

Original Version of Ali Meeting Light and Vine

from The Perilous Gems Episode 2

By Nicole Eatough

Chapter One

Ryker McMichael

Friday, October 27

Ryker groaned as he rolled over in bed, clutching the side of his head. It pounded like he'd drunk too much last night. But last night was Sunday. He and his triplets agreed they wouldn't party right before the work week started. They had too much riding on their arctic mining operations to screw it up by coming to work only semi-coherent. Grandpa Rand would fire them the second he thought they weren't up to the task.

But he couldn't think of what else might cause the pounding fuzziness in his head. And he couldn't remember what happened last night.

Swearing, he rolled out of bed, hoping his brothers were in a better state than him. He stumbled into the kitchen, still in his pajamas, and found Ryder stuffing his face with toaster waffles with his phone on speaker.

"We're still waiting to hear what you want to do about the second broken drill, Sir," the phone said.

Ryker's own stunned eyes met his brothers. *Second* broken drill?

"What ya mean *second*?" Ryder demanded, his words muffled by waffle.

Ryker shoved him aside. “What do you mean second broken drill?” His ice genie had reinforced all their oil rigs to be cold resistant. One had broken a month ago, but that had to be a fluke. Flukes didn’t happen twice.

The voice hesitated. “I told Mr. Ryder on Monday that another drill had broken. We’ve been waiting to hear what you want done.”

“Today is Monday,” Ryker said, ignoring Ryder’s glare.

Ryder swallowed the massive bite in his mouth, wincing as it went down. Wiping his mouth, he snatched his phone from the table. “If this happened last Monday, why am I just hearing about this now?”

Another hesitation. “It’s Friday, Sir. I called you four days ago to talk about this.”

Ryker darted for his room, snatching his phone. The small text read: Friday, October 27. He went to his younger brother’s room, pounding on Rylan’s door.

“What?” his annoyed voice called. “It’s only nine.”

“Nine on what day?” Ryker demanded.

“Monday!” Rylan shouted. “What, you can’t check your phone?”

“You check your phone!” Ryker yelled back before returning to the kitchen.

Ryder was speaking to one of their genie wizards. “What do you mean we were gone four days? Where were we?”

The wizard lifted one eyebrow before erasing any expression, folding his arms behind his back. “You three aren’t in the habit of telling us when you leave or where you go. I don’t know, Sir.”

“Do any of you know?” Ryker demanded, but he knew the answer. Unlike some Society members, he and his brothers didn’t need wizard babysitters trailing them everywhere. And since

they didn't answer to servants, they didn't bother telling them where they went. "Never mind. Where's Santiago?" The busybody had stuck his nose into everything the triplets did from the moment he arrived. He might know where they'd been. And what kind of party they went to where they were missing four days.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but none of us have seen Santiago. He hasn't been seen since the three of you left on Monday. We'd assumed he was with you."

"Get out," Ryder demanded, waving his hand, then muttered, "Ethan probably sent him as a spy."

The wizard bowed his head and left, almost colliding with Rylan when he scrambled into the kitchen in a bathrobe. He glared at the wizard like it was his fault, straightening his robe's tie.

"Did some girl roofie me at a party?" he asked once the wizard left.

"Only if she roofied all three of us," Ryker said, hoping the mysterious she was at least hot. And liked him best.

"We wouldn't be missing four days from being roofied," Ryder snapped. "Assuming you also thought today was Monday."

Ryker scowled, rubbing his aching head. "You think someone's universal genie messed with us?" Having your genie screw with Society guests at a party was bad manners. But that didn't mean it didn't happen. He just wished he remembered what party they'd been at. And now their family didn't have their own universal genie to fix whatever had been done to them.

"Could've been," Ryder said, smacking Rylan's hand away from his waffles. "You'd think if we took Santiago with us, he should have stopped this."

"Maybe not if he only came to spy on our drilling operations," Ryker argued. "Ethan doesn't trust us."

“Spy?” Rylan asked, looking between Ryker and Ryder. “Since when is Santiago a spy?”

“Since always,” Ryder said. “Why else would Ethan send one of his best genie wizards our way?”

“And since he left with us on Monday, but didn’t return with us last night,” Ryker added, guessing they’d returned last night since they all woke up in their beds. Had someone carried them to bed? He should have asked the genie wizard.

“We can ask Ethan where Santiago went,” Rylan said grabbing a glass and holding it under the fridge’s ice dispenser. “Maybe he knows what happened to us.” The dispenser groaned and whirred, but nothing came out. He opened the freezer, then sighed. “There’s no ice. It must be broken.”

He turned to Ryker, holding out his glass. “Make the genie give me ice.”

Ryker rolled his eyes. Though he also wanted ice to put on his head. “Genie, I wish you’d put ice in Rylan’s cup.”

Nothing happened. He frowned, patting his pocket. The gem was there. “Genie, I wish you’d put ice in Rylan’s cup,” he said louder. Still, nothing happened. Growling, he ripped the light blue gem from his pocket, rubbing it was he said, “I wish you’d come out and give us some ice!” The gem glinted in the light from the kitchen, but no genie and no ice appeared.

All three brothers stared at the gem and Ryker’s mind flashed to his cousin Tyler losing his fire genie. His heart jumped to his throat. He couldn’t have lost his ice genie. He was holding the gem. And the genie was under contract. But rubbing for the gem and calling the genie again did nothing.

His eyes met Rylan’s. “Call Ethan,” he demanded. Wherever Santiago was, he must have some idea what was happening.

Chapter Two

Ali

Saturday, October 28

I blew out a slow breath as I stared at the door leading from my bedroom to the living room. I wanted to obtain a mechanical engineering degree, not become embroiled in a world filled with people like the McMichaels. So, I'd avoided asking my roommates any real questions about their lives and the secret world they came from. But I needed to know what Tavor was doing. Rajan thought it was because of Tavor that Rajan and Illan became my genies when that shouldn't have been possible. When I asked Tavor about it on Thursday, he didn't deny it—but he said that he didn't know what was going on either. That he needed time to think.

Two days wasn't much time to think, but I wanted to have this conversation now. I'd worked late last night, getting done all my homework and studying for the weekend so I could focus only on this. But I wasn't sure how Tavor would take my questions. It had been weeks since I'd seen him upset, but he hadn't reacted well in the past to me pushing him. But I needed to know what he was doing and what he was planning.

I cracked my door open to peer outside, hoping to see Tavor. He'd spent a lot of time in

his gem since we'd appeared with Santiago and Illan on Thursday. But I should have known better than to think I could just open my door first thing in the morning and waltz out.

"What?!" I shrieked, staring at the wall of water greeting me on the other side of the door. Water filled the entire doorway, almost like a solid barrier except it continually rippled. Beyond my doorway, neon bright fish darted here and there and giant pieces of pink coral made up my kitchen island, fridge and oven while clam shells stood in place of the cabinets. It was too dark for me to past the kitchen into the living room.

I poked a finger into the wall. It felt the same as dipping my finger into a warm bathtub, but, when I pulled my finger back, it came out dry.

Movement much larger than from a fish caught my eye and my heart jumped to my throat. I stepped back, searching for a shark, then caught sight of swaying white puffy pants and deep red hair, floating upward in his impossibly spikey style despite the water.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Rajan walked toward me. The red tie around his waist fluttered in the water and bits of sand floated upward with each step he took. He moved slowly through the water, like in slow motion. Just watching him totally enclosed in water made me feel like I couldn't breathe, though I could see his dusky bare chest rising and falling.

Reaching my door, he placed his hands on the door jam and stuck his head out of the water. The silver bracelets encasing both his wrists were barely out of the water, the ripples covering and uncovering them. His hair, which had been floating in the water, now looked completely dry. I resisted the urge to touch the strands to make sure.

"Hey," he greeted with a bright smile. "You slept late this morning. Not getting lazy only a few months into the semester, are you?"

"I was up late last night," I defended. "I had extra studying to do." I didn't want to

explain that I'd done the studying I normally saved for Saturdays. He'd want to know why and I wanted this conversation to be just between me and Tavor.

He rolled his eyes. "Of course you did. You were probably making up the work *everyone* missed in that class from Thursday."

I tried to hide my wince. It was the first class I'd missed since starting college—but that had been unavoidable. Aside from dodging the McMichael's attempts to kill me with their ice genie, the class's professor had been unconscious courtesy of Rajan.

"Anyway," Rajan said, his red eyes developing a laser focus that reminded me of a hawk sighting prey, "on to more important things—are you making muffins this morning?"

I coughed to cover up a smile, then gave a pointed look behind him. "I'm not sure the kitchen is setup to make muffins."

He looked over his shoulder with a frown. "I think you could do it. We can breath in Tavor's water and anything that's wet is dry the moment you stick it in another room. I was testing that all morning with the bathroom." I had a sudden image of him catching fish and poking them into the bathroom. "We could eat the muffins in here—if you're okay with that." He looked over my room with uncertain eyes and I realized he'd never seen it before, let alone been invited in.

"I was hoping to talk with Tavor this morning." If I pushed off our conversation, I'd keep finding reasons to push it off. The same way my mental list of questions kept piling up—questions I'd ask "someday." I studied last night so I couldn't use that as an excuse today. "I'll make brunch after, okay? If I can." I gave the coral oven a doubtful look. How could I bake with flour when it got wet the moment I pulled it out? If it wasn't already wet. And the eggs might float away the moment I cracked them. For a moment I had the thought that this ocean interior

decorating better not spoil my food. Then I remembered that I didn't buy food anymore. As part of Tavor's 'rent,' he filled my food and cabinets with food every week. I probably ate better than ninety percent of college kids.

Rajan pouted. "He's in his gem again."

Irritation flashed through me. Was he hiding from me? "He has time to revamp the apartment, but not to say good morning?"

Rajan shrugged.

I leaned forward, as though telling a secret. I didn't quite understand how genies being in their gems worked and didn't want to be overheard. Rajan leaned in too. "Is it bad etiquette to ask a genie to come out of his gem?"

His lips twitched toward a smile before he became solemn. "Masters don't ask, Ali. They demand."

I flashed to his dark expression when he told me Thursday that he never wanted to return to the McMichaels. What had his life been like passed from master to master? What was life for all genies like?

We stared at each other before he dropped his arms. "You can ask him. His gem is laying in the clamshell nearest the fridge."

I bit my lip, staring at the water. My parents and I went snorkeling on a vacation to Florida. It took me twenty minutes of practice before I stopped trying to hold me breath. My brain kept telling me I couldn't breath with my face under water.

Rajan's expression lightened and he held his hands out to me. "Do you need help?" he teased. "I promise you'll be able to breath. And see. This isn't like real water."

Slowly, I took his hands. He stepped back with slow, measured steps, pulling me with

him. The warm water encased my hands, then forearms, my elbows. I unconsciously leaned back when it reached my biceps, but Rajan kept tugging with the same gentle pressure. I squeezed my eyes shut, holding my breath as the water covered my face.

Totally immersed now, it felt more like I was encased in a warm bubble than submerged in water. Still holding my breath, I cracked one eye open. When the water didn't bother it, I blinked both eyes open.

Rajan smiled and tapped my nose, still keeping hold of my other hand. "You can stop holding your breath." The water distorted his words, making them garbled, but I made out what he said after a moment.

My chest felt tight and my options were dart to my room or try to breath. My mind yelled to to return to my room, but Rajan had to have air to talk—at least, that was how things were supposed to work. I took a shallow breath in. Gently, water flowed into my nose, but it wasn't uncomfortable and it didn't stop me from breathing. I took a few more breaths, then shook my head. "This is crazy." My voice sounded muffled, like I had earplugs in.

A pink and green fish swam by one one side while a blue and purple one flitted between Rajan and me.

"You'd be less impressed if you'd seen more magic," Rajan told me. "You've barely seen what we can do."

I shook my head again. "I'm talking underwater. This will always be amazing." Like when I breathed, water flowed in when I spoke, but it felt more like thick air than water.

"You're easily impressed," he said. "It's all that science you fill your head with."

I stuck my tongue out. "Science is magical too. Just in a different way. And it's helped us out just like magic."

He shrugged, unable to deny that. Then he gestured to the clamshell by the pink coral reaching taller than both of us. “He’s in there.”

I slipped my hand from his and knelt by the clamshell. It was as big as my couch cushion. Not that I’d seen my couch in over a month.

Not sure what to do, I kneeled down and knocked on the shell. My dark hair floated around my face as I waited and I gathered it up in one hand. Slowly, the shell opened and in the center lay the imperial topaz. The gem didn’t gleam in the dark water, but still seemed to contain a mysterious light. I waited some more, but Tavor didn’t appear.

“Tavor?” I said, hoping he’d hear my garbled words. “Can we talk?”

Like the first time I’d rubbed his gem, orange light streamed from the gem, swirling until they formed Tavor. His white pants and orange vest fluttered in the gentle motion of the water, the parting vest revealing his toned abs and chest. A fish dashed to the gold band around his right bicep, mouthing at like it was food.

He stared down at me, raising his eyebrows expectantly.

“Um . . .” Bubbles flowed from my mouth as I trailed off, looking back toward my room. “Can we talk in there?”

I saw Rajan’s hands twitch from the corner of my eye. I’d only lived with Rajan three weeks, but this was the first time I’d asked to speak to any of them alone.

Tavor gestured for me to lead the way and I moved in what felt like slow motion, the water holding me down and back. Though the water holding me down must have been another part of the magic since people normally wear weights to walk along the bottom of the ocean.

I gasped when I stepped into my room, the sudden change in pressure catching me off guard. Then I shivered. My room was chillier than the rest of the apartment in the morning. I

presumably had a thermostat somewhere, but I could never find it in the midst of Tavor's interior decorating. He kept the temperature of the living room temperate for the most part and I only used my room for sleeping, so I didn't worry too much over the temperature in here. If anything, I hoped it was lowering the cost of my utilities.

Tavor stepped in behind me. Like with Rajan, the water had little affect on his wildly tousled orange hair.

My eye's caught Illan's who stood behind the coral reef taking up the kitchen island as I shut the door. I couldn't read the expression in his pale, pale blue eyes, but now I was worried my other roommates would think we were in here gossiping.

I stared at the closed door until Tavor said, "Are we going to talk, or were you hoping I'd redecorate our room?"

I turned to see him giving my plain room the same distasteful look he'd given the secondhand furniture in my living room when he first appeared.

"My room is fine the way it is," I retorted. The words jumped out without me meaning them to. I winced. "Sorry. No, that's not why I wanted to talk." But I didn't know where to start. "You said you had to think over how you might be doing something to me that's making other genies become mine. Have you had time to think about it?"

When Illan, who'd been under a contract, became my genie, I'd been sure it was all Tavor's fault. After all, contracts were supposed to be unbreakable. If you owned a genie and didn't have a contract, someone could kill you and take your genie. If you had a contract with your genie and someone killed you, no one could use that genie for a century. Contracts were an ironclad way to keep your genie—at least until your contract was fulfilled. But when Illan appeared in the apartment, Tavor had been stunned.

“Let me ask *you* a question,” Tavor said, folding his hands behind his back as he rose in the air. He moved as though walking on air, studying me. “When you found our gems—mine, Rajan’s, and Illan’s—how did you feel?”

I frowned. Why were we talking about his gem too if we were trying to figure out how Rajan and Illan became my genies?

He continued staring, so I sighed, thinking over when I first saw all three gems. “I felt . . . pulled in . . . like the gems had their own center of gravity tugging at me. I guess entranced would be the best word?” A flush crawled up my face as I remembered touching Rajan’s ruby at the museum and setting off security alarms. “But isn’t it normal to be entranced by genie gems?” I hadn’t given it any thought before now. “I mean, they’re magic, right?”

“Of course,” Tavor said. “It’s not uncommon for humans to be enraptured by genie gems. I’ve seen humans throw more lustful gazes at our gems than at each other.”

His agreement relaxed something in me. Though I hoped I hadn’t gazed at their gems with lust. I hadn’t felt lustful at the time—but maybe I wasn’t really sure what that word meant, not on a personal level, anyway.

“What does my reaction to genie gems have to do with anything?”

He paced in the air. “Mm, mostly I’m speculating, but I’m curious if you *not* wanting genies is a factor in all this.”

I tried to wrap my brain around his words. Then I gave up. “You think I’m getting more genies because I don’t want more genies?”

He held his hands up defensively. “Like I said, I’m speculating. You asked for answers, but I don’t have anything concrete. You can hear my theory, or we can wait to have this discussion.” He raised one eyebrow. “We could intentionally test my theory. Wouldn’t your

scientific mind enjoy making an experiment out of this mystery?"

I gave him a warning look. "Let's just start with your theory."

He shrugged. "As I said, if I'm doing something, it's not on purpose. You gave me free reign and I desire to see my genie brethren enslaved to the McMichaels moved to a superior master." He stopped moving, his gaze on the wall. Then he spoke so quietly I had to lean forward to hear. "Barring Illan, we've been enslaved within the same family for centuries. I feel some responsibility for the others."

He cleared his throat and resumed his pacing. "Perhaps my free reign and desire to see the others in a better situation and your desire *not* to use or abuse genies are working together to bring the other genies to you."

"Like, make the genies mine or literally draw them to me?" I asked, feeling a flare of panic. Encountering three genies in less than two months probably wasn't normal, right? At least not for someone not involved in that secret world. Or, at least, someone who wasn't *supposed* to be involved in that world. Visiting a museum and meeting with my professor should not have resulted in me getting more genies.

Tavor's eyes widened and uncertainly flashed through his eyes. "I—meant the former, but I suppose the latter may be true." He stared down at me like I was the amazing one.

"But it has to be the free reign and your desire to save you the others, right?" I asked, shaking my head. "How could some girl make a difference?" Masters made wishes, not magic. And I certainly didn't have a secret wish to have more genies, not even just to get them away from the McMichaels.

He pursed his lips, staring at the ceiling. "Though a universal, beast, or transformation genie could have stolen my gem using a bird, I suspect it was a transformation genie." He gazed

at me out of the corner of his eyes. “They have the ability to see beyond the natural eye. They can even spot a genie in human form, which the rest of us cannot do. Perhaps the transformation genie who took me saw something special in you, and that’s why he gave me to you.”

Again, I puzzled over his words. Mostly because I didn’t know what a beast or transformation genie could do, but that wasn’t the important part. “But you said the only magic in the world comes from genies and genie wizards.”

His eyes met mine. “That was what I thought.”

I jumped when a knock came at my door. It was followed by Rajan calling, “Am I getting muffins this morning? Or are you going to go straight into studying? I’m just trying to decide if I should be excited or disappointed.”

“Does that mean muffins count as an exciting day?” I called back.

He snorted. “They are an exciting *moment*. Don’t get carried away.”

Tavor suddenly landed in front of the door, reaching for the doorknob.

“That’s it?” I demanded, putting my hands on my hips. “You’re done?” His last statement sounded like a lead-in to a whole new conversation.

He sighed, his shoulders sagging. “Ali, I don’t have the answers you’re looking for.” He turned to look at me, his orange eyes seeming tired. Or maybe exasperated. His gaze sharpened as his eyes met mine. “But I intend to find them.” Then he opened the door.

Chapter Three

Rajan backed away from Tavor, putting most of his body in water. He cast an uncertain look between Tavor and me. Had he interrupted us on purpose? Or was he really that anxious about muffins? He'd proven protective—but he was impatient. Either option seemed plausible, though I wasn't sure why he'd want to interrupt us when I initiated the conversation.

“I'm sure Ali is as eager for breakfast as you,” Tavor said breezily. “It takes a lot of calories to support her study habits.”

“You didn't leave me a very serviceable kitchen,” I complained.

Tavor waved one hand idly without turning around. “You'll be able to do what you need. I always leave the kitchen's functionality in tact.”

Right. Nothing screamed functionality like a coral-shaped oven. Or gathering ingredients underwater.

Rajan stared after Tavor.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, touching his shoulder.

He jumped, jerking away. I pulled my hand to my chest, trying to ignore the painful squeeze in my chest at his rejection. At least, it felt like rejection. I'd held his hand to comfort

him earlier this week, but maybe that had been a special situation.

“It’s fine,” Rajan said. His mouth flicked upward in the imitation of smile, though it quickly dropped away. “Tavor’s spent a lot of time in his gem lately.” His gaze jumped to Tavor. “I guess he’s just moody.”

Tavor had only been holed up in his gem for the past two days, though that was different from the rest of his time here. He rarely went into his gem when I was home, but I didn’t see him once Thursday evening or yesterday. It was the first day I hadn’t seen him since he’d moved in.

Rajan seemed to shake off his thoughts as he turned to me with raised eyebrows. “So, muffins?”

“Right,” I said, stepping into the water. I still couldn’t help closing my eyes and holding my breath as I stepped through. When I opened my eyes again, I looked for Tavor, but he was already gone. Should I be more concerned about his behavior? But concerned about what exactly? It felt like he’d been living here months, but it had only been five weeks. Really, I didn’t know him well. Or Rajan, though he was easier to read. His emotions danced across his face in a candid display.

My eyes caught on my newest roommate, who I knew least of all. Based on interactions so far, we’d get along fine. Unlike Tavor and Rajan, Illan supported and even appreciated my dedication to school. His eyes met mine before glancing away to study a blue and purple fish.

Was he upset I’d spoken to Tavor alone? Or maybe he was bored. There wasn’t much to do in my apartment. I hoped he wasn’t anticipating much excitement like Rajan had been.

Since I didn’t know how well my voice would travel through the water, I made my way to him. He politely shifted his gaze from the fish to me.

“I’m making raspberry muffins. Would you like some? Tavor doesn’t touch human food,

but Rajan likes it. At least some, anyway.”

He tilted his head as he studied me. “I’m not opposed to consuming human food upon occasion.” He hesitated, as though thinking the matter over. “Yes, I will have some if you don’t mind.”

“That’s why I offered,” I said, though when I turned toward the fridge, I hesitated. My open door poured light into the living room—but that was the only light. The farther from my room, the darker the room got. It was murky and dim, like the real ocean floor. My mind insisted I’d run into a shark or some other predator if I got too close to a dark corner.

“Something wrong?” Illan asked.

“It’s dark,” I said, then flushed. “I’m not afraid of the dark, I just can’t see well.” The statement was mostly true. I didn’t find the dark scary—so long as I knew what was in it.

“It is dim, isn’t it?” He held up one hand, fluttering his fingers in an elegant dance. Ice crystals in the shape of elongated lanterns grew above us. The first lantern caught the light from my room before bouncing it to the other lanterns, making a star above us and banishing the shadows with blue-tinged light.

I gave a delighted laugh as I gazed up at the beautiful star. “Perfect! Thank you, Illan!”

The lights drew a crowd of fish, and I smiled at the colorful display. I looked down at Illan and found his gaze on me.

“You’re welcome. Ali.”

He said my name with such formality, but it was the intensity of his gaze that made heat rise to my cheeks. Everything he said and did carried a sincerity, a weight, that I’d never felt from anyone else. To cover my discomfort, I spun away and busied myself with prying open the coral fridge and teasing my non-refrigerated ingredients from clam shells.

I mixed my ingredients into something resembling muffin batter—though getting the flour was as troublesome as I expected, and I had to fight off fish while filling the muffin tin. When I turned to the coral oven, tin in hand, I stared. There had to be buttons to set the oven somewhere. I should have pre-heat it before mixing ingredients, but it’s hard to remember to set your oven when it doesn’t look like an oven.

As I stared at the oven, Rajan plucked the tin from my hands. “That contraption takes too long.” He marched toward my room, his hands seeming to glow red where they touched the tin.

“Hey!” I called, rushing after him. “Those need a steady three-hundred and fifty degrees!”

Illan followed me and I glanced toward the clam shell nearest the fridge, but Tavor stayed inside his gem.

#

Tavor

Tavor was used to planning for the long game. It was a game he played well—but it had never been more maddening than right now.

He could, barring the shadow genie, free his genie brethren from the McMichaels. Well, Ali could after he convinced her to, but he needed to exercise caution. She needed space after gaining yet another unintentional genie. From inside his gem, he’d heard the stilted conversations in the living room and the tension in her voice as she tried to hide her frustration. But time wasn’t something they had. After Illan’s disappearance, the McMichaels would be on high alert. The more nervous they got, the more up their guard would be, reducing their greatest weakness—their unfailing arrogance and faith in their own untouchability.

Upon becoming Ali’s ‘roommate,’ his true intention *had* been to enjoy this respite for as

long as he could. Now? His mind couldn't stop churning with half-formed plots and daring dreams. But he didn't dare plan much before he learned Ali's true capabilities. The only thing he knew for sure was that she could free the others. Or, at least, grant them greater freedom than they'd had in centuries.

She had given him more food for thought with her comment about drawing genies to her. Her running into Rajan and Illan, though surprising, was believable. Masters placed their genie gems in museums on temporary display all the time, and Ali's professor had been a contract worker for the triplets for over a year. But he couldn't rule out that Ali may be a catalyst in these events.

One rumor of genie whisperers spoke of the magnetism between them and genies. Though he'd discredited the rumor, he'd assumed it meant in a magnetic personality sort of way, not a physically draws their presence kind of way, but who knew? And that magnetism did seem to go both ways. He'd half-lied to Ali about her reaction to genie gems being normal. Yes, plenty of others were entranced by the gems—but only for those who knew genies lied within and lusted after their power. To be entranced by the gem *without* knowing there was a genie inside? That was something he hadn't encountered.

Outside his gem, Ali ate in her room with Illan and Rajan, all of them ignorant to his plans. He'd considered telling Ali that she alone was responsible for her growing list of roommates, but sensed the information would be too much for her to handle. He didn't want to frighten her. Or risk her dumping them and running away. She'd previously chosen to keep him over accepting the McMichael's generous offer, but that was different from being told she was a sub-race of humanity and had abilities relating to genies.

