



A Molten Metal Thread

by Nina Kirik Hoffman

When I got home from work at Adult and Family Services and tossed my keys in the woven basket on the little table by the apartment door, I noticed the smell. Patchouli. I've hated it since I was young, ages ago. My mother had worn that scent when she went out manhunting, and the men she caught using that scent as a lure were people of low character and bad behavior.

That scent and light spilled from the living room into the front hall where I stood, gilding the wooden floorboards into honey and shadow.

It was too late to be secretive, since my keys had jingled as they dropped into the basket, and I had let the door close with a thump. I waited for more clues about the unknown presence in my apartment.

“Amerit?” someone called from the living room.

Julie. She was my best friend when I went to college for the fifth or sixth time. Then she married Hank, and he eased her away from me, smiling the whole time. What a wanker he turned out to be. If she wanted to be married to Hank, we couldn't be friends anymore, so I had let her go, with regrets. I had not made many friends in all my years, and fewer still I trusted with my secrets. I hadn't seen Julie in five years.

“Julie?” I stepped away from the front door, wondering why my ex-best friend would adopt a scent she knew I hated. And why would she visit me wearing it?

I peeked into my own living room.

Julie sat in the center of my rose-red couch, her brown skin as unlined as it had been five years earlier, her eyes as bright, her smile — her smile was different. Brittle. Scared. She wore a pale green dress and a gold-buckled, wide leather belt. Her hair, which used to be in dreads, was now short, a red-brown haze around her head. She wore red high heels. A broad gold bangle circled her left wrist, and gold hoops hung from her earlobes. Her hands lay palms down on her thighs.

A cinnamon-skinned woman sat next to her. The stranger wore a tight orange dress and a small gold-and-diamond tiara, and one of her hands gripped Julie's left wrist. This woman didn't smile, but regarded me with pale, crystalline eyes.

Patchouli was all through my living room, coming from the stranger; Julie's own lily scent was present, but almost masked by the stronger odor. I wondered how I'd ever get it out.

“What's going on?” I asked both of them.

“I told Tante Melisande that you're a jinni, Amerit.” Julie's voice came out squashed.

“Why would you do that?”

Melisande cocked her head and smiled at me, her pale, spooky eyes narrowing. “When I ask, people answer me, whether they want to or not,” she said, her voice smooth and powerful as molten iron. “Are you a jinni, Miss Amerit?”

“Strictly speaking, no,” I said, which was as much of a lie as I could manage. I was only half jinni, on my father’s side. I was still bound by some of the magical rules that operated in exchanges like this.

Melisande was one of the bad ones. Any of them who have a voice like that turn bad sooner or later. Sometimes it takes many years, and they do good things at first. But eventually they all go to the dark side.

“What are you?” Melisande asked.

The answer flew into my mouth, but I clenched my teeth to lock it in, and I thought as fast as I could to find an alternative. “I am a dwirlkin,” I said, a word I had invented in childhood.

“And what is that?”

“I invoke the laws of hosting and hospitality,” I said, “and I call you an uninvited guest. I have answered two questions, and that is all I need to answer for someone who is here without my willing it.” I was bound by rules of exchange, and so should she be.

“Not true. The number of questions is three,” said Melisande. “Answer one more and you may direct me to leave. What is a dwirlkin?”

I couldn’t stop my words. “A dwirlkin is one who tailors enchantments,” I said. I had not done any magic work in the past decade, though. The deliberate exercise of restraint filled me with quiet joy.

“You will do a job for me,” said Melisande. The words locked into receptors I had thought I shut down, and my will bent to Melisande’s. My path had always been to bend instead of breaking. Happiness was a byproduct of quiet times, so I readied myself to lose my current joy in the life I had built for myself. I glanced at Julie and saw tears on her cheeks.

“Still, you are uninvited,” I managed to say, “and I direct you to leave.”

“You will come with me,” said Melisande, rising and pulling Julie up with her.

Her words had hooks in them.

I still had my purse over my shoulder, and the jacket, slacks, and shirt I had worn to work. I was better armored for weather than either of my visitors. I followed Melisande as she left my apartment, and I still had enough will to pick up my keys and the three small grenades in the woven basket by the door. They looked like acorns. One would not suspect they had explosives inside.

Melisande, still clutching Julie’s wrist, descended four flights of stairs, ignoring the elevator, and led me out the front door of my building, and left along the street to the riverfront park.

The river in our park has been tamed, with asphalt paths among the plantings and lawns there, and vistas opening between mature trees. A theater opens out onto the river path, and there is a carousel, and hotels front the park, and there’s one bridge just for pedestrians. The city has placed sculptures in the water, which are lighted at night.

Now it was twilight, cold falling from the sky as the sunlight faded. Melisande led us to a place where red spotlights shone on a large metal sculpture that looked like the ribcage and vertebrae of a fallen dragon.

