want to deal with some mysterious stranger and his dark plans. He wanted to go adventuring! But the weight of adult responsibilities was not to be shed on a whim. "Although I do owe you so much already, my friend-"

"Yes? What do you need?" Sinbad smirked.

"I did speak with the Greek man yesterday." Cassim paused. "It was not me he was looking for, after all. He sought a man who used to own my parrot." It was odd to speak of Iago as if he were a thing to be owned, but there was no question that Jafar had owned him.

"Did he want to buy the parrot?" Sinbad chuckled. "I daresay your bird would have had words for that."

"No." Although the bird had indeed had words for that. "I'm not entirely certain what he wanted and I would like to know. He said nothing more to you than that he was looking for the tall man with a beard- correct?"

"Yes, that's all," Sinbad said. "I would tell you if there were more."

"He mentioned the Greek god Hades. Do you know anything of him?"

Sinbad shook his head slowly. "I know that he rules the Underworld, or a portion of it, but nothing else. My people go to Davy Jones, not him."

Cassim decided that at this time there was no use in driving himself mad by considering the theological implications of these things. "I see. But I thank you, and I am eternally at your service."

"Did the man cause trouble?"

"Only a bit of a disturbance... I don't think there's anything in it, but I would like to have a word with him if I get a chance, so if you see him do let me know, won't you? You have my thanks."

"Yes, yes," said Sinbad wryly, "I have more of your thanks than I can ever use." He waved.

Cassim might feel guilty if he did not know how much the man savored being useful and appreciated. He simply bid good-bye and left.

He made his way towards the marketplace.

Perhaps Iago was wrong for once- he had good instincts for what was going to be a problem and what wasn't, but anyone could get things wrong now and again, particularly if operating with frayed nerves and little sleep. Perhaps, if none of the market-sellers had anything to say about the Greek man, Cassim could forget about the whole thing and go treasure-hunting like he wanted.

Why were so many people gathered around the center of the marketplace?

Even the vendors had left their booths. They gave Cassim knowing, amused looks as he pressed closer. A familiar voice rang out: "This thing? You gotta be kidding, right? It's scummy, it's broken!"

It was a bit of an open secret in the town that Iago was not exactly a typical parrot, but before today, he had never spoken clearly to anyone but Cassim outside of the shelter of the tavern. What on Earth was going on?

Cassim edged through the crowd. In the center, he found a perfectly ordinary traveling peddler, a short man wearing a large round turban. "Oh! This rare item is not a bird toy, no no! Shoo! At least it is not a toy for birds who are not paying customers!"

Iago was perched on the peddler's item counter. One claw lightly gripped the handle of an old, battered thing. Cassim could say nothing definitive about it beyond that it did have handles.

"Who says I'm not a paying customer, huh?" Cassim had always thought that it would be an attack of temper or nerves that finally did away with the charade, but Iago had the same glint

in his eye that appeared when he was winning a hand of cards.

The peddler snatched away the item. "The little tiny pea brain of a parrot cannot possibly understand the deep, lasting value and beauty of a tea-kettle book-stand!" Whatever that was in his hand, it looked like neither of those things.

Iago rolled his eyes dramatically at the crowd. "I ask you, does anyone here really want to drink tea while reading?"

"And to think," said the peddler, "this is a genuine Nimerian artifact that will triple in price within a year!"

Iago shook his head. "Sure it is, sure. Let me see here, I'll give you... three dinarii for it."

"Four!"

"A whole four dinarii?"

To Cassim's left, Zumurrud the rope-seller stepped forward shyly. Her eyes were alight. "I will give you four dinarii, sir," she said. "I can hardly afford not to!"

"Ha!" The peddler raised his arms in triumph. There was a puff of smoke, and the dubious item appeared in Zumurrud's arms. She looked delighted.

"That makes you oh for two, parrot boy!" crowed the peddler.

"The money," Iago muttered. "Take the money, bozo."

"Nothing up my sleeve!" The peddler opened his hand- four coins sat in his palm.

"It's a start," said Iago, and he ambled across the table. "What's this stupid thing, an oil lamp? Wait, an oil lamp?"

"Ah, now that is an exceptionally rare item!"

"You're not selling this thing, are you?" Iago lowered his voice but, being Iago, he was still quite audible at this distance. "Seriously, you're not selling this, are you?"

"It's a conversation piece. Many times I have told the tale-"

"Okay, got it, great, these people are in a buyin' mood. Get this out of here." He knocked the lamp off the table.

The peddler darted forward to catch it. "Well, that was rude. I hope my insurance covers angry bird damage," he said, dusting it off.

"I want to buy the lamp!" someone in the crowd yelled. Sounded like old Ahab.

"You see, you see the problem?" Iago hissed, and he fluttered across the table to grab something else. "What's this thing?"

"Ah, the unbreakable china of Alhazen!"

"I bet I can break it."

"No you cannot, that is what 'unbreakable' means!"

Iago picked up the 'unbreakable' 'china'- it looked like a small, black, shiny oblong item and was possibly a rock- and tossed it down on the surface of the table. "So far so good," he said. He rolled it around a little bit.

"You see, it is birdy-proof!"

"Is not!" Iago took the item into his claws and launched himself into the air.

"Fore!" the peddler yelled as Iago dropped the item from several feet off the ground- it hit the ground and bounced, apparently unharmed. Iago landed next to it and walked around it in a circle.

"Truly unbreakable!" the peddler called. "Guaranteed! No warranties."

"I'm not done yet, slow your roll," said Iago.

A voice rang out from the crowd- "Do your worst, bird boy!"

Iago started attacking the item with his beak.

"Wait, use this!" another voice cried, and a knife thunked into the ground next to Iago, landing point-down in the ground.

Iago jumped, but then looked into the crowd with appreciation. "Now you're talking!"

"How is that fair?" the peddler asked mildly.

Iago held down the object with one claw and started trying to pull the knife out of the ground- it was bigger than he was.

Cassim was reluctant to interrupt the show, but this could only lead to disaster. He walked forward.

Iago stopped what he was doing and peered into the knife blade. He must have seen Cassim's approaching reflection, because he turned with an appeasing look, and blocked the knife from view with his body- apart from the handle, which stuck up above his head.

"Hello," said Cassim, pleasantly.

"Oh, uh, hello there."

"What have we here?" Cassim pulled the knife out of the ground, carefully keeping the blade away from the bird, and held it up to the light. It was a fine blade. He looked out at the

crowd. "Whoever is willing to tell me that they threw a knife at this defenseless bird is welcome to have it back."

No one stepped forward.

"Very well, then." Cassim put the knife away, next to his other knife.

The peddler jumped on top of his item counter, arms thrown out wide. "Alright, it's family time! Everybody out!"

"Show's over," Iago added. "Get back to work."

Cassim took note of the peddler's odd, curly beard, and of the faint scent rising from him and his wares- pepper and mint.

And suddenly, they were in the tavern, despite not having moved a step.

"Al Sr.!" The Genie spread his arms wide, and Cassim submitted to a hug that felt like the embrace of the southern breeze itself.