She was stuck on silly dreams of a normal, orderly life and hearing she was only semi-

human could throw those plans off-kilter. Assuming she didn't try denying her true heritage outright. Remembering how she originally insisted he was a hallucination, he was afraid she might do just that. He would ease her into the truth. After she accepted she was meant for greater things than some college degree.

Chapter Four

Ethan McMichael

Sunday, October 29

Chaotic was not normally how Ethan classified his home, but it was becoming the norm. As was the intrusion of unwanted relatives.

“I warned you you had a spy,” Jeanine declared, her eyes gleaming with triumph and fury. It was difficult to tell which was stronger—her rage over the stolen genies, or her pleasure over believing she’d been right. “Brandon and Santiago must have been working together, but things went wrong for Brandon.

“What makes you so sure Santiago isn’t dead too?” he asked. The gleam left her eyes. “The triplets are missing four days of memories. Santiago didn’t do that.”

“So you believe someone is stealing our genies and targeting our genie wizards?” she sniffed. “If you had followed my advice and kept your wizards under supervision while I had your home searched for evidence, perhaps our family would not be short an ice genie.”

The reminder of her home invasion still made his jaw clench. Only Ren’s and Santiago’s intervention prevented her from ransacking his home without his permission. Jeanine

undoubtedly felt this proved Santiago's guilt while she conveniently ignored that it was a genie wizard's duty to serve the interests of their employer.

“Under who's supervision, Aunt Jeanine? Your genie wizards? They're privy to nearly as much information as my own and therefore should fall under similar suspicion. Rand's genie wizards are in the same boat—though they outnumbered Santiago plenty. If they were unable to watch him, who could have?”

She opened her mouth too retort, but he continued.

“And need I remind you that our genie owners and therefore our genies are frequently accompanied by our wizards? Anyone targeting our genies should also face a wizard. It would be far more suspicious for us to lose genies while our wizards remained unharmed. Yet, none of your wizards were present—or harmed—when your grandson lost his fire genie. They were aware of the fire genies presence at the museum, weren't they? While my wizards were not privy to that information, as the shadow genie placed his protections around the ruby prior to becoming my genie.”

It was a pleasure to watch a dull flush creep up Jeanine's normally pale face. It was also childish. Someone out there was playing the McMichael family like a well-tuned violin. As this someone stole their family genies one by one, something that should have been impossible, all his relatives could do was sit and point fingers. The triplets had performed a video call yesterday to blame Ethan and Santiago for the loss of their genie. At least Jeanine was only blaming Santiago.

“Now is hardly the time for us to throw baseless accusations,” Jeanine said, smoothing her plum blaser. “That will not change what's happened. Our focus should be facts, not speculation.”

If only she truly believed that, but, like many of those in power, crises served one purpose in her mind—they provided an opportunity for her to grab more power. The worse he looked in all this, the better positioned she was to become head of the family.

“I’ll leave discovering that truth in your and Ellen’s capable hands.”

Ellen raised one eyebrow at him, then pasted on an expression of sincere concern. “Our family must band together to protect our interests, Aunt Jeanine,” she said, taking their aunt’s hand. “We can’t let our shock and horror over this unprecedented outrage drive us apart. As one of the oldest families in The Society, we must react with decorum to this crises.” Her eyes went cold. “And send a clear reminder of why our family is part of the upper echelon of The Society.”

Jeanine pursed her lips as she looked between Ethan and Ellen. “And where will your brother be during this show of solidarity?”

“We cannot let our business suffer while we chase an unknown enemy. I will focus on reclaiming our genies while Ethan focuses on running the conglomerate.”

Jeanine’s eyes narrowed, but Ethan was done wasting time.

“I leave this matter in your hands. Let me know how I may help.” He gave a brief bow of his head before turning on his heel and striding to his office. On the way, he passed several genie wizards who did not belong. This time, wizards from Rand’s branch of the family as well as Jeanine’s. Gritting his teeth, he ignored every last one of them.

Once he regained his universal genie—which he would regain—neither his aunt nor his uncle would enter any of his homes again. He pulled a black tourmaline crystal from his pocket, the long lines of the crystal catching the overhead light.

“Genie, I wish you would investigate every last movement of the triplets from Monday to Friday. I want to know where they went, who they saw, and who they spoke with. And I want to

know if Santiago accompanied them.”

The room darkened as shadows swirled, then coalesced into a genie with mocha skin and curly black hair. He was burlier than the simple toned figure of most genies, but dressed plainer with only puffy black pants and flat black shoes. He could pass for human even in genie form if not for his night-black eyes. They gave him the appearance of a demon rather than a genie. An appearance that matched his personality.

“Anything else, Master?” the genie asked, tilting his head.

Ethan couldn’t tell from his tone if he was being sarcastic or sincere. “No. Just go.” The genie melted into shadow that dashed to his balcony doors before disappearing.

His attention caught on the balcony—the very place where all this began when a raven stole his universal genie moments before the genie officially became his. One by one, his fingers curled into fists until his nails dug into his palm.

If everyone around him was too incompetent to discover who was targeting their family, he would investigate himself.

Chapter Five

The Shadow Genie

The shadow genie kept himself incorporeal as he flowed into the three idiot brothers' home. He held no fondness for the ice genie, but had once heard him use that term and liked it. It was appropriate.

He ignored their inane chatter as they sniped at each other, instead focusing on their unique energy, the imprint they left on the world. Their imprints covered the apartment, making it difficult to determine which imprint belonged to which brother. He didn't care to distinguish between the three, but the wish demanded that he be able to—otherwise he might not be able to 'investigate every last movement of the triplets.'

He flowed closer, hiding in the shadow of a couch, then a lamp table before splitting himself between the shadows of the three brothers, reading their individual imprints.

They raised their voices, shouting over one another, as though the opinion of whomever spoke loudest mattered most. Such rudeness. The McMichaels never had excelled at teaching their spawn manners. So he took that upon himself, pushing at the boundaries of Ethan's wish and wrapping his essence around the brothers to gain a truly intimate read of their imprints.

Two of the brothers abruptly stopped speaking and the third slowly trailed off as a cold that had little to do with temperature sunk into their bones. Ah, blessed silence. Even the trio of idiots could sense a predator—though only after being wrapped in the grasp of his shadows. He gave them just a taste of what his shadows could inflict—unknown terrors hidden in the dark, helplessness in the face of an inevitable force, and a confrontation with their own worst nature.

Sadly, he wasn't interested in engaging with genie wizards today, so he slid his essence away. It all took mere seconds, and he wished he could remain to see how long it took for the terror to fade enough for the brothers to speak, enough for them to realize noise wouldn't draw down unseen monsters upon their heads. But he had a wish to fulfill and wizards to evade, which meant it was time to set about untangling the paths the trio of idiots trod the past week

He trailed along the path each brother took. Humans had a statement regarding boredom—something about watching paint dry—but at least painting something was accomplishing something. He wasted hours moving from room to room, from house to office to house to restaurant to house . . . Just because he didn't have anything better to do didn't mean he wouldn't prefer wasting away inside his gem to performing inane wishes.

Causing one moment of terror wasn't worth all this tedious effort. Now if he could have toyed with the triplets without any wizard interference, that would have made this worthwhile. Instead, he entered yet another restaurant. Apparently, the three idiot brothers didn't believe in the time-honored McMichael tradition of keeping an in-house chef.

The brothers' paths converged at their private airplane, along with Santiago's imprint. Or lack thereof. Genie wizards left an absence of an imprint, like an empty space in a photo when you expected something there. Picking out individual wizards took more practice. Some shadow genies couldn't do it, but he was more sensitive than most. And he paid attention. Genies were

hardly better than humans when it came true awareness of the world around them.

He took to the skies, still incorporeal as he followed the imprints of his targets. His pace slowed at where the plane landed, moving to a crawl as he arrived at the triplet's destination, Santiago still in tow.

"Seriously?" he snarled, coalescing into his genie form. He stood in the middle of a college campus a twenty minute drive from Ethan's main estate, which he had left hours ago. He'd spent all that time diligently following the triplets' trail only to wind up nearly where he started.

"Investigate every last movement," he mimicked as he walked into the school. If he had one wish, he'd stick every master he'd had into a hamster wheel they could never leave. Then they'd have some idea of what it was to be a genie. Actually, he'd probably kill them all slowly, but the hamster wheel was still a pleasing thought.

The trail led him down a row of offices where he stopped abruptly, staring at an empty chair. "The hell?" he asked, staring at the chair as though it might divulge secrets if he stared long enough.

"Who are you?" he murmured, stalking forward silently. Someone with a far brighter imprint than any human he'd ever encountered sat here. The desire to follow this imprint pounded through his chest, raising his heartbeat in a way that usually only mayhem and carnage did—but the wish pulsed incessantly in his mind, forcing him back to the triplets' trail.

But inside he found more surprises. The bright imprint spent time in here—with the triplets and Santiago plus one other human. Perhaps the office's occupant. An ice genie and fire genie also spent time here. Burn marks and water damage decorated the office like some deranged interior decorator's idea of a cutting edge design. He wanted to ask what kind of idiot

thought a fire genie and a water genie fighting would do any good, but that would make him the idiot.

So, someone, either the bright imprint or the other human, had a fire genie. The triplets ordered Illan to attack. The genies fought and then . . . what? He followed the trail out to a closet, which had held Santiago and the triplets. That must have been crowded. The essence of the triplets than shifted. He couldn't tell how it shifted, but the triplets were physically—with the help of magic—transported away, not teleported away. As if the ice genie brought them back to New York, then left. Of his own accord.

His lip curled at the thought, then he frowned upon realizing Santiago didn't leave the same way as the triplets—which was obvious since magic moved them and wouldn't have worked on Santiago, but he didn't feel any sign of Santiago leaving. Of course, wizard non-imprints were faint at the best of times. He paced around the closet, around the office, then around campus, but he ended up right outside the closet. Santiago's trail disappeared right here, as did the bright imprint's.

“Where did you go, Wizard?” he murmured, crouching down to stare into the closet where the massive man had lain. “Magic's not supposed to work on you.” And genie's under contract were supposed to be impossible to take from their master, yet the three idiot brothers still found themselves genie-less.

Not for the first time, he wished he could sense the imprint of genies, but they either didn't leave imprints, or he was blind to them. Something somehow moved Santiago. The bright imprint was an anomaly—but one he doubted had teleported away a wizard. No, the bright imprint was probably a superbly gifted human who'd turned to genie hunting. The fire genie may well have been Rajan, and now this human had taken Illan as well. But how had they teleported

away a wizard?

He narrowed his eyes, another thought occurring. Neither Rajan nor Illan were the first McMichael genie to disappear—that universal bastard hadn't discovered a way to affect wizards, had he? His eyes widened as that thought led to another thought. He'd found the genie wizard sent after Tavor, but had he really? Or had he found a trail left by the universal genie to lead the McMichaels away from his location?

He snarled wordlessly at the idea of Tavor tricking his senses. The brick wall of the closet cracked as he slammed a fist into it. Shadows licked just under his skin, aching to be set free, but freedom and magic didn't go together. Not for genies, anyway.

Genies, even one under contract, were being stolen from their masters. Somehow, this had Tavor written all over it. Except it was supposed to be impossible, as was using magic on wizards. So how was he doing this?

#

The shadow genie dragged out his stay at the college, searching for clues, but found nothing. The wish soon dragged him back to New York, despite it being a further waste of his time, but the wish as specific. He must follow the path they trod from Monday to Friday. But he knew what he needed to. The triplets left with their genie in tact Thursday. Their genie—perhaps—returned them back home, then left. Something happened in Horton, both with Santiago and with Illan.

After following the rest of the triplets' trail mandated by the wish, he returned to Horton. He couldn't see the college as he flew in his shadow form, but his eyes went in that direction anyway. Genie hunters were dull, but something extra was going on here. If this hunter had kept Tavor and Rajan and then gone after Illan, it seemed far more likely this hunter was following a plan Tavor had hatched then following their own plan. Though the universal had a gifted tongue

and the hunter undoubtedly believed they were following their own will. As though any being truly had free will.

He found Ethan in his office and entered, his shadow form folding in on itself until it revealed his genie form.

“What did you find?” Ethan asked, turning his attention from his phone.

“About what?” the shadow genie inquired, his eyes wide with innocence. The problem with asking questions? They weren’t a wish.

Ethan’s left eye twitched. “I wish you would tell me what you discovered from my previous wish.”

“The triplets . . .” he paused for dramatic effect, “don’t utilize an in-house chef. It’s seems a terrible waste, all that eating out. Eating well is the difference between obesity and leading a healthy life. It’s a travesty how poor eating has ravaged this country. Even the McMichaels are not exempt.”

Ethan’s lips thinned until they nearly disappeared. The shadow genie preferred the eye twitch.

Ethan’s narrowed his eyes at the shadow genie, like he could will him to provide the answers he wanted. “I wish you would tell me what you learned from investigating the triplets that is *relevant* to the disappearance of the ice genie.”

“They went to Horton.”

Silence filled the room as the two stared at each other. Ethan’s eye gave another twitch. His voice held a growl as he amended his wish to, “I wish you would tell me *everything* you learned from investigating the triplets that is relevant to the disappearance of the ice genie.”

“They went to Horton with Santiago and entered a college campus. They encountered

two humans, one of whom had a fire genie. The genies fought—based on the look of the office the triplets were in—then the triplets were magically returned to New York, though whoever moved them clearly did not remain with them.”

Ethan frowned, his brow furrowing. “Why did—I *wish* you would tell me what you discovered about why the triplets went to Horton and what happened to Santiago.”

The shadow genie crossed his arms over his bare chest and shrugged. “I track people, not motives. I don’t know. And Santiago disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” Ethan echoed, his frown deepening.

“Disappeared. He was there, then he was gone.”

“You didn’t lose his trail?”

Now it was the shadow genie’s turn to fight off a twitch. He kept his voice level as he said, “I found your other wizard, didn’t I? I don’t make mistakes.” Unless the trail he’d followed before had been purposefully laid for him.

“There is one other thing,” he added, because he wanted to see the look on Ethan’s face. “I believe one of the human trails I encountered belongs to the genie thief you’re seeking. I suspect that rather than selling the genies they find, they’re keeping them all—the ice genie, the fire genie . . . and the universal.”

Ethan didn’t disappoint, his hands fisting, his eyes burning with greed and rage, and his mouth nearly salivating. “You saw evidence of the universal genie?”

“Not physically,” the shadow genie admitted. “But I believe I saw signs of his magic. These impossibilities the McMichels are encountering—I suspect the universal genie is involved. The genie hunter is likely more pawn than mastermind in all this.”

Ethan swallowed, probably to keep the drool at bay. “I will investigate what connection

the triplets may have with Horton. The imbeciles themselves probably don't know why they would come here." He gestured at the black opal on his desk. "Return to your gem."

The shadow genie's jaw locked tight as he complied. Ethan hadn't given a wish, but pretending to go of his own accord was less humiliating than being forced inside.

Chapter Six

Ali

Monday, October 30

I stepped carefully around the apartment Monday morning as I got ready, side-eyeing slick rocks surrounding hot springs spread through the room. Ferns and other plants surrounded each spring, hiding some of the slickest spots. Steam rose into the air, dampening the dirt making up my floor and turning the space into a sauna. Outside my window, a light snow fell. For the first time, I wanted to stay home instead of going to school. Mostly so I could hunker down in one of the hot springs rather than brave the first snowfall of autumn.

But I couldn't afford to miss any classes. Especially since my mom was still threatening to visit the week before Thanksgiving and I didn't know how that would affect my study time or class attendance. It would definitely take away from studying, but I would put my foot down about missing any classes. Hopefully I would, anyway. I would miss Tavor's redecorating while she was here.

"I'm off," I announced, grabbing the front door.

"Ali?" Tavor called.

I turned to find him floating cross-legged above one of the springs. Rajan was dipping his feet in another spring, though looked up when Tavor called for me. Illan sat in a corner, a barrier of ice rocks surrounding him as though to ward off the heat.

“May I speak with you after school?”

I hesitated, my hand still on the doorknob. “About what?”

He waved a hand dismissively. “I’d hate to distract you from your lessons. We’ll discuss this tonight if you’ll give me some time.”

My first thought was that he’d realized something new about how I was accidentally stealing genies—but why not say so if that was it? The way he worded things gave me suspicion whatever he wanted to discuss belonged to a weekend conversation rather than a weekday. But Tavor didn’t often make requests of me.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll talk after school.”

Hopefully, whatever he had to say wouldn’t derail my focus for the rest of the week. Though at this point I was becoming a champion at ignoring things I didn’t want to pay attention to. I’d never be able to keep my grades up otherwise.

Chapter Seven

Nathan Wild

Nathan smiled wide in the mirror, checking that his teeth were clean, then smoothed a stray lock of blond hair. For good measure, he added more gel to ensure the lock stayed in place. Surveying as much of his appearance in the bathroom mirror as he could, he gave a satisfied nod, tugging at the edges of his red blazer. Red in honor of him receiving his family's fire genie for the first time.

At seventeen, he was the youngest in his family to become a genie owner in over a century. At least, according to The Society archives he was—and the archives were always accurate. His family made sure of it. His aunt disapproved, which was why he had to look perfect. He'd show her how serious he took this responsibility. Though he suspected Aunt Janie was mostly angry because her daughter Susie hadn't been chosen to own the genie next, but Susie was fifteen and at least five years less mature than Nathan. That was why he was student body president at the most prestigious private school in Colorado and she hid in a corner of the library with her little friends every lunch.

A library should be a fitting place for a member of one of the Overseer families managing

The Society's archives, but Susie chose to waste her time giggling over magazines. What kind he didn't want to know.

Satisfied with his appearance, he made his way downstairs, but paused when he heard his aunt's raised voice coming from the kitchen.

"Yes, Nathan is performing well in school. We're all very proud, Jared—as should be clear from the way Mother goes on about him every holiday gathering. But that doesn't mean he's prepared to handle a genie. Top grades at school aren't relevant here."

"Do you think Mother and I chose Nathan to have the genie next because of his grades?" Nathan could hear his father's raised eyebrows in his voice. "This isn't a reward for scholastic excellence. Nathan is a prodigy. He understands concepts adults a decade older than him will never understand. He has the maturity to handle this. He will be the next head of the family, and this will give him necessary experience. If you disagree so heavily, you should have discussed this with Mother." His voice turned mocking. "But only if you've forgotten her word is final."

Nathan puffed out his chest. Grandmother had become head of the family and Premier Overseer of the archives at only thirty and had full faith in him. She announced last year that he'd eventually succeed her as head. If Aunt Janie wanted the honor, she should have made different choices.

"I don't think eavesdropping is a very mature thing to do," a snide voice called out.

Nathan scowled, blushing as he spotted his cousin Janie in a stupid yellow dress with bows standing to the side of the stairs. She hadn't been there when he first came down, the little sneak. She was worse than a little sister. And weren't bows for little girls?

"If your mom wasn't a coward, she'd say her doubts to my face," he hissed. "And I'm welcome to do as I please in my own home."

It was her family's fault they were doing the transfer ceremony now instead of November first, as was traditional. The Wild family didn't do contracts, instead opting to transfer ownership of the family genie every two months. Whoever proved most useful in their use of the genie during those two months got the genie more frequently, and he planned to prove himself very useful.

Everything had been set to perform the transfer ceremony Wednesday, then Aunt Susie declared her presence was necessary for her nephew's first transfer ceremony. But she couldn't come Wednesday, because she'd be at court. Her husband died last fall, and she was still fighting for control of his assets. She should have checked his will the day they married.

Nathan's father and Aunt Susie came out of the kitchen, probably drawn out by Janie's voice. Aunt Susie, wearing a more mature version of Janie's dress, stared at him with pursed lips. He raised his chin, refusing to cower under the disapproval in her eyes. The opinion of family traitors didn't matter to him.

They heard car doors slam outside, giving Aunt Susie an excuse to break eye contact. "That must be the Master of Ceremonies," she trilled, spinning toward the door. Her heels echoed on the marble floor as she moved.

"Or Mary Anne," Jared added dryly. Mary Anne came from another Overseer family managing the archives. Most genie transfers included a representative from one of the three Overseer families, either physically or virtually, so an Overseer could personally verify who had ownership of which genie and keep the archives up to date. The Wild family were considered the Premier Overseers since the Premier Overseer had come from their family for three centuries, but it was bad form for an Overseer family to be the representatives for their own genie transfers.

Nathan followed his aunt outside alongside his father with Janie trailing behind. Both

their guests had arrived, Mary Anne Sutton with one genie wizard and the Master of Ceremonies with two, a man and a woman. All three genie wizards raised their eyebrows at the scholastic shrubbery lining the long driveway. The bushes were fitting of an Overseer family, shaped into massive open books, piles of books, book cases, and reading chairs with books waiting on the arm.

“Jameson,” Jared greeted, shaking the Master of Ceremonies’s hand with both his own. “We appreciate you coming today.” There were many Masters of Ceremonies, but Jameson had overseen Nathan’s father’s first transfer ceremony and the two were old friends.

“I’m honored you requested me,” Jameson assured him. His hair was whiter than the last time Nathan saw him, his wrinkles heavier. Master of Ceremonies seemed like an easy job, but dealing with the upper echelons of The Society was probably enough to make anyone’s head turn white.

“Congratulations,” Mary Anne told Nathan, her smile showing off perfectly white teeth as she hugged him. “Matt’s dying that you’ll get a genie before him, but he would have come if he could. He had mid-terms today.”

“Duty calls,” he said with a careless shrug, though he would have preferred for Matt to be there. Nathan had no doubt he could handle a genie—but your first genie was a big deal and he wished his best friend was there for support. He got to skip school for the transfer ceremony, but he didn’t have a test and was still in high school. Matt was in his first year of college and still working to prove himself capable of handling the family genie.

“He’ll visit as soon as he can,” Mary Anne promised. “Dad wasn’t happy with his last test score, so he’s buckling down on studying.”

“He’s got a hard act to follow,” Jared said, “following you graduating summa cum laude

last year.”

“He’ll get by,” Mary Anne brushed off. “He’s as devoted to the archives as I am.”

Jameson pursed his lips disapprovingly. “‘Getting by’ is for slackers. Such attitude is unbecoming of the Sutton family.”

Mary Anne’s eyes flashed, though she hid it with a deferential bow of her head, her brown hair sliding over her face.

“Matt doesn’t shine when it comes to academics,” Nathan jumped in. “He learns better with hands-on experience. The archives will be in good hands with him.”

“He’s already improved the cross-reference functionality of the digital archives,” Mary Anne added, shooting him a grateful look. With nearly two thousand years of history, the vast majority of the archives still only existed in paper form, though Matt believed the more robust their digital system, the easier it would be to move everything over.

The Overseers prided themselves on the accuracy of their records—which meant no universal genie was allowed to muck things up by transferring their treasure trove into digital form. No wish would be sufficient to ensure the integrity of the archives. It would have to be a dissertation.

“That’s right!” Aunt Susie jumped in, her eyes triumphant as she shot a look at Nathan. “School performance is not an indicator of true ability. Experience is.” She turned to Jameson. “Don’t you think that’s the most important factor in *maturely* handling a genie? Youth is a time for making mistakes and living it up. Not for taking on heavy responsibilities.”

Jameson frowned. “A sound mind and clear reasoning is what’s needed to handle a genie well, and Nathan has demonstrated both. He’s more equipped to handle a genie than other Society members who’ve been giving one.”

Behind Susie's back, Mary Anne stuck her tongue out at her. Nathan pressed his lips together to withhold a smile.

"It is not the Master of Ceremonies place to dictate who receives a genie," Jameson continued. "Merely to see that it is done properly. I have great faith in the judgement of the Wild family after working with them over the years." Overseers and Masters of Ceremonies got to know each other well will both needing to be present for genie transfers.

"Let's head inside, shall we?" Jared suggested, giving Susie a warning look. "It's past time we began the ceremony."

Nathan's heart rate picked up, all of this suddenly seeming more real. His first genie. He grew up with and around his family's fire genie, always questioning the wizard staff about what she could do and secretly investigating how each family member used her abilities. He would not disappoint his grandmother's trust in him.

On the way in, something dark flickered in the corner of his eye among the shrubbery. He blinked, turning to get a better look. He blinked several more times, but all he saw was perfectly trimmed bushes.

"Nathan?" Mary Anne said, her eyes crinkled with concern. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh—no," he said, giving an embarrassed smile. For a moment, he'd wondered if someone was spying on his transfer ceremony, but the genie wizards would have sensed any magic, and Aunt Susie was probably the only person who'd want to spy on him anyway. All three Overseer families were too low for anyone to bother with. The big families didn't want the 'burden' of maintaining dusty old records. Still, he couldn't help glancing behind one more time before entering the house.

Chapter Eight

Ali

I returned home from school to find the apartment the most spartan I'd ever seen it. The whole space was white—not white like painted white, but like infinite-space-never-ends white. I blinked. It had to be an optical illusion. I turned back to touch the door, only to find it gone. My heart jumped into my throat and I put one panicked hand out only to jam my fingers against the wall.

“Ow,” I murmured, cradling my hand to my chest. At least I'd determined the never-ending look was an optical illusion.

“It's just for effect,” Tavor said behind me. His voice turned dry as he added, “I wouldn't trap you to talk to you. I just wanted to eliminate distractions.”

Turning back around, I found Tavor floating cross-legged in the air, a small silver table and chair below him.

Slowly, I made my way over, dropping my backpack and sinking into the chair. “I only have an hour,” I warned. I finished my homework before coming home so I could give Tavor my undivided attention. It wasn't the study marathon my afternoons normally were, but I usually had

time to study during work. The insurance company I worked for was local and not many calls came in during the evening.