“Get me the beast’s heart,” said Melisande.

The hooks her voice had placed in me dragged me to the edge of the water, and then my jinni nature rose from the tiny brass box in my chest where I had hidden it when I learned I could, in high school decades ago, when Mother still spoke to me about my father, though they hadn’t stayed together very long. He had told her some things to tell to me, and that was the best one.

I let out my powers and walked across the water to the dragon’s bones. Now that I was in my second guise, I saw that the sculpture had secrets: metal sheaths covered actual fossilized bones, and the bones glowed with the purple light of Otherwere, the place just next door where magic lived. I rose above the ribcage and looked down into the space it cupped. Spotlights clustered where a heart should be.

I glanced back at the shore. Melisande glowed, too, with spectral light, muddy orange-red; and Julie, once my roommate and best friend, the only one I had told my secret to, had a pale pastel yellow glow of her own. Where Melisande gripped her wrist, there was a knot of dirty green light. The outer glow that encases all living things told more stories: tribal lines showed that Julie and Melisande had common heritage, though they were not as close as sisters or parent and child. Perhaps they were distant cousins. Symbols twisted in their outer glows, a language I didn’t know.

Melisande’s wish gripped me in its insistence that I yield, obey, accomplish. I closed my eyes and opened my other senses, seeking the slightest rip in the world’s fabric that would let me travel to Otherwere. The dragon bones warmed as I touched them, their glow rising, until a scarf of purple slid sideways and let me slip across into the land beyond.

I pulled the scarf closed behind me and let all that was human about me wash away on the hurricane winds of the land beyond. Melisande's wish weakened here, where so many other magical forces operated. I reached for a river of power and washed away the last traces of it. I became fluid, the river my body. We washed over standing stones, fields and forests, structures and surfaces that were there and not there, embracing everything that was and was not.

An eternity later, I recollected myself near the shimmering place where I had entered the land beyond. I formed a body like my old one from the magic around me, power offered by spirit of place, playfully and twistingly. It had been too long since I had been here and reveled.

I held out my hand and asked a silent question. Magic answered, gathering into a red, glowing, chambered heart, rags and flutters of magic coalescing, some of it dragon essence. In the center of it lay my three acorns, a power of striking, wrapped around judgment and dragon fire.

I sent out waves of gratitude. The land beyond answered by stroking all my now-solid surfaces, teasing touches that went beneath my skin, tiny flickers of fire lodging in my palms and the soles of my feet, scented breezes moving in and out of my lungs, water flowing in my veins, and earth and metal strengthening my bones.

Fortified, I lifted the curtain and stepped out into the cage of bones, a loaded heart in my hand. I breathed in the air of my adopted city, building blocks of stone and plaster, brick and metal, asphalt and earth, plants and air, river water, and all the scents of moving parts — people and vehicles, water and electricity and animals and birds, winds and weathers. I breathed in enough local substance to settle my shape.

I glanced down and saw my recreated clothes had changed a little, but not too much. I took one more deep breath of local life, then rose above the sculpture and scudded across the river to the shore, where Melisande waited, her hand outstretched.

“I am not in the wish-granting business,” I said, fortified by transformation. “I will make you a trade.”

Her eyes burned with red fire. “State your bargain.”

“I will give you this heart in exchange for any claim you have on Julie. And this will be our final transaction; you will never approach me again.”

Her smile widened, and she nodded. “I agree.”

I sketched the signs of a contract and agreement in the air between us, and she gestured to confirm it. I handed her the heart, and she let go of Julie.

“Go,” I said.

She laughed and walked away. Just before she vanished from sight, I heard her cackling.

Later she would learn what opening such a heart could do.

I turned to my friend. “I hope you didn’t want to stay with her.”

Julie stared after Melisande, then looked at me and shook her head. “No. She’s toxic, but I couldn’t get away. I’m so sorry, Amerit. I never meant to tell her anything, let alone the secret you trusted me with. She gets to talking and somehow, I couldn’t keep my silence anymore. I forgot what she was like.”

“It’s enough that I know what she’s like. Come home with me. Or — do you still have Hank for a husband? Do you have a family?”

She looked toward the river. “Hank and I have a daughter, Amy, the only thing that ties us together anymore. Tante Melisande came and talked to me while I had Amy with me. I heard what was in Tante Melisande’s voice, clearer than I ever did before, and I sent Amy home to Hank before she could listen to Melisande anymore. Something’s in my throat, Amerit,” she whispered, and I heard the thread of molten gold in her voice. “Now I don’t know if I’m safe to be around my daughter anymore. I don’t want to do to her what Tante Melisande did to me and to you.”

“Stay with me a while,” I said. Sooner or later they all go to the dark side, those with that voice, but with help maybe it would be later for my friend.

The End.