They sat in a table in the corner, with Fatima watching from with a keen interest but from a safe distance (she claimed that the scent of djinn magic gave her a headache).

"You look great! You look fabulous," said the Genie, cupping Cassim's face in his large, smooth hands.

"You look good yourself," Cassim laughed.

"You know, you're aging like a fine wine?"

It was impossible to take anything the Genie said in anything other than the cheerful spirit with which it was intended. "The greatest of compliments. To what do I owe this visit? Has eternal life so bored you that you've resorted to seeking out my company?"

"Oh, oh," said the Genie, leaning forward, "I haven't been bored in years! Lately I've been living like a human. It's great! You know, everything's going so well at the palace, I was in the way..."

"You're a peddler now, are you?"

A light weight descended on Casim's shoulder, with a soft flutter of wings and a not-so-soft "A peddler that doesn't know the value of money! Genie! Everything on that table is worth twice what you're asking for it!"

"You think so, huh?" Genie asked.

"Quick lesson," said Iago. "I sold for one coin at the market. What does that tell you about how bad a merchant can get shafted?"

"That's a loaded question if I ever heard one," said the Genie. "Why don't we put a pin in that one? Now what was I talking about... oh! I didn't just come here to be insulted. I have something for you, Al Sr.- now, where did I put that thing?... Aha!"

A scroll of paper materialized, with a spray of colored bits of paper. Where either had come from, Cassim did not know.

Hey Dad,

I know you probably have a lot going on, so I'm sending this pretty far in advance. Ahmed is turning a year old in January and Jasmine and I would love to have you visit.

Love,

Aladdin

"A trip to the palace!" Iago cried, having finished reading the note just before Cassim did.

"Sounds wonderful! I can show off how much better off I am without everybody. Hey, Genie!... how do I look? I look great, right? I don't need to lose any weight before January, do I?"

The Genie tapped his fingers together. "Keep slinging those loaded questions at me and we'll have enough for a shootout at high noon."

"Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves," said Cassim, folding up the letter. "It was kind of them to invite me."

"Don't get ahead of ourselves?" Iago looked stricken. "Cassim, this is your grandkid! Why wouldn't we go?"

"There are logistic problems."

"Logistic prob- what are you talking about?"

"I am an outlaw, Iago."

"What, you're afraid of getting caught?" He threw up his wings in frustration. "Your best pal is a witch who makes disguise staffs! We have a Genie!"

"Transportation is an issue."

"A teleporting Genie! And you think your kid won't loan you the Carpet if you need it?"

"I could poof you into the palace," said the Genie. He held up one hand and wiggled his fingers. "Poof!"

Cassim smiled and shook his head. These two were, in their own ways, rather naive. "I'll think about it."

Iago held up one wing. "Genie, you tell 'em he'll be there. I'll make it happen, all right?"

"Hoo, maybe you'd better just give in now, pal," said the Genie. "He might loud you to death."

"I'm sure I'll survive." In private, he would try to make Iago see reason.

The Genie shook his head. "I hope you change your mind sooner rather than later. It doesn't feel right when Mr. McMolty is the sane one out of you two."

Iago fluttered down to stand between them on the surface of the table. He cocked his head to peer at the Genie out of one eye. "Oh, what was that? Oh, yes you do owe me something!"

"I'm not going into any shady business deals with you this time, Iago!"

"Look, look, nothing shady," said Iago, "I just need to go somewhere. Poof me into Jafar's lab." He mockingly fluttered the tips of his wings. "Poof."

"And... why?" asked the Genie.

"I concur," said Cassim. "Why?"

"Gotta check on something..."

"About yesterday?"

"Hm, well..."

"We should tell the Genie about it," Cassim said. "Perhaps he knows something. He does have knowledge beyond mortal ken."

"Does he really, though?" Iago muttered. "Look, we don't wanna bother the Genie, the Genie's busy."

The Genie sat calmly with his hands folded on the table. "No I'm not."

Cassim turned to the benevolent djinn. "A worshipper of Hades came here yesterday looking for Jafar."

"Don't ask why," said Iago, "I don't know, I wanna find out, that's why you gotta poof me into the lab."

"Hades! That's a name I haven't heard in a while," said the Genie. He rubbed his chin.

"So you've heard of him?" Iago asked.

"Heard of him! Did you ever wonder why genies can't kill anyone?"

"No, I didn't, I admit it," said Iago. "I was really just grateful."

"What about raising the dead?"

"I thought that one was you, I thought it was a morals thing."

"Nope," said Genie. "Here's something for your next trivia night, Hades banned us from tampering with the dead or the Underworld in any way." He winced a bit. "Funny story, he

didn't stop there, actually..."

"Then," said Cassim, "he really exists?"

"Well, it would be nice if he didn't, but yeah he does!" said the Genie. "I've met him face to face. If you don't believe me, who can you believe?"

"So Hades is real and he messes with genies." Iago threw his wings open wide, imploringly- who or what he was imploring Cassim didn't know. "That guy was bad news, I knew it, I could feel it. Genie, you'd better take me to that lab..."

"I think he's right, actually," said Cassim, "we ought to go."

"No," said Iago, holding up one wing- "no 'we', I'll go. It's faster that way, it's just- it's better."

"Are you sure? That sounds like a bad idea."

"No," Iago shook his head. "It's hard to get out of there quickly unless you can fly out the window. Just me. Got it?"

"...Really? Do you really want to do that?"

"Yeah. I'm just- I'm just gonna go get some water. I'll be back. I'll be back to get poofed." He flew off of the table.

"And we were having such a pleasant outing," the Genie said.

Cassim stood. "You see why I'm not certain of attending that party."

"You didn't ruin our outing."

"No, but my past can be just as inconvenient." He shook his head and frowned. "I hope he'll be all right."

The Genie raised an eyebrow. "He'll be fine if he can survive his own drama fever."

Cassim knocked on the door.

"Don't come in!" Iago squawked.

He could only want Cassim to stay away because he didn't want to be talked out of something he was in desperate need of talking out of. Cassim opened the door.

"Did I stutter?" Iago snapped, without looking up. He was walking back and forth over the table, climbing over objects without the slightest change in pace, his body held parallel to the ground, feathers fluffed, wings held slightly away from his body.

Cassim folded his arms over his chest. "Tell me why I should stay out of my own room."

"I'm trying to think in here."

"Are you thinking about doing reckless things?"

"Nnno," said Iago, in a tone that meant 'Yyyes'.

The Genie slowly materialized at Cassim's elbow.

Iago stopped pacing suddenly, looking out over the room. He spread out a wing to gesture at the surroundings. "Look at all these riches!" he said, in a maudlin tone.

The room presently contained:

The planning table, the thing currently being paced on. It was covered in writing materials, reading materials and other things of little individual value.

Cassim's comfortable-but-cheap sleeping mat, his washbasin, a simple chair for reading, and his trunk of clothes and letters- admittedly, they were very nice clothes, but they were decidedly not for sale, and the trunk that held them was plain.

Iago's washbasin/drinking bowl, perch constructed of simple wood, his beloved anti-thief box with its rather awkward-looking runes, and the overstuffed cushion he used as a bed. Fatima had fished it out of her junk closet when they first arrived three years ago, and now it was torn, shabby and had a lot of down stuck to it.