Illan and Rajan were nowhere in sight, so I guessed Tavor asked them to make themselves scarce for this conversation. The thought made my palms sweat and I rubbed them absently on my jeans as I started up at him.

“How is school going?”

“What?” I expected something shocking or bizarre, not mundane. The totally innocuous question coming from Tavor didn’t compute in my brain.

“School,” he prompted, like maybe I’d forgotten what that was. “You’re a bright-eyed and bushy tailed freshman all ready to take on the world of college. How is it going?”

“Good,” I said, the word almost sounding like a question. Was he leading to something here? Or trying to relax me before bringing up what he really wanted to talk about?

“No complaints?”

“Aside from a professor trying to molest me?” Not to mention my grades tanking for a bit after learning genies existed, but that might sound like I was blaming him. “No, it’s fine. Classes are going well.” My grades were where I wanted them, I had a good study routine going, and my job allowed my primary focus to be on school. Everything was going according to the plan I’d started formulating at thirteen. Barring the addition of my genie roommates.

“Good, good,” he said, then put his palms together, resting his fingertips on his lips as he studied me. “But . . . I can’t help feeling your life is lacking. Rajan and I have brought this up in round about ways. Your entire life is school.”

“Because I’m in college,” I interrupted. “Your life is supposed to be about school in college. That’s how you get good grades and then a good job. I can live for other things after.”

This topic sent flutters of panic through my chest. Movies and TV shows loved to focus on partying college students. On young adults living up what might be considered the freest time of their lives. That attitude would get me yanked right back to Chicago. Or affect my grades, potentially delaying obtaining my degree or lowering my attraction as a future employees. Both scenarios were unacceptable.

“I’m here to get an engineering degree, not to make friends.” Aside from largely missing out on developing that social skill thanks to my overbearing mother and my father demanding background checks on the families of anyone I associated with, friends would want to hang out, which would take away from study time.

“Are you happy?” he challenged, his orange eyes boring into mine. “Four years is a long time to spend with textbooks as your closest companion.”

“I’ll graduate in three,” I corrected him. “I got some credit in high school and I’ll attend summer semesters. And this is *my* choice. Living my own life is a lot better than—” I cut myself off.

“Oh?” His eyebrows rose, curiosity sparking in his eyes. “Better than what? I don’t know anything about your family, do I?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, flushing.

“No, this sounds interesting.” He propped his elbows on his knees, resting his chin on his fists. “What is it about your life before now that makes surrounding yourself with nothing but school so appealing?”

I didn’t answer. Beyond not wanting to get into it, I wasn’t sure *how* to answer. My thoughts tangled in a giant knotted mess, weaving in and out of each other. There were probably lots of ways to escape controlling parents, maybe even easier ones, but I set my heart long ago on

doing it through supporting myself with a good degree. I wanted a relationship with my parents—but one where I could set boundaries and that meant being able to stand on my own. And maybe if I just got smart enough, I could explain why I wanted independence to my parents without setting them off.

He continued when it became apparent I wouldn't respond. "What if you could have more out of life? What if you were *intended* for more?"

"I don't want wishes." The words were a knee-jerk reaction. I didn't need any help obtaining my goals.

His lips twitched toward a smile. "I'm not suggesting you make a wish."

That got my attention. "Then what are you suggesting?"

"What if Rajan, Illan, and me coming to you was fate?"

I blinked. "You said I had rotten luck."

"That was before you ended up with two genies who already had a master—one of them under contract."

"But that's your fault."

"*Our* fault," he corrected. "But it's not just what's happened, it's how it's happened. Greed is part and parcel of the human experience. Genies have ended up with masters outside The Society before, and they've been just as greedy as masters within The Society." His lip curled into sneer. "Genies are taken for granted as existing for the benefit of human whims. You just being you, that's an immeasurable gift for a genie."

I squirmed uncomfortably. I wasn't anything special. I just happened to want to accomplish my greedy desires by myself. I'd had more than enough of having things done for me supposedly for my benefit. I would decide what benefited me and accomplish it with my own

hands.

He placed a hand on the table near me. “Ali, together we could free the rest of the McMichael genies.”

I sat in stunned silence before blurting, “I’m not freedom, Tavor. You said I can’t grant you freedom.”

“You are the closest thing we’ve had to freedom in centuries. And when past masters have given us a semblance of freedom, it’s only been to help accomplish their desires.”

“I’m still not freedom,” I argued. “And the McMichaels will come after us. And The Society, whoever they are. Illan said he doesn’t think they know the McMichaels are missing more genies than you, but it sounds like once they do, they’ll be after us too.”

“You saw Illan with his master. Do you really think any genie would choose being in that situation over being with you? And does true freedom exist for anyone in this world? You’re tied to your studies, but perhaps you find that more freeing than other situations you’ve experienced.” He raised his eyebrows at me and an image of Illan trembling as he fought against a wish to harm me flashed through my head. On its heels was the memory of my mom sending me to my room for refusing to apologize for making cookies to surprise my dad.

“What about a third option?” I asked. “Being with the McMichaels is awful, but being with me isn’t really a solution. Is there somewhere else I can take you that would be better? Or hide your gems somewhere they won’t be found?”

“We’d be confined to our gems the moment you died. Genies without a master can’t leave their gems, and that’s a different kind of hell.”

“Well, you’re not offering any real solutions here,” I said, frustrated. “If you can come up with something, I’ll support it.” Though I should probably learn what The Society would do to

me if they caught me first. If the rest of the people in The Society were like the McMichaels, they probably had resources I couldn't comprehend.

“We can discuss solutions once we have the other genies.”

“No, we can't, Tavor. Then I'll end up even more over my head in a situation I don't want. I agreed to one genie roommate. *One*. Then I decided I didn't need to know more about genies and ended up with a second genie. Then I decided that I had questions that needed answers, but I would wait. And then I ended up with a third genie. No more 'we'll figure this out later.' We need a solution first.”

“Don't you humans say necessity is the mother of invention? Nothing is more motivating than a problem in your face needing a resolution. And the more genies we have, the better and quicker we can brainstorm a more permanent solution.”

“You're thousands of years old,” I countered. “Quick for you and quick for me are probably very different. What if we don't figure something out during my lifetime?” I had visions of being old and gray, surrounded by genies and having accomplished none of my goals because I never had time for anything but the genies. I didn't want to jump into marriage the way my mom wanted me to, but I wanted it eventually.

“And isn't my lifetime a drop in the bucket for you?” I continued. “Is a few moments of relative freedom worth causing so much havoc?” Like genie wizards attempting to kill me and the McMichaels plus The Society trying to hunt us down. How long could we really hide from people with resources like theirs? Billions of dollars and who knew how many genies.

The silver table started glowing and the hairs on the back of my neck rose. My eyes jumped to Tavor's to see them glowing brighter than the table. My heart jumped to my throat and when the table's glow increased to supernova levels, I leapt from my chair. The table exploded,

most of it dissolving, but a few bits of metal rained down, tinkling as they hit the ground.

I stared at the black spot where the table had been. If I was still normal human fast, I might have gotten caught in that explosion.

“Worth it?” he asked, his booming voice filling the room. He’d done this once before—but he was louder this time, making me want to cover my ears, but I didn’t dare as he uncrossed his legs and rose in the air. “If this freedom had lasted a *week* it would be worth causing ten times the chaos, and you would deny us this?”

My heart thumped so hard I thought I could hear it, but I quietly said, “You would end my life for a week of peace?” Because the moment the genies were taken, I’d have no protection and past experience said the McMichaels would never let me live.

The glow in his eyes lessened as he lowered himself to just above the ground. “That’s not what I meant,” he sighed, his voice retaining a tinge of the echo it held when he’d yelled. “My point is that the freedom may seem paltry to your eyes, but you’ve no conception of what it is to be a slave. A temporary reprieve, no matter how temporary, *is* worth it.”

Resentment balled in chest, the closed-in feeling I often got at home making me feel claustrophobic despite the never-ending look of the space. “The McMichaels will eventually find out who I am and I’ll have to go into hiding. I’ll lose *everything* I’m working toward only for you guys to be thrown right back into slavery either when I’m hunted down or when I die. *Unless* you have a real solution.” I might risk what Tavor was asking for if we could give the genies more permanent freedom. I wouldn’t do it while he didn’t have even the barest idea of a solution.

His eyes sparked brighter. “I can give you *everything* you’re working toward.” He twisted the word everything sarcastically. “You’re going for a bachelor’s degree—I could give

you a PhD in mechanical engineering from the most well-regarded institute in the world and all the knowledge that went with it. But. That. Doesn't. Matter." He spoke each word as its own, distinct sentence. I could almost hear a gavel banging with each word, like a proclamation from on high.

"You have a greater purpose than some stupid, mundane life like most humans," he continued. "Aren't your kind always searching for purpose in life? Why you're really here? What will you accomplish with your degree? You'll be some easily replaced cog in the machine of some company versus the potential of changing the course of the lives of six beings."

The back of my mind said it thought there were seven McMichael genies, not six, but the forefront screamed something else. "Maybe a stupid, mundane life is exactly what I want, is exactly what I've been fighting for. Maybe it sounds inconsequential to you, but it means a hell of a lot to me!"

"If you truly want a simple, mundane life, why did you let me stay?"

"You think I let you stay because I wanted to spruce up my life with a genie?" I asked, my voice rising incredulously. "I didn't want you around for the magic you throw around the apartment. I wanted—" I abruptly cut off, flushing red. When I'd dreaded the thought of sending Tavor along, my thoughts had been full of our silly discussions about food, of him enjoying the home decor magazines I brought home for him, and wanting to make him smile again. But I wasn't going to tell him that. Especially not right now. "My life is mine to live, not yours to control. You don't get to make my choices."

The glow had faded from his eyes and he stared at me with an inscrutable, almost confused look.

"I'm done," I muttered, yanking my backpack over my shoulder and moving to

approximately where I thought my bedroom door should be. I should have never let these genies into my life in the first place. I didn't have room for distractions like this—let alone the life-threatening aspect their presence presented.

The white rippled until it revealed my door and I stormed inside.

Chapter Nine

Nathan Wild

“The Wild family is in good hands,” Jared said, squeezing Nathan’s shoulder as they finished up refreshments after the transfer ceremony. “You’ve taken a big step today toward becoming head of the family, Son.”

His father’s eyes shone with pride and emotion clogged Nathan’s throat—until Aunt Susie ruined the moment by rolling her eyes. “Should we walk our guests to their cars?” she asked, her voice chipper. “It’s getting late.”

Nathan ground his teeth at the ‘our guests’ comment. This wasn’t her home or her transfer ceremony. There was no ‘our’ here, but she’d been determined to make everything in the Wild family ‘ours’ after her husband’s death left her with nothing from her in-laws. She’d even changed her and Janie’s last names back to Wild earlier that year. As though that could erase her walking away from her duty as an Overseer.

He wanted to sit and continue talking since Aunt Susie was the one who suggested getting up, but Jameson stood, so everyone else followed.

“Thank you again, Jameson, Mary Anne,” Jared said. “Truly, we appreciate your

involvement in Nathan's first transfer ceremony."

"I wouldn't have wanted the Overseer representative to be anyone else," Mary Anne assured, flashing Nathan a smile.

"And I look forward to a continued close relationship with the next generation of the Wild family," Jameson said, giving Nathan a solemn nod that he returned. Behind Jameson's back, Janie's face took on a pinched look. Probably at not seeming to be included in that statement. Not that she should have been.

The sun was setting as they stepped outside, casting an orange glow across the sky. The genie wizards moved to stand at the doors of the cars, waiting for their employers to say their goodbyes.

A dark flicker—right where he swore he saw one before—distracted Nathan. It was right over the hedge shaped like an arm chair with a pile of books resting on the arm of the chair.

"We'll have you over soon," Mary Anne promised, distracting him. "Matt will want to hear all about your plans for your genie."

"Of course," Nathan said, patting his pocket where the ruby gem rested. He had to impress grandmother so he'd get the ruby again soon. "I look forward to seeing you both."

Jameson climbed into his car on the passenger side and the two genie wizards got in. Nathan walked Mary Anne to her car, about to wish her a safe drive when Janie shrieked. He whirled around to find her slack jawed and wide eyed as she pointed at something. He moved his gaze to where she pointed and stepped back in horror, bumping into Mary Anne.

A burned corpse sat awkwardly on the arm chair, more laying in a straight board than sitting. Silence reigned.

Slowly, Jameson got out of his car along with his genie wizards.

“Jared,” he said, his voice breathy, “what is the meaning of this?”

“I-I have no idea,” Jared stuttered.

Nathan swallowed hard, his hand finding Mary Anne’s wrist and gripping it. She shifted so her hand held his, squeezing just as hard and pulling him back a few steps. He’d never seen a dead body before. An acrid smell reached him and he spun away, coughing and fighting the urge to retch.

“You had the Wild fire genie last,” Jameson pointed out, his voice cautions, but stern.

“Jared!” Aunt Susie cried, her voice shrill. “What have you done?”

“I didn’t do this!” Jared snapped.

“Father would never kill anyone!” Nathan cried, spinning back around to glare at Susie. He swore he saw a delighted gleam hiding in her horrified expression.

The three genie wizards inserted themselves between their employers and the body, moving closer to it. His family didn’t keep wizards on retainer but they had their uses. He was glad they were here now.

Mary Anne squeezed his hand and hissed, “The bigger families use their genies for murder all the time.”

He whipped his head around to snap at her and she quietly shushed him. “I know your father didn’t do this. I’m saying Jameson and Susie shouldn’t be making such a fuss. They should be calmer about discovering what’s going on.”

“This body couldn’t have been here earlier,” the male wizard serving Jameson said, narrowing his eyes at the corpse. “We would have sensed the concealment magic.”

“Our family doesn’t have a genie with concealment magic,” Nathan pointed out. Then another idea occurred. “And we can just ask our genie herself. Genie, I summon you.”

The ruby in his pocket seemed to warm before flames burst into the air in front of him, fanning him with heat. The flames died down to reveal the fire genie. The red of the setting sun turned her looks even more fiery, the fading light gleaming off her deep red hair pulled into a high ponytail, her hair flying unnaturally every which way like it refused to be tamed. Her puffy pants and short, closed red vest were redder than any sunset. Her red eyes stared down at him with disdain. Like how Aunt Susie might stare at a cockroach on her immaculate floors.

He glared up at her, gesturing to the dead body. “What is this?”

She looked at it, then turned back to him, unimpressed. “A burned corpse.”

An embarrassed flush crawled up his face. He knew better than to ask non-specific questions. “I know what it is. How did it get there?”

She shrugged. “I couldn’t say. Sadly, being psychic isn’t related to fire, so this is outside my realm of expertise. If you were asking for my opinion, I imagine someone put it there.” She looked over her shoulder at Jared and gave a flirtatious smile. “I imagine only the culprit would know.”

“Stop insinuating lies,” Nathan demanded as the assembled crowd eyed his father again.

The genie wizard who first spoke frowned, stepping closer to the corpse. “It looks like a genie wizard from the size of it.” He angled his head this way and that, studying it. There were enough facial features left that Nathan wouldn’t say it was burned beyond recognition, but he wasn’t interested in getting close enough to see if he recognized it.

The genie wizard froze, then glanced at his female counterpart. “This looks like Santiago.”

Nathan heard her give a sharp intake of breath before she stepped closer. She turned to Jared, her eyes hard. “This *is* Santiago.”

Nathan and Mary Anne shared a confused look. He looked to his father and Aunt Susie, but they didn't seem to know who that was either. Jameson also looked mystified, but tried to hide it with a wise, knowing look at Jared.

"The McMichaels," the woman snarled. "Santiago serves . . . *served* the McMichaels." She stumbled over using past tense.

Someone else said something, but all Nathan heard was roaring in his ears. Why was a genie wizard who served the McMichaels dead on his lawn? He couldn't help looking around, as though to search for spies lurking to report this back to the McMichaels. But if anyone from The Society sent spies, they wouldn't send ones Nathan could spot with his naked eye.

"Our genie couldn't have done this," he said desperately. Only the very highest families in The Society could hope to cross the McMichaels and survive. The Overseer families were insignificant—which was why Aunt Susie married up and ran why. "Genies can't harm genie wizards." Unless he'd been lied to all his life. Did the archives have any records of something like this?

"We didn't say you used your genie," the female wizard said, her voice harsh, though her eyes still flickered the fire genie. The fire genie buffed her nails on her vest, seemingly ignoring them all. "But Santiago's body is dead on your lawn. We need answers as to why."

Aunt Susie nodded vigorously, though even she looked pale at this revelation. "Yes, Jared, a dead genie wizard is terrible news—especially one from one of the upper echelon families. You should know what's happening on your own property."

All three genie wizards shot her an annoyed look.

Jameson spoke, his words coming slowly. "This is troubling, old friend." His eyes met Jared's, seeming to bear a heavy weight. "Especially in light of recent events—with the theft of

the McMichael's universal genie less than two months old, I imagine their genie wizard may have been investigating the theft."

Jared shook his head in denial, his eyes wide. Panic gripped Nathan at the almost frightened look in his father's eye.

"Beast and transformation genie owners were brought in for questioning," Jared said. "They said the theft must have been done by one of those genies." He gestured to the fire genie. "We couldn't have done that theft."

"You couldn't have without *help*," Jameson amended before turning to look at Mary Anne. "The Sutton family has a beast genie. Was your family brought in for questioning?"

To Nathan's surprise, Mary Anne paled. "They called in every beast and transformation genie owner for a thousand miles for questioning—but our family was in Germany on vacation. We had our genie with us."

"So you weren't questioned?" Jameson pressed, raising his eyebrows.

Mary Anne's hand tightened on Nathan's as her brow lowered in anger. "No. Because there was no need to." Releasing Nathan's hand, she pointed to Santiago. "And we still haven't address that no genie could have done this. You're throwing dangerous accusations at the Wild and Sutton families without real evidence. This body wasn't here when we arrived, but appeared when we came out. Someone is looking to Fram the Wild family."

Jameson shook his head sadly. "Perhaps the McMichaels learned of their universal genie's whereabouts and sent a message." His genie wizards twitched, though Nathan didn't know if it was at the suggestion of killing a genie wizard for a message, or at using a genie wizard as a message in general.

"If this was a warning, the McMichaels would have killed one of the Sutton genie

wizards, or a wizard that has contracted with the Wilds in the past,” Mary Anne snapped. “Not one of their own.”

“Santiago is—was well regarded among wizards,” the female wizard said, crossing her arms over her chest as she stared down Jameson. She was at least six inches taller. “He trained many of the best and would not have been thrown away for a mere message.” With a sinking feeling, Nathan wondered if this woman was among Santiago’s trainees. A personal connection would leave her looking for someone to blame. And grasping at straws for who to blame if no clear culprit emerged.

“All right, that was a thin argument,” Jameson admitted, holding his hands up in a gesture of peace. Then he sighed as he turned to Jared again. “But I’m afraid our long history has no bearing in this, my friend. The Wild family’s dislike of genie wizards is well-known.” Nathan gritted his teeth to stop himself from lashing out. They didn’t ‘dislike’ genie wizards, they just didn’t believe in crippling themselves with dependence on beings who had their own loyalties and agendas. “With the victim being on your property and from a family that just suffered a theft of a genie, this doesn’t look good. An investigation must take place, but I will try to keep this quiet until we’re able to learn more.”

“You can’t really believe we would still from the McMichaels,” Jared said. “Or attack one of their genie wizards. Yes, he could have been burned by normal means, but no regular human could take on a genie wizard. We would have had to—”

Jameson held up a hand to cut him off. “I will allow a universal genie to sort this out. I’ll try to be discreet in arranging for one to be brought in, though using discretion means it will take more time to arrange.” He turned to Nathan. “Have your genie bring Santiago’s body to the shed for storage until we’re able to get to the bottom of this. This . . .” he gestured vaguely at the

shrub. Nathan would never be able to look at the chair the same way again. He'd sat in at as a child. Maybe they'd have their gardener turn it into something. "This is disrespectful."

He wanted to snap that since his family hadn't put the body there, it wasn't his fault that it was disrespectful, but instead he said, "Genie, I wish you would put Santiago's body in the shed."

The genie didn't move, pursing her lips instead. "Ghee, Master, I'd love to—but, unfortunately, a wish must involve magic. Fire magic, to be specific. Manual labor just isn't covered. You'll have to do it yourselves."

They all looked to the three genie wizards, who exchanged unhappy looks. Finally, Mary Anne's wizard said, "I know where the shed is, if you'll help me bring him. We can cover him with a tarp."

Nathan had to look away as they moved the corpse, a shivering going down his spine as a bit of black flesh flaked off in the wind. He had the consolation that the questioning by the universal genie would prove the Wild and Sutton families innocent. But it wouldn't erase the stain of being accused. He glared at Jameson, not caring if the lowering light would hide it from view or not. He wouldn't forget this slight against his family.

Chapter Ten

Ethan McMichael

Tuesday, October 31

Ethan reviewed his reports on the Museum of Horton as his self-governing car took him toward the city in question.

Once the shadow genie revealed he thought the genie thief was in possession of all three missing genies, Ethan had delved into his pompous second cousin's loss of the fire genie. Santiago and Ren had investigated the fire genie's theft as had Jeanine's genie wizards. They'd come away baffled and his aunt Jeanine had jumped to finger-pointing.

Ethan's own investigation showed the short-sightedness of genie wizards. They were so focused on magic and genies, they forgot the human side of things. He'd gotten ahold of a report at the museum stating that a young woman was the only patron to walk into the museum prior to the theft of the ruby, yet Tyler claimed he was told the thief was a man and the police reports listed the thief as a man. It could be a clerical error—or an indication of memories changed after the fact. Universal genies weren't the only ones capable of modifying memories, but they were the best at it.

His hands tightened on his tablet. The shadow genie believed the universal was involved with the theft of the ice genie, and now he had evidence that he may have been involved with the theft of the fire genie as well. Doubtless, whoever stole the universal genie believed they were pulling the strings of this operation, but the universal was a wily one. He'd almost brought ruin to the entire McMichael family twice during the past two centuries. Ethan's father had often spoke of his prowess in never falling prey to the universal's tricks. Ethan doubted this since his father kept genie wizards attached to him like they were his third and fourth arms.

The two additional stolen genies on top of the universal were humiliating and a setback unlike any the McMichaels had faced during their climb of The Society's hierarchical ladder. Other than the universal's attempt to ruin them, but Ethan was no longer upset by the additional thefts. Not when they gave him hope that the universal hadn't been sold off.

A genie hunter selling the imperial topaz on the black market was the worst case scenario. Those genies were not always recovered. But a family keeping the universal and making a grab for the rest of the McMichael genies? They could be tracked down and destroyed. Ethan had waited his entire life for the universal to become his. Nothing would stand in the way of that.

His phone buzzed, one of his genie wizards checking on him. With the impossible happening—genies stolen from their masters and contracts being broken—one could argue this was the worst time to travel without the protection of wizards. However, Aunt Jeanine's accusations still rang in his ears. He would investigate alone and hopefully gain insight into the possibility of one of their wizards betraying them. But he hasn't a fool. His wizards believed he was in sensitive business meeting and were to check in with him every half hour. Aside from that, the genie wizards hadn't proved successful in keeping either the universal or ice genies safe.

He had no need of useless tools during this investigation.

The car stopped outside a small home with a single car garage. Investigating why the triplets would visit Horton, Ethan had discovered they had a contractor here. A professor at the local college where the shadow genie had tracked the triplets to. The genie had reported two other humans present when he believed the triplets lost the ice genie. He didn't have a guess as to who the second human may have been, but the professor being the first was a viable theory.

It was late enough on a Tuesday morning that the professor may be at the college, but Ethan still planned to start here. If the professor was out, he would have the shadow genie go through the professor's home for any clues.

He rang the doorbell and waited. When nothing happened, he knocked heavy on the door. Still nothing. He rang the bell one more time and the door jerked open to reveal an unshaven man in a bathrobe.

Ethan glanced at him distastefully from head to toe. Standards had gone down if such a man was allowed to teach higher education. Or perhaps this was the difference between a prestigious university and a local college.

"Professor Jacob Treen?" he asked.

The man paled as he stared, presumably recognizing Ethan from his many appearances in the media.

"What do you want?" the man whispered.

"To talk. May I come in?"

Treen hesitated before standing back to allow Ethan in.

It was an effort not to wrinkle his nose at the smell of cheap alcohol permeating the room. The couches in the front room looked clean enough, but he opted to remain standing.

“Are you here to officially break the contract?” Treen spat. “Most people in breach of a contract have to pay up for breaking a legal agreement, but not the McMichaels.”

Ethan froze. Nothing he looked into within the triplets’ business suggested they had let this man go. But they weren’t known for their record keeping skills or attention to detail. “This happened last week when they visited?”

Rage filled his eyes. “Yes, this happened last week! On Thursday. Those bastards backed out of our agreement after trying to demand I deliver results *months* before the agreed upon date.” He clenched his fist, gritting his teeth so he had to force his next words out. “But it wasn’t my fault. Their assistant said they fired me because I flew into a rage and destroyed my office—but I didn’t. The girl did it. She trashed my office, lost me my contract job, *and* got me fired!” He was yelling by the end.

Ethan sighed, glancing at his Salvatore Ferragamo watch. He hadn’t expected great insights from the professor into what happened. Hints would have been his best hope since the professor likely had either missing or modified memories, but he hadn’t expected a raving loon either. Clearly, the man was unhinged and shouldn’t have been hired. He hopefully had outstanding qualifications for the triplets to have worked with him at all.

Then Ethan paused. If the theft occurred at the college as the shadow believed it had, the most likely culprits were either this man or the other person the genie sensed—which may have been the girl Treen was raving about.

“Tell me more about the girl,” he ordered, settling into one of the couches.

