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CALIFAR

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PROLOGUE: THE TALE OF THE SCEPTER

It had no name, and no need of one. But humans, who have the need to label such things, would call it an Ifrit, a demon of fire and one of the races of jinn that live among mankind. It was born anew in each strike of lightning on the earth, and in the ozone sparks of electrical machines. It fanned out from plumes of smoke that wafted over the dead and dying on countless battlefields, and it danced in the yellow and blue flames of birthday candles and cooking fires. It wavered in the gun smoke and flashes at Gettysburg, and it flowed with streams of sluggish vapor over Byzantium, Carthage and Rome.

And it was hungry.

And always it watched and waited for an opportunity to become flesh, to invade a human host and for a time to clothe itself in mortal skin. This is the way of some demons: to fall in love with the wearing of a human body. So it was with this Ifrit, having tasted humanity.

The demon hovered over the face of the waters, just off the smoking bow of a large, wooden sailing ship. Wisps of oily smoke streamed out across the waves as men ran across the deck and worked to extinguish a blaze that had sprung up suddenly in the galley. If the demon heard their cries of alarm, it paid no heed.

The ship was not its concern, merely its conveyance. Men shouted to one another, cursing the flames and the ill luck that could cost them their lives, but the Ifrit ignored the men's cries as it peered below the lapping waves, past cobia, grouper and sole, to the oyster bed at the bottom of the shallow sea. Satisfied, the Ifrit pulled back to its perch in the heat of the galley stove as the sailors brought the blaze under control. But the ship had lanterns, and lanterns were eyes. It settled itself to wait and watch.

"Captain Kallos, sir," the first mate reported, "the fire is out." The captain nodded and

surveyed the burned galley and the grim faces of the men. But the damage was light: it would not threaten their harvest or their lives. The captain had lived through worse.

“Very good. We’ll fish for our supper after the day’s work. Give the divers the all clear to descend. Organize repairs; there’ll be double-shifts today and we’ll rest on the morrow.”

The rough and dark deckhands brought out odd-looking diving bells, metal and wood tent-barrels like large, inverted drinking cups, open at the bottom and weighted with sand bags. These were lowered on thick ropes from the sides of the cedar ship, sent down with their precious cargo of air to the rocky bottom. Skin divers leapt into the sea and followed the ropes downward, swimming out along the floor to harvest oysters and then returning to the diving bells to replenish their air.

One of the divers, skilled in his trade as was his father before him, held his breath to swim along the seabed. On instinct he chose a large, tan oyster from among the many others, wrenched it from its resting place and returned it to his diving bell. At length the bell was raised to the surface, where the diver handed his basket of plucked oysters to the boatmen before descending to continue the work.

Within one of these oysters there rested a Marid, a jinni of the water just as the Ifrit was a jinni of fire and smoke. And while the Ifrit was drawn to humans and fire and land and was full of thunderous thoughts and lightning devilry, this Marid was a creature of calm ebb and flow and slow dreaming, drawn to water and cold and dark and the denizens of the sea. She—for the Marid thought of itself as a she—had grown tired of filling the oceans and had pulled herself tightly together to sleep within the oyster’s embrace. The oyster, reacting as oysters do to any small foreign presence, began to deposit layers of glistening nacre. After several years a perfectly round pearl had formed around the Marid.

The sleeping Marid might yet have escaped back to the sea but for the presence of a wizard. This servant of a far-off Babylonian king was stationed on the ship to inspect pearls as the oysters yielded their treasure. And he was not happy: the nautical journey had been punishment for displeasing his king.

“Oddballs and grindings, the lot of them,” complained the wizard to the captain in frustration. They had sailed in and out of nearby ports for several months already, picking through the oyster beds that the wizard identified as most promising. “There’s not a second sight in any of your men—these divers couldn’t sense a donkey’s tail.”

“And if I had any sense I’d not be looking for pearls,” the captain retorted with a snort. “I’d rather search for the waters of life. That’s where the real treasure lies.”

“Bah. There’s no such thing. The mages and alchemists would have discovered it long ago.”

The captain laughed. “I am not so sure, sir wizard. I’ve sailed many seas, and the world looks plenty large to me—large enough to hold many wonders.” He motioned to one of the deckhands to pull over another basket of oysters. The burly laborer dumped a large woven basket onto the deck, while another finished sweeping the rejected shells and their inhabitants back into the sea. “Let’s hope today’s harvest improves our haul, or we may be looking for new work.”

The wizard didn’t answer the captain: he extended his senses across the latest group of oysters, sweeping up and down and through the giant pile to find any with usable pearls without opening each mollusk. Suddenly, he caught his breath. “Worlds’ end! Bring that enormous one to me!” He pointed to an oversized oyster with a perfectly banded shell. “There! That’s the one—quick!”

The captain cocked his eyebrows as the excited wizard breathed heavily and bounced up and down on his toes. “Found something special, mage?” He grabbed a lantern from a large iron

hook and moved toward the wooden table. Some of the crew gathered round the captain to look over the wizard's shoulder.

From within the shining lantern flame the Ifrit likewise watched the scene, but its effect on the flickering lantern light remained unnoticed.