A large collection of scrolls piled up in the corner. Most were maps. A few were spells.

A small sack of copper coins. The real money was hidden under the floorboards, sewn into Cassim's clothing here and there, or invested somewhere in the town.

Discarded under the table, a chalice that neither of them had yet been able to fence, because it was ugly.

All in all, it was hardly the treasure trove of the Forty Thieves.

"I started from nothin," said Iago. "Just me and a pickpocket monkey, a couple of crazy kids in the mean streets of Agrabah."

"What about Jafar?" asked the Genie.

"I'm talking about my thief career, not my villain career! That one's over. It's done."

"Iago," said Cassim. "I am worried about you."

"Worried, why worried?" His voice was cracking. "Don't worried. I mean, don't worry."

"Again, I ask that I accompany you to Jafar's laboratory..." Mostly, he was concerned. This behavior was concerning.

But partly, he was curious. He had heard the name of Jafar here and again, and yesterday he had seen an image of the man. He had heard tales of Jafar in letters from Aladdin. But he didn't have any real sense of who Jafar was or why he had left such indelible greasy fingerprints on Iago's brain.

"No," Iago insisted. "It's nasty in there, you wouldn't like it. There's cobwebs."

"Why wouldn't you let me come with you? Am I so annoying?"

"You're not annoying. Usually."

"Is there something in there that you don't want me to see?"

"No?" Iago said. He looked down, scratching at the surface of the table with one claw. He wasn't going to damage it any more than Cassim did when he absent-mindedly carved doodles into the surface with his knives, so Cassim said nothing. "Yes? I think so?"

"Do you not trust me?"

"Not trust you? No? I mean, yes? I mean, no, I don't not trust you. I mean, yes, I do trust you..." He trailed off.

The Genie seemed a bit of a loss. He was such an honest and direct creature. He was naturally rather out of his depth when trying to communicate with someone whose eyes said Help me while his beak said Get lost.

Cassim looked back at Iago. He was standing next to a book that had been left on the table, and it was larger than he was- a great deal more durable as well.

But Iago wasn't a child. "I am against this," Cassim said heavily. "But if you really feel you must go alone, who am I to stop you?"

Iago nodded. "Fine, I'm going alone, then."

"Very well."

Iago resumed pacing, but slower. There was a muddled, confused pain in his eyes. Perhaps his own violent emotions were what he didn't want Cassim to see.

BEFORE: Looking out for me

The sun was setting as Jafar closed up shop.

A litany of complaints ran from his shoulder as he counted up money and inventory.
"...Why's that kid always have to paw at me? Do people walk up and put their hands all over you, Jafar?"

"No."

"You're sure I can't bite him without getting you fired?"

"Quite certain." He arranged a few scrolls that were visibly out of place.

"And what's with your boss?" Iago asked.

"I ask myself that every day."

"What is this place, a money laundering scheme?"

Jafar headed for the door, ducking his head to avoid hitting it on the frame on the way out.

"No, wait," Iago said quickly. "And another thing-" They were out in the world now and he had to cut himself off with a faint growl.

"I'm sure it can wait," Jafar said.

The parrot could not resist a muttered "You should be in charge!"

"Trust me... I know."

They had the misfortune to pass a news crier on the way to the palace. "Princess born!" he squalled. "Reward offered to man who sold spell to Sultana in February! Palace guards search for tall, ugly man working in magic shop! World's largest grain of sand found in woman's back yard!"

"That's called a rock," Iago muttered as they quickly walked past.

"I'm glad the royal oppression is secured for another generation," Jafar added quietly- very quietly. Iago's feathers fluffed up around his body and he began to pace back and forth over Jafar's shoulders.

The rest of the message sank in, slowly, as he walked, and when Jafar reached his home his palms were sweating, his heart was pounding, and he was barely aware of Iago anxiously calling his name.

The parrot paced back and forth over the table with his odd bobbing, rocking gait, his wings fluttering and flipping about in time with his rapid-fire speech- "You're sure? You're one hundred percent sure this was you."

Jafar mutely nodded. He himself was in a stupor of sorts, and if one of them at least hadn't been showing some reaction to things, Jafar may have lost his mind on the spot.

"If it wasn't you," Iago said, looking like he'd had a revelation, "you can lie!"

"I have proof," said Jafar slowly. "Only I know what it was that I sold to her... and once granted an audience with the Sultana, she will know my face..."

"I'll say! No one's forgettin' your face. They'll see it in their nightmares!"

Jafar did not have the energy to react to that insolence.

Iago fluttered up to him and began picking at a loose thread on Jafar's sleeve with his claws. "So what's the reward?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"We need to find out pretty quick, if you ask me. We can't figure out what to do with it if we don't even know what it is."

"Makes sense." Jafar did not stir.

Iago resumed pacing, wandering up and down Jafar's arms and over the table. He glanced at Jafar's face and away again. "Hey," he said. "I can fly, why don't I go find out for you? I'll listen to that news guy until he says something. I'll find out real quick and then I'll be back. And you're gonna be just fine!"

Jafar said nothing. The parrot vanished out the window in a flash of wings.

Jafar blinked and looked around the apartment. It seemed like a foreign landscape.

He ought to have called Iago back- the reward would obviously be money. In a life-changing amount. Iago had never flown about the city by himself and was more likely to be eaten by a cat than he was to return with useful information.

He walked to the window. Any sight of the colorful bird was long gone and Jafar wondered how long it had been since he'd flown away- Jafar's sense of time did not seem to be functioning.

The palace looked dim and distant in the fading evening light. Then, as if in an instant, it was almost entirely dark and Iago had returned, lighting on the sill next to Jafar's hand.

"You survived," Jafar said.

"Me? Yeah. And you're still alive, too. That's good. Jafar, Jafar, I found out what the reward is. The reward is anything you ask for. A favor from the Sultan, the most powerful guy in

Agrabah!"

"A favor..." If used wisely, that could be even more life-changing than a sum of money.

Iago looked at the palace and back at Jafar. He fluttered his wings. He was trembling with excitement, shifting from foot to foot and wholly unable to be still for five seconds. "Jafar, Jafar, Jafar!"

"What, what, what!"

"You oughtta ask to be the new Sultan!"

Jafar thought that a very impertinent joke and was about to say so when he realized from the look on Iago's face that this was no joke- he was actually that ignorant. Jafar ought not to forget that he was speaking with a dumb animal, after all.

Jafar did not have the energy to laugh at this idiocy. "I can't ask to be Sultan," he said instead, looking out at the palace.

"Why not?"

"No one who says 'anything' really means 'anything'."

"But that's a cheat!"

"Life is a cheat."

Iago looked away with a beaky attempt at a pout. "Okay... can we ask to live in the palace though?"

Jafar opened his mouth to say 'no'-

But then he wondered.

He wondered.

The throne room was enormous and mostly empty. The footfalls of the guards echoed as they kept in step behind Jafar with their spears at his back. Jafar was outwardly calm; the small red thing on his shoulder was rocking tensely back and forth.