Chapter Eleven

Ali

Wednesday, November 1

I walked into the same sight I'd seen in my apartment yesterday and this morning—a barebones apartment with second-hand furniture. Not only was Tavor not making an appearance after our argument, he'd stopped changing the decor for the first time since he'd arrived.

Illan and Rajan sat on the two stools next to the kitchen island, hushing their conversation as I walked in.

Rajan gave me a half-hearted wave as Illan murmured, “Welcome home, Miss Ali. How were your classes?”

The atmosphere had been awkward ever since we brought Illan home. Not because of his presence, I was sure, but because of Tavor's abrupt hiding away act once he realized he'd freed a genie under contract. Or, I guess *we'd* freed might be more accurate. It was a shame, because Illan and I would probably get along well under less tense circumstances.

“My Statics professor was replaced this week, so that's good news.” Professor Mumford had jumped right into teaching based on where we should be at according to the textbook. I

should have been thrilled she didn't waste an entire class period trying to learn where we were at rather than stewing over genies. Was I making the atmosphere awkward too since Monday? I couldn't tell, but I was starting to want my normal, quiet apartment back for studying. I didn't want a quiet apartment that came from tense silence.

"Sooo . . ." Rajan began when I gently placed my backpack on the table so I wouldn't throw it. Why was paying my own way in college and having the time to study for good grades so much to ask for? "What did you and Tavor talk about on Monday?"

"You didn't hear?" I asked, my head jerking up to meet his gaze. "Your gems were in the room, weren't they?"

"We cannot hear the outside world while in our gems unless we are on our master's person," Illan explained. "We are blind and deaf to anything outside our gem. Though we can hear our master's voice if they summon us or make a wish."

I frowned. "Didn't Tavor open the clam his gem was in because I knocked?"

"He probably put a sensing spell on the clam," Rajan said, his voice dry. "Universals can do things us peons can't."

I nodded, unsure where to go from there. Should I tell them about Tavor's idea? Would they agree with him? The words 'you have a greater purpose than some stupid, mundane life' rang in my ears, bringing angry tears to my eyes. Something I'd fought for for years wasn't stupid or mundane. It was precious.

My mom probably thought that it was stupid and mundane too. She'd wanted a different path for me as well.

"Ali?" Rajan said, his voice tentative. "Did you two fight?"

I laid my hand on my backpack, feeling the hard press of the textbooks inside. "This

means everything to me,” I whispered. “I chose this college. I chose this degree. I got my own job.” And was saving everything I could to pay rent for next year. Come January, I would begin applying for loans to pay for school next year, and I was always on the lookout for scholarships opportunities. These were the first real decisions I’d made. *I* was directing my life for the first time.

My hand tightened. “It’s not stupid. And it *does* matter.”

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Rajan and Illan exchange a look.

“Of course it’s not and of course it does,” Illan said, joining me at the table. His perfectly styled light blue hair and perfect posture looked out of place at my dingy table. Even the way he wore his white vest and puffy light blue pants looked prim and proper. His slanted eyes tried to catch mine, but I kept my gaze fixed on the backpack, annoyed that he made my little apartment look even more worn. “Did Tavor say those things?”

“Tavor thinks we should free the other McMichael genies,” I said. Tavor’s eyes widened as Rajan’s mouth dropped open. Rajan’s eyes went to my backpack and his gaping mouth moved to form an ‘oh’ of understanding. “He talked like . . . like you three coming to me was fate.” But maybe he only said that to try to convince me to go along with his plan.

“But it’s not like it’s freedom, right?” I asked, looking between the two genies. “Living in this cramped little apartment.” I threw my hands up in frustration. “What’s so great about that? And how long would it even last for?” I didn’t want to bring up all the reasons why it wasn’t likely to last. Genie wizards, the McMichaels, and The Society. A scene from a nightmare I half-remembered from Monday night popped into my head—a shadowy figure reaching to break my neck as I screamed I hadn’t meant to do any of it. I shivered, wrapping my arms around myself.

“I want to be here,” Rajan said. I couldn’t read the expression in his eyes. Hurt?

Betrayed? Uncertain? “Even in its natural, ratty form I’d rather be in your apartment than the McMichaels’ mansions.” He paused. “Do you not want me here?”

“I wasn’t talking about you,” I said, shaking my head. “And it’s not that I don’t want to help the other genies. But I can’t offer them freedom, not really. And once I took all the genies, the McMichaels would never rest until they found us.”

“Actually, they would die,” Illan said.

My shocked gaze jumped to his. His cool blue eyes were clear and collected, as though he hadn’t just pronounced the potential murder of an entire family.

“What?”

“The Society is for families with genies,” he said. “A family with no genie is not a member of The Society, and humans not involved with The Society aren’t allowed to know of genies’ existence.”

“B-but they’re part of The Society,” I stammered. “Aren’t they? And the McMichael conglomerate is one of the biggest in the world. Everyone knows their name. They couldn’t just kill them.”

Neither of them spoke, but the atmosphere seemed to say ‘you poor naive fool, we’ll just leave you in the dark.’

My hands tightened as my jaw locked. But I reminded myself that I Illan had already told me what happened. I was the one questioning a world he’d lived in for centuries. And maybe I was misreading the atmosphere. Maybe it really said, ‘okay, we’ll keep the gory details away from you if you don’t want to hear about them.’

“Fine, the McMichaels wouldn’t be able to come after us for long if we got all their genies, but The Society would still come after us, right? We’ve already been tracked down by

two genie wizards.”

“Technically speaking, the second one you found you by accident,” Rajan pointed out.

“There’s still the bird,” Illan pointed out.

“The bird?” I echoed, my eyebrows scrunching together as I tried to connect how birds fit into this conversation.

“The bird who left Tavor with you,” Illan clarified. “He knows where we’re at. Even if he didn’t follow you home, he knows you’re in Horton. Circumstances may be such that the genie responsible may not have to tell his master where you are, but that doesn’t mean he won’t.”

“So there might be someone out there who knows where we are?” I asked, my voice getting higher.

“Maybe not,” Rajan said. “There may be someone who knows where *Tavor* is. They couldn’t have guessed Illan and I would follow . . . but they might suspect we’re here too.”

“Except, we don’t think anyone outside the McMichaels knows of our absence yet,” Illan reminded him. “Once more missing genies becomes known, they may investigate.”

“Great,” I said, dropping my head into my hands. How, exactly, was I supposed to get quality studying done with this hanging over me?

“Can you tell us anything specific about the bird?” Illan asked. “Any unusual markings?”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because all transformation genies have markings that follow them no matter what form they take. If the bird was a transformation genie, we may be able to identify who they are and who they serve.”

I almost admitted that Tavor believed the bird was a transformation genie, but then it felt like I would also have to admit that Tavor thought there was something not-human about me. I

didn't want to talk about that.

I shook my head, "I'm sorry, I don't know much about birds. If there was something different about it, I didn't notice or don't remember. I was more distracted by the giant bird suddenly hopping around me."

"What did it look like?" he pressed.

I shrugged. "Big and black. Shiny, I guess."

"Did it have a pointed or flat beak? Was it bigger than a pigeon?"

"Pointed," I said, remembering how afraid I was it would peck me with that big beak when I reached for Tavor's gem. "And way bigger than a pigeon."

"Most likely a raven," Illan murmured, rubbing his chin. "They're bigger beak would have made it easier to carry the gem."

I shook my head again, about to ask why it mattered if it was a raven since that didn't help us identify the genie. Then my eyes caught Rajan's and he raised his eyebrows significantly at me, reminding me of a vaguely reminiscent argument we had about mastodons and mammoths. I couldn't help smiling, understanding just a little of the frustration Rajan felt that day. He returned my smile, his eyes relieved.

"But what . . ." I started to speak, then hesitated, not sure I really wanted to know their answer to my question. I twisted my hands together, my fingers gripping each other until they turned white. "What do you guys think of Tavor's idea?"

Rajan turned his gaze to the floor. "I already told you my opinion," he muttered. "I'd rather be here."

I wanted to press him, to ask if it would still be worth it if he ended up right back with the McMichaels, or with some other master. If it would be worth it if I wound up dead. But my

mouth wouldn't move, not while I couldn't forget his face as he gave his fervent declaration last Thursday that he never wanted to go back.

"Do you want to help with Tavor's plan?" Illan asked.

"Telling me to grab a bunch of genies isn't a plan," I argued. "I told him if he thinks of a solution, of somewhere you can all go where you'll be safe, that I would support it."

Rajan went rigid. "So you want to get rid of us?"

Shouldn't he want to be somewhere safer and more permanently free than here?

"Do you really want to live in this little apartment for years while I do nothing but go to school?"

He held my gaze, as though searching for something, then his eyes darkened. I jumped as he burst into flames before flowing into his gem.

"Rajan!" I cried, my hand hovering over his gem. He would only hear me if I touched the gem, but presumably he'd gone inside because he *didn't* want to talk to me.

My hand wavered, not wanting to invade his privacy, but not wanting to leave things like this either. Tentatively, I brushed against his ruby. "Rajan, I didn't mean I want you to leave. I just meant I don't want more genies in the apartment unless they have a better place to go."

I removed my hand and stared at the gem, but he didn't come back out. I sighed, slumping against the table.

"Forgive him," Illan said. "Though we detest many of our human masters, we genies are vain creatures at heart. We are slaves, yet expect adulation and avarice for our abilities. Being unwanted is . . . new." His gaze flickered to the scratched table. "Though I suspect our desire to be wanted is similar to that of humans."

Was Illan talking about himself too? I couldn't tell. He didn't seem to be taking this

personally the same way as Rajan. But wasn't being accepted what I wanted with my parents? I never once wanted them out of my life. I just wanted them to let me live out my life plan instead of theirs. Could Rajan feel similarly? Wanting to be close to someone, but always having masters who only wanted him for his magic? Who had such a predetermined visions of genies that they couldn't imagine them fulfilling any other role?

I stared down at my hands as I thought. I hadn't had many close relationships. My parents made making friends difficult, but, beyond that, how could I have space to connect with other people when I was trying so hard to connect with the two people who should have been closest to me? With everything I'd gone through with Tavor and Rajan, I was probably closer with them than I'd been with anyone else outside my family.

"Have you ever been close with a master before?" I asked, raising my gaze to Illan.

His eyebrows went up in surprise. "Yes, I have." My eyes widened. "I've grown quite close with masters willing to acknowledge my intellect and consult with me as a partner rather than as a slave. Such incidences are few and far between though, and inevitably end in me being passed to a master who does not have the same respect for my abilities beyond my ice magic."

"Did you feel more free with those masters? Was it worth it to only be with them for a time?" I hesitated. "Or did it just make it worse when you move onto to the next master who treats you only as a slave?" How would I feel if somehow I graduated, yet ended up in my parents' clutches? Would I be grateful for the time during college where I made my own way and chose my own path? Or would I see it as wasted effort if I ended up right back where I ran away from?

Illan blinked. "I've . . . never given it much thought." He stared off into space. "Though free is the wrong word. I've never been given absolute free reign as you have done. I have felt

respected in those circumstances, which is far superior than being treated as a mere tool. In the end, yes, I am grateful for those times.” His eyes met mine. “They give me hope that there are better masters out there and perhaps I will chance upon one again.” His blue eye pierced mine as he quietly added, “Though I’ve never been able to lose the hope that I will find the master who sees me as a true equal and will not hand me off to be a mere tool for someone else.”

My heart skipped a beat at his look. That didn’t sound like something you admitted to just anyone. *I* wouldn’t admit that to just anyone. It seemed Illan did feel the same as Rajan. Or, at least, similarly. Part of me wanted to be the one to offer what they wanted. True companionship would be worth losing a little study time and, in this case, a little sanity over. Maybe being so isolated and so new at connecting with others because of my home life would help me be the perfect person to connect with them. But Tavor wasn’t asking for friendship.

“I like having roommates,” I admitted. “But that was what I signed up for. Roommates. Not to go on some crusade to pretend to offer freedom when I can’t really do that. I don’t see the point.” I bit my lip. “Do you think that’s selfish?”

“To not want your life taken over by beings you didn’t know existed until recently? No.”

His words sent a flood of relief through me, though I tensed when he added, “But would the other genies prefer to have limited freedom temporarily over staying with the McMichaels?” He shrugged, his eyes going to Rajan’s gem.. “I’ve only known these genies for a few years and I cannot say. Rajan and Tavor would know better.” His eyes returned to mine. “But this is your life. I do not blame you for not wanting to get caught up in Tavor’s schemes. From his attitude, I believe his intent is for this relative freedom to last much longer than you seem to be thinking, but what all role you would play in that, I can only guess.”

“Thank you, Illan.”

He tilted his head, his eyes questioning as he asked, “For what?”

I shrugged. “For listening, I guess. I don’t know what I should do.” I just knew I didn’t want to take in more genies. “But I feel better after talking with you.”

His eyes warmed as he did that thing where he smiled with just his eyes. “You’re most welcome, Miss Ali. I’m happy to discuss your thoughts or concerns anytime.”

Chapter Twelve

Friday, November 10

I trudged to school the next Friday for my Mechanics lab. I should have been happy to escape the awkwardness of the apartment, but instead I was depressed the atmosphere was so heavy. Rajan hadn't come out of his gem since our argument, and Tavor was still a no show. The fridge was getting low on food. Tavor had always replaced my ingredients regularly, but he was either so upset he'd forgotten, or wasn't in the mood to bother. At least I had spare money for shopping. I'd been adding the money I used to spend on food to my rent fund for next year, but I could use it for groceries instead.

Illan was the only bright spot. He greeted me every morning and sat with me for every meal. He even studied with me after I finished work in the evenings. Unlike Tavor and Rajan, Illan was actually helpful. He was more than happy to discuss the principles I was learning.

I kicked a rock as I reached campus, wondering how to patch things up with Rajan. Tavor was another matter. I wasn't sure he'd want to talk with me unless I agreed to what he wanted, but I at least wanted to clear things up with Rajan. I hated the thought of him hiding in his gem because he felt unwanted in the place that was supposed to be his home.

I kicked another rock and an unfamiliar voice said, “What petulant behavior for a young woman. Though I suppose a thief wouldn’t be one for proper conduct.”

I looked up, and immediately jerked back, my eyes going wide as panic clogged my throat. I would have gasped if I could have gotten enough air. Instead, my legs went weak and all the blood drained from my face as I stared into the face of Ethan McMichael. I’d never seen him in person, but I recognized him from the news. I’d seen his face just a few weeks ago as he pleaded for the return of his family’s ‘precious heirloom’ of the imperial topaz.

Of all the people I’d feared encountering, Ethan McMichael wasn’t on that list. My gaze jumped around, searching for the MMA build of a genie wizard, but all I saw was a man leaning against a tree with curly black hair, mocha skin, and dark, dark brown eyes. He wore all black and was muscular—but nowhere near the level of the two genie wizards I’d seen. And he was much shorter, only reaching around Tavor’s height. He watched Ethan and I with amused curiosity.

I dragged my gaze back to Ethan, who seemed to be waiting for a response. “I-I’m not a thief,” I said, my voice coming out in a whisper. “I’m just a college student.” If I had enough blood in my face, I’m sure I would be turning red. My reaction was too over the top for me to plead innocence. How did he track me down? What did he know about me?

“No?” he asked, taking a step toward me. I locked myself in place to stop from stepping back. He looked me up and down and every hair on my body rose. Not in a this-guy-is-a-creep kind of way like with Professor Treen, but in a-this-guy-wants-me-dead kind of way. Now I really was frozen—this time in fear. It was like back at the museum, no fight or flight response here, just a desire to hide, to believe that if the monster couldn’t see me, it wouldn’t come for me.

“You do appear to be a normal college student on the outside, and nothing about your situation seems to have changed these past few months . . . other than your sudden ability to get a professor fired.”

Dizziness set in as I fought to get enough air. Professor Treen hadn't seen any magic, so we thought he wasn't a danger. But even though we told *him* he no longer worked for the McMichaels, that wasn't actually true. But how did talking with Treen lead Ethan to hunting me down?

“There were multiple sexual harassment charges against Professor Treen if that's who you're talking about,” I said, narrowing my eyes. Treen's firing had been one hundred percent legitimate. Even if I maybe pushed things along by blaming him for the damage Illan and Rajan did to his office. “He was fired because he was a danger to the woman of this school. I'm sure you could find record of those charges both at the school and with the police since he's gone to court over it.” I wasn't actually certain he had, but he'd said something to another professor about those charges being dismissed. That could have happened in court.

Ethan stared down his nose at me. “You and he tell that story very differently. Last Thursday, he spoke with you, fell unconscious, then awoke to a damaged office that he was fired over.”

I raised my chin. “The engineering department head said Treen has a history of drugging woman. If he accidentally switched a drug meant for me for himself and then doesn't remember what he did, I'm sure he *would* like to blame me. People of his caliber never accept blame for their actions.”

The man leaning against the tree snorted. Ethan sent him a dark look.

Ethan lowered his voice. “Your past appears perfectly ordinary, which I imagine means

you've recently stepped into a very new world that you know very little about. I am here personally to do you a great favor." Right. Because I was an ignorant little girl who was in great danger from the big, bad genies. Apparently, genie wizards weren't the only ones who spoke like this. "But first, I need to know who hired you."

"Hired me?" I repeated, totally lost. Hired me for what? To steal the genies?

He stared down his nose at me, his eyes cold. "You did not enter this world, by accident. Someone brought you into it. Whether they were hoping some nothing slip of a girl would go unnoticed, or believed you had skills that would serve them, someone else is involved. For the safety of others, they have committed a grave crime."

My mouth wanted to stay shut, or continue to plead innocence. But I was too afraid to when it would be so obvious I was lying. "I don't know." If I was purposefully chosen for Tavor's gem, I didn't know who chose me. And if it was random, I still didn't know.

My mind grasped for a tale of half-truths that would be believable. "They didn't tell me who they were and I didn't ask to be involved in anything. I'm just trying to pay for college. You said nothing has changed in my life—that's because school is all I care about. I didn't want all this complicated crap and I would have run away from it all if I'd known the trouble it would bring." I'd had that thought before. That I would have left Tavor's gem in the park if I'd know what it was, what it would lead to. But I wasn't so sure that was still true.

"Mankind has often chosen serious trouble for the want of money," he said. "But you are in even more over your head than most. Barring the family you've crossed, the creatures you hold in your possession are more dangerous and cunning than you can imagine. They are kept within an isolated world to protect everyone from them. My family was nearly destroyed by one of the very creatures you possess. For all our wealth and power, he brought us to our knees."

“Yet you still use him,” I said, the words about before I could stop them.

“Because we are trained to,” he said, enunciating as though that would help me understand. The words made me sick, reminding me of dog aficionados advocating you only adopt certain breeds if you had experience with them. But he was talking about sentient beings. “The stories I could tell you of the ruin brought upon numberless people who thought they could handle your situation—managing creatures you’ve no true conception of—you’d run home in terror. Yet, here I am, offering you a reward to not only do the right thing in returning what doesn’t belong to you, but to save yourself.”

“Your employee offered a reward for clearing up the trouble in my life,” I said, gripping my backpack straps. My heart pounded in my chest, seeming to spread nausea with every pump. If I didn’t throw up here and now, I was definitely going to afterward. And I’d thought dealing with the mummy was scary. “Right before he attacked me.”

Ethan froze. “That man was not working under my orders. He’d gone rogue.” Uncertainly seemed to flash through his eyes before he cleared his throat and straightened. I wondered what he was thinking. “I thought he’d committed suicide.”

That I wasn’t going to respond to.

He narrowed his eyes. “Have you encountered another . . . employee of mine?”

I shook my head, hoping I could get away with at least one complete lie instead of all these half-truths. Had I really thought even with just my three genies that we could continue to hide from one of the biggest conglomerates in the world? Especially when they still had four genies?

He shook his head. “No matter. You are dealing with me now. I would not stand at the head of so many companies if my word was not my bond. I will give you five million dollars for

the return of what you've stolen from my family." His face gentled, but still looked cold. "I could spend all day telling you of the danger you're in. Of how these creatures twist words and warp minds. Of good men and women who lost everything, including their lives and the lives of their families due to these creatures. You have a bright future ahead of you. It would be a shame to see all that lost because of a poor decision you made for money when your life is really just beginning. I know people your age think your immortal and all-knowing, but *this* world you know nothing about."

Brandon, Santiago, and now Ethan all spoke of how dangerous genies were. It felt like an excuse to keep genies to themselves, though Brandon and Santiago also seemed to genuinely believe genies were threats. Maybe they were more dangerous and destructive than I understood. Rajan would probably routinely burn things down if I let them—and I didn't actually know what happened to Santiago. Tavor said they could probably work out something other than killing him, like he had with Brandon. But I didn't stick around to see what they did.

And neither the wizards or Ethan were jumping up to admit all the ways the McMichaels were dangerous—how they'd probably wished for reporters to disappear when someone printed something unflattering about the McMichael twins. Or how they'd wished for people to lose their jobs and have heart attacks when people refused to move from an area the McMichaels wanted. Even if genies weren't saints, the McMichaels were not good people.

All I could do was act on my personal experience and knowledge. Even if genies were dangerous, Tavor, Rajan, and Illan had all saved me. My insides squirmed uncomfortably at my train of thought. If, in my experience, the McMichaels were the bad guys and the genies were at least better, what did that make me for wanting to leave the rest of the genies with the McMichaels? Illan trembling as he fought against a wish to hurt me flashed through my mind

again. How many times had Illan or the others fought against an order given by the McMichaels that they could not ignore? My parents wanted to control me. The genies had no choice but to be controlled.

But how do you tell a megalomaniac no? I had no idea how to get out of this situation. Or what to do next. With Ethan knowing where I was, who I was, we had limited options. Option one, I handed over the gems, which would be a gut-wrenching betrayal that I'd never be able to face myself after. Option two, we went on the run and maybe started life over somewhere else. Option three, we went for the genies and knocked down the McMichaels' power. Which would probably still lead to us going on the run and starting over because the McMichaels would still have resources to chase us—unless The Society killed them, like Illan said they would. That would still leave The Society to run from. At least option three had us running with a purpose.

I hoped Ethan couldn't read any of the thoughts on my face. "I don't think it would be easy to extract myself from my current situation," I said carefully. I needed to talk with Tavor and the others before making a decision.

"Whatever bargain you've made with the devil you invited into your life, I have the means to help you out of it."

Right. He thought I had a contract, that was why he hadn't moved on to threats and murder attempts. If I had a contract in place and they killed me, he and everyone in this generation of McMichaels would have passed away before they could become Tavor's master again.

I blew out a breath, thinking quick. Planning under pressure wasn't my strong point, but I was getting better at it. I'd had lots of practice lately. I looked into Ethan's eyes as I said, "I told you earlier that school is my top priority. Everything else is ancillary to that. May I go to class? I

have a lab in a few minutes.” I hesitated, then pretended to quietly admit, “My contract could be fulfilled by the end of the year, but not by much before that. Missing my class won’t speed anything along.”

Ethan studied me. I imagined he wanted to demand and rage and force, but he didn’t dare with how little he knew. Like whether I had Tavor with me. What my contract was. What protection wishes I had in place—assuming that was a thing. Arguably, my enhanced athletic ability was a wish like that. It had saved me plenty of times now.

“Very well,” he finally said. “I expect your call soon as to how to resolve our related problems.”

Numbly, I nodded. My choices were definitely down to three options. And the clock to decision time was ticking away very quickly.

I made to leave for class—with a side trip to the bathroom in case I threw up—when Ethan called. “Ms. Bianchi?” I looked into his eyes. “The reach of the McMichaels is far and wide. I promise you, there is nowhere you can run where I cannot find you. You will call soon.”

I nodded, sure Ethan’s misbelief about a contract was probably the only reason I was still alive, then I hurried off, dread and nausea pooling in my stomach.

Chapter Thirteen

Ren

“If you don’t live up to your state of the art claim, I’m demanding a refund and leaving a terrible review,” Ren told the lock he was installing as he knelt next to his bedroom door. Well, the *twins*’ door since he was temporarily living at their house. *His* room was at Ethan McMichael’s main mansion, which was where he should have been. But with even genies under contract being stolen, nearly all genie wizards were being redistributed to McMichaels currently in possession of genies.

Of course, since Ethan *had* a genie and Ren officially *worked* for Ethan, he should have returned to him after Jeanine’s investigation into Ethan’s wizards uncovered nothing. Instead, he was stuck here. He’d only caught bits and pieces of the twins’ plea to Ethan that they were *so* scared and felt *so* comforted having a genie wizard as experienced as Ren in their home. While he didn’t disagree he was better than any of the wizards they retained on staff, that was their problem. He belonged at the top, which meant serving the head of the family.

Ethan assured him the situation was temporary, but Ren feared Jeanine’s poison whispers were getting to him. After all, the two genie wizards to disappear were the two closest to him.

Brandon wound up dead, but no one had a clue what happened to Santiago. Jeanine would no doubt spin this as further proof, but Ren said bull. Santiago had been on to something. He'd been quick to volunteer to go to the triplets when Ethan sent them away. And now he was gone. As was the ice genie.

But Ren didn't think that meant Santiago was in on whatever was going on. No, it meant he'd failed, just like Brandon had. It appeared the teacher fared little better than his student against this adversary. A scary thought given the caliber of wizard both men had been.

He cursed as his screwdriver slipped and cast an eye down the hall to make sure no one was watching. Not that he would stop if anyone was. A twin 'accidentally' coming into his room at night while 'drunk' once was unacceptable. She'd pawed at him the whole time he'd led her back to her room, encouraging him not to be a gentlemen. If he'd followed her advice, she wouldn't have liked the results—his solution would have been to tie her up and throw her out in the cold until her eagerness cooled off. Instead, he'd laid against his door the rest of the night to prevent a repeat.