The deckhand picked up the oyster that the wizard had indicated and produced a thick-bladed oyster knife from his belt. With a quick and practiced movement of his rough hands, he slipped the shucking knife into the shell and slid it upward to cut the powerful muscle keeping the mollusk clamped shut. As the shell fell open they gasped—wizard, captain, deck hand and first mate alike.

Most of the pearls harvested on that trip ordinary: a few round, some drop-shaped, oval or pear, but most baroque and lumpy with imperfections and destined for pearl dust, cosmetics, paints or aphrodisiac potions. But when the wizard spied the jewel in the tan oyster, this queen of pearls, he saw at once its impossibly rare value and perfection. The pearl was enormous and white, a perfect sphere, and its luster exceeded that of any other—it glowed with an internal light that illuminated the faces of the boatmen arranged like a halo around the wizard's oyster table.

“Stand back,” commanded the wizard, and despite their amazement they all took several steps back, even the captain. “A presence—a trapped and sleeping power—lies within this pearl.”

“Of what nature, sir?”

“I cannot fathom. But I know enough to treat such demons with caution.” The wizard summoned all his considerable strength and began a binding spell unintelligible to the crew—an ancient incantation handed down in secret from wizard to wizard through each generation.

“There is danger here,” the wizard said as he labored over the large, white orb, which pulsed

with life like a slow heartbeat.

“What sort of danger?” the captain asked in concern. “Should we send it back to the sea?”

The wizard had broken into a heavy sweat as he strained to contain the spirit within the pearl and did not answer. He knew enough of the ancient lore to fear the power that he had bound into the pearl, and so he poured more and more of his own energy into the binding spells; first to help calm the spirit and slow its inevitable awakening, and then to prevent it from breaking free. The toll on the wizard was severe, and as he finished he collapsed shaking to the deck. As the wizard was carried off to his quarters, he admonished the captain in a hoarse voice: “Take care with the pearl...keep it locked away...until we can have it transferred to a gold-lined box.” The captain thought these instructions odd, but knew better than to argue with a wizard of the king.

The Marid awoke slowly, in a foggy and dreamlike haze, to find herself trapped and bound within the pearl, and having spent her existence filling entire oceans, this peering outward from a single vantage point was a new experience. A jinni does not have human emotions, but the Marid experienced feelings like amazement and wonder as she observed the voyage through a milky lens the changing scenery. The confinement continued however, as the valuable pearl was brought safely off the boat and placed into an exquisite mahogany and satin case lined inside with lead and outside with thinly beaten gold.

The finest jewelers and smiths of the king created a royal scepter of great design, a long and magnificent staff of office, wrought of silver and gold and encrusted with rare and priceless gems topped with the most priceless of all: the glowing, enormous pearl. But the trapped spirit had developed frustration and fear at her inability to break free of the binding enchantment, and by the time the scepter was presented to the appreciative king, the Marid had become incensed, and her anger radiated outward in invisible waves.

Over the next few years the king exhibited increasingly odd and erratic behavior. It was rumored that he danced with invisible beasts, and that he fell in love with the stars and refused to see his subjects during the daytime. He became reclusive and did not bathe. It was whispered that he boiled to jelly the eyes of his servants so they could not spy on him. The wizard who had bound the spirit into the pearl was summoned back to the palace and executed. Many others lost their lives, and the kingdom began to suffer unrest and unhappiness. Finally the nobles of the court, in fear for their lives and positions, murdered the king with deadly poison hidden in aspic and served with his supper, then promptly and smoothly arranged the succession of a suitable and mentally stable member of the royal family.

But the tainted scepter proved too strong for each new ruler to withstand, and one by one they all succumbed to strange fits of madness, and often-grotesque illnesses. Their limbs contorted like the roots of the olive tree; their skin erupted in blisters. Their children were born with extra limbs, or none at all. One claimant to the throne, a distant cousin, was elevated to queen after proving that she had the correct number of fingers and toes; however, within a few months an additional mouth was heard speaking in the region of her stomach. And while this second mouth spoke as clearly as could be expected from beneath her royal gown, it spoke in such vile and mocking tones that it made the court jester turn away in disgust.

In time the people took matters into their own hands. The brief but violent revolution put an end to the monarchy; palaces were destroyed, statues and sacred urns were broken, and jewels and baubles great and small were smashed and looted. A kingdom vanished; other conquerors moved in.

No one would ever know the cause of the years of madness, and no one discovered the secret of the king's great scepter and the strange power that drove its possessors insane. The scepter

disappeared, melted down for its individual jewels. The giant and lustrous white pearl was lost and none knew its fate.

The Ifrit knew, but what an Ifrit knows no other can discern.

It had no concern for the plight of the Marid; it had experienced similar events many times and had always eventually prevailed. No confinement can withstand eternity, and a jinni can afford eternal patience. The Ifrit hungered again to experience human life; it had that one powerful desire that drove it to return to humanity like a mantis to its mate.

And if a spirit can be said to have concrete thoughts, this was its conclusion as it snapped its attention away from the pearl toward another time, another place, another world:

Humans, like oysters, are best consumed fresh.