A figure stood before the throne, her head bowed and her arms spread out. "And so," she was saying, "I had my servant prepare a spell for the sultana-"

Iago screamed out the cheated rage that Jafar dared not express. Suddenly, all eyes were on the two of them.

"Jafar," Morgiana said stiffly. So. She had heard of the reward too, then, and had guessed that it was purchased from her shop- or was simply making her case based on the fact that she had

a shop.

"I apologize," Jafar said, striding forward. "A parrot is not a domesticated animal. It is impossible to check his behavior completely." He bowed low to the Sultan. "My lord."

The Sultan was rather shorter and less fit than Jafar had expected. And... "What a pretty bird!" He was reaching for Jafar's shoulder.

"A-ah, your Highness," Jafar said. 'Highness' indeed. The Sultan would perhaps reach the middle of his chest when standing. "He is not an entirely tame bird and I cannot guarantee that he won't nip." He didn't trust Iago, who ought to know better than to nip but sometimes did anyway.

"Oh, I see," said the Sultan. "But he is gorgeous. Hello, pretty Polly!"

"Awk, hello," Iago said dutifully. This praise would not be good for his ego.

The Sultan positively beamed. "He can talk!"

"Only a little," Jafar said hastily. "The empty echolalia of an animal that mimics sounds without understanding their meaning."

The Sultan looked vacant. "Echo... what?"

"Your Highness," Morgiana interrupted.

"Now hold on a minute, miss," the Sultan said. "My wife was quite clear that a man sold her the spell, a tall man- and my, you are a tall drink of water, aren't you?" He chuckled.

Morgiana scowled. No doubt she had known that this was a desperate ploy when she made it.

"Does your beautiful wife dress in a brown cloak when she goes out?" Jafar asked.

"Yes, oh, such a dangerous habit, she should stop," said the Sultan.

"Does she have eyes like midnight?"

"Yes, so lovely!"

"And as a result of what she purchased from me," Jafar said delicately, "a lovely flower grew into your family... did it not?" 'Jasmine'... a tacky name.

"Why, yes!" said the Sultan. He turned to Morgiana.

"I will go now, my lord," she said quickly, and she turned to leave.

"Guards! This woman is trying to steal an honestly earned reward!"

She fled, with the guards in pursuit.

The Sultan shook his head. "I am so sorry, my boy. There are so many in this world who exist only to take advantage of others. But, but you are owed a reward! There is nothing that I can offer you that is half so precious as my Jasmine, but if I could share but a fraction of my happiness..."

This had to be a front. People this naive did not exist. The man's sheer sugariness was making Jafar's teeth ache. This was the man in charge of Agrabah?

He bowed low again.

"I say," said the Sultan, "he even bows!"

Jafar opened one eye. Iago was indeed in a sort of avian bow, with his head lowered and his eyes closed.

"I believe you've made an impression on this willful creature," said Jafar. "As for my reward, I wish only to serve you and my country, my lord. I have long wished there was more I could do for Agrabah. I would be honored to be allowed to undertake some sort of work in the palace."

"Work here? That is your reward? But of course, my lad, of course!"

Jafar was pushing thirty and there was only a bit of gray in the Sultan's beard. "A scribe, perhaps, if you will it, sire," he said. "Or the head of the royal library."

"Oh, we don't have a library." What? How did they not have a library? "But for someone as sharp as you, I think I have just a thing. The Grand Vizier is getting very old, you know. He could use an assistant. Yes, it's quite lucky that you're here! You would be perfect!"

An assistant to the Grand Vizier?

Jafar found that he was without words.

"Yes, yes!" The Sultan clapped. "You'll start right away. And of course, you'll live in the palace!"

Jafar's jaw dropped. Iago leaned over to nudge it back into place.

To The Secret Lab

The lab hadn't been touched since the last time he'd been in it, three years ago or more. Jafar's books and scrolls were scattered all over. They'd been looking for some information about... what was it, an ifrit? Something like that.

No, not an ifrit, they were looking up sand magic. He remembered Al picking up an encyclopedia. "This thing must weigh ten pounds," he'd said.

"With a weightlifting regimen like that," said the Genie, back then, "how did Jafar ever maintain those teeny tiny toothpick arms?"

"He looked like a stick bug," Al had said with a laugh. He'd opened the book and his face had gone kinda- not serious, but not laughing anymore. He'd pulled out one of Jafar's bookmarks, a long, purple tail feather.

At the time, of course they hadn't put the books back. That would have been a stupid waste of time.

Now Iago was looking at a way bigger waste of time because he was going to have to check every pile.

He was gonna be here for hours.

He looked up at the Genie, that crazy blue smoke cloud of a guy. He was still freaky as anything, still a window onto cosmic confusion, but something felt different about talking to him ever since Iago had moved out.

Not important. "Well, we'd better get to work," Iago said.

"Ah, excuse me, 'we'?" The Genie raised an eyebrow at him. "Oho, no. You had an offer of emotional support and you turned it down flat. Unh-unh."

"Oh," said Iago. That was correct. He had done that. Somehow he hadn't anticipated that maybe the Genie wouldn't hang around either... maybe he hadn't anticipated that he'd want the Genie to hang around. "Wait, hey! How am I supposed to get back home if you leave?"

"You have wings, don't you?"

"I live a hundred miles away from here! Why do you think I didn't fly myself here to begin with?"

"All right, I guess that's fair," said the Genie. "I'll wait outside the window. But I'm not staying in here with you." His tone was serious- for the Genie he was serious, anyway. "Your demons are in here, Oggs- not mine."

"I told you not to call me... that." The Genie was already gone.

Iago looked around. He'd been in here plenty of times since Jafar had bought the farm- was sold the farm, if you wanted to get technical. But he'd never been in here all alone, without even the monkey. Parrots weren't supposed to be alone, they were flock birds. They didn't do so hot on their own. And it was so quiet in here.

"Well, sooner I get started the sooner I can leave," Iago muttered- he'd blown his chance to not be alone in here, but he did have a choice about whether or not it was quiet.

He flew over the piles, looking for a good place to start reading.

The latest useless book hit the wall with a satisfying whap.

Iago landed on it and started tearing out pages. There was nothing. Nothing useful in this whole garbage heap!

"You paranoid nutcase!" Iago yelled. His voice echoed off the rocks, sounded wrong, sounded eerie. "Where are you hiding this crap?"

There were plenty of hiding places. There was, for starters, the little alcove under the experiment table where Jafar had walled himself up to sleep- Jasmine had found the sleeping mat and pillow one time when they were searching the place, and boy had she freaked out. Jasmine wasn't the squeamish type, didn't go 'ewww' over reptiles or snakes or whatever- and a good thing too- but Jafar's old stuff had brought out the recoiling side of her.

And there were other places, places in the walls. Stuff Iago didn't know about. Even he hadn't been allowed to see everything. Jafar had covered his cage with a blanket if he was going to do something secret, or if he was in a funny mood he'd put Iago in a box or a jar and just expect him not to suffocate. But all the places he knew to look, he'd looked, and there was nothing. Zip!