When the same thing happened earlier this week—he didn't know if it was the same twin since he didn't care enough to tell them apart—he'd vowed to get a lock the twins *didn't* have a key for. It was possible their desire to keep him around had more to do with his looks than his abilities, but that thought belonged in a dark corner of his mind with the label 'blasphemy.' Though he imagined the twins' regular wizards had been carefully chosen by their grandfather Rand since they were all none-too-pretty. Which was another mark against him in their eyes. Not only was he better—which was clear given he was *supposed* to work for the head of the family—but he was also better looking.

He frowned at the door, pulling the directions closer and glancing between them and the

door to make sure everything looked right.

It wasn't long before his mind was back on Santiago. Despite them being in competition for the coveted spot of Ethan's top wizard, he thought the two of them would have gotten along well. If only Santiago had told Ren whatever his suspicions had been, maybe he wouldn't have disappeared. They could have worked together to stop the McMichael's foe. Or maybe he would at least have enough information to barter his way out of this house and back to Ethan's.

Blowing out a sigh, he returned his attention to the lock. "Looks right enough to me," he muttered, before turning the lock and stepping outside of his room. He shut the door and tested the lock, using just a touch of his extra strength as a genie wizard. Then he pulled out his lock picks and went to work truly testing the lock.

After ten failing for ten minutes, he give the lock a please pat and used his key to get inside. The twins' lock picking skills were far below his own—that of rich girls sneaking in out of locked college dorm rooms rather than his training to break into enemy homes.

Flopping on his bed, he ran his hands through his slicked back hair. Maybe whoever got Brandon and Santiago would target here next. They'd get two for the price of one with both twins possessing a genie. They'd also be foolish as all get out for confronting so many wizards. But a man could dream.

Life would be much more interesting if the culprits attacked here. It might even make putting up the twins worth it.

Chapter Fourteen

Ali

I was shaking by the time I got home. Maybe I should have skipped class—my mind only tracked the lesson half the time and my professor tried to send me home twice. But being home didn't change anything about my situation.

“Ali!” Illan cried, rushing to my side. “Are you sick?” He cupped my face in his hands, his unnaturally cold palms making me shiver as he peered into my eyes.

“N-no,” I chattered, suddenly freezing. I wrapped my jacket tighter around me, huddling in on myself.

“You look sick,” he said with a frown. “You're paler than I am.”

“Oh, that's probably just from throwing up,” I brushed off. I had ended up throwing up before class, then did so again afterward. It was like my body thought throwing up released some of the terror—but then my thoughts would spiral out of control and the fear would build and build until I threw up again. I hoped I was done with that now though.

He raised his pale blue eyebrows. “You're throwing up, yet say you aren't sick?”

“I—” I didn't know what to say. I wanted to say I'd eaten something bad, but didn't want

to lie. But I also *really* didn't want to bring up Ethan. I wasn't sure I could say his name without puking. "I need to talk with Tavor. Do you know where his gem is?"

Hurt flashed through Illan's eyes as he took a step back from me. His eyes turned cool as he said, "I believe he's at the back of the cupboard closest to the fridge."

My heart clenched at the look on Illan's face. Him pulling away hurt after he'd been so supportive the past week. What had my thought been last Wednesday? That maybe I was the perfect person to connect with the genies? What a joke. I couldn't talk to one without hurting them or pissing them off.

"Thanks," I whispered before scuttling off. I stood on my tiptoes to open the cabinet and peered into the very back. I thought I saw something and reached toward the back, patting the cupboard until I touched something smooth and cool. I pulled it out to see Tavor's orange gem.

Clutching the gem, I glanced toward Illan, but he was turned away from me, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared out the window. My shoulders slumped as I trudged to my room. I hated this. All of it. Hated it, hated it, hated it. Hated feeling forced into a position I didn't want. Hated that some megalomaniac was trying to threaten me into throwing beings who'd saved me into slavery. Hated that my simple desire of going to college was being interrupted at every turn. And, maybe most of all, hated that I felt like a whiny little brat crying about wanting to go to school while Tavor, Rajan, and Illan were in danger of going back to the McMichaels.

Shutting my bedroom door, I said, "Tavor? I need to talk with you."

I thought he wouldn't come until, finally, bright orange lights swirled from the gem in my hand until they formed Tavor's outline, flaring in a burst of light before finally revealing his full form. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared down his nose at me, raising his eyebrows as he waited for me to speak.

“Could we erase the McMichael’s memories of genies entirely?” I asked. The thought occurred to me during my lab. My guess was no—with Brandon, Tavor said it was too dangerous, but I still wanted to ask.

“No,” he said, his eyebrows staying raised, but his look becoming less challenging. “The Society would figure it out eventually and reverse it.”

“But we could buy ourselves time?” I pressed. Time for what, I wasn’t quite sure. We couldn’t truly free the genies and Tavor didn’t have a viable long-term solution, but Illan seemed to think Tavor had plans he wasn’t telling us.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “*If* we took all the genies, then erased the McMichael’s memories of genies. Though, they have frequent dealings with The Society, so it may not last long.”

I frowned. “I thought your plan was to take all the genies.”

“No. Not the shadow genie.”

“But he’s enslaved too,” I argued. “Isn’t the point to help the genies? You said you feel responsible for the McMichael genies.”

“Yes, but not that one. He’s too much trouble.” He shook his head at my disbelieving look, letting his arms drop as he rose into a cross-legged position. “That one is as twisted as genies come. He’d screw us over just for the hell of it.”

“By doing what?”

“Turning us into The Society.”

“Oh,” I said, blinking in surprise. Though, as I kept saying, it wasn’t like being with me was freedom. Maybe this genie didn’t care about relative freedom and felt that slavery was slavery. I couldn’t blame him for wanting to fight against that however he wanted to. But since we wanted to avoid detection for as long as possible, we needed to leave him out. I didn’t want

to take a genie who didn't want to be taken anyway. "Do we have to take all the genies before erasing the McMichael's memories?"

He rubbed his chin and gazed at the ceiling. "I could get creative. Make them think they've only ever had the shadow genie. That might even buy us more time. He'll try to convince them they're wrong once he realizes what's going on—but I'll leave the memories of how . . . contrary he is." He smiled. "They'd never take a genie at their word."

His smile dropped as his gaze turned to me. "What changed your tune?" he asked, tilting his head to study me.

My stomach twisted as I wondered if I was doing the right thing. What if there was more truth than I realized to the warnings I kept receiving about the dangers of genies? I didn't see why the genies would have all saved me if they were so vile, but maybe that was part of tricking me, of convincing me to do what they wanted.

"Necessity," I admitted. "Ethan McMichael cornered me at school."

I jerked back when Tavor suddenly appeared inches from my face, clutching my arms.

"Hey!" I cried, trying to twist away.

His grip tightened. "What did he say? What happened?"

"The same crap as with the genie wizards," I said, still squirming. I winced when his grip tightened again. "Let go!"

His grip loosened, but his hands remained locked on my arms. His gaze was intent as he stared into my eyes. "Ali, I need you to tell me what happened."

"He thinks I'm a hired genie hunter, but he knows I'm new to all this. I told him I just wanted to pay for school and don't want to be involved anymore. I don't know if he believed me, but he told me to call him soon to arrange something. He didn't do anything because he thinks

we have a contract.” I hesitated. “Why didn’t he confront me at home? Was he afraid of running into the three of you?”

“No,” Tavor said, letting me go and pacing in the air. “I have the apartment too heavily shielded for him to find it. He could watch you walk right in and he’d have no idea. The shadow genie could watch you walk right in and he wouldn’t know it.”

“Tavor,” I said softly, bringing his attention back to me. “We don’t have a contract,” I reminded him. “If I planned to hand you over, I wouldn’t have told you about Ethan.” He stopped pacing and I flopped onto my bed, throwing my backpack on the floor. “We can’t stay here anymore,” I whispered, dropping my head into my hands. “But if we have to run anyway, I’d rather run with all the genies than just you three.”

“Ali,” Tavor said, abruptly kneeling in front of me and peering up into my face. I blinked at the strange sight of seeing him so low to the ground. He cupped my face, his gaze warm. “Once we have the genies and alter the McMichael’s memories, we may be able to remain here for a while. You can keep going to school while we figure out a more permanent solution.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask what about after? What about after we had a more permanent solution? Or what if we didn’t find one? But I’d already decided we’d get the other genies. As much as I hated pushing off future decisions—after spending weeks procrastinating just that—this was too big for me to wrap my whole head around, and we didn’t have all the answers. All I could focus on was the next step.

We needed to get the other three genies so Tavor could alter the McMichaels’ memories. Then we would be safe. For a while. Part of me said I was just digging myself even deeper into a situation I’d never really had a handle on, that I should demand a more concrete plan first. But I didn’t think Ethan would wait around until we had a plan in place. The sooner we moved, the

better off we'd be. Especially if Ethan, like the genie wizards, had chosen not to share information about us.

"I'm sorry about what I said," Tavor said, bringing my attention back to him. He sighed, dropping his hands from my face. "School is important to you." A smile flickered across his face. "Your every action shows that. I was too harsh when I told you your dreams don't matter. I admire your desire for knowledge. After all, Rajan would not have escaped the museum and he and Illan wouldn't have overpowered Santiago without your help. I just think your talents can be used in better ways. You're so much more amazing than the life you're living. It would be a waste for your potential to be squandered on the mediocre life you've dreamed for yourself when you can do so much more. But, it's your life and your desires for it are what matter."

His words eerily echoed Ethan's about it being a waste for me to lose my future so soon after my life had really started. The similarity sent a chill up my spine, but they weren't talking about the same thing. Ethan was claiming—or maybe threatening—I'd lose my life or worse if I stuck with the genies. Tavor was saying my time and talents would be better used on some master plan he was scheming instead of the life I'd dreamed for myself.

"I'm not trying to be callous about your position, or the position of the other genies. I just don't want to sacrifice what I've worked for if nothing will come of it in the end." Sacrificing my dreams for them to have a temporary reprieve wasn't worth it. But with Ethan was forcing my hand, all I could do was hope it would all be worth it.

"I know you care. I know you didn't want Rajan or Illan—or me really—but you've let all of us stay." He sat back, raising cross-legged into the air until his eyes were even with mine. "Though I *would* make it worth your while if you would let me."

"That would make it worse," I said, holding my hands up in a 'stop' gesture. "All I want

is enough time for school. And to pay for it and for my apartment myself. Those are my only desires.”

“Such a simple creature,” Tavor said with a shake of his head. “But I suppose that’s what’s so good about you.” His expression sobered as he added, “If we’re going to move against the McMichaels, we need to do it now, before they raise their defenses even higher.”

“As in right now?” I asked, my voice squeaking.

“Yes.”

Right. Because Ethan wouldn’t wait long. He might even expect me to do something. Which meant this could be a trap. But waiting around wouldn’t make things any easier. And, if he really wanted to trap me, wouldn’t he just have brought along a bunch of genie wizards? Maybe what he really wanted to find was whoever ‘hired’ me. He’d be waiting a long time to learn that.

“Right. Okay.” What did grabbing someone else’s genie on purpose even look like? At least I’d finally earn the title people kept bestowing on me—genie hunter. Maybe it was accurate that if you said something enough times it would make it true. “I guess we should tell Illan and Rajan?” Though Rajan wasn’t speaking to me and maybe Illan didn’t want to anymore either.

“Yes. We’ll need both their help for this.”

“Right. Can I speak to Rajan first? He’s kind of not talking to me right now.”

Tavor stared at me. “Fine. I don’t think we should leave until later then they’ll be asleep anyway, but we have a lot to discuss. Make it quick.”

Sure, because making up with your genie roommates after a fight was a snap, right? Then his words ran through my mind again. “Wait, what do you mean ‘they?’”

Chapter Fifteen

Five minutes later—with an assurance that Tavor’s ‘they’ comment would be answered shortly—I sat cross-legged on my bed with the ruby gem in my hands.

“Rajan?” I said softly. “Can we talk?” I tensed, expecting flames as Rajan came out, but nothing happened. My shoulders slumped as I stared at the gem. This was so awkward, sitting here alone and feeling like I was talking to myself. Was Rajan listening? Or completely ignoring me? Could he drown out my talking while I held his gem? Was he upset enough that he wanted to?

Resentment flared as I remembered all the times my mom gave me silent treatment because I didn’t do what she wanted, but the resentment quickly died down. Rajan was upset because I’d hurt him. He felt I’d told him I wanted him gone.

“I miss you,” I said quietly. “It’s been quiet with just me and Illan.” It was amazing—and terrifying—how quickly someone could become a part of your life. How had Rajan brought so much excitement to the everyday when I’d known him less than a month? Was it his love of my cooking? How he used any excuse summon fire? Or maybe it was that he liked working with me. That he’d worried when I had a meeting with a professor who seemed sketchy.

Was this what it meant to have friends? To feel awkward and vulnerable and a little idiotic? Maybe I hadn't missed out on as much as I'd thought by not having close friends growing up. But I didn't want Rajan to stay hurting, so I'd keep talking. Even if it did make me feel like an idiot. I talked to random animals in Chicago all the time for someone other than my parents to talk to. Talking to a gem wasn't that different, right?

I squeezed the ruby, as though that would help carry my feelings to Rajan. "I like coming home and talking to you after school. I like your elaborate fire displays and your love of muffins." I paused, then lowered my voice. "This was never about me not wanting you here. If I do what Tavor wants, I'm not sure I can keep the dreams I've been working toward since I was a girl. I don't want to give up everything I've worked toward if it will just end up with all the McMichael genies back with The Society . . . but I don't really have a choice anymore."

Finally, fire streamed from the ruby. I flinched at its proximity, but the heat never reached beyond what I found comfortable. The temperature cooled rapidly as Rajan formed, matching my cross-legged position with his arms crossed over his bare chest and his eyebrows lowered in a scowl.

"What do you mean you don't have a choice anymore?"

I kept the ruby clutched in my hands, the weight of it giving me comfort. "Ethan found me. He confronted me at school today. I imagine I only made it home because—"

"Are you okay?!" he demanded, his hands clutching my arms. It was almost a mirror to what Tavor had done—except Rajan's eyes roved over me as though searching for injuries rather than ordering an explanation like Tavor had. "Blast it! I should have been with you. We never should have let you go out alone after Santiago found us."

The concern exuding from his eyes made me feel like a jerk. After saving each other and

working together at the museum and again at the college, I'd made him feel unwanted, but his first thought upon hearing about Ethan was worry for me rather than himself. I may have allowed the genies to stay because they had nowhere else to go—but, more than that, I liked the friendships we were forming. Except, I was fumbling in the dark because I had no idea what it really meant to be a friend. But I knew that I didn't want to hurt Rajan again.

"I'm fine. He vaguely threatened me, but I think he's more interested in learning who supposedly hired me to steal you guys. I'm just a collateral threat, so to speak. And he thinks I have a contract, so he can't really go after me unless he wants to risk losing access to you guys. He has to get me to work with him instead."

Rajan frowned. "So what are you going to do?"

I sighed. "If Ethan knows where we are and is coming for us anyway, there isn't any reason not to get the other genies. Tavor says that after we get them—other than the shadow genie—that he'll warp the McMichael's memories so he thinks they only have one genie. It will at least buy us some time for whatever comes next."

Rajan nodded, still frowning. "Yeah, we don't want that shadow freak near you."

I felt better knowing Rajan agreed with Tavor. Though what made the shadow genie different from the other genies? Were shadow genies darker in general? Or was it just this particular genie? Was it taboo to ask about things like that? Rajan had been offended at the museum when it came up that shadow genies were more powerful than fire genies. Power level and personality were two different things, but labeling a genie based on their type seemed like dangerous territory without knowing more information.

"I hope you won't have to leave school," Rajan added. "Tavor's good at memory stuff, so we should be okay for at least a while."

He hesitated, glancing down at my comforter. “It’s not like I *want* more genies around.” He peeked at me before looking down again. “That’s not why I got upset. But being with you is a much better place than with the McMichaels—or any other master I’ve had. I’m sure everyone will be happier here.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. I knew our fight had been more about Rajan’s feelings being hurt than him being angry at me not jumping at the chance to enact Tavor’s plan, but what was I supposed to say? Thank you? Yes, absolutely I’m better than the McMichaels? I settled on, “So you’ll help me get them?”

He nodded and something inside me relaxed.

“Good.” My mouth quirked into a half-smile. “Because you’ve been with me for the last two adventures. I’m not sure I could do this one without you.”

“Psh, of course you couldn’t,” he said, folding his arms behind his head. “You’d be sitting in a corner trying to figure out some science-y thing while someone snuck up behind you. I’ve got your back.”

“Let’s go talk to Tavor and Illan. Tavor wants us to make our move tonight.”

#

Tavor had already given Illan a rundown on the situation—Ethan’s sudden appearance and our new plan to grab the other genies. Minus the shadow genie.

Illan and Tavor stood around the table while I sat at a chair with Rajan sitting on the table, his curly-toed shoes resting on the seat next to me. Illan watched me with worried eyes, but stood further back than Tavor, almost like he was holding himself apart from us. Was he upset I told Tavor about Ethan before him? He *was* the one who’d been with me while Tavor and Rajan disappeared into their gems. I should at least make it clear I was grateful for that, but now wasn’t

the time.

“We should go after the twins first,” Tavor said, his eyes bright. They almost seemed to twinkle with orange lights. I couldn’t tell if I was imagining it, but I’d never seen him, or any of them, this excited, so maybe it wasn’t my imagination. Did all strong emotions make weird light phenomena occur in genies’ eyes? “They each have a genie, so that will be more efficient.” I guessed the twins were the ‘they’ Tavor was referring to when he said we wanted them to fall asleep.

Rajan went rigid. “Do we have to start with them?”

Tavor raised his eyebrows as he rose into the air to stare down at us. “The moment the McMichaels realize we’re striking, they’ll move into high alert. Better we grab the plant and light genies first to ensure we get both at once, then grab the water genie. Waiting to see her won’t make it easier.”

“Her?” I repeated.

“Rajan’s former master,” Tavor explained. “He belonged to one of the twins before going to the master you took him from.”

“I can speak for myself,” Rajan snapped.

Tavor stared down at Rajan with an expression that lifted the hairs on the back of my neck, but Rajan’s eyes were glaring at his feet. “Whatever. I don’t care what order we do it.”

The image of Rajan’s face when he told me he never wanted to return to the McMichaels was burned into my memory. Like so many other things during the past two weeks, this brought that to mind again. Was this former master part of why he never wanted to return? Impossible to tell when he’d been with the family for centuries.

“Maybe Rajan shouldn’t come to the twins,” I said slowly, already knowing he’d object.

His head snapped up, his eyes wide with shock before they snapped with fury, flashing bright red. “I’m fine,” he said, lifting his chin as he glared at me. “We’re not even going for the twins. Just the genies.”

“And if Rajan doesn’t go, you’ll only have Illan,” Tavor said. “Between the two genies and the genie wizards, you’ll be too outnumbered.”

“What do you mean I would only have Illan?” I demanded. “Where will you be?” This had been his idea from the beginning.

“Unable to join you, unfortunately. Society families, the McMichaels included, have a habit of magically warding their homes against foreign genies. But magic, unlike your studies, isn’t an exact science. Without knowing which genies might invade their home, masters can only make general wishes. While I could never get through the barriers created by these general wishes, elemental genies are more slippery. I expect Illan or Rajan—though hopefully both—will be able to sneak in. Getting out may be another matter until you make the genies yours.”

I stared at him disbelievingly, my shoulders hunching in as a weight settled over me. On top of wanting us to do this insane plan, he expected us to do without him. No, *needed* us to do it without him.

“What if they’re hiding like you’ve hidden us?” I asked. “Maybe we won’t be able to find them.”

“That’s specialized magic,” Tavor brushed off. “Not all genies can do it, unlike the warding of a house against invasion. Besides, even within The Society only cowards hide. Hiding is a sign that you think your defenses are too weak to protect you and your family. The McMichaels would never do that.”

“Is there anything else pressing I should know about our evening plans?” I asked, not

bothering to keep the irritation out of my voice. Unlike the triplets and Rajan's previous master, I'd heard of the twins. Mostly in respect to them appearing in gossip columns and in celebrity spotlights. And the fact that anyone who portrayed them in an unflattering light had a tendency to disappear or have something terrible happen to them.

"You've already seen the light genie's magic," Rajan said, staring at his feet again. "He made the laser gemstones at the museum."

Great. I couldn't wait to see what he would do when attacking me directly.

"It will be fine," Tavor assured us. "Just make the plant and light genies yours as soon as possible, then fight your way out through any genie wizards. You'll go after dark and no one will expect you. You're unlike anything The Society has ever encountered, Ali." His gaze held mine. "You've got this."

Chapter Sixteen

Ethan McMichael

Ethan entered his home Friday night to find both his Aunt Jeanine and his Uncle Rand in his living room. He stilled, though his hand twitched toward the black opal in his pocket.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” This was the last thing he needed. His entire day had been unprofitable. He’d confronted the girl involved in stealing from his family, but accomplished nothing by it. He had no inkling who hired her or why. By sending the shadow genie after her, he did know she’d been serious about attending class, though after she’d disappeared from even his genie’s abilities.

By all outward indications, the girl had been telling the truth about school being her top priority. But that didn’t guarantee she would return his genies. Nor did it even mean she *could* return all his genies. He hated being unable to strike openly. With another Society family, he at least knew the rules and played his cards well in the game of subterfuge to get what he wanted. But this girl was outside all that. He couldn’t risk striking because he might lose all chances at obtaining the universal genie. She held the upper hand—he just hoped she was too ignorant to know that.

Jeanine sniffed. “While you’ve been out chasing some pet project, we’ve been hearing whispers that Jameson, a Master of Ceremonies, is discreetly searching for a universal genie to question the Wild and Sutton families.” She paused. He clenched his teeth, waiting for her to reveal why he should care that some Master of Ceremonies wanted to question two Overseer families. “There’s also a rumor that Santiago’s dead body was found on the Wild’s lawn.”

Ethan’s breath caught, his mind scrambling for all the facts he knew about the two families. “The Sutton’s have a beast genie.” His eyes narrowed as he looked between his aunt and uncle. “They weren’t brought in when we questioned Society families with beast and transformation genies.”

“Their family was on ‘vacation’ in Europe,” Rand said, his gruff voice sarcastically twisting vacation. “So they were excluded from the questioning.”

Santiago came to Horton, Nebraska with the ice genie, then disappeared and—possibly—ended up on the Wild’s yard in Colorado. The tension he’d been holding since speaking with Ali Bianchi grew. Had Brandon and Santiago betrayed him? Surely, Brandon must have found something before he died, yet, he’d reported nothing. And maybe Santiago’s trip to Horton had been innocent, catching him up in schemes he’d been oblivious to, but the connections were too suspicious to ignore. Brandon had been Santiago’s protege and they’d both been guarding a genie when that genie disappeared. He wanted to believe that Santiago’s death meant he hadn’t betrayed him, but it could just as easily mean the wizard had gotten involved in something over his head.

“The Wild and Sutton families are small to be challenging us,” he said, unwilling to buy into rumors that may be baseless.

“But they may hold knowledge the rest of us do not,” Jeanine pointed out. “Who knows

what mysteries the archives hold in their depths? The impossible happened to us, not once but twice. First with a genie being stolen, then with a genie under contract being swept away.” She raised her eyebrows, her perfectly neat French twist adding to the haughty air she exuded. “I don’t know about you, but *we* plan to be present when the families are questioned, and we will regain what is ours.”

Her words held double-meaning. Both she and Rand wanted to stand at the head of the family after the death of their older brother, but Criton left all his belongings, including his companies, in Ethan’s and his sister’s name.

Ethan glared down at his relatives as bitterness flooded his mouth. He wouldn’t lose everything he and his sister worked for to two crones from a bygone era. He’d wasted enough time on Ali Bianchi and her past, trying to learn how she became involved in this world. She was just another genie hunter. Someone to be dealt with, but a girl of no consequence. She may hold the universal genie since the shadow genie couldn’t follow her home, but the real threat was her mysterious backers with the impossible ability to steal genies from their masters.

He would bring the Overseer families to their knees and force them to return his universal genie. Then he’d kill the girl and turn his attention to fortifying his legacy against all threats—and forcing his aging relatives out of the family business.

Chapter Seventeen

Ali

Saturday, November 11

Tavor teleported the three of us outside the twins' mansion at one in the morning. His parting gift was to jam cell signals in the area so no one could call for help, then, we were on our own. Which wasn't any different from my last two escapades, but this time was different. Now we were on *his* crusade.

Except, if I was committing myself to this, I needed to make it *my* crusade. I stared up at a three story mansion bigger than the Museum of Horton and more elaborate than anything along the Magnificent Mile in Chicago. Standing here felt like standing at a border in my life. From here on out, there would be the time before I stole genies and the time after.

Part of me wanted to turn and run, to say I changed my mind about all of this. But the time to turn back would have been when I told Tavor he could stay with me. Turning back now wouldn't change any of the problems I was facing. Maybe—maybe—Ethan really would allow me to return to my normal life, but I could only regain the life I'd planned, the one I'd wanted by taking away the life Tavor, Illan, and Rajan had chosen for themselves. Did freedom always have

to a trade-off? Was that the only way this would work?

“Ali?” Illan asked, his voice seeming loud in the quiet night, though he spoke softly. “Are you ready?”

I turned to Rajan to find him staring at the mansion with a resolute expression on his face, but his eyes held the same reluctance I felt. He wasn’t any more eager to go in than I was, but for a very different reason. Yet, here he was, supporting me at a place he never wanted to return to. The McMichaels may be threatening to overturn my life if we couldn’t change their memories, but they’d completely run Rajan’s lives and the lives of all the other genies. They’d been trapped with this family for centuries. Tonight, we could change that.

Slowly, in case my touch wouldn’t be welcome, I took Rajan’s hand. He jumped, then interlaced his fingers with mine, squeezing tightly.

“How do we get in?” I asked him.

“Magic,” he said unhelpfully, but pulled me toward the home. Illan followed behind us.

We slunk around outside as the pair searched for a weakness in the magic they could slip through. My mind turned to the near immediate future. According to my mom’s threat from a few weeks ago, she’d arrive in Horton on Monday to stay with me the week before Thanksgiving, then take me back home with her the next week. Could we have everything resolved by then? All the genies except the shadow genies in our hands and the McMichaels’ memories altered?

If not, I’d tell my mom that I was drowning in home sickness and needed to go to Chicago, then Tavor could finish things off here while I was away. My mom wouldn’t be pleased with that since she was set on us having ‘girl time,’ but my going there was better than trying to stop her from coming here. That would end in failure and disaster. Even now, I hated the thought

of missing school and work for that many days, but all that kind of paled in comparison to whatever the McMichaels might have planned. Getting the genies and keeping us all safe took priority over everything else.

“Here,” Rajan said, his voice hushed and grim as his grip on my hand tightened.

Illan nodded and we stopped in front of a brick wall with a third story window hanging high above us.

“Um . . .” I began. Tavor floated around in the air all the time, but I’d never seen Illan and Rajan do that. “How are we getting in?”

“I already told you, magic,” Rajan said, raising his eyebrows. “I’ll turn us into smoke to get in. Illan will turn himself into ice crystals.”

“Like he did to take the triplets to New York,” I clarified, mostly because I wanted to stall. I wasn’t psyched over the thought of turning into smoke, especially not with the smoke inhalation I’d suffered at the Museum of Horton.

“Yep,” Rajan said. “I’m going to do it now, okay?”

Swallowing hard, I nodded. Rajan wouldn’t do anything that would hurt me, but I couldn’t help squeezing my eyes shut and clutching his hand. I went from feeling his warm skin against mine to feeling nothing. It reminded me of floating in the middle of a pool, except less wet. I felt motion and a vague sense of my surroundings as we presumably moved toward the window. It was terrifying to lose my senses. No sight, hearing, smell, or touch, but soon we were on solid ground and corporeal again.

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least that hadn’t involved being surrounded by flames like when Tavor teleported us home.

“Where to now?” I asked quietly.

“Second floor,” Rajan said, his voice terse. Even in the dim light let in through the window I could see how tightly he held his jaw. “The twins are in opposite wings of the house, but they’re both on that level. They keep their gems with them.”

I nodded. “So we just need to sneak into their rooms and get the gems.” I hesitated. “Are there any guards patrolling? Or, like, alarms we need to worry about?” Rich people always had alarms in movies. And bodyguards. And guard dogs. But dogs were usually outside and we hadn’t run across any.

“Families with genies don’t tend to rely on technology for safety,” Illan explained.

“And the twins don’t like anyone walking around at night,” Rajan added. “They say they’re light sleepers.”

My shoulders slumped. So much for my hope that maybe we’d get away without attracting any attention.

“We shouldn’t assume that’s still the situation,” Illan said. “With three of the McMichael genies taken, they may have genie wizards walking patrols at night. Regardless, we should expect them to be on high alert.”

“If the wizards attack, we’ll retaliate,” Rajan said, summoning a ball of flame to hover over his palm.

“But let’s try not getting caught instead,” I said. “We came late so we could sneak in without attracting attention. Let’s grab the gems and leave.”

Surprisingly, Rajan nodded. I expected an argument for wreaking havoc.

“We’ll start in the left wing. That’s where Sandy is.”

With that, he left, holding his ball of flame in front of him to light the way. Illan and I exchanged a glance before following him. I wondered if Sandy had been his master or if it was

the other twin, but I wasn't going to ask.

Rajan moved confidently, but the visible tension in his back and shoulders made me want to tell him to stand behind Illan and me. Except, neither of us knew where we were going. The only thing I could do for Rajan was move as quietly as possible in the hope of getting out of here without a confrontation.

He paused when we reached a stairway, seeming to wait for something before gliding down and turning left. We passed several doors before he stopped outside one.

He glanced at Illan before looking at me. "Stay out here," he said quietly. "Illan and I have experience moving silently. But you . . ."

"I'm just some college girl," I agreed, holding my hands up in an 'I give up' gesture. "I'm not a klutz, but I don't spend my free time practicing stealing things while people sleep."

"We'll be quick," Rajan promised. "We'll search for the gem and be out as soon as we can." He paused to study both ways down the hall. "Call us if anything happens. Or come into the room if you don't feel safe." He gave me a severe look, one more serious than I was used to seeing from him. "But only if you have to."

I nodded and he dissolved into smoke again before flowing under the door. Illan followed suit, leaving a trail of glittering ice.

Chapter Eighteen

Ren

Ren stared deadpan at the ceiling as his stomach grumbled. He'd been so excited about his new lock that he'd been hiding out since he'd installed it—which meant he'd missed dinner. He could hear his former mentor's voice in his mind telling him that deprivation would make him stronger and encouraging him to continue his fast through the night. But if he waited to eat, he risked encountering the twins.

You'd think it'd be easy to avoid people in a house this size, yet the twins found him over and over. To the point that he was sure they had a camera pointing at his bedroom door to monitor when he left. Or maybe the other wizards had been ordered to report his location to the twins. Gross. The thought of either scenario sent a shiver of disgust down his spine.

That settled it, he'd eat now and fast all day tomorrow—or maybe grab enough snacks to tide him through the day. Maybe enough for the whole weekend. He padded through the dark hallways in his t-shirt and shorts. He preferred sleeping in boxers, but nixed that after the first 'accidental' last night visit to his room.

He'd memorized the mansion's floor plan two days after his arrival, allowing him to

move without turning on any lights. Thank goodness. If either twin caught him, they'd insist he was coming to see them and attempt to drag him to their room. If it came to that, he might leap out a window and abandon working for the McMichaels altogether. Finding a normal job was preferable to this treatment. Especially afterward he'd worked his way to the top and into Ethan's good graces. What the hell had all that work been for if it ended with him guarding a pair of socialites?

He switched to tip-toeing when he reached the second floor, where the kitchen was located. Because heaven forbid the twins have to make the trek all the way downstairs when they wanted a snack. With how little they liked to move, he wasn't sure how they kept their slim figures. Maybe surgery. Or magic. Their father held the universal genie for several years, after all.

He'd just reached the turnoff to the kitchen when he sensed another presence. Though in darkness, he was in plain sight of Sandy's room and only the twins had rooms on the second floor, making it unlikely his unwanted companion was a wizard. He mentally cursed, debating the merits of throwing himself toward the kitchen versus back the way he'd come as he glanced toward Sandy's room.

His stomach rumbled in protest when he decided turning back was safest. Then his mind registered that the figure he could make out down the hall was too small to be Sandy. As in, half a foot too small. She could have brought a friend over—but why would her friend stand around in the dark?

Slipping down the hall, he flipped the light on. A girl with long brown hair and dark blue eyes gasped, her gaze flicking to Sandy's door. Her posture shifted, seeming defensive until he noted little quirks like her shoulders moving toward him and her hands moving back like she was

shielding something. She stance was protective, not defensive. But protective of what?

Silence stretched between them. He wanted her to break the silence to hear what story or excuse she gave, but she seemed too frozen to make the first move.

“You’re a bit young to be thieving, don’t you think?”

Outrage flashed through her dark eyes. “I’m eighteen,” she countered, keeping her voice low. “You can’t be much older,” she added, looking him up and down. Her eyes didn’t contain the appreciation he was used to from women, but this *was* an extenuating circumstance.

She was right. He was only four years older. But he remembered himself at eighteen and she was definitely still a child if she was anything like he’d been.

“Want to tell me why you’re here?” he asked, taking a step closer.

She stepped back toward the door, her posture still protective.

“Who’s with you?” he demanded, his tone harsh. No McMichael would be harmed on his watch. It would besmirch his reputation and he had no intention of ending up like Santiago after he lost favor.

She gulped. “We’re not here to hurt anyone.”

The audacity of someone targeting a family as high up in The Society as the McMichaels filled him with outraged offense until he recalled that that was exactly what had been happening lately. He looked the girl over again.

“You can’t be—you’re not the genie hunter stealing from the McMichaels.”

Her eyes widened so comically with surprise and panic that he threw his head back and laughed. “You? You’re the genie hunter who has the McMichaels running around accusing each other? Color me impressed. I was expecting someone older. And bigger.”

Color flushed her cheeks. It was an adorable, though unexpected reaction. Hunters

usually held more arrogance than this. “I’m not a genie hunter,” she muttered. “If anyone is, it’s Orange.”

“Orange?” Red repeated, blinking at her. Was that a code name? Then he pictured the universal genie with his bright orange hair, eyes, and vest. “You’re not talking about the universal genie, are you?”

She raised her chin defiantly, but said nothing. Despite her posture, dread bled from her eyes.

“If you’re acting on the universal genie’s orders, you’re just a tool,” he told her, gentling his voice. Those crafty bastards could twist anyone not trained in dealing with them. They held more magic than the wishes they granted. No human could hope to wield charisma or cunning like a genie. Not without a wish, anyway.

“I’m certainly a tool right now,” she muttered. “Thanks to the McMichaels, things are going exactly how he wants.”

Ren tilted his head as he studied the girl. She knew she was being used, yet was going along with it anyway? “Do you have any idea what you’ve gotten yourself into? Whatever you think you know about genies—”

“Yes,” she snapped, her eyes suddenly fiery. “The McMichaels go around using magic to murder, back stab, and hoard power, but the genies are the monsters. If you were so concerned about evil, I think you’d be more interested in the wish makers than the wish granters.”

He smiled. He knew meeting the culprit behind the thefts would be interesting. Did she think she was on some kind of crusade here? “You’ve been talking to Brandon and Santiago, haven’t you? What happened to them?”

Guilt and uncertainty slid through her eyes and he frowned. This little girl couldn’t take

on a normal sized-man, let alone a genie wizard. Whatever magic she might have been granted by a genie, a wizard could counteract it.

He stepped forward, keeping his hands plainly visible at his sides. “We don’t have to make this messy, but I do have to capture you. I can’t let you run around freely here.”

Noise suddenly came from behind Sandy’s door. He and the girl turned to stare. The door popped open, releasing the fire genie, the ice genie, and a shrieking Sandy covered in a protective light barrier.

Chapter Nineteen

Ali

“The other twin is coming,” Rajan announced, his eyes wide as he, Illan, and a young woman wearing a skimpy nightgown came out of the room. Light surrounded the woman—presumably Sandy—and I thought I saw another figure behind her still in the room. “Sandy wished for Mandy to be alerted there’s a problem.”

“What happened?” I demanded, backing up to keep both Sandy and the genie wizard in sight. At least, I thought he was a genie wizard. He was much smaller in height and bulk than the other two wizards I’d met, but two wasn’t enough to establish a pattern and he was still plenty bigger than me. Maybe Brandon and Santiago were the anomalies rather than this guy.

“She’s wearing the gem,” Rajan grumbled, his eyes going to Sandy’s neck where I spotted a pale-yellow gem dangling from a necklace, rather like the necklace I had with Rajan’s ruby. “They didn’t used to wear their gems.”

“Of course we’re wearing them now,” Sandy said, shaking out wavy blond hair. “That idiot Tyler lost his gem because he let it out of his sight.” She gripped her gem. “Our diamonds never leave our bodies now.”

Illan's eyes went to the wizard. "Noise out here woke her as we were searching. Are you all right, Young Miss?"

I was confused by the Young Miss until I realized that, like me with the genies, Illan was avoiding using my real name. "Yes, I'm fine . . . but what do we do now?" I was guessing they hadn't tried to take the yellow diamond because the light surrounding Sandy was some wish preventing them from touching it. If they couldn't grab it, I doubted I could. Even if I should be able to easily overpower her.

Before either genie could respond, Sandy rushed to say, "I wish the fire genie and ice genie couldn't escape this house!"

Light flared around us, making me flinch and cover my eyes. By the time I could look again, Illan and Rajan were wincing as they exchanged a look. I guessed that wish got rid of the elemental genies wiggle room since now there was a specific wish against them.

"What's going on here?" a shrill voice demanded as a young woman nearly identical to Sandy only with darker hair and an even skimpier nightgown arrived. At her neck rested a pale green gem in the same shape as Sandy's. I hadn't known diamonds came in colors other than white.

She gasped upon sighting Illan and Rajan. Shockingly, her mouth curved into a smile as she crossed her arms and jutted out her hip as she gazed straight at Rajan. "Aw, you missed me so much you had to come back? I knew we had something special." She looked him up and down, her smile growing. "I've missed the sight of you. You were so much fun to look at. So much manlier than the genies we have now."

Rajan's hands formed fists, his body vibrated with tension.

I sent him a horrified look, wondering what Mandy had previously done to him, but his

attention was all for his former master. My gaze moved to Illan and he made a soothing gesture with his hands. “Wishes are only for magic,” he explained quietly. “Masters cannot physically force a genie to do anything, and intimate relations between genies and masters are punishable by death for the master. That doesn’t stop some masters from objectifying their genies, though I imagine it’s worse for the females.”

For a moment, I was surprised to hear there were female genies since I hadn’t given it much thought. “Well, I guess you have to reproduce somehow,” I mumbled, then wondered if a human and genie could have a child together or if our species were too different.

“No, that’s not how we reproduce,” Illan said. I blinked. So that was probably a no on humans and genies having a child together.

“This isn’t lecture hour,” Rajan snapped. “It’s not the weekend.” I almost smiled at his reference to me only allowing magic talk at the apartment over the weekend, but he was right that now wasn’t the time—even if it technically was Saturday morning.

“Perhaps we should summon the other wizards,” the man suggested, confirming that he was a wizard. He patted his pockets. “I’m afraid I don’t carry my phone when searching for midnight snacks.” He gazed at each twin. “And neither of you seem to be carrying one. Miss Sandy? Perhaps you could wish for the rest of the staff to be alerted that we need them?”

“You should have come sooner if you missed me so much,” Mandy said, ignoring the wizard. If Mandy and Sandy were unconcerned, did that mean their genies were more powerful than Illan and Rajan? Or were they banking on their wizards stopping the genies without any problems? I hoped it was the latter. Mandy lowered her lashes as she added, “I’ve made it clear you’re always welcome in my room.”

Rajan suddenly spun toward me, his eyes determined and a little manic. “Can I be a bit

rude?” he whispered before his face descended toward mine. I froze, but his hands still gripped my forearms to keep me in place. From the twins’ vantage point, I imagined it looked like Rajan kissed me on the lips. In reality, he mostly kissed my cheek, catching just the edge of my lips.

The over-warm press of his lips against my skin made me jump despite me realizing beforehand what he planned. The manic in his eyes was gone when he pulled back, his grip on my arms loosening as he murmured, “Sorry.”

Everyone around us disappeared as I stared into his red eyes, confused and uncertain. Did that count as a kiss? Was I being taken advantage of? But Rajan was only here because I was and his attitude made it clear that being in the same room as Mandy was the last place he wanted to be.

“It’s okay,” I said quietly. Heat rose to my cheeks as I added, “Just give me more warning next time.” More heat rose as I realized I’d insinuated this would happen again.

For a moment, all the turmoil left his eyes as he grinned. “Sure,” he said, his voice holding an edge of laughter. “I’ll give more warning next time.”

I jumped as a shriek sounded behind Rajan. He turned back toward the twins, his eyes cold. He kept hold of one of my arms.

“You beast!” Mandy shrieked. “You’d kiss that little girl, but not me? Genie, I wish you’d skewer her!”

Rajan’s eyes widened and he pulled me into his arms before leaping backward. I gasped as a thick green tendril erupted from the floor where I’d been standing. I stared at in disbelief until I realized it was a vine. One that apparently had the potential to kill me. We’re all McMichaels so violent? Or just the ones born at the same time as their siblings?

Placing me behind him, Rajan flung his hand forward and the plant burned up.

“Genie, I wish you would alert the genie wizards I need them!” Sandy yelled, apparently deciding to act now that her sister made the first move. A beam of light burst into being. One end stayed in place while the other shot forward and toward the stairs leading to the first floor.

“Want to know the difference between you and her?” Rajan snarled. “I’m not *hers*, I’m *with* her, and you will not harm her.”

The figure I’d thought I’d seen in Sandy’s room emerged. Even without all the light displays around Sandy and her wishes, I still would have pegged him as the light genie. He his neon yellow hair was nearly translucent and styled in short spikes. His yellow eyes seemed to naturally glow, making me wonder what they looked like when he experienced strong emotions. He wore a white vest, puffy yellow pants, and white curly shoes. His right bicep featured an elaborate gold armband, as opposed to the plain armbands worn by Rajan, Illan, and Tavor.

“What do you mean?” Light—because I may as well start off calling him that at this point—asked, his gaze intent on Rajan.

“Hey dude,” Rajan said, giving him a nod. “Just what I said. It’s our first master-who-is-not-a-master. And we came to get you and the plant genie.”

“I order you not to talk to him!” Sandy snapped just as we heard thunderous feet coming up the stairs.

Light’s eyes, full of confusion, uncertainty, and doubt, went to mine. He looked lost and I wanted to offer comfort and assurances, but what could I say when this wasn’t my crusade? His expression made me want to make it mine though. How could I have been so callous as to say that a temporary reprieve wouldn’t be worth it when there were six of them trapped in servitude? I didn’t have much to offer, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t worlds better than where they were.

Huge men and women resembling MMA fighters entered the hall, three men and two

women. I backed up a step, my eyes shooting to the diamond necklaces. Sandy was still surrounded by yellow light and I'd have to get passed her and Light to get to Mandy. And dodge any murdering vines along the way.

“Genie!” Mandy snapped. “I said I wish you'd skewer that girl!” Vines erupted around the women genie wizards, waving toward them before stopping abruptly as though hitting a barrier. The wizards hadn't even done anything to stop the vines. I guessed that was what was supposed to happen when a genie attacked a wizard. Or, more accurately, what everyone expected to happen.

Mandy screeched in frustration. “The girl in the hoodie! I wish you would skewer the girl in the hoodie!”

“These are too many wizards for us to engage,” Illan murmured. “We should retreat and form a plan to suite our new circumstances.”

I wanted to ask retreat where, but Rajan grabbed me before I could. All my senses faded as I dissolved into smoke. All I could do was hope Rajan remembered a room we could defend while we made a plan.

Chapter Twenty

Ren

Ren's fingers flowed in an intricate pattern of an offensive spell before he threw the magic at the fire and ice genies as they dissolved into smoke and ice crystals. His attack hit too late and struck mostly empty air. He should have attacked earlier instead of allowing his curiosity to get the best of him. Now wasn't the time to sit back and see what happened. He was here as a soldier, not a bystander.

"That was terrifying!" Mandy cried, throwing herself at Ren. His nose wrinkled in disgust as he held his arms away to avoid touching her barely clothed body. He hadn't seen an ounce of fear on her. Only—his thought cut off abruptly as he stared at the empty space down the hall.

"She didn't make a wish."

"What?" Mandy asked, raising her head from his chest.

"That girl." He turned to the other wizards. "That girl didn't make a wish, but her genies used magic."

"You mean *our* genies," Sandy snapped.

One of the female wizards rolled her eyes. Ren didn't remember her name because he preferred not to clutter his mind with unnecessary information. "She probably whispered her wish. Or made a wish beforehand to give an order if things went wrong."

"Right," Ren said, his voice scathing as he gently pushed Mandy away. "And why don't you tell me what types of genies are present based on smell?" He wouldn't have noticed himself if not for his experience at the Museum of Horton, but he was on the lookout for it now. He smelled the sun-warmed rock scene of the light genie and the wet leaves scent of the plant genie, but that was it.

Subtly, the five wizards sniffed the air. Several of their brows furrowed, but the oldest wizard growled, "It's probably a new hunter trick. Not smelling their magic doesn't mean the girl didn't make a wish."

Ren stared at him disbelief. "We have genies stolen from their masters, magic with no scent, genie wizards *dead* after encountering genies, and you're arguing this is a *trick*? The McMichaels have already lost three genies. We need to be on guard." Was this why Brandon and Santiago failed? Because they looked at that young woman and decided she couldn't be more of a threat than anyone else they'd encountered?

"We don't know how Brandon died or where Santiago is," the woman who'd rolled her eyes countered. She stared down her nose at him—easy to do since she was half a foot taller than his five foot ten—and added, "This is what happens when youth are given positions of prestige within Society families. They jump at any little chance to prove themselves. You can run from the big bad boogie girl if you want, but we have genies to find." She shared a smirk with the other female genie wizard. "It shouldn't take more than five minutes since they can't leave the house."

Fortune favoring the bold was a wise proverb, but boldness without caution was reckless. Ren planned to live a long, prosperous life, which meant greeting new situations carefully.

“Maybe Ren hasn’t graduated from math yet,” one of the men mocked. “We have the genies outnumbered three to one, kid, but even a one-to-one ratio would have them outmatched. I guess the main branch of the family isn’t training their wizards right.”

Pathetic old codgers. He tilted his head, letting a lock of hair fall into his eyes as he gave his most charming smile. “Or maybe you old coots have led such easy lives you can’t recognize true danger when it’s knocking you over the head with a mallet.”

The five glared at him, but he turned back to the twins. He waved a dismissive hand toward them as he said, “Run along if you think that’s what’s best, but the thief has seen the diamonds. We should hide them.”

“That’s not necessary,” the oldest wizard said. “We’ll send two wizards to search the house and leave four to guard Sandy and Mandy. No genies will get past us.”

Sandy undid her necklace as the old wizard spoke, then held it out to Ren. The old wizard made a strangled noise, which Sandy ignored to say, “We don’t know how our cousins lost the ice genie, but I don’t plan to be stupid like them. The genies won’t be able to get the gem from a wizard.” She turned a haughty glare on the light genie. “I wish you would stay with me to keep the light barrier on me.”

Mandy followed her sister’s example, holding her necklace out as well while saying, “Come out, Genie. I wish you would stay with me to protect me with your magic.” Green light sprang up next to Mandy, swirling in a pattern of leaves before dying down to reveal the plant genie. His wavy green hair was threaded through with flowers, as usual. His brown vest might have belonged to a regular gardener if it wasn’t over a bare chest and paired with green puffy

pants and brown shoes curled at the toes. Sandy's light barrier splashed highlights across the plant genie's dark skin.

With a reverential bow of his head, Ren took the yellow and green diamonds, keeping his smirk to himself. Clearly, the twins knew who was taking this threat seriously. Admittedly, he was also the one who let the genies get away, but he would rectify that imminently. He needed to secure his place back at Ethan's side, not be distracted by this mysterious thief. Though the situation called for caution, it was still fleeting and temporary. His station within the McMichael family was something he planned to keep for decades—or as soon as he could move to a more impressive family. Whichever came first.

“I will not allow this thief to steal from the McMichaels again,” he promised the twins, pocketing the necklaces in separate pockets. “I have never failed the your family and will not do so now.”

He ignored the glares the other wizards sent his way. Rising through the ranks meant pissing off everyone around you. That was why he didn't bother with friends or allies. Though in the case of Santiago, he wished things had gone differently.

Mandy looped herself around one of his arms. “I don't care who chases the genies, but *you* have to stay to protect us. You're the most powerful genie wizard here.”

He didn't miss the female wizards snorting and hoped things went terribly wrong for them. It'd serve them right for underestimating the situation. Their physical strength may be superior to his, but that didn't mean they could beat him in a fight. And if they could match his magical prowess, they'd be working for the main family, not serving socialites who partied as much as they worked.

“The gems shouldn't remain by you. That's the first place the thief will check since she

already spotted them,” Ren said, twisting his arm to remove himself from Mandy’s grasp.

Her gaze immediately went to his shorts, the intensity of her glare suggesting she wanted to snatch her necklace straight from his pocket. He didn’t doubt she’d be willing to do just that and eased himself back from her.

“Perhaps we ought to be taken with you,” the light genie said. All eyes turned to him. His neon yellow eyes were difficult to stare directly into, but Ren wasn’t about to lose a staring contest with a genie. “You don’t know how the ice genie and fire genie were stolen. Maybe the thief needs us and not our gems.”

“Do you know something?” the oldest wizard snarled, his large jowls trembling as he shoved himself in the light genie’s face. He crowded the genie, as though he might intimidate him using height. “We can make you talk.” He held up one hand threateningly in preparation for an offensive spell.

“How could I have knowledge you do not?” the light genie asked, blinking up at the wizard. “I didn’t know the ice and fire genies were missing until now.” A smile played at the corners of his mouth. “Seeing them stolen, my first guess would be that they tore their former masters to pieces. But, since the harlots aren’t frightened, I’m guessing the thefts went down some other way.”

“How dare you,” the wizard said, backhanding the genie. The light genie’s head rocked back, though he stayed in place. “You will speak of your betters with respect.”

“The fire genie thought the thief was better,” the plant genie said in his far-off voice, as though he was distracted by something infinitely more interesting. He looked at the light genie. “Not better than him, but better than these ones. You could tell he likes her. Do you think she’s nice?”

“You’ll never know,” Mandy snapped before glaring between the two genies. “And you’re both staying where you belong. Right here protecting us.”

“We’re wasting time,” Ren broke in. He understood the concern that the light genie might know more than he was letting on—but they had no evidence of that and more pressing concerns. They could question the genie after they caught the thief. “Whether the thief is trapped or not, we’re giving her time to plan. It’s time to move out.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Ali

We reformed in a dark room. Windows surrounded one side of the room, allowing enough light for me to make out the figures of Illan and Rajan, but nothing else.

“Where are we?” I whispered.

“In part of the attic,” Rajan said, summoning flames on either side of him.