He looked over the chaos he'd managed in here. It had started off a mess. Now it was a disaster area. He hadn't needed to even mess with half the stuff he'd thrown around. See- parrots shouldn't be alone. A guy could get frustrated if he was on his own. A guy could start to feel a little weird- could get to feeling like any minute, Jafar might walk in.

"What is this mess?" Jafar would hiss, and Iago would say:

"You shouldn't leave me alone like this. It's been hours. Where were you? I was starting to think you'd gotten executed!"

And then Jafar would say: "Alone, are you? I was executed, Iago. And not by the Sultan."

"Yeesh," Iago said out loud, shaking out his feathers. But Jafar sure would've been mad if Iago had done this to his stuff while he was alive. He probably would have put the door back on Iago's bird cage and locked him in it.

His bird cage.

Iago looked straight up towards the ceiling. There it was, suspended from the ceiling. It wasn't bad, for a cage. Big, roomy, and the door stayed off unless Jafar was really mad at him, like he would be when he saw this mess.

The cage wasn't used as book storage, of course- Jafar had to get on a ladder to get to it, a big pain. But sometimes Iago had been in the habit of squirreling something to read up there when he couldn't sleep. He hadn't been in that cage since Jafar had shuffled off the mortal coil- with some help- so whatever he'd taken up there last was still there.

That had been five years ago.

"Must be some monster-sized dust bunnies up there," Iago said.

He just sat there a minute. His stomach didn't feel good and there was no one here to call him a jerk, a coward, selfish, whatever if he didn't go up and check the cage- which might not have a scrap of info about Greek gods in it. It might not have anything in it except dust bunnies.

Abu always said that Iago smelled like dust bunnies, whatever that meant. If Abu were here he would definitely be on the side of checking the cage. He'd definitely call Iago a jerk, a coward, selfish, a lot worse.

"If a bird acts like a jerk and no one is there to call him one," said Iago, "is he still a jerk?" And then he rolled his eyes and took off into the air. He'd always wonder if anything was in the cage if he didn't check, was the thing.

What would've happened if they'd just left the palace that night, if Jafar had never seen that 'Prince Ali' had the lamp? Maybe Jafar would still be alive. Maybe he wouldn't be. Maybe Iago wouldn't be alive either. Or maybe they'd both be alive and well and out in the tropics somewhere. They could have a nice little place on an island. Jafar could stay inside and complain about the sun and read books and ignore the beach and plot revenge.

Iago looked into the cage. He wasn't a big fan of cages. The one good thing about them was that they kept other things out- but then they kept you in. Not a good tradeoff. This one didn't have a door though. Sure, it would be fine.

Iago slowly stepped inside. The bottom of the cage was littered with feathers, crappy raggedy feathers covered with stress bars.

He looked up. There was a scroll up there, wedged behind a perch. It was easier to climb the cage bars than try to fly to it- the base of the cage was really narrow. He started pulling himself up-

Who was that?!

Iago squawked. The mirror attached to the cage bars on the other side squawked back at him.

Stupid! Stupid! Of course he had a mirror in his cage! Forgetting it was there was no excuse!

The parrot in the mirror glared contemptuously back at him. Hey, apart from the glare, though, that didn't look like Iago. That guy in the mirror looked downright sleek. Pretty fit, too, for a bird. The arch of his keel bone meant he would always look pretty round, and that was what he said whenever someone told him to lose weight, but now there wasn't any flab over the top of that keel bone. And there were no stress bars on those feathers. They were gorgeous. Sure, if he raised a wing there was a little bit of a mess underneath from what that jerk of a cat had done to him yesterday, but apart from that...

Iago's reflection cast a suspicious eye over him. Well, it had to be him, from the sour look on his face.

The Hand of Midas gleamed on his chest, half-buried in vibrant red down. That wasn't Jafar's pet parrot in that mirror...

A flicker of motion over his reflection's shoulder.

Iago dove for the bottom of the cage and zipped out of the bottom. He flew over to the big globe thingy Jafar had hanging from the ceiling and perched on it.

Just a rat, probably, or something. He was freaking himself out for no reason-

He looked back. There were two things moving down there. Two... things. One of 'em was a blue-green color, and the other was purple. They were both looking up at him with giant goggle eyes. They had horns. They had long, pointed tails.

Iago broke the silence. "Who the hell are you people?!"

There was a moment of complete silence. And then...

"Uh, I don't think this is... s'posed ta... happen?" The purple one had a froggy, uncertain, crackling voice.

They could talk.

"Maybe we should just ignore him," the other one hissed- he sounded anxious and nerdy.

Iago cleared his throat. His heart was going whack-whack-whack against his keel.

"Do you realize," he said, "that you're trespassin' in the royal palace?"

He sensed weakness.

The nerdy skinny guy looked back and forth from Iago to his more portly companion. "The royal palace, yeah- what- what's he gettin' at, huh?" The horns sprouting up over his forehead were pretty long, but they had a goofy rabbit-ears look to them. Good luck getting a bird to hold still long enough for a headbutt anyway.

The purple guy's eyes narrowed. "I think it's uh... a threat?" He had a whole lot of sharp teeth, that one, but he wasn't even baring them. Also, he was all the way down there.

"A threat? Nah, I'm just letting you know," said Iago. He fluffed his feathers up and smoothed them back down. It put the feathers back in order and made his skin tingle pleasantly. "I'm not the one you'd need to worry about anyway. The, uh, the last I knew the princess around here kept tigers. But I haven't seen her in a while, maybe she's onto lions now."

He looked over the two guys. They were naked and covered in bald skin, except for a patch of fur on the head of one of them. They each had horns that looked purely decorative and long skinny tails that ended in a small pointed club. Bipedal, with short little legs and weak-looking arms. Not your typical animal, and they each spoke in fluent human language, so most likely they were magic. Could they have been sealed up in bottles or something? Iago had broken a few bottles earlier just to hear the glass smash against the wall. Maybe he should've checked each one for imps or ifrits first.

"See," said Iago, as the two weirdoes kept anxiously eyeing each other, "I'm not like the princess- she has a temper on her, you know. I don't. I'm a reasonable bird. Maybe we can figure out what you two need without involving Her Royal Tigerness."

The blue guy leaned in close to whisper to the purple guy. Iago could just make out: "- shouldn't be talking to a mortal. Remember Sisyphus?"

"Oh boy, do I," said Purple, and to Iago he called: "Shut your yap, bird, we don't talk to mortals when we're on a job, got it?"

"My yap? My yap?" So they were immortal and they were on a job, were they? These were no bottle imps. "I'm hurt, really, I'm offended. Look, I don't wanna chat, I just wanna talk a little business- I won't get in your way."

"Aren't you... scared of us?" the skinny imp ventured.

"You?" Scared of these chumps? He confined himself to saying: "Nah, I ain't scared. I don't scare easy." He did, though. Just not when he was talking to a couple of losers. So... they were on a job, and these two did not seem like they were in charge. So someone else was probably in charge. "Your boss ain't such a jerk that he won't let you have a few words with a helpful bird, is he?"