They hovered next to his head like two torches and I blinked against the sudden light, looking around. We stood in a large room that more than anything reminded me of a fancy Barbie house for twins. Each side of the room mirrored the other with pale pink lounge chairs, old-fashioned purple and gold armoires, and two vanities with light bulbs all around them.

“This is an attic?” I asked.

“More like a play place for the twins,” Rajan said, his lip curling in disgust. That statement could be taken many ways and I didn’t want to delve into a single one of them.

“I have no idea what to do now,” I said, feeling like an idiot. Did I really think that getting the other genies would be as easy as deciding to? I hadn’t, but I hadn’t expected to have no idea what to do either. But I probably should have. Despite what the McMichaels thought,

stealing was a new concept for me. At least I didn't have to worry about the police arriving like I had at the museum.

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “Could we call the police on the McMichaels?” Rajan and Illan exchanged a panicked look that questioned my sanity. Heat rose to my cheeks as I added, “Not right now. I mean, rich people get away for doing terrible things all the time, but what if Tavor made all the evil things they've done through magic public knowledge? And gave the police fabricated evidence to prove it?” It left a bad taste in my mouth to put ‘fabricated evidence’ and ‘prove’ in the same sentence, but the McMichaels *should* face punishment for their crimes. “Though maybe the shadow genie could just get them out of prison.”

“He could,” Rajan said, looking intrigued, “but he couldn't do anything to clear their names, not if the world knew they were guilty—and the McMichaels being convicted of all their crimes would be global news. They could escape prison, but they'd have to stay on the run.”

“Prison wouldn't save the McMichaels from The Society if that's what you're hoping,” Illan warned, his eyes seeming to pierce mine.

“But they would still have the shadow genie. Wouldn't that qualify them to stay members of The Society?”

Rajan snorted. “After losing six genies? They'll be labeled too incompetent. Even if the shadow genie is under contract and no one can use him for a century, The Society will still kill all the McMichaels—though they'll try to cut a deal with whoever is the shadow genie's master. But I like your plan. It'll keep the McMichaels off our backs until The Society deals with them. Then, no one will know who you are or where we are. They'll search, but they won't have any leads.”

“So long as the McMichaels and their wizards keep what they know to themselves until

Tavor adjusts their memories,” Illan reminded. “Tavor will move as soon as we have the water genie, but the McMichaels may ask for help as a last ditch effort before then.”

“Then we won’t give them time,” Rajan declared, pounding his fist into his palm. “We may not be able to leave this house, but we can make sure no one else can either. Illan?”

Illan nodded before holding his hands out to either side and fluttering his fingers. Blue light dashed for the walls and windows around us. Sharp crackling filled the air as layer upon layer of ice covered anything near the outside of the house.

My next breath came out in a cloud of smoke as the temperature dropped. I shivered, transfixed by the beautiful patterns the ice made. “But won’t the wizard be able to destroy your ice?” I asked, remembering how easily Santiago had destroyed Illan’s ice.

“I will feel if they do and counter it.”

“Or I’ll counter it,” Rajan said, a feral grin overtaking his face. His expression turned petulant as he added, “But Illan’s magic is a better barrier for now. My fire is more likely to get out of control. It won’t break through the light genie’s barrier keeping us in, but I might bring the interior of the house down and if the yellow and green diamonds get buried under rubble, we may never find them.”

So the wizards and twins couldn’t escape or communicate with anyone outside the house. But we still had no plan to get the diamonds.

“What will the twins do?” I asked Rajan.

“Probably hide away with their genies standing guard.” He winced. “Though Mandy might be mad enough to send the plant genie after us and convince Sandy to do the same. That’s on me—sorry.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t have to come and I’d be lost without you. If pissing off

Mandy helped you feel better, I'm all for it." I blushed at remembering just what he'd done to upset her, but there was no need to blush when it hadn't been a real kiss, right? Except Rajan's cheeks almost seemed pink the light from his flames.

Illan cleared his throat. "While there is less concern of the plant genie finding us within a brick and stone structure, the light genie could easily track us down. Since the wizards will be reluctant to rely on a genie for help, they will be our biggest concern unless the twins push the issue. They'll leave most behind to guard the twins, but will probably send at least two after us."

"Can you guys handle two wizards?" I asked, remembering how much they'd struggled with Santiago. Ice and fire weren't any better a combination now than they'd been then. Fighting next to each other weakened the others' attacks.

Illan held his hands out in a 'who knows' gesture. "Being able to use our magic against wizards is new and we only have one experience to base our knowledge off. Though I suspect that once the wizards realize we can attack them, they'll send more to deal with us."

If they could barely handle one, how were they supposed to handle six?

"What if I helped handle the wizards?" I suggested slowly. "I'm stronger and their magic won't affect me." The only problem was, I had no idea what I meant by 'handle.' The best option would be to knock them out, but how did you actually do that? The movies liked to conveniently have the bad guys drop after a good whack on the head, but hitting someone's skull seemed like a fine line between causing unconsciousness and causing permanent damage.

I needed to start carrying rope around. That could come in handy in so many ways. I'd tied Santiago's hands behind his back using my backpack straps, but I didn't have anything like that handy now.

"No," Illan said, shaking his head. "Wizards act as all-around bodyguards, which means

they sometimes carry human-made weapons. Those won't harm us, but you'll be at risk. We need to focus on obtaining the diamonds rather than countering our enemies. Once we have those the plant and light genies, our numbers will be four to six, much better odds for confronting the wizards."

"You're right," I said, "but I don't think we can get the gems without fighting our way there. Not to mention we still have to deal with the light barrier around Sandy. Can either of you break it?"

Rajan's face took on a familiar offended scowl as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Only a shadow genie or a universal could break it," he grudgingly admitted.

"But the plant genie may be able to break through," Illan added. "Vegetation has a relationship with light, after all."

I didn't follow the logic of his argument, but since it was Illan talking, I was sure he was right. "We'll aim for the green diamond first then," I said. A sick feeling entered my stomach at my words. Deciding which gem we'd hypothetically grab first wasn't a plan, nor was guessing that only a few wizards would be sent after us. We needed something more concrete before we tried again. Or before we were found.

Something occurred to me and I perked up. "What if we make the wizards *think* I'm trying to take them on alone? That's what I would have to do if you two weren't able to use your magic against wizards. You two will hide inside your gems, and then materialize behind the wizards while I have them distracted. If the wizards can't use their magic in time, you should be able to take them, right?"

Tavor's single confrontation with a wizard had been against a tied-up Brandon and he'd had little trouble other than seeming to need to ramp up the amount of power he used.

“That could still be dangerous for you,” Illan said, frowning.

The sick feeling, which had faded at the thought of having a plan, intensified. “We’re in the middle of a McMichael home with a bunch of wizards and two genie owners. I don’t think we’re getting out of this without danger.” A tight ball of resentment residing in my chest—mostly over my parents—tried to compete with the sick feelings. If Illan didn’t want danger, he should have come. Not that I thought we could do this without him, but what was the point of him being here if he was going to act this way?

I turned to Rajan. “Do you think it’s a good idea?”

“I think it’s great. Attacking from behind may be fighting dirty—but so is using enslaved genies. I have no problems with it.”

I felt better having his support, though maybe I should have been concerned rather than encouraged that my plan had Rajan’s stamp of approval. I hadn’t even thought about the genies attacking from behind has being anything like fighting dirty or cowardly. I was just trying to get us all out of here.

“Illan?” I turned back to him. “If you have another idea, I’m happy to hear it.” We’d been so in sync when we plotted to get Professor Treen fired. I wished we had that same energy between us now. But maybe we worked better together with things that didn’t potentially involve violence.

“No,” he said, his look cold and distant. “I do not have another plan. We’ll go with yours.”

#

I crept down the hall, feeling like an idiot. I probably looked like a kid playing at being a spy. It was stupid to come here. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Except, I still didn’t see an alternative. If I was

forced to run, I might as well bring all the genies. Though Tavor thought we could get away with staying right where we were after we got all the genies except for the shadow genie. For now, anyway.

“Crouching as you walk doesn’t make you quieter,” a voice observed.

I winced before turning to see the young genie wizard with the dark hair. Even though we’d planned to run into wizards—it’s hard to avoid running into someone when you’re trapped in a house with them—my heart still jumped into my throat. I was a mechanical engineering student, not a budding 007. I was here because some stupid bird-genie dropped a gem in my lap.

He held up his hands in a peaceful gesture. “I don’t want to hurt you. I’ve always been opposed to violence against woman.”

“That ship sailed the moment she entered this house!” a woman called from behind the first genie wizard. I looked back to see a middle-aged man and woman stalking our way. Three. Could Illan and Rajan take on that many even attacking from the back. “No enemy of the McMichaels will escape.”

The first wizard’s eyes narrowed as he tossed a look over his shoulder. His voice was light as he asked, “Are you that afraid of a little girl?”

“It’s called making an example,” the man said, his eyes intent on me—and completely missing the swirls of flame and ice forming behind him and his companion. “I guess you’re too young to understand the concept, Ren.” He smirked. “I guess the rumors are true that Ellen picked you out for your face and not your smarts and abilities.”

Ren—the name of young wizard apparently—glowered and muttered, “Ethan picked me out. I don’t work for Ellen.”

I almost froze at hearing that this man worked for Ethan, but I needed to keep their

attention on me. I took up what I hoped looked like a fighting stance, my legs held apart and my hands in first in front of me. “Aren’t you nervous that two genie wizards went missing after running into me?” I asked, lifting my chin. Hopefully, he couldn’t hear the shaking as much as I could.

He tilted his head, regarding me until we heard gasps. He glanced back to see Rajan and Illan engaging the other two wizards in a fight. Then, unconcerned, he turned back to me. This time, my confident smile was real. He was so convinced genies couldn’t harm the wizards that he wasn’t interested in their fight. I needed to keep things that way.

“Catch me if you can,” I said, still sounded like a kid playing at same game. Then I took off in the direction opposite of the genies’ fight.

Ren followed. I ran. When I found a new staircase leading upward, I took it. The house was huge, but I wasn’t confident I wouldn’t accidentally run into the twins if I stuck to the second floor. I didn’t want to introduce more wizards into the mix until we took care of these three.

I took a wrong turn and ended up in a dead-end hallway. There were doors to either side, but I could hardly hide with Ren close enough to watch which room I chose. Spinning around, I took up my pseudo fighting stance. He smiled.

“Clearly, you’ve been enhanced by a wish. Also clearly, you don’t know what you’re doing. You should have wished for fighting ability to go with your speed.”

“I don’t want to fight,” I said, fighting the desire to back up as he walked closer. “And I don’t make wishes.”

“No?” he asked, stopping to study me. “Maybe that’s why the fire genie likes you so much.” He raised his eyebrows. “Or maybe they like you because you’re doing their bidding.

That's a silly thing to do—steal genies and then follow what they want. Even if their advice seems good, they only want—”

“To warp my mind and lead me down a path to destruction?” I deadpanned.

He smiled again. “I was only going to say they're looking out for their interests, not yours.”

I didn't see how Rajan taking out a professor trying to molest me or Illan fighting against a wish to harm me could be interpreted as them looking out for their own self-interest. Rajan would have been my genie either way and Illan had held no hope of becoming my genie.

“What's your end goal?” He took a few steps forward and I inched back. I'd taken down and apprehended Santiago, but there had been ice to help me and surprise was on my side. Was I stronger than a genie wizard? Maybe a better question was if I was stronger than *this* genie wizard. Since his build was more short basketball player than an MMA fighter, it seemed plausible. “I would've thought you'd have sold the universal genie on the black market as soon as you got him, but you seem to be collecting genies rather than selling them. Hoping to start your own empire?”

“I haven't stolen anything,” I snapped. As a policeman's daughter, I'd always felt duty-bound to keep my record and conscious perfect. I knew right from wrong and my actions—current circumstances not counting—would reflect that. “Some stupid bird gave me the topaz, I found the ruby because I went to the stupid museum to relax, and the stupid brothers showed up with the aquamarine when I was trying to meet with my stupid professor.” The words spilled out even as my mind told me to shut up. I was giving clues to where I lived and I shouldn't care what a random stranger thought of me. Hopefully, his memory would be erased by the end of the weekend.

His eyebrows scrunched together in a confused expression and he put his hands on his hips. “Are you saying you got the universal, fire, and ice genies by *accident*?”

“Well I certainly wasn’t going out looking for something I didn’t know existed!” And then I lunged at him. Even if I was stronger and faster than him, that didn’t mean I could past him. At least, not without getting hurt. I’d never so much as been punched in my life and wasn’t keen on learning what pain felt like.

He moved almost quicker than I could track, catching my arms and stopping me a foot from him. I struggled against him, but couldn’t move.

“Clever distraction tactic,” he said, his eyes no longer amused. “What fascinating lies you tell.”

“They’re not lies,” I said through gritted teeth. “If I was the genie hunter you thought me, why *wouldn’t* I have wished for fighting ability? Or, even easier, why wouldn’t I have brought guns? You’re immune to genie magic, not weapons.”

Uncertainty flickered through his eyes. His grip loosened and I kned him in the gut, hoping I was doing it right. With how protective my dad was, I wished he’d taught me basic self defense instead of insisting I carry pepper spray everywhere. Though, come to think of it, I should have brought that.

He doubled over, letting out a groan, but his hands didn’t release me. I twisted, fighting to get away and stomped on his foot only half on purpose. We ended up on the ground in a twisted mess. He lost hold of one of my arms, but tightened his grip on the other to the point of pain. I hissed, my hand brushing against his pocket.

I stilled. It felt like a necklace. But it couldn’t be one of the necklaces holding the diamonds, right? Unless they decided a wizard would be a good place to hide the gem. My hand

darted into his pocket before my brain caught up. I felt a thin chain and yanked. Out came a silver necklace with a perfectly shaped diamond dangling from the bottom.

“Hey!” Ren cried, squirming as he flipped me under him. “You’re not getting these genies! Not under my watch!”

“No!” I cried as he reached for my hand. He still had hold of my other arm. Desperately, I whipped the necklace, trying to flip the pendant into my hand. I failed, so dropped it on my leg and seized the diamond, furiously rubbing it.

“You stupid girl,” Ren snarled, grabbing the chain and ripping it from my hand. I winced at the pain as I prayed I’d done it right. Rubbing was all I’d had to do with the ruby and aquamarine. “You really have no idea what’s going on, do you?” He stood, glaring down at me as I breathed heavy.

“No,” I admitted, then I met his eyes. “But at least I know more than you.” Feeling silly, I raised my voice. “Plant genie? Would you come here please?”

Green leaves swirled next to me before revealing a dark-skinned genie with green hair a few shades lighter than grass and brilliant green eyes. He wore the outfit I was accustomed to with puffy green pants, an open brown vest and curly brown shoes. Plain gold armbands covered both his biceps.

“Hi,” I breathed, looking up at him from the ground. “Thank you for coming.” I hoped my words hadn’t forced him out. I’d seen the triplets bring Illan out of his gem without using the words ‘I wish,’ but maybe he’d come out on his own rather than waiting to be forced.

He looked at me curiously, like I was an animal doing something unexpected. “You’re welcome.”

I sat up and smiled at Ren. “You might want to check on your friends. I imagine they’re

having more trouble than you expect.” My smile widened. “Unless you don’t find it odd that they haven’t joined us.”

His eyes widened as he looked between the plant genie and me, then he spun on his heel and sprinted away. I breathed a sigh of relief until I realized that my friends hadn’t appeared either.

“I have to make sure Flame and Ice are okay,” I said, not sure if it was kosher to use genies’ real names in front of other genies without permission. “Come with me?”

He blinked at me and I realized he had tiny purple flowers sprouting from his hair. “I don’t know what’s going on?” he said, the words coming out like a question.

“I don’t either,” I confessed. “It’s a long story and Orange, the universal genie, is the driving force behind this if that helps. I promise we’ll explain more later.” I took a couple steps without him following.

“You can go back to your gem if you’d prefer,” I told him. “Ren took it, but that doesn’t matter since you’re my genie now, right?” I flushed at my wording, hating how it sounded. “I mean I’m your gem’s official owner.”

He tilted his head, now gazing at me like I was a baffling creature. “That’s how it’s supposed to work.” Despite the situation, his voice was calm. Or, more like, far-away, as though he was only half-paying attention to all this. “You can summon my gem back to you, or wait for it to appear on its own. Gems only tolerate being away from their master for awhile.”

“Oh.” He made it sound like the gem was alive. I filed it away as a question to ask Tavor later—and this time I would *actually* follow up on that. No more ‘somedays’ for my questions. Not after taking this plunge.

Then another thought occurred to me. “Do you know where the light genie’s gem is?”

“The wizard who ran away had it.”

“Dang it!” I said, reflexively clenching my fist as though I could capture the gem I’d let slip past. I hadn’t even thought to check his other pocket.

“He probably won’t have it next time you see him. The twin will be very angry and the other twin won’t trust him to keep hers now.”

“Right,” I sighed. At least we were halfway to our goal and had one more genie to help.

“Crap!” I exclaimed, remembering why we needed another genie to help. “I still need to check on Flame and Ice!” I ran and, this time, the plant genie followed.

“I grant you free reign, by the way,” I huffed, wishing I could be a little more formal since this was a big deal to the other genies. “Flame and Ice have it. It lets you use your magic against the wizards, but they can still counter it with their own magic. Also, can I call you Plant? I don’t like calling genies Genie.”

He looked bemused before saying, “I’d prefer Vine.”

Ridiculously, I felt a thrill of triumph at a genie finally telling giving me a name they preferred. Tavor and Rajan had both thought I was ridiculous when I asked them what they wanted to be called. “Vine it is then!”

We tore down the stairs and I prayed we’d find Rajan and Illan unharmed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

We rounded a corner and I plowed into Rajan before bouncing off his chest. If I was more solid than a wizard now, I apparently wasn't more solid than a genie.

“Oof!” I cried, wincing as I waited to hit the ground. Instead, gentle arms enclosed around my biceps from behind, keeping my upright. I turned to see Vine.

“Thank you,” I breathed, straightening. “Sorry, Rajan.” I flushed at my mistake, my eyes widening. “I mean Flame!”

Rajan snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. “Too late to fix that, Girlie, but Flower Head already knows my name. Don't know if he knows Ice's though.” He twisted the word ice sarcastically.

I sighed. Some people just didn't respect circumspection.

Then Rajan smiled. “Good on you for already getting one of the genies though. Did Pretty Boy have him?”

At least I wasn't the only one Rajan called by a silly nickname—though, now that I thought about it, he was hardly one to throw stones over what I called people.

“Yeah.” I drooped. “He had the light genie's gem too, but I didn't realize and he got

away. How did things go with you two?" My eyes danced between them. "Did either of you get hurt?"

Illan shook his head. "No, but nor were we entirely successful. We took the wizards by surprise, but they countered before we had them incapacitated. After a few minutes, they expressed fear that we were a distraction while you attacked the twins, so they created an opening and fled."

I fought to hide my disappointment. I'd really hoped our next altercation would be three genies against three wizards, not five. But I was sure they'd done their best and I'd screwed up too.

"Well, I'm glad you're both okay." I bit my lip before adding, "If you couldn't take the wizards two on two, do you think we stand a chance against five of them?"

Rajan narrowed his eyes. "Did you miss the part where we didn't get hurt and *they* ran away? We'll be fine."

I looked to Illan and he sighed. "I'm not as optimistic. Our greatest advantage was surprise and the fight did not go as I'd hoped. The McMichaels employe some of the best the genie wizards have to offer. They're highly trained and I should have expected their reaction time to be quicker."

I peeked at Vine. "Will you help us fight the wizards? We need to get the light genie's gem. Plus, his magic is guarding the house, so we can't actually leave until we get him."

He blinked at me, then at Rajan and Illan. "You told her your names?"

I gaped at Vine. Had he been listening to the conversation? Or were true genies names such a big deal that they took precedence over being able to fight genie wizards? I was pretty sure Rajan rated fighting wizards over giving out his real name.

Rajan shook his head at me, his expression full of pity. “Flower Head’s brain is full of flowers. That’s why he’s Flower Head.”

“Well, Ta-Orange told me I was the first human he’d given his real name to. It’s a big deal, right?”

“Not bigger than beating down wizards,” Rajan said, confirming my belief.

“Tavor too,” Vine murmured, more to himself than us. “Curious.”

“Um, so will you help us fight?” I asked.

He regarded me for what felt like a full minute before asking, “Why do you want our gems?”

I opened my mouth to give the excuse that Ethan had forced my hand. Then I realized how ridiculous it was to claim I had to steal three genie gems because a billionaire megalomaniac had threatened me, so I closed my mouth. Ethan threatening me was why I was taking the gems *now*, not why I was taking them. When Tavor first broached his plan I’d told him I would help once he had a viable solution to keep the genies relatively safe and free.

“I can’t fathom what your lives are like,” I said, envisioning Illan trembling as he fought a wish to hurt me. “But I have a small idea of what it is to live with people who believe it is their right to control you.” Ironically, that was why I was here. If my parents weren’t so controlling, if they’d supported my dreams instead of trying to impose their own on me, I’d be attending a college in Chicago.

Vine’s bright green eyes focused on me as I said, “Being with me isn’t freedom. I can’t remove the magic that binds you, but I can choose not to make wishes or demands.”

Rajan snorted. “*Choose* not to make wishes? We literally ran around a museum being chased by fossils as you *refused* to make wishes.” He turned to Vine. “She’s the best kind of

genie master—because she doesn't *want* to be a genie master. She freaked out when my gem became hers and was rude after Illan joined us too."

"I just told him I didn't want him!" I defended, my cheeks flaming red. Really, the embarrassing thing wasn't that I hadn't made wishes at the museum, but that I hadn't thought to grant Rajan free reign earlier. Then what I just said ran through my mind again and I spun toward Illan. "As a genie! I didn't want you as a genie. As a friend is a different matter."

Illan nodded his understanding. I wasn't even sure if he considered me a friend, especially after he'd stood by me and then I snubbed him in favor of Tavor when I was upset. I hadn't meant for things to come off that way, but I imagined that was how it felt for him. I'd need to find a way to apologize and explain myself. After we nabbed all the gems.

I'd nearly forgotten why we were having this conversation until I realized Vine was still studying me.

"Will you help?" I asked again.

"You're odd," he told me. "So yes, I will lend you my power."

I blinked. Did that mean odd was a compliment? A mark of favor? I had no idea, but I breathed out a sigh of relief. I wasn't sure we could pull this off with him, let alone without him. My mind fought to block out all the things that might happen if we didn't get out of here. If the wizards overpowered the genies, I would be captured and brought to Ethan. The belief that I had a contract would keep them from killing me, but how would they try to get the genies from me? Torture me into fulfilling my contract as soon as possible? Once Ethan realized I'd rejected his offer—and in a pretty dramatic way to boot—I was sure he'd stop trying to pretend he was the good guy.

"Great," Rajan said, clapping his hands. "We should strike hard and fast this time. If we

can kill or near-kill those wizard bastards, this will go much smoother.”

I stared at him in horror before stuttering, “Wha . . . no. No! We didn’t come to kill anyone. We came to get the plant and light genies.”

“Rajan is correct,” Illan said, crossing his arms. His blue eyes were clear as they gazed into mine. “The surest way to incapacitate an enemy is to kill them. The odds are against us and we will only even them by decreasing the forces we face.”

My mind jumped to the day we met Illan, when we brought Santiago to Tavor. Tavor told me he could handle Santiago differently from Brandon since there were more genies now, then he’d told me to go to school. The atmosphere in the apartment had felt off to me. Part of me warned me to stay—but I hadn’t to get any more involved than I was. Tavor gave me the exact out I’d wanted to prioritize college.

“Did you guys kill Santiago?” I asked, my stomach squirming and my heart thumping as I waited for the answer.

I didn’t have to wait long. Rajan didn’t even blink as he said, “Of course we did.” My stomach sank. Had they even tried to think of another solution? Santiago had seemed sincere when he’d said he wanted to talk with me—but Brandon had seemed kind right up until he’d decided it was more convenient to kill me.

“You don’t get it,” Rajan added. “There are thousands of years worth of bad blood between us and the wizards. Genie masters may hold our gem, but it’s the wizards who crack the whip. The more wizards who die, they better off we are. It’s a fact, Ali.”

“So your name’s Ali,” Vine said, like he’d made a discovery.

I gaped at him again. He seemed oblivious to my shock as he told me, “You can’t accomplish taking from the McMichaels without killing. Didn’t you know that?”

“No!” I exclaimed, wondering if killing anyone who stood in our way was part of Tavor’s plan. “Tavor said he’d alter the McMichaels’ memories after we got all the genies. He didn’t mention anything about killing anyone.”

Nausea similar to when Ethan confronted me filled me. I’d known something was off with Santiago, but ignored it. Had I known things would turn out like this this time? I didn’t think so. I’d decided to come here less than twelve hours ago. Everything had been such a whirlwind that there hadn’t been time to think through any consequences.

“You’re very naive for a genie owner,” Vine said.

“I never asked to be one,” I said, wanting to cry. Could I have saved Santiago if I’d stayed at the apartment? Had Santiago been worth saving? Did the genies want the McMichaels dead as much as they wanted the wizards dead? Illan had been ready to kill the triplets until I’d asked him not to. He hadn’t pushed the issue after that, but the McMichaels weren’t a threat to the genies in the same way the wizards were. Unless the genies decided they’d be safer if the McMichaels weren’t around to try to get them back.

I was a pathetic coward, avoiding confronting anything that made me deviate from my silly little college plans. And, in the face of possible murder, it *did* feel silly. No wonder my dreams looked insignificant to Tavor. Even if they meant everything to me .