"Ohoho, yes he is," the skinny one said with a full-body shudder. "You have no idea..."

Aha, bingo. There was a boss. The boss was the one with the potential to be a problem, then. Maybe not a big problem if this was the kind of quality staff he hired, though.

"Ahem," said Purple, stepping forward and giving Iago a look that was challenging, but backed up by body language that was meek, "We have nothing to say to you, mortal!"

"Okay, okay," said Iago. "That's your problem, really, not my problem. I guess I'll just watch you guys work then."

"Why don't you, uh... fly away?" Purple asked with a suspicious squint.

"Me? Well, that's my bird cage behind you." They might notice that the implication that he lived here was a little bit of a conflict with his statement that he hadn't seen the princess in a while, but he had a feeling that they wouldn't. He could explain that away if they did. "You're intruding a little, yes you are. Thanks for askin'. But that's fine. I'll just wait, you know, preen... think about birdseed..." He turned to attend to his feathers, make sure they all lined up right. Just in case he had to fly away fast.

He heard the bunny-ears-horns guy whisper: "Should we... should we kill him?"

"Uh, we're not... usually... s'posed to do that without permission?"

Now, it was never a good idea to dismiss a death threat out of hand, and Iago had hollow bones and was a third of their sizes and knew better than to underestimate stupid and all that, but they were so clearly uncomfortable with the idea of killing him that he didn't feel a pressing need to flee just yet.

The two losers began to crawl over the book piles, awkwardly looking up at Iago every so often.

"Don't mind me, boys," he said, studying his primary feathers. "I'm just waitin' for you to finish so I can get back to doin' bird stuff."

They were definitely looking for something in the books.

The lab had one window, and it had been boarded up as long as Iago could remember. The boards were still there, and the spaces between them were way too small for these two to fit through- Iago could fit, but just barely. Plus, the Genie was supposedly out there, although Iago wouldn't put it past him to wander off. But on the other wing, even lost in thought and not paying attention, Iago was pretty sure he would have heard the door open.

"So you guys can teleport, huh?" he said. "I'm jealous. Really, I am. I have to flap like a maniac to get anywhere."

"I wish we could teleport," Bunny-Ears said miserably.

"Uh, how we got here is none of your business, Polly," the purple guy said.

"No, it ain't, you're right. I'm not in charge of palace security." He yawned. "They don't like me, actually. Sometimes I get in trouble. Even just coming in and out of this place here, sometimes I run into the Genie at the window."

"Well, he doesn't notice a couple of mice coming in and out," said Purple, triumphantly.

"We have a mouse problem? That tiger's getting lazy in his old age."

"Well, right now you d- I mean- never mind, bird boy!"

"Sure, sure." Iago didn't know what that meant, the mice thing. Those guys sure weren't mice. If anything they looked like huge beetles, moving around over the piles down there.

He heard a nervous remark: "How often do you think Aladdin comes in here?"

"All the time," said Iago. "Does that worry you?"

"Uh, uh, nnnno," said the purple guy.

"Well, if you wanna get home early I might know where to find whatever it is you're lookin' for."

Bunny-Ears glared up at him. "And what's in it for you, pal?"

Oho, he thought he was getting smart, huh? Adorable. Iago turned away to rearrange his tail feathers. One of them was still a little bit chewed towards the tip and he had to keep fixing it. It would stay wrecked like this until his next molt, probably. Wonderful. "You guys don't like Aladdin, do ya?" he said. "Not friends?"

"What's it to you, uh... punk?" the purple guy stammered.

"Well, you know. A lot of people aren't too fond of that kid these days. The hero thing makes you a lot of enemies. 'Specially if you take it a little too far." He and Al really and truly didn't get along on some stuff. Iago let a little of that old festering resentment work its way into his voice. Not too much of it- just a little.

"So this is a... revenge thing?" Purple guessed.

"I had a cushy gig goin' on. He ruined it. But enough about me, we're not here to talk about me, are we?"

Blue guy was wringing his hands, but his face was open. These two, they looked like they thought they understood now. Little guys like them, running ragged for their boss- who wasn't here risking his neck, whoever he was- well, they probably knew about resentment. "Do you, uh..." the blue guy ventured. "Do you know if there's anything here about a guy named Hades?"

"Whosies?" Iago asked lightly, while stuffing down a sudden attack of heartburn.

"Hades? Big, tall, intimidating guy, dresses in black... flaming hair?"

Iago didn't know what Hades looked like. Nothing in the book of myths had described him. But these guys, they knew what Hades looked like. That had certain implications.

"Uhh-" He cleared his throat. "Well, you see, uh..." He fluttered off of his perch, skimming through the air to land at their feet. They'd be more comfortable if they were looking down at him instead of up, and the cool breeze of flight calmed him down a little. Reminded him that he could get gone whenever he wanted to. "Boy, it's a good thing you asked me. That stuff is all hidden in the walls. You would have wasted hours looking for it in the stacks!"

"The... walls?"

"Yeah, this room is full of hiding places." He flew over to one of the ones he knew about- he tapped the right spot with his beak and a scroll popped out from between the wall stones. "This isn't what you're looking for, it's just Jafar's secret hair-growth potion recipe. Stuff doesn't work, either. See, I don't know where most of the hiding places are, though. Here's the thing- I'm a bird!" He held up his wings for inspection. "I don't have your nimble little... imp fingers." They didn't challenge him on the assumption that they were imps, and Iago risked another guess. "You wanna help me out, or are you gonna make Hades wait?"

"We'd better not make him wait," said Blue Boy, doing what was either a fear dance or a pee dance.

Iago said nothing for a little bit as he watched the two imps grope the walls. Hades. They were servants of Hades. They were- they were stupid! Who was Hades if this was his hired help? Was he just some chump? Or maybe he was one of those high-risk, high-reward types. Like that guy who hung out with Abis-Mal to point him at everything like a chaos gun. Never really worked out for him, did it?

One of the imps hit a trigger point with a loud click and a knife came shooting out of the wall. It grazed the first guy's scalp, the blue-green guy, and shot across the wall to land square in the purple one's back.

Iago held up both wings uselessly and stared as both guys sent up a petulant yowl, as if they'd stubbed their toes. There was no blood. Both of them were just... empty. And both of them regrew their skin as he watched.

"Hoo," Iago said in a squeaky, cracking voice. "No harm done, right kids?"

"You did that on purpose," Bunny-Ears whined.

"On my honor," which did not exist, "I did not know that was there." He hadn't exactly not suspected booby traps, there was a reason why he hadn't explored the walls too much himself, but he hadn't thought that would happen. "Look, why are you whining? That obviously didn't kill you!"

"You'd be surprised what you can live through," the imp sniffed.

"Would I, though?" Iago asked. He folded his wings behind his back. "If you don't like this, you can always go back to the Underworld empty-handed. Would Hades like that?"

The two imps cringed, and when they finished cringing, they went back to searching.

"Oh, Oggie-bird?"

That was the Genie, at the window.

Both imps turned their heads in unison. Freaky.

"Let me handle this," Iago told them. He headed for the window.

The Genie peered through it at him. He looked antsy.

"Listen," said Iago. "My name is not Oggie-bird. That's too cute. I am not cute. I'm mean and I'm nasty."

"Fine, Iago," said the Genie. "Look, I didn't say anything when you started doing a one-parrot show of Jafar's greatest hits earlier, but you are officially freaking me out, man!"

Had he been having his mental conversations with Jafar out loud? Apparently he had. Apparently the Genie had heard. That was embarrassing. Also embarrassing: it looked like the Genie thought Iago was voice-acting both imps for fun.

Iago could enlighten him on the matter, but should he? The Genie was unpredictable. The Genie was honest. The Genie was loud and flashy. The Genie wasn't sneaky, he wasn't stealth.

"Sorry, sorry," he said. "I'll just be a few more minutes. Go ahead and take a coffee break if you need one."

"Maybe I'll grab a glass of water."

"Whatever you want." Iago could use some water. He'd been here a while.

He dove back down into the room, coming in for a landing a safe distance away from the two imps.

"Ignore that guy," said Iago. "He's just a friend."

They were staring him down.

"Okay," said Iago, "my friend is a genie. Your friend is the Greek god of the Underworld. You wanna start somethin' with me?"

Purple squinted at him. "He called you, uh... Iago?"

"You're the treacherous parrot!" Bunny-Ears babbled.

Iago backed up. "Whoa, whoa! You've heard of me?" Why did the servants of a death god know Iago by name? Not just in a vague way, not just knowing that Jafar had owned a pet bird, but by name? By name and by reputation?

"Jafar told us you're why he's in the Underworld!"

"He's told that story like fifteen times?!" Purple added.

"Jafar?" he asked, his chest heaving. "Jafar- talks to you?"

"We can't get him to stop!" Purple complained.

Get a grip, feathers, Iago told himself. "So you- you know who I am. Because Jafar told you?"

"Yeah, we know who you are!" Bunny-Ears walked up and pointed in Iago's beak. "You're a lyin' scumbag!"

"You've been conning us, haven't you?"

"Uh, uh-" Iago backed up. There was no harm in letting them see him sweat a little- no harm in letting them feel like they had the upper hand. Also, he couldn't help it anyway. "Me?"

"There's nothing here, is there?" Bunny-Ears snapped.

It took a lot of doing, or a really stupid mark, to pull off 'I was lying before but now I ain't, honest. There's nothing stopping me from lying a slightly different way now, but I'm not lying. Really.' Looking scared, looking like they had him where they wanted him- that would help. Hopefully.

"Okay, here's the thing," Iago said breathlessly. "Jafar-" Jafar, who was alive. No, dead. But alive after death. "Jafar hid some good loot in here somewhere, I know he did! I can't get it! I can't do the thing where a knife hits me and I'm all better the next minute! If you help me, you can have... some. Of the treasure. I'll at least let you look at it!"

Jafar had told them he was greedy, he hoped. He hoped Jafar had told them he was selfish and short-sighted, too.

"No way, pal!" the purple guy said with an emphatic sweep of his tiny hands. "You're tryin' to keep us here so your pal Aladdin will come in and kick our asses, aren't you?"

"Maybe! I do love watching people get their asses kicked for me!"

"No way, we're out of here!"

The other one flipped an angry, sarcastic salute. "See ya, sucker!" And then they were both... bugs. Moths. Shape-shifters! Of course! That was how they got in, they'd literally been mice! They flew towards the window. Iago wondered if they knew parrots didn't eat bugs or if they were just taking a really stupid risk.

And they were gone. The room was empty except for the moonlight. Moonlight! He really had been here a while. And maybe it was time to get the hell out of here.

Iago looked around the room one last time, the mess he'd made. There really were treasures, but he was pretty sure they were all cursed, and Iago wasn't so good at spellcasting that he could break a hidden curse in the split second before it hit. He spread his wings.

He looked at the scroll that was still wedged up in his birdcage.

After all that crap, he'd rather not go home empty handed. He flew up into the cage and tugged the scroll out of its hiding place. What were the odds?

He unrolled the scroll and Greek writing jumped out at him. His heart slammed up into his throat.

What were the odds, indeed?

Iago folded the parchment up real small and wedged it into his collar. Now he could leave.

BEFORE: Servants and flunkies

Chapter Notes

This is going to be the last chapter for a while because this marks the end of the part of the story that is actually finished and not just a chaotic collection of scenes. I am not sure when I will be able to resume updates.

As a reminder, I wrote this story last year for July's NaNoWrimo, and I don't think I've done any major edits to it since about October. I want to complete it, but life keeps getting in the way.

I'm very grateful to everyone who's left kudos or commented.

Jafar carefully slid the bolt out of the gate and walked into the menagerie.

What a monument to wealth and excess this place was... an indoor garden, with a sky-blue ceiling so high that one could think one was outside. Tigers growled, peacocks cried and birds chirped in the distance as Jafar wound his way through the lush foliage. It was a tediously long walk to the birdcage...

Someone was already here.

Jafar instinctively stepped behind a tree, even though he had every right to be here. Ever since coming to live at the palace, he had found in himself a growing tendency towards caution. Something about living among people who could have one executed at a moment's whim without consequences brought that out in him.

He peered out from his hiding place. Even from the back, and even wasted by disease, the Sultana had a lovely figure.

She was opening the door of the bird cage. All of the birds were gathered at the back out of arm's reach. Avoiding her, perhaps...

Or were they avoiding something else? Jafar had noticed that a certain occupant of the cage seemed to unfailingly be on the other end of it from all of the other birds.

The Sultana withdrew her hand and closed the cage. She'd taken out a bird, and that wasn't a canary.

"Good morning," the Sultana said.

"Awk. Good morning."

"I hope you slept better than I did."

Iago frowned silently up at her for a moment before ducking his head, perhaps as a show of deference. It apparently made an impression on the Sultana, who began to stroke the back of his neck.

"How brazen," she said, sitting in the bench at the side of the cage- placed there for the benefit of people who were entertained by looking at birds. Her chest heaved and her skin glistened. Dark smudges under her eyes marred her complexion. She was out of breath merely from the act of opening and closing the cage, and the hand the parrot rested on was trembling though Iago did not weigh more than a pound.

He crawled up her arm to sit on her shoulder, and her empty hand fell to her side.

Her dark eyes turned up to Jafar, who was now close enough for the shadow he cast to brush her leg. He saw no reason to stay away.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," he said.

"Jafar. Good morning." She smiled weakly. "You've caught me stealing your bird."

"What's mine is yours, milady. If his company is a comfort to you, spend as much time with him as you wish."

"No, no, I won't take him from you." She held her hand to her shoulder and Iago stepped onto it.

Jafar held out his own hand and their fingers brushed as she reached out to transfer the lazy thing to a new perch. Iago was well able to fly to Jafar's shoulder on his own- he didn't need to make a dying woman cart him around.

Her touch was clammy. Jafar stepped back, mindful of contagion. "Milady, you do not look well. Ought I to call an attendant?"

"No, absolutely not," said the Sultana. "I will not be taken from my animals as I have been taken from my daughter." She closed her eyes, drawing a labored breath. "Forgive my outburst. I would never forgive myself if I were to pass my disease to Jasmine. I know I must never see her until I'm cured."