“I would prefer temporarily incapacitating the wizards to killing them if we can,” I said. My voice shook despite my efforts to calm down. I couldn’t back out of this situation now. I could only stand for what I thought was right. I looked at Rajan, then Illan in the eyes. “You’re both clever and powerful. I’m sure we can escape without leaving any dead bodies in our wake.” Of course, that was easy for me to say when I couldn’t help with the fighting.

“Are you willing to try?” I asked, turning to include Vine in my question.

Rajan and Illan exchanged a look. Illan's expression was unreadable, though Rajan looked uncertain.

"We can *try*," Rajan finally said, sounding as uncertain as he looked. Then his look turned warning. "But only try. Don't get mad if this turns into a blood bath."

I winced. "I'd rather them go down than us. And, to be clear, I don't want you guys getting hurt." I hesitated. "If the option is you get hurt or the wizards . . ." I couldn't even bring myself to say die. "Or the wizards go down, I'm for the wizards going down."

"We'll do our best," Illan promised.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ren

Ren jetted down the stairs on silent feet, his mind a swirl of confusion. Part of him couldn't accept that his wizard compatriots could be having trouble from genies. It went against millennia of knowledge, two decades of learning, and half a decade of personal experience. So why was he speeding toward them? Because he'd just watch some girl rub a gem and steal a genie under contract.

That whole scene felt surreal as it replayed in his head. As she'd rubbed the gem, he was sure she was deranged. That she wasn't the real culprit behind these thefts, but some fall girl sent to throw the McMichaels off the real culprits trail. Then the plant genie appeared.

He froze when he heard voices around the corner. One vaguely familiar, the other foreign—and both calm. He peered around the corner and his eyes widened to see two genies and no wizards. His mind flashed to Brandon and Santiago, dead and missing respectively and he almost chocked on his spit. He forced himself to calm down. The wizards may have merely been chased away. Which still boggled his mind, but was less frightening.

Slipping back around the corner, he took another route to Sandy's room, where he

assumed the wizards would have fled. In shame. Despite the situation, a smirk curled his mouth. Playing guard dog for masters bored him. It was days, weeks, months—maybe years—of monotony punctured by an exciting moment or two if you were lucky enough to be on duty at the right time and place. And here he was, smack in the middle of . . . something.

Maybe this would end up a small, insignificant blip that caused panic only for the McMichaels before being wiped out. Or maybe this would be the biggest upset in all of The Society's history.

He was getting ahead of himself, but his mind churned with unending questions. Had a bird really dropped the imperial topaz with the girl? Had she already been a genie hunter? Or had the universal genie convinced her to take this route? If she was to be believed, it sounded like the latter. But why give her the gem in the first place? Perhaps he and Santiago's guess that someone was looking to stir up another Society war was correct and this girl was an unwitting accomplice. And none of that even scratched the surface of how these impossible things were happening and what the ultimate goals was. He found himself wanting to play detective rather than enforcer.

He could be subtle and charming. Two attributes that could get one oh-so-far in nearly any endeavor. As was evidenced by him going from being the half-breed outcast to serving the head of one of the top Society families. He'd never been ashamed of his fully human mother, and maybe this would be the opportunity he'd been searching for to prove what he was really capable of. Which was a lot more than the over-sized full wizard bastards around him.

Screeching reached his ears and he winced, slowing his pace. It took a couple seconds for him to pick out individual words. He couldn't tell the twins' voices apart, but, from the words, it had to be Mandy.

“Go get my genie! He's mine! Not some stupid, little girl hussy's! Mine!” A pause. “No

one cares if you're burned! You. Don't. Matter. None of you do. You're here to do *our* bidding, not whine! Go get him!"

"Shouldn't you be counting on your precious Ren to save your genie?" one of the woman wizards asked. "He's the one you entrusted your gem to and he's the one who lost it. He should get it back."

Mandy gave a wordless scream of rage. Ren winced before entering the hallway. All eyes turned on him, the twins' full of fury and the wizards full of gloating, accusation, and shock. He spotted the two wizards who'd gone searching with him. Their arms were horribly burned, the skin red and blistered and bleeding in some places. He'd heard frostbite looked like heat burns and he honestly couldn't tell who'd fought the fire genie and who'd fought the ice genie. But he was glad he'd run after the girl.

"Weren't you the one who told us to be careful?" the taller of the woman wizards asked, throwing her shoulders back to stare down her nose at him. Not like she needed any help with that with how much taller than him she was. "And then you went and lost a genie."

"The thief grabbed the gem and summoned the plant genie," he said. Stunned silence met his statement.

"That's impossible!" one of them exclaimed.

It was a Herculean effort not to face palm. "As are the injuries to Jack and Jill over there." The injured pair shot him a glare, but it was undeniable that there was a sameness to them. Maybe they were related, maybe not, but there were rumors of inbreeding among The Society members and Ren suspected the same may be true of some wizard families.

"You still failed," Mandy said, her voice cold. For once, she sounded like the adult McMichael she was supposed to be rather than the petulant child she usually was. Then she

ruined the moment by twirling toward her sister and demanding, “You have to protect me too!” She shot a dark glare at the wizards. “While they get my genie back.”

“Genie,” Sandy said, not bothering to look at the light genie who was standing away from the group, “I wish you’d protect my sister with the same light barrier around me.” The steady light around Sandy shifted and flowed to encase Mandy.

Sandy held her hand out toward Ren. “Give me my gem,” she demanded, shaking her hair back. “Clearly, the genie can protect the gem better than you.”

He stepped into the middle of everyone to hand the yellow diamond over, his gaze going to the genie in question. The light genie tried to appear a mix between stoic and bored, which were the only expressions Ren had seen on him, but the genie looked pale and his eyes couldn’t hide flashes of confusion and . . . hope? Fear? Ren didn’t know him well enough to tell.

Sandy clasped the necklace around her neck, protectively gripping the gem. Her eyes showed too much white as Mandy huddled next to her. They’d been so confident that they had the upper hand. Now one had lost her genie and the other was confronted with the fact that she may lose hers as well. It was a new fear for a McMichael.

“They still can’t leave the house,” the jowl-faced wizard said. “That thief won’t escape with the McMichael genies.”

Ren opted not to point out the obvious—that just because the little genie thief could steal genies from masters willy nilly didn’t mean the McMichaels could take them back. And what was the likelihood that she wasn’t creating contracts as soon as she gathered the genies? She’d claimed she hadn’t been seeking the genies—but maybe that was a lie and even if it wasn’t and she hadn’t been, she was clearly seeking them now.

Jowl-face turned to the light genie. “You said you wanted to go with the search party. Is

this what you were hoping for? What you expected?” His lip curled, his eyes gleaming with a cruel light as he held up a hand. “You’ll talk now.” His hands flowed into an offensive spell before throwing it at the light genie.

The genie jerked under the onslaught of magic, gritting his teeth against the pain. He held out well before falling to one knee. The light barrier around the twins flickered and died out. Unsurprising since genies hit by offensive spells couldn’t perform magic. That was one of their benefits.

“No!” Sandy shrieked, pummeling Jowl-face with her fists. The hits couldn’t have hurt the man, but he winced upon realizing his mistake and stopped his spell.

“Stupid wizard!” She hit him one last time for emphasis. “Are you trying to make us vulnerable? Maybe *you’re* how the thief is getting information!” She turned on the genie kicking him in the stomach. “Get your barrier back up! I wish you’d get your light barrier back on me and my sister right now!”

The light genie’s head snapped up, his eyes glowing with menace. Sandy flinched and stepped back. Then, seeming to realize what she’d done, stood still, her hands trembling. Slowly, the light barrier reappeared around the twins, flowing unevenly before steadying.

“We should go to our safe room,” Mandy said, her voice uneven.

Sandy nodded, clutching her twins hand.

In the back of his mind, Ren wondered if that would make a difference. In the forefront, as he watched the light genie slowly get to his feet and his mind ran through his conversations with the genie hunter—that she didn’t make wishes, that she was following a genie’s plans, that she got angry when she thought he was speaking disparagingly of the genies—and he wondered if she’d come because she thought she was saving the genies.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ali

“Any thoughts on how to approach this?” I asked, worrying my lip. They’ll have five genie wizards and we don’t know where the yellow diamond is.”

“I can turn my molecules into ice particles and survey the scene,” Illan said. “However, the wizards will be on high alert and it’s unlikely they wouldn’t sense my presence.”

“I can get a sense of what they’re doing with my plants,” Vine offered. “And I will not be harmed if they’re detected and destroyed.”

I shot a sidelong glance at Illan and Rajan, a little concerned about Vine’s capabilities at this point. Rajan gave a subtle nod.

“Yes, please,” I said. “I would appreciate that.”

Vine nodded, then sat cross-legged on the floor, closing his eyes and resting his hands on his knees. Then we waited. A slight frown furrowed his brow. “The twins’ rooms and hallway are empty. Kitchen . . . living room . . .” He tilted his head murmuring, “Guest rooms? Bathrooms? Theater? Indoor pool?”

Rajan smacked his forehead. “Panic room. The stupid twins have a panic room. I never saw them use it, so I forgot about it. It’s supposed to be made totally out of metal, so G-...Vine can’t get in.” His cheeks flushed pink at his mistake and he wouldn’t meet anyone’s eyes.

Vine seemed unconcerned that Rajan had almost said his real name. Instead, his expression lightened as he said, “I know where that is.” A moment later he added, “I can’t get in, but I sense vibrations from two people outside it.” His eyes remained closed as he tilted his head. “From the intensity of the vibrations, I think they’re snarling at each other.”

“Make sure the rest of the house is clear,” Illan cautioned and Vine nodded. “We don’t

want to be lured in only to be ambushed from behind.”

Vine’s eyes popped open moment later. “Clear,” he said, standing. “But as Rajan said, I can’t get through metal.”

“Well that’s easy, right?” I said. “I think panic rooms are made of metals like steel. If Rajan can’t melt it, he and Illan can rapidly heat and cool it, causing cracks . . . unless a universal genie . . . I guess *our* universal genie . . . used magic on the steel?”

“That’s possible,” Illan admitted. “But our first concern will be the wizards stopping our magic.”

“Right,” I said, worrying my lip again. Thoughts of ice and fire swirled through my mind as I sought for a solution.

I brightened as I exclaimed, “We can use smoke to stop the wizards!”

“Uh, they can stop my smoke,” Rajan said, raising one eyebrow as his look questioned my coherency. “Not just my fire.”

“But we’ll use *real* smoke and *real* fire,” I said, bouncing on my toes in excitement until I realized I was acting as arson-happy as Rajan. I forced myself to stop. “We’ll set a real fire near the panic room and the wizards will try to extinguish it thinking it’s Rajan’s, but they won’t be able to—and I bet that will freak them out. They must be panicking after you two were able to attack them directly. Why else would they run to a panic room when they have us outnumbered? After they stop using their magic on the fire since it’s not working, *then* Rajan will add his smoke to the real smoke and knock them out!”

Rajan threw back his head and laughed. “Girlie, I like the way you think. Let’s never adventure without each other, okay?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I promised.

“So, how should we make this fire, science expert?” Rajan asked. “I don’t deal in the non-magic kind—but I do know where to find lighters.” His lip curled. “Mandy loves candles.”

Vine nodded, his face also darkening. “My plants don’t like her.”

This was the second time Vine had spoken of something inanimate as though it had feelings. *Did* his plants feel things separate from him? Or did he just talk this way?

“Fire isn’t my expertise,” I said, “but soft woods often give off more smoke than hard woods. We’ll gather what we can, and dump anything handy that’s flammable on it.”

I glanced at Vine and winced. He’d literally just insinuated a dislike of lighting plants on fire. “Sorry.”

He blinked at me, then his lips quirked in an almost smile. “Dead wood doesn’t care.”

Right. At least we weren’t upsetting him. “Let’s go.”

#

The kitchen and panic room were, thankfully, on the same floor since the kitchen contained the most handy source of wood. We developed a system of smashing the wood in the kitchen before tiptoeing toward the panic room and gently placing our vandalized goods in the middle of the hallway leading to the panic room. We didn’t want to alert the wizards outside the panic room of our presence too soon.

On my third trip to the kitchen, I ran into Vine, who watched wordlessly as I smashed a barstool to kindling using my feet.

I flushed over the attention, though I wasn’t sure if it was because I was embarrassed over my strength or embarrassed at being watched while technically performing an illegal act.

“Athleticism is the one wish I’ve made,” I explained. Or maybe defended was a better word. “I didn’t believe that Tavor was a genie, so he demanded I make a wish.” I frowned at the

barstool as I picked up the piece, taking care to avoid sharp edges. “It feels like I’ve gotten stronger since when I first made the wish, but it’s hard to tell. The only time I use my enhanced abilities is when I’m fighting genie wizards. Or when Tavor turns the apartment into an obstacle course.” He claimed he was just helping me hone my wish. He seemed to take personal offense that I didn’t utilize the effects of my one wish more often.

“Do you often fight wizards?” Vine asked, tilting his head so much it looked like he was trying to make sense of an abstract painting.

“Fight is probably an exaggeration,” I said as he gathered several cook books into his arm and followed me down the hall. I lowered my voice to add, “I mostly just helped to capture two. Brandon and Santiago. Brandon because he came after Tavor and Santiago because he was fighting Ice and Rajan.”

He looked me up and down—which didn’t take much with my short stature. I wondered if he was mentally sizing me up against the MMA-sized genie wizards and I blushed again.

“The wish was a whim since I didn’t think it would work, but I’d be dead twice over without it. Good thing Tavor couldn’t take it back, I guess.”

“Couldn’t?” Vine seemed confused.

I stopped. “Tavor said he couldn’t take the wish back when I asked him to. He said wishes don’t work that way.”

Vine made a noncommittal noise and kept walking. I followed, wishing I knew Vine well enough to press the issue. But maybe it was for the best since now wasn’t the time. It took us nearly half an hour to break and pile up enough flammable debris to cover the hallway all the way to Rajan’s waist. We weren’t looking to engage the wizards in a fight and wanted to make sure they couldn’t actually get us.

“We ready now?” Rajan asked, flicking the lighter off and on.

“Almost,” I said, ripping the top off a flour bag I found in the pantry and dousing our whole pile with it.

Rajan raised an eyebrow, still flicking the lighter. “You hoping to bake something over the fire, Girlie?”

“Flour is highly flammable and will help the fire spread faster,” I explained, pushing his hand with the lighter away from the pile. “It’s also combustible when in the air, so be careful. We need to let it settle first.”

His eyes glinted and he took a step closer.

“Smoke is our goal,” I reminded him, holding my arms out to block him. “Not an explosion that will draw the wizards out.”

He pouted, stopping his flicking of the lighter to cross his arms over his chest. “Then you owe me a flour explosion.” His pout turned into a smirk. “Maybe I’ll care more about that science of yours if it involves more flame. I might even let you lecture about how the explosion happens.”

“Deal,” I agreed, checking the area for stray floating flour particles before stepping away.

The orange light of the lighter reflected in Rajan’s red eyes as he set fire to our pile. The flames leapt across the flour, reaching every last corner of our pile as it devoured the tiny particles. It didn’t take long for the flour to incinerate, but now we had a slowly burning fire left on our mishmash of kindling.

“I hate waiting,” Rajan sighed, crouching down next to the flames.

We didn’t dare leave in case the wizards tried to get past the fire to put it out by natural means. Though I didn’t think they would—what reason would they have for believing the fire

was a natural fire? Especially since Rajan had magicked the floor and walls around the fire to make it heat resistant and suppress the fire from spreading. We weren't trying to start a house fire, just make enough smoke so Rajan could slide his smoke in and knock the two wizards unconscious.

The fire crackled quietly as it burned through our pile, smoke rising and spreading down the hallway. Finally, a jowl-faced man came to investigate. He glared down at us as he weaved his arms and hands in the patterns wizards used to case magic. He finished by tossing his hands toward the fire, almost as though throwing water on it. Nothing happened.

Rajan laughed at the slack-jawed shock on the wizard's face as he rose to his full height.

"Didn't your friends tell you? We've found a way around your power. You can't stop us anymore."

"Then why didn't *you* stop my 'friends'?" the man sneered, though his ruddy face looked pale. "They got away from you easily enough."

"Because we allowed them to," Illan lied, his voice calm. "There was no harm in allowing them a temporary escape when you are no longer a threat to us."

The man's lip trembled. "Shawna!" he yelled. "Shawna get out here!"

"What is it, Jedd?" a tall woman, even taller than the one from earlier, said as she stalked around the corner. She eyed the fire, Jedd, and us. She muttered something about burns and cowards, then gracefully flowed into the same pattern that Jedd had used. Again, nothing happened. She froze, almost like a switch had been turned off.

She cleared her throat, edging back a step. "Jedd. We'll do it together. We just need more power."

The two jumped into their arm weaving, their movements so synchronized they must

have practiced it. Despite being mostly sure it couldn't work—wizard magic was only supposed to affect genie magic—I held my breath.

Still nothing. I released a quiet breath of relief.

“No need to feel bad,” Rajan told them with a dark smile. “Everyone has an off day, no one will judge you for it.” Down at his side, he flicked his hands and the smoke thickened, oozing slowly toward the wizards.

“Fine,” the woman snarled, reaching for a bag at her waist and pulling out something silver that jangled. “We can't stop your magic—but you can't perform magic without wishes!” She darted toward the fire and I realized the thing in her hand was a chain just as she uncurled it and whipped it toward me.

She laughed as the metal wrapped around my waist. “You didn't think wizards were only skilled at magic, did you, genie thief?”

Illan's caution about the wizards maybe carrying human weapons bounced around my ears as time seemed to move in slow motion. The wizard gave a sharp yank and I screamed as it pulled me into the fire.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I crashed against our debris pile, flames licking at me as sharp edges from broken chairs and bar stools jabbed into me. I screamed again, reflexively trying to jerk away from the fire, but unable to budge thanks to the chain wrapped around my waist. My shirt caught fire, the heat burning against my skin. I strained my neck, fighting to keep my hair away from the fire.

Illan and Rajan cried out, but it was massive vines thicker than my calves that wrapped around me, shooting down the length of the chain to wrap around the woman. The vines blackened, but not before the wizard let go of her chain with a curse, reflexively moving into the flowing pattern of wizard magic to combat the vine. The moment she let go, the vines threw me backward. The vines writhed in the flames, almost as though trying to escape the heat. Before the fire could finish them off, they dissipated, the wizard's magic eliminating them.

Illan knelt next me in a flash, cool frost from his hands dousing the fire on my clothes. I gasped and shivered at the sudden cold.

The wizard gave her hands a confused look. "Why could I stop the vines but not the fire?" She looked up at our pile, her eyes narrowing before moving to Rajan. "And since when do flame genies need kindling to start a fire?"

“Too slow, half-wit,” Rajan snarled as thick dark smoke poured into the two wizards’ noses and mouths. They gasped, clawing at their faces and throats before their eyes rolled back and they dropped.

I breathed out a sigh of relief, sitting up to check my wounds. My adrenaline must be pumping hard, because I didn’t feel a thing yet. Except, as I peeked under my charred shirt and examined my arms, I didn’t find a single burn. My skin didn’t have even a tinge of red.

“I’m not burned,” I stated, still staring at my arms.

“Of course not. I made you heat resistant,” Rajan said, waving his hand over the natural fire and it vanished.

“What? When?”

“At the museum. I never took that magic away.”

“Oh.” I’d forgotten that. He’d done it before we fought the shadow-controlled mummy for the last time. It hadn’t occurred to me that he’d have to actively undo that magic for it to go away.

I glanced back at the blackened debris pile and gasped. “Vine! Your vines! They didn’t have to burn since I didn’t need to be pulled from the fire.” I turned to him, my eyes full of regret. “I’m sorry.” I still didn’t know if his plants felt anything, but they’d thrashed in the fire as though they did.

The dark genie stared at me, dumbfounded.

I glanced at Illan still kneeling next to me and murmured, “Did I say something wrong?”

His eyes flicked from Vine back to me. “I rather think the opposite, Miss Ali.”

“Hah,” Rajan said, his face tilted in a cocky expression as he crossed his arms over his chest. “See? Isn’t she the best master?”

Vine didn't respond, looking lost and a little scared.

Illan rose to his feet, offering his hand to me. "Though you may not have needed saving from the fire, you did need saving from the chain whip." He glanced at my burned shirt. "And I imagine your wardrobe appreciated the timely save as well. Vine acted well."

Turning to the pile of debris, Illan blasted it with ice with such force that he cleared a path down the center. "Shall we continue?"

#

A short walk down the hall led to a small tiled room and a steel door connected to a solid steel wall.

"Okay," I breathed. "Only three wizards to go . . . and a light barrier to get past if Sandy is using that to protect the yellow diamond." Assuming they *had* the yellow diamond in there. I couldn't imagine they didn't, but wouldn't that be a terrible joke? We went through all this trouble to get past the wizards and the panic room only to learn the gem we wanted wasn't even there. For now, we'd plan like a light barrier and steel walls were our only barrier to the diamond since that was their best protection so far as we knew.

I tapped my lips as I stared at the reflection of the overhead light on the steel wall before us. "Vine, Ice said that he and Rajan couldn't get past the light genie's barrier, but that you might be able to. Do you know if you could?" I kept my gaze on the wall as I spoke, transfixed by the reflection.

"My magic creates," Vine said. I waited for an elaboration until I realized one wasn't coming.

"Does that mean you can't, or you don't know if you can?"

He glanced down at his hands, flexing his fingers. "Plants love light."

I blew out a slow breath. Was that supposed to mean that it was a possibility?

“O-kay,” I said slowly. “I had a thought—even if Rajan can’t break through the light barrier, maybe he can weaken it and give Vine an opening.”

“How so?” Illan asked.

Rajan grinned, rubbing his hands together. “It’s through science, isn’t it, Girlie? Lay it on me.”

“Heat can cause distortions in the atmosphere, changing the index of refraction of the air and making light change directions.” I gestured to the steel in front of us. “This setup is perfect for that. The heated metal will give off heat waves to distort the air and the reflectivity of it will help bend light even more.”

Illan looked doubtful. “I’m aware of the potential light refracting abilities of heat, but we’re dealing with magic, not the natural world.”

“It worked at the museum,” I argued. “*Not* to our benefit, but the cold air and hot air created by magic mixing still resulted in a predictable scientific outcome.”

“That’s right!” Rajan exclaimed, snapping his fingers. “Something about hot air and cold air and refracturators combing to create shadows.” I didn’t correct him on his made-up word refracturators. A lot of the words I used probably sounded made up. “When my hottest fire hit the cold of that shadow bastard’s shadow creation, it created more shadow mummies.”

Illan looked stunned. “I didn’t think science and magic could interact to create predictable outcomes. I’ve never tried.” His look turned doubtful again. “It still may not work. The cold air and hot air mixing to create shadows may have been partly a function of the shadow genie intentionally setting his magic to react in such a way.”

I bit my lip, recalling Rajan saying that the shadow genie had set things up like that on

purpose. Illan might be right.

“I will try,” Vine said.

“We’re talking about weakening the light barrier, Flower Head,” Rajan sighed. “I’m the one who needs to try.”

“Oh. We’re working together?”

I gaped before giving Rajan a disbelieving look.

He sighed and shrugged. “Honestly, this is the best we’ll get out of him.”

Since we were about to confront four genie wizards, that made me very, very nervous.

“Vine,” I said, keeping my voice even. My hands hovered as I debated putting them on his shoulders to make sure I had his attention, but I didn’t know how he’d feel about being touched. Instead, I stepped close to him, making sure his eyes were on mine. “This is the plan—we think the yellow diamond might be protected by the light genie’s barrier. We need to weaken the barrier. Rajan is going to do that, then you’re going to see if you can get past the barrier. Okay?”

He nodded. “I will try.”

I sure hoped he would.

“All right, you all get out of my way,” Rajan said, shooing us away.

The three of us moved back. Rajan raised his hands high and flames shot from them. His hands moved like he was conducting an orchestra as more and more flames added themselves to the fire. Within moments the fire burned bright yellow, the color fire turned above 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit.

Even with my heat resistance, the room turned suffocating near instantly, the waves of heat warping the air between us and the panic room. Just standing there felt like my entire body

was touching too hot metal and the sweat dripping down my face felt on the very of boiling.

Slowly, Illan extended his hand toward me. Confused, I took it, but understood instantly when coolness rushed through me. So much that it made me shiver, but I tightened my grip.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

Then I straightened, my eyes shooting to the dripping metal ahead of us. “Will they die in there?!” I asked, panicked.

“The wizards won’t allow it,” Illan assured me. “I suspect they’ll interfere soon.”

As though he’d summoned the interference with his words, Rajan’s flames flickered. He swore as they died down completely.

“I guess metal doesn’t impede their magic,” I said, relieved and disappointed. Relieved because I’d been envisioning the people in the panic room screaming and writhing as they were cooked alive, and disappointed because I didn’t know what to do now.

Smoke poured off the walls as the dripping metal cooled. Within moments, the heat disappeared and the panic room solidified. Albeit, into a twisted and warped version of what it was before.

“Well, we still can’t get in, but they can’t get out,” I said, not sure if that improved anything. The door still existed—kind of—but was more one with the walls than any door had a right to be.

“Do you think the metal is weakened enough that I could break through it?” I asked quietly. With how much had melted, parts of it had to be thinner, though that didn’t mean I had a prayer of breaking through it.

Before anyone could answer, we heard screaming from inside.

“Let us out!”

“I want out! Now!”

“Get us out of here!”

The shrill voices had to belong to the twins. Guilt pricked me at the fear they must have felt when the wall began burning. And maybe the pain. But these were also the twins who, by all outward appearances, had ordered the death of several journalists based on the rate that gossip columnists who spoke poorly of them disappeared.

I wanted to stand back, to ask who would be the spokes person, but we were here because of me. Yes, this was Tavor’s plan, but *I* made the choice to come.