"Quite," said Jafar.

"You must have a great deal of work to do," she said. "Please don't let me keep you from it."

"Milady." Jafar bowed.

"And I'm sure you have work to do too, Iago," she said wryly to his shoulder- the parrot must be bowing as well, he had learned that royals lapped up that trick. "You're Jafar's right-hand man, after all."

Jafar stood. "May I ask how you learned his name?" Jafar had not shared it with her at any point.

"Well, you trained him to say it, didn't you?" the Sultana asked.

Jafar eyed the bit of red fluff on his shoulder. Iago was sitting with his feathers ruffled up all around his body and his eyes closed. "Yes, I suppose I did."

"You must have worked with him for hours. He's very well behaved."

"Is he?" Jafar droned.

Iago opened one reptilian yellow eye, and closed it again.

The morning light made their surroundings pale and vague. Very few people stirred in the palace this early and the halls were deserted.

"You've been worming your way into the upper echelons of society, have you?" Jafar hissed.

Iago's voice was hardly pleasant at the best of times- now it had roughened into a phlegmy croak. "Uh, she thinks I'm cute or somethin'. I don't know why."

"Neither do I," Jafar droned. So the queen of the entire nation was of the intellectual tier that thought a fat, angry bird was 'cute'. How delightful.

Iago usually wandered back and forth over Jafar's shoulders, but today he sat huddled in one spot. "She's a nice broad, but I think she gave me her cold."

"You had better hope that she didn't. She has far worse than a cold. What have you said to her?"

"Nothin'."

What a brazen liar. It was almost admirable. "She knew your name," said Jafar.

"Oh, that... I guess I said my name when she asked... kind of a stupid pet trick thing. Lots of parrots can say their names. She thought it was adorable, by the way." He yawned. "Look, it's nothin', she talks to me, she pets me, she puts me back and I go back to sleep." He covered his face with his wing. "Until those damn canaries start singing. Jafar, I think I'm dyin'."

"You are not, don't get my hopes up."

Iago sniffed loudly and said: "How much time do you have today?"

"Very little," said Jafar. "Let's not waste it."

"Where we goin'?"

"You will see where we are going shortly." They had reached the room, and no one was about. "Behold," Jafar said. He pulled on the rope.

Nothing happened. Iago squinted dully at the rope. "Did I miss somethin'?"

Jafar took a few steps to the left. "Nothing happens when I pull that one," he covered. "But this one has a secret." He pulled on it. The wall slid open. Yes, good.

"Oh, okay," Iago rasped. It would not have killed him to sound a bit more impressed.

Jafar entered, carefully closing the wall behind him.

"It's dark in here," Iago mumbled.

"Dark for secrecy." Jafar ascended the stairs to the heavy oak door at the top and opened it. Together, they stood in the secret tower. A space twice that of both of the rooms in Jafar's old apartment combined, dimly lit by one window and containing adequate shelving for the extensive library that Jafar had been forced to pack away into an unopened trunk up to now. And no one knew it was here.

Jafar threw his arms out. "Behold!"

Iago made a throat-dredging noise. "It's a nice, uh... empty room."

"Oh I beg your pardon, I had forgotten that nothing less than the royal garden is good enough for you these days!"

"I don't wanna be in the garden either. You know," said Iago, "our little apartment was kinda nice, really. It was cozy."

Jafar rolled his eyes. He had only himself to blame if he'd thought a bird would understand the implications of this space- and this bird in particular, this bird who was never satisfied, it seemed. "May I ask whose idea was it to live in the palace to behind with?" Mindful of contagion, he moved Iago to the empty table, the one piece of furniture in the room. Or he tried to- Iago stepped obediently onto his hand but once brought to the table he simply sat there and did not step off.

"I guess that's fair," Iago said. "You could have told me no. You tell me no a lot."

"I have reasons, I assure you." Jafar pushed his hand forward a little as a signal that Iago should step off of it. The signal went unheeded. "But, in any event, I shall soon be sleeping here," he said, "not in the servant's quarters." If Iago was forced to contend with that hovel instead of the paradiscal environs of the menagerie garden, maybe then he'd have a right to complain. "Then, there will be no need for you to spend nights in the menagerie and therefore no need for you to whine about it."

"Really?" Iago looked up at him with fawning admiration in his eyes. "You mean it? Can I stay here now?"

"No, not yet, it's unfurnished. As you so astutely pointed out." Jafar finally gave up and pushed Iago off of his hand. His small body was quite hot. "And now you shall keep your germs to yourself." Jafar had enough to contend with without getting the flu. Unlike some, he would not have the luxury of sitting around all day sleeping it off.

"Fine, fine. That's fair. Put me in with a bunch of germy finches every night and blame me when I get the plague, that's okay."

"Hush." Jafar walked a few feet away. "This sanctuary is the start of a new era for us. Finally, I shall have adequate space to practice my sorcery." The apartment had been too small. An errant spell could be lethal without enough space to avoid it.

"Instead of just talkin' about it, huh?"

"Yes, instead of just talking about it!" He sighed. "But for the time being I must return to wait on that... doddering fool."

Iago coughed wetly.

"And you," said Jafar, "are going back to the menagerie."

"The menagerie?" Iago spread his wings in a nervous fluttering gesture and re-folded them. "Okay, so, I had a thought-

Jafar tapped his foot. "I'm sure I have no idea what you could mean."

"I'd be quiet," Iago whined.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Jafar asked him. "I am no longer sitting at my leisure in an empty shop. I can't simply bring my pet with me everywhere I go in the palace all day, and I'm too busy to entertain you, in any case." He wondered how good Iago's memory was. They had had to have this conversation quite a few times.

Iago winced. "You wouldn't have to entertain me, I'd just sit on your shoulder, I'd probably take naps most of the time, I-" He began to cough, and turned away, covering his beak with his wing.

"You shan't cough in my ear all day, Iago!"

"I won't cough, I'll cover my beak, I'll be good!"

"No," said Jafar. "Absolutely not."

"I can stay here! I know it's unfurnished, but I'll just sit here!" He looked desperate. "Hey, hey! How do you think they'll like you around here if your pet bird starts an epidemic in the menagerie, huh? I'll start an epidemic! I'll do it!"

Jafar shook his head. In truth, he did not want Iago breathing viruses into his face for the entire time it took to walk to the menagerie from here. "Fine," he said.

"Oh, thanks, Jafar! Really, I mean it, I'm grateful!"

"Whatever." Jafar walked away.

A whine on his way out- "Jafar? Before you go can you leave me some water? My throat's on fire."

"I'll return with a water dish if I have time," Jafar said.

"Oh, thank you! I won't ask for anything else, I swear! Uh- well, actually-"

"What?" Jafar demanded, without looking back.

"Oh... never mind, just the water," Iago said.

"That's what I thought." Once the day's work started, he might not be allotted a break. Iago would survive a few hours without water. He would certainly opt to be thirsty for a time over being run ragged all day, if given the choice.

That bird didn't know how good he had it.